

**Shabbat Shalom
from Rabbi Michael Gold**

Candle Lighting Time
Friday Erev Shabbat 7:25 pm

Services
Shabbat Morning August 30 9:30 am

Selichot Saturday night September 13, 8 pm. Followed by reception where our choir will perform.

Israelis have been marching by the thousands calling on the government to end the war in Gaza and bring home the hostages. Many of my friends in Israel have joined in those marches. From the comfort of my home in Florida, I cannot tell Israel what to do. I can only pray that the hostages come home and the war ends soon.

**PARSHAT SHOFTIM
A KING**

“And it shall be, when he sits upon the throne of his kingdom, that he shall write for himself a copy of this Torah in a book from that which is before the priests the Levites.”
(Deuteronomy 17:18)

The Torah often amazes me. I understand it is a product of its time, and entire sections reflect a world in which we no longer live. One can understand why there are sections of Holy Scripture which do not resonate with us today. The permission to own slaves, the treatment of women, or the brutal wars against the Canaanites reflected the historical reality of a different time. That is why, in each generation, scholars must re-interpret the words of the Torah to better reflect the ethos of their times. If we say the Torah is historical, then we can say that history has changed how we interpret the Torah.

Having said that, I must admit that sometimes the Torah seems radically progressive. There are laws that seem to come from the Enlightenment period or even more modern times. One wonders how this ancient text could get a modern idea right. A perfect example is how the Torah talks about kings.

The Torah commands the Israelites to appoint a king over themselves (Deuteronomy 17:15). Later in the Biblical book of Samuel the prophet Samuel discourages appointing a king lest he become corrupt. A king would become the norm amongst the early Israelites. But he was to be a king very different from the other kings in that time and place.

Until the Enlightenment period, kings ruled with absolute power. Kings saw themselves as chosen by God; in ancient Egypt, the people saw Pharaoh as a god. They spoke of the divine right of kings. A king with limited power was unheard of until modern times. It was not until the nineteenth century that Lord Acton said, "Power corrupts, absolute power corrupts absolutely." It was the end of the seventeenth century that John Locke wrote about the natural rights of man and the permission to stand up against a despot who threatened those rights. Until modern times, everyone saw the monarch as a ruler with absolute rights. Everyone, that is, except the Torah.

The Torah, with insights most humanity would not achieve until the Enlightenment, taught the rights of a king were to be severely limited. The king was forbidden to multiply horses or to return to Egypt. Perhaps we could see this as a limitation on the police power of kings. A king could not have too many wives, lest they lead his heart astray. King Solomon tried to ignore this law, thinking that he had the willpower to not turn astray despite multiple wives. But even the wise King Solomon could not resist the temptation to follow other gods.

Perhaps most important, the king had to keep a scroll of the law with him at all times. He should read it and learn how to fear the Lord. In other words, echoing the old Hebrew National Commercial, the king had to answer to a higher authority. And when a king abused his power, he was confronted and scolded by a prophet. Perhaps the most famous example was King David tempted by the beautiful Batsheva as she bathed on a roof. David committed adultery with her and then arranged for the murder of her husband. The prophet Nathan confronted David with a parable of a rich man who steals a poor man's sheep. David is outraged by the rich man's action. And then Nathan tells David, "You are the man." To be a prophet is to speak truth to power.

It would take human civilization millennia to discover what the Torah already knew. The power of a king must be limited. Sometimes the Torah speaks with words wise beyond its age.