

Even Kings are Subject to the Law - Shoftim 5782

So, here's a scenario: let's imagine that I am downstairs doing some research in our Bines Library. I pull out a *Humash* from the reserved section, which, since it's from the reserved section, is not allowed to leave the library.

Now imagine that I'm deeply engrossed in finding ideas for my



Shabbat sermon (yes, this happens!) when I get a call about an urgent pastoral matter. I need to rush to the hospital. I rush to my car, realizing I still have the Humash.

The next day I notice that I had accidentally forgotten to return the Humash. And now, I need to pay our library fine.

We don't actually have fines, but you get the picture.

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This happened on a much more serious level with a former civilian employee of the Defense Department who was sentenced to three months in prison after admitting to taking materials with classified information to her hotel room and her personal residence. [It is clearly a matter to be taken seriously.](#)

Given the allegations of inappropriate handling of top secret documents by the former president, this case raises an important question that strikes to the heart of our democracy:

Are there different standards for different people?

Is justice applied evenly?

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Our tradition has a lot to say about this.

One of the hallmarks of the Torah was to change a system of justice that favored the rich and powerful over the poor and powerless.

In the book of *VaYikra/Leviticus*, the Torah states that:

לֹא-תַעֲשׂוּ עֹנֵל בַּמִּשְׁפָּט לֹא-תִשָּׂא פְּנֵי-דָל וְלֹא תִהְדָּר פְּנֵי גָדוֹל בְּצִדֵּק תִּשְׁפֹּט עִמֵּיתְךָ:

“You shall render an unfair decision: do not favor the poor or show deference to the rich; judge your kinsman fairly.” (Lev 19:15)

But the Torah knows this is not so easy to put into practice - sometimes, there are complicated cases, gray areas. In this morning’s *Parashah* - Torah portion, we learn that in some cases, you have to go to the religious leaders, the judges, who would function as a “sort-of” high court so they could do their best to interpret the Torah, rendering a decision.

לֹא תִסּוּר מִן-הַדָּבָר אֲשֶׁר-יִגִּידוּ לְךָ יְמִין וּשְׂמָאל :

“You shall act in accordance with the instructions given you and the ruling handed down to you; you must not deviate from the verdict they announce to you either to the right or to the left.”(Dt. 17:11)

Implement the law across the board as it was interpreted, not according to what you think it should be. The law should be evenly applied.

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But the Torah was especially wary of people who had even more power. And this week’s reading goes into this at length. It imagines a person with more power than the judges, a ruler with much more power -- like a king. Today, we can imagine someone like Vladimir Putin or other authoritarian leaders.

But in the Torah’s view, no one is above the law.

If you need to have a king (the Torah prefers that you don’t), then “When (he) [the king] is seated on his royal throne, he shall write a copy of this Teaching [The Torah] for himself on a scroll [copied] from the one that is in the charge of the Levitical priests. Let it remain with him and let him read in it all his life, so he may learn to revere Adonai his God, to observe faithfully every word of this Teaching as well as these laws. Thus he will not act haughtily toward his fellows or deviate from the Instruction to the right or to the left.” (Deuteronomy 17:18-20)

How prescient!

The Torah warned us.

Once someone has power, one may take advantage of it and abuse it. Even the king is bound by the Torah

I love the details here. Not only does the king have a copy of the Torah with him at all times, but he is to study it daily throughout his life.

But the Torah goes further; the king has to write his own Torah scroll! Not a simple task.



Rava, a rabbi who lived in Babylonia around 300 CE, takes this even further:

אמר (רבא) אף על פי שהניחו לו אבותיו לאדם ספר תורה מצוה לכתוב משלו

“Even if his fathers left him a sefer Torah, he has the obligation to write his own!” (Sanhedrin 21b)

This is no cut and paste job.

Just like taking notes (or typing them), there is something about writing.

It makes you truly internalize the ideas.

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Then the Talmud makes an ingenious move; it compares kings to teachers, to the sages themselves (Gittin 62a). The Hasidic tradition interprets this to mean that just as kings must study Torah, so should our teachers, and since we are all students, this includes all of us.

In fact, the rabbis go so far as to suggest that every Jew must write a copy of the *sefer* Torah for themselves!

All leaders must be engaged in learning and studying the law - the values that help us engage in moral behavior. This is the essence of justice.

Thus, the king is modeling behavior that all of us should follow. We all must study and learn, and in one of the Talmud's core teaching - Study is the greatest *mitzvah* - commandment because it leads us to action.

Learning the law is not merely an academic exercise; it leads us to act; it leads us to be activists pursuing justice.

So, now we are left with our values moving in two directions. We learn, and our leaders are inspired to do the same. And the king should serve as a *dugmah* - an exemplar of someone subject to the laws of Torah, the laws of justice, engaged in writing and learning them regularly.

There is no special application of the law for the king. And the requirement of daily study is a daily reminder to him not to forget his place.

That brings us to another core teaching of this week's Torah portion - *tzedek, tzedek tirdof* - justice, justice - you shall pursue. All of this learning leads us to act, bringing a more evenhanded justice into the world. A good place to learn is right here at Emunah, where we have a rich adult education program.

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All of this leaves us with a clear direction. When we see injustice, speak out! We must ensure that justice is practiced equally for everyone - from the king to the most powerless person. That encourages our leaders to learn, reminding them that they are subject to the same rules.

And the rules for the king remind us that we, too, should be engaged in studying and following the same laws.

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We are enjoined to study the Torah to be the most just society.
So maybe, it's not that bad to take a *Humash* home so you can study.
But if you don't mind, please take one out of the library officially!