



Your Highness

Parshas Shoftim

The man who greeted me at JFK airport did not outwardly look like particularly observant Jew. His grandfather emigrated from Hamburg, Germany, to the United States at the turn of the twentieth century. During those days, the United States was a spiritual wilderness for Jews. The Chief Rabbi of the Jewish communities of New York serving at the time of his grandfather's immigration was Rabbi Yaakov Yosef OB"m, known as the "Kollel Rabbi", who would travel from community to community tending to all aspects of religion.

There was an agreed upon code between Rabbi Yosef and the grandfather of my new acquaintance, every time they met Rabbi Yosef would call the grandfather "Your Highness". The grandfather, an émigré from Germany, would smile contentedly, understanding the meaning.

The nickname had a story to it. Back in 1890, a few years before the grandfather came to the USA, Rabbi Yisrael from Hauenstein came to spend a Shabbos in Hamburg. The community members prepared themselves for his arrival. He was known as a person who possessed special powers, he was known as "The Wonder Rebbe". All community members came to see him. The grandfather, a real "Yeke"¹, never heard of a Chassidic Rebbe or a *Tisch*. He came to the Shabbos eve gathering to witness the event. He had never before seen such a sight; never saw such airs of royalty. His eyes were wide open, and mouth agape, taking in every detail.

In our weekly parsha we are commanded: "You shall set a king **over you**".² A question is raised: why does it say "**over you**" in singular, after all, it is a national responsibility?

Rabienu Bahaye³ writes that "This commandment was given with the Jewish Nation in mind, as they were to ask for a king in the future, not in accordance with G-d's desire, for the Almighty Himself walks among them, watching over each individual. This is the chosen people who are ruled by the Creator of all".

G-d is our king, and from His perspective there is no need for another king. If so, what is the meaning of the commandment to set upon ourselves a king? The Ksav Sofer⁴ explains that G-d made human kingship a possibility in order to teach them that even a simple person can become a king.

The righteous across the ages have added that the deep esoteric meaning here is that each individual should set a king upon himself. "You shall set a king **over you**". As the Sages said "One affliction in one's soul is of more affect than several on one's body". When a person sets upon himself a king and a regime he will improve his ways before the Lord.

In essence there are two kings – the King of the world, and a personal king, which is the one the Torah commanded us to set upon ourselves, and it specifically relates to "**over you**", as it is a personal obligation.

The amazed guest walked over to one of the Chassidim and asked him the meaning of all he saw. The chasid, who was transfixed as well, explained to him in short the essence of the Baal Shem Tov's teachings. He did not really comprehend. Someone else tried explaining, but still to no avail. "Why is he called the Wonder Rebbe?" he persisted.

The Rebbe noticed the stir and asked about it. When he was told that one of the locals was inquiring about Hassidism he asked them to bring him forth.

The man approached the Rebbe and shook his hand. He was served a wine glass. "I will explain to you the essence of the matter", the Rebbe said. "You know of the *Shul* rabbi". He confirmed. "And what is his responsibility?", "He tends to all the *Shul* related issues". "That is correct", the Rebbe affirmed. "And what does the communal rabbi do?", "He tends to all the communal issues". "Correct, and what does the city rabbi do?", "He is in charge of all the other rabbis", the grandfather answered confidently.

"And do you know what a wonder Rebbe is"? The Rebbe continued, "He is one who rules over **himself**", with those words the Rebbe continued the *Tisch* into the night.

A true king is one who rules over his desires and is not enslaved to them. A Jew who enslaves his desires to G-d is in essence a king; a ruler, as our Sages have said: 'All of the Jewish People are the sons of kings'.

The 'Kollel Rabbi', Rabbi Yosef, hearing this story from the grandfather, would from that moment on call him "Your Highness".

¹ Term used for Jews from Germany, generally indicating exactitude in behavior matched by a rationalistic approach.

² Dvarim 17,15.

³ Bahye ben Asher ibn Halawa (mid-fourteenth century - 1340) was a rabbi and scholar of Judaism. He was a commentator on the Hebrew Bible and is noted for introducing Kabbalah (Jewish mysticism) into study of the Torah. He is considered by Jewish scholars to be one of the most distinguished of the Biblical exegetes of Spain.

⁴ Avraham Shmuel Binyomin Sofer, also known by his main work Ktav Sofer (1815–1871), was one of the leading rabbis of Hungarian Jewry in the second

half of the nineteenth century and Posh Feshiva of the famed Pressburg Yeshiva.