

# On the Haftarah: The Ideal Jewish King

## For the haftarah of Korach, From the Teachings of the Rebbe

By Yitzi Hurwitz

The haftarah for Korach is from the book of I Samuel.<sup>1</sup> It tells how Samuel established King Saul as the sovereign over the Jewish people. This was the second time Samuel did this. The first time was a small event in Mitzpah, when Saul's sovereignty wasn't yet widely accepted. But now, after proving himself by winning a battle against the Amorites, the whole nation rallied around him. The second event, establishing Saul as king in Gilgal, was celebrated with great festivity and joy.

With the nation gathered in Gilgal, Samuel talked to the Jewish people. First, he established his innocence as a leader who never took anything from the people. He said: "Whose ox have I taken? And whose donkey have I taken? Have I robbed anyone? Whom have I oppressed? From whose hand have I taken payment that caused me to hide my eyes [from his wrongdoing]?"<sup>2</sup> The people answered that he hasn't done any of those things. Then he reminded them of how much G-d had done for them and reprimanded them for asking for a king, when they already had G-d as their King.

He continued to say that as long as they stay true to G-d, they will live happily with their king. He then warned them not to turn away from G-d, and what will happen if they do. He then demonstrated that point by asking G-d to make it rain. Being the time of harvest, this would damage all of the crops. It began to pour, and so the people asked Samuel to pray for the rain to stop. He told them not to fear, just remember not to turn away from G-d. The point was made—that their lives are in G-d's hands—and they realized that asking for a king was the wrong thing to do. He then concluded by reminding them not to turn away from G-d, and that no matter what, G-d will not abandon them.

How does this connect to our parshah? The simple answer is that in the parshah, Moshe said a statement of innocence, "Not a donkey have I taken from a single one of them, and I haven't harmed a single one of them."<sup>3</sup> This is similar to what Samuel said in the haftarah, "Whose ox have I taken? And whose donkey have I taken? . . ." The problem with this explanation is that it's only a detail. How do the themes of the haftarah and the parshah sync?

Perhaps we could say that when the Jewish people asked Samuel for a king over them, rather than having him continue as their leader, it was a form of rebellion, akin to the rebellion of Korach in our parshah. The problem with this explanation is that it's not really the same because appointing a king over the Jewish people is a mitzvah, as it says: "You shall appoint over yourself a king."<sup>4</sup> What then is the theme of the parshah that the haftarah highlights?

There is a famous question asked about the story of our haftarah.<sup>5</sup> When the Jewish people asked for a king, Samuel was unhappy. G-d was unhappy as well, He said to Samuel: "For they have not rejected you, but they have rejected Me from reigning over them."<sup>6</sup> Yet He commanded Samuel to go ahead with it.<sup>7</sup> Now, if it's a

mitzvah to appoint a king, why were G-d and Samuel upset? And if they were upset, why did G-d tell Samuel to appoint a king?

There are two possible reasons for appointing a king. The first is to maintain basic law and order, like any nation that has a king or other governing body. As it says in *Ethics of the Fathers*, “If not for the fear [of the king] one man would swallow the other alive.”<sup>8</sup> Even though people should know better, their nature is to want things, which causes them to go against what is right. Having a king and a government is a deterrent for such behavior.

However, in an ideal Jewish community, the people fear G-d, and that is their deterrent: G-d is their King. In that case, appointing a king is for a different reason. It is because of the greatness of the king, that he is “head and shoulders” above the nation spiritually, and he can help us reach higher levels of closeness to G-d than we can attain on our own.

The ideal Jewish king is not the great warrior or someone who could wield his power over the people. Rather, he is a giant of spiritual holiness. Why is he so great? Because not only is he a spiritual giant and a Torah scholar of the highest caliber, he is so humble and feels so nullified before G-d that G-d clearly comes through and expresses Himself through him. He is at such a high level, beyond anything that G-d-fearing Jews could reach on their own.

In the Torah, the king is often called the *nassi*, which like the word *nasso* means “to raise.” It is the job of the king is to raise the people higher. One such person was Moshe, and another will be Moshiach. A person who is at this level has no interest in power or being the king. His greatness is a natural part of him; he has no need to control people. It is we who recognize that he is beyond anything we could attain, and we request of him to be our king.

When they asked Samuel for a king, they didn’t ask for the kind of king that will bring them closer to G-d. They asked for a king “like all the nations”<sup>9</sup>—a law-and-order king—and this was upsetting because it meant that they didn’t feel that G-d was their King. There was a lack of fear of G-d. It was a rejection of G-d. This is what Samuel meant when he said: “And you said to me, ‘no, rather a king should rule over us,’ but the L-rd your G-d is your King.”<sup>10</sup>

If G-d was unhappy with the request, why did He give them the king they were asking for?

Now that the Jewish people asked for a king “like all the nations,” it was a clear demonstration of how low they had fallen. There was no time to waste; they really needed a king to guide them, to show them the right way to live. Once they had accepted upon themselves a leader to show them the right way, in time they could become G-d-fearing, and then they would be able to have the higher level of king who will bring them to new heights and a deeper connection with G-d.

Now that we don’t have a king, who then fills that much-needed position? Our sages tell us:<sup>11</sup> “Who is the king? The rabbis.” They serve as our guides. In *Ethics of the Fathers*, it says, “Make for yourself a rabbi,”<sup>12</sup> These are

the words of Rabbi Joshua ben Perachya, who was the *nassi* in his time. He was of the opinion that every Jewish person, even the most knowledgeable, like himself, should have a rabbi to guide him.

This is a call to every Jewish person to find for themselves a rabbi. For some, it means a guide in everyday matters; for others, it means a guide to higher spiritual growth. If one says: “I will be my own rabbi, I don’t need a rabbi for guidance,” that symbolizes a lack of fear of G-d. No matter how learned you are, you should have a rabbi.

It need not be an ordained rabbi, but someone who you respect and feel can guide you in the ways of Torah and spirituality.<sup>13</sup>

Perhaps<sup>14</sup> this is how the haftarah brings out the theme of the parshah. Korach and his cohorts came before Moshe and Aaron with a complaint, “The entire congregation is all holy, and G-d is in their midst, so why do you raise yourselves above G-d’s community?” In other words, do we need you to or anyone else to guide us? We are G-d fearing; isn’t that enough? And in truth, that is when Jewish people need a guide to take them to heights they could not reach on their own. That represents a form of rejecting G-d because why wouldn’t you want a king—a Moses to bring you ever closer to G-d? The haftarah stresses the point that we should not reject G-d. Korach and his cohorts rejected G-d on a deeper level because at their high level, they should have known better.

May we merit to see Moshiach become our king, the one who will take us to the greatest heights and the deepest levels of closeness to G-d. May it happen soon!

*Dedicated to the Lubavitcher Rebbe, whose yahrtzeit is this week. He was the leader who saw the potential in every person and raised us all to a higher level.*

## FOOTNOTES

1. [I Samuel 11:14-12:22](#).
2. [I Samuel 12:3](#).
3. [Numbers 16:15](#).
4. [Deuteronomy 17:15](#).
5. Abarbanel on Parshat Shoftim. Kli Yakar to [Deuteronomy 17:15](#). Radak to [I Samuel 8:5](#).
6. [I Samuel 8:7](#).
7. [I Samuel 8:7](#), 9.
8. Pirkei Avot, Chapter 3, Mishnah 2.
9. [I Samuel 8:5](#).
10. [I Samuel 12:12](#).
11. See Talmud, Gittin, end of Chapter 5.
12. Pirkei Avot, Chapter 1, Mishnah 6 and 16.
13. Likkutei Sichot, volume 24, pp. 104-106.
14. The ideas in this paragraph came to me as I was writing this article. I don’t know if it is written anywhere else. Perhaps a reader can enlighten me.

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Rabbi Yitzi Hurwitz—father of seven, husband of Dina, and spiritual leader at Chabad Jewish Center in Temecula, Calif.—has been rendered immobile by ALS (Lou Gehrig’s Disease). Unable to speak or type, he uses his eyes to write heartfelt

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