

A Daily Bread

Date: 29 Av 5786 (August 12, 2026)

Torah Portion: Shoftim

Topic: A King and Shmuel, Part 1

It is written, **“When you come to the land...and you shall say, ‘Let me set a sovereign over me like all the nations that are around me’”** (Deut. 17:14). Ramban understands the words **“you shall say”** as part of the Torah’s command concerning kingship. After Yisrael enters the Land, possesses it, and settles in it, the nation is to appoint a king. Thus, the Torah does not reject kingship itself. On the contrary, it provides for it and carefully defines the character and responsibilities of the king.

This raises an important question. If the Torah allows—and according to Ramban, commands—Yisrael to appoint a king, why was Shmuel displeased when the people later asked him for one? The elders approached him and said, **“Look, you are old, and your sons do not walk in your ways. Now appoint for us a sovereign to rule us like all the nations”** (1Sam. 8:5). When Shmuel brought the matter before YHWH, He answered, **“Listen to the voice of the people in all that they say to you, for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected Me from reigning over them”** (1Sam. 8:7). If the Torah had already provided for a king, why did YHWH describe their request as a rejection of His kingship?

The difficulty is resolved when we distinguish between **the institution of kingship** and **the kind of kingship the people desired**. Deut. does not envision an independent or secular king who replaces the authority of YHWH. Rather, the king of Yisrael is himself to live under the authority of Torah. He must write for himself a copy of the Torah and **“read it all the days of his life, so that he learns to fear YHWH his Elohim”** (Deut. 17:18–19). His heart must not be lifted above his brothers, nor may he turn aside from the commandment. The king therefore does not stand above Torah; **the king himself stands beneath Torah**.

This helps us understand what troubled Shmuel. The problem was not simply that the people asked for a king. Their words revealed something deeper: they wanted a king **“like all the nations.”** The Torah had permitted Yisrael to have a king, but Yisrael was never intended to become like all the nations. Their king was to be different because their covenant was different. He was to rule under the authority of YHWH and His Torah, reminding the people that YHWH—not the king—remained Yisrael’s true Sovereign.

There is another explanation for Shmuel’s anger. The elders said to him, **“You are old.”** According to the traditional chronology, Shmuel died at a relatively young age. Their words therefore may have carried a meaning beyond physical age. Shmuel could have understood them as saying that what he represented had become “old”—that his teachings, ideals, and manner of leadership belonged to an earlier generation. What grieved him was not merely a comment concerning his age, but the possibility that the people regarded the spiritual principles for which he stood as antiquated and no longer suitable for the nation.

A third explanation concerns the kind of authority the people desired. Under Shmuel, the nation was continually reminded that its true Sovereign was YHWH. Shmuel did not rule according to popular opinion; he judged according to the word of YHWH. A human king, however, might appear more accessible and more easily influenced. The people could therefore have desired a ruler whom they might pressure, direct, or control according to their own wishes. Instead of submitting themselves to divine authority, they wanted an authority that could be shaped according to human expectations.

A fourth explanation is that Shmuel initially regarded their request as a personal rejection of his leadership. If a king replaced him as judge, perhaps he feared that he would no longer be able to relate to the people in the same way as their spiritual leader. YHWH therefore corrected his understanding: **“They have not rejected you, but they have rejected Me from reigning over them.”** The issue was greater than Shmuel. Their request revealed a weakening of their willingness to live directly under the sovereignty of YHWH.

Shalom.