FIRST THINGS

KING DAVID

by
Meir Y. Soloveichik
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In a provocative and profound essay in this magazine ("A King in Israel," May 2010), the late Michael Wyschogrod proposed that the Jewish state define itself as a democratic, constitutional monarchy. Israel, Wyschogrod suggested, should rename its head of state—the president elected by its legislature, who already plays a largely ceremonial role—and give him or her the title "Regent of the Throne of David." This would not, he wrote, involve changing anything about the Knesset and other aspects of the political process. Without redefining its democratic nature, "Israel nonetheless can be declared a Davidic monarchy without a reigning king." This symbolic action, Wyschogrod argued, "would build into the self-understanding of the state of Israel the messianic hope of the Jewish people, while excluding a messianic interpretation of the present state of Israel."

The proposal was given very little attention by Jewish thinkers, and even less by Jewish politicians. Yet the essay, for admirers of this great theologian, is classic Wyschogrod. It puts forward a provocative statement, expressed in a way that may attract few allies, that nevertheless forces us to reflect on a profound, and often ignored, theological truth. In this case, the truth is that many religious Jews simultaneously celebrate the existence of a Jewish republic while praying three times a day for the advent of a messianic era featuring a restored Davidic monarchy.

We seldom reflect on the dialectical nature of this theological posture. If religious Jews believe that Israel should be both democratic and Jewish, Wyschogrod writes, "we must conclude that a constitution uniquely suited to a Jewish state should embody the political form through which this higher authority has been manifest in the Jewish concept of polity for the past three thousand years," which means a monarchy

of the line of David. Here we see the tension. "The deep Jewish longing for Davidic restoration, expressed so frequently and with such deep emotion in the daily liturgy that Jews have recited for thousands of years, in which we beseech God to see a descendant of David on the throne of Israel," shapes the political imagination of religious Jews. The state of Israel, however, has no civic or political dimension that reflects that yearning, and this clashes with a religious Jew's pride in the accomplishments of the Jewish people in founding their own state, as well as his proper sense that the state of Israel plays a central role in the future of the Jewish people. Hence the genius of Wyschogrod's proposal: To be a constitutionally *Jewish* state, "Israel must understand itself as a monarchy temporarily without a king." With the office of "Regent of the Throne of David," one of the civic symbols of a Jewish state would embody the millennia-long yearning that has animated Jewish prayer.

Wyschogrod's provocative proposal may be unrealistic. That should not prevent us from engaging his philosophical point. Any seriously Jewish political philosophy must consider the place of the House of David when reflecting on what it means for Jews to exercise sovereignty as a people.

Since the Mishnaic era, the first centuries of the Common Era, Jewish political thinking has had to grapple with a seeming contradiction in biblical texts. The resulting rabbinic debate has had enormous influence on the ultimate direction of modern democratic thought. Deuteronomy, the most political text in the Torah, seems to anticipate, and even approve of, the crowning of a king, as long as he is an Israelite: "When thou art come unto the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee, and shalt possess it, and shalt dwell therein, and shalt say, I will set a king over me, like as all the nations that are about me; Thou shalt in any wise set him king over thee, whom the Lord thy God shall choose: one from among thy brethren shalt thou set king over thee."

Nevertheless, when the Bible later recounts this historical moment in which the people seek a king, the connotations are negative. After the period of the judges, Israel ultimately asks the prophet Samuel to establish a monarchy ("Give us a king to judge us"). The request "displeased Samuel." God, in turn, informs Samuel that "they have not rejected thee, but they have rejected me, that I should not reign over them." The question is therefore obvious: Is the appointment of a king encouraged, or is it not?

The matter is debated in Tractate Sanhedrin:

> R. Judah said: Three commandments were given to Israel when they entered the land: [i] to appoint a king, [ii] to cut off the seed of Amalek, and [iii] to build themselves the chosen house. . . . While R. Nehorai said: This section [in Deuteronomy regarding the appointment of a king] was spoken only in anticipation of their future murmurings, as it is written, And shalt say, I will set a king over me etc.

In this exchange, Rabbi Judah seems to embrace the system of monarchy, while Rabbi Nehorai rejects it. Yet the latter's reason for regarding monarchy as morally problematic is not made clear. In Devarim Rabbah, however, the Midrash identifies monarchy with the supreme sin:

> God said to Israel: My Children, it was My intention that you be free of kings . . . but you sought differently. . . . I therefore said, since you will in the end ask for a king for flesh and blood, from [Israel] shall they rule and not a foreigner. . . . Rabbi Simon said: All who trust in God will be like Him. How do we know? For it is written, "blessed is the man who trusts in God" . . . and all who trust in idols will end up like them.

The implication is that the appointment of a king is akin to idolatry; it is a form of honoring and placing one's trust in someone who is not God. It is for this reason, according to the rabbis, that God saw the Israelites' request for a king as equivalent to a rejection of the divine.

This midrashic interpretation may seem simply a matter of intra-Jewish debate, but one can make the case that it changed the world as we know it. Eric Nelson's recent book *The Hebrew Republic* makes the remarkable and convincing case that seventeenth-century European political thinkers were deeply engaged by Jewish texts. This, he notes, runs counter to our standard assumptions, as it is often held that modernity's achievements were made through a progressive secularization. The truth, Nelson shows, is exactly the opposite. Renaissance humanism, "structured as it was by the pagan inheritance of Greek and Roman antiquity, generated an approach to politics that was remarkably secular." Yet, in the seventeenth century, during the ongoing fervor of the Reformation, "Christians began to regard the Hebrew Bible as a political constitution, designed by God himself for the children of Israel. They also came to see the full array of newly available rabbinical texts as authoritative guides to the institutions and practices of this perfect republic." Nelson goes on to argue that the political achievements associated with modernity—

including democracy and religious toleration—reflect a "political Hebraism," an outlook on civic life that used rabbinic sources to bring European ideas about the polity into better conformity with biblical sources.

In the debate over the execution of Charles I, Milton cited rabbinic texts in *Pro populo Anglicano defensio* to make his case against monarchy, utilizing the argument from Devarim Rabbah.

> God indeed gives evidence of his great displeasure at their request for a king—thus in [1 Samuel 8] verse 7: "They have not rejected thee, but they have rejected me." The meaning is that it is a form of idolatry to ask for a king, who demands that he be worshipped and granted honors like those of a god. Indeed he who sets an earthly master over him and above all the laws is near a strange god for himself, one seldom reasonable, usually a brute beast who has scattered reason to the winds.

Milton further notes that the Bible "imputed it a sin" that the Israelites sought a king, explaining that the sin lay in the fact that "a king must be adored like a Demigod" by his subjects who are "on either side deifying and adoring him."

The argument was echoed a century later by Thomas Paine in a passage that he acknowledged was lifted from Milton and inserted into *Common Sense,* one of the most influential polemical pamphlets in American history:

> Government by kings was first introduced into the world by the Heathens, from whom the children of Israel copied the custom. It was the most prosperous invention the Devil ever set on foot for the promotion of idolatry. The Heathens paid divine honours to their deceased kings, and the Christian World hath improved on the plan by doing the same to their living ones. How impious is the title of sacred Majesty applied to a worm, who in the midst of his splendor is crumbling into dust! As the exalting one man so greatly above the rest cannot be justified on the equal rights of nature, so neither can it be defended on the authority of scripture; for the will of the Almighty as declared by Gideon, and the prophet Samuel, expressly disapproves of government by Kings. . . . And when a man seriously reflects on the idolatrous homage which is paid to the persons of kings, he need not

> wonder that the Almighty, ever jealous of his honour, should disapprove a form of government which so impiously invades the prerogative of Heaven.

Paine's argument is first and foremost a religious argument, one we can trace back to the rabbis.

Wyschogrod, in his aforementioned essay, claims that a rejection of monarchy is inherently secular. "A world without God is a world in which nothing is hereditary but all glory is temporary and republican," he observes. "God's election of Israel—which is, in a sense, a royal election—is based on none of these fleeting considerations but is as permanent as the throne of David, the most permanent of all the earthly thrones sanctioned by God. It is probably for this reason that monarchy is so repugnant to secularists." As we have seen, however, opposition to monarchy need not be secular. Influential aspects of the Jewish tradition regard sovereignty without a king as preferable, because it allows a people to be ruled by God alone. At the same time, it is undeniable that the rabbinic tradition, and especially its liturgy, embraces David's kingship as essential to Jewish thinking about history, politics, and nationality. Thus the question must be asked: If a significant strand of Talmudic theology, one that exercised an important influence on modern political thought, worries that monarchy has the potential for idolatry, how are we, as modern Jews, to understand the significance of the Davidic dynasty for Jewish theology?

Deuteronomy can be viewed as the constitution of ancient Israel. Yet its concerns are as theological as they are political; indeed, perhaps its central concern is the worry lest the political and social be promoted at the expense of the theological. As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks has noted, if there is one consistent message in Deuteronomy, it is a warning: "When you eat and are satisfied, when you build fine houses and settle down, when your herds and flocks grow large and your silver and gold increase, when all you have is multiplied—it is then you must beware lest your heart becomes proud and you forget God your Lord who brought you out of Egypt and the land of slavery." In verses such as these throughout Deuteronomy, Sacks writes, Moses gives voice to the most counterintuitive message imaginable: "The greatest challenge is not slavery but freedom; not poverty but affluence; not danger but security; not homelessness but home. The paradox is that when we have most to thank G-d for, that is when we are in greatest danger of not thanking —nor even thinking of—G-d at all." If the Jewish political tradition's concern regarding monarchy is the danger of worshipping the non-divine, its concern is part of a larger worry that we are tempted to worship the self.

It is with this in mind that God's election of David is to be understood. If David is chosen, it is because throughout his career he sees and cites God as the source of his success, as well as the success of the state he rules. He embodies the importance of Jewish power, of military might, and at the same time ascribes all triumph, all success, all glory to God. We see this combination already in David's first great triumph against the gargantuan Goliath, before he becomes the warrior king of Israel who awed all his enemies. He is at this point but a stripling, and a shepherd boy at that, spoiling for a fight. When Saul voices skepticism, David replies in defiance that he has bested many a mighty adversary on the field of battle: "Thy servant kept his father's sheep, and there came a lion, and a bear, and took a lamb out of the flock . . . thy servant slew both the lion and the bear: and this uncircumcised Philistine shall be as one of them." He appears, superficially, to embody arrogance, confidence, and braggadocio. Yet David says more, allowing us to understand that in fact, his entire approach to victory is different: "The God who saved me from the lion and the bear, *He* will save me from the Philistine." David draws confidence not only from his own abilities but also from his faith, declaring to Goliath: "Thou comest to me with a sword, and with a spear, and with a javelin; but I come to thee in the name of the Lord of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel."

For this reason David, and only David, is chosen as the eternal ancestor of the Israelite monarchy. If the danger of monarchy is potential idolatry—and if the central social concern of Deuteronomy is the idolization of the self—then David as king, statesman, and political leader is the antidote. Several of the recent books about David, including Malcolm Gladwell's *David and Goliath*, have argued that David's victory against Goliath was the result of brilliant strategy and the choice of a weapon that is quite powerful and deadly. His victory was, therefore, not *merely* miraculous. This may well be true, but to stress this is to miss the full meaning of the episode. What is remarkable is that David is grateful to God even when he could have given all credit to himself. David is not Moses, who disrupts the laws of nature in his daily life. The miracle in David's life is that he ascribes his achievements to God when the temptation to do otherwise is enormous. He is the man who refuses to allow society to idolize him, and thereby reminds society not to idolize itself.

While this central feature of David's character is made manifest in the book of Samuel, it is even more evident in the Psalms. Thomas Cahill has noted that the Psalms are a "treasure trove of personal emotions and a unique early roadmap to the inner spirit." While the historian must normally "guess at the emotions of his subjects from incomplete or indirect evidence, David's Psalms reassure us that three thousand years

ago people laughed and cried just as we do, bled and cursed, danced and leapt—that our whole repertoire of emotions was theirs." This is exactly right, but to this description one more point must be added: Every one of the Psalms, poetry and prayer that run the gamut of the human spirit, is addressed and dedicated to God. David composes Psalms to God when he defeats his enemies and when he is fleeing from them, when he is studying the Torah and when he has sinned, when his kingship is teetering and when it is secure. There is no part of his life, no part of his failures and his achievements, in which God does not have a role. This is Deuteronomy's ideal. And that is why, for all his failings, the political and civic society of the nation of Israel must always be linked to David and his legacy. There can be no Jewish state that does not have a role for God.

David's unique role helps us understand his dream of building a temple, and why that dream was denied. According to Chronicles, David went so far as to put together the blueprints for what would ultimately be known as the "Temple of Solomon." This is a biblical instance of a dream deferred and denied. David was informed by the Almighty that not he but his son would construct the house of God in Jerusalem. Before his death, charging his son to bring his dream of a temple to fruition, David explained why God would not allow him to do the one act that he desired more than any other:

> He called for Solomon his son, and charged him to build an house for the Lord God of Israel. And David said to Solomon, My son, as for me, it was in my mind to build an house unto the name of the Lord my God: But the word of the Lord came to me, saying, Thou hast shed blood abundantly, and hast made great wars: thou shalt not build an house unto my name, because thou hast shed much blood upon the earth in my sight. Behold, a son shall be born to thee, who shall be a man of rest; and I will give him rest from all his enemies round about: for his name shall be Solomon, and I will give peace and quietness unto Israel in his days. He shall build an house for my name.

Rather than building a temple as a reward for his military career, God tells David that he cannot, and cannot precisely *because of* his military career. What are we to make of God's refusal to grant David his wish to build the Temple? Is Israel not grateful for David's valor? Were the people of God not saved again and again because of the Goliaths slain by this warrior of Israel?

The Hebrew Bible never puts forward a pacifist ideal, recognizing again and again that the existence of evil, and of Israel's enemies, can require a firm, steely response. If the bloodiness of David's leadership should not be seen as a moral failing, why, then, was David denied his dream?

Martin Goodman's study of the contrast between Jewish and Roman culture, *Rome and Jerusalem*, provides helpful insight. He notes that Jews, like Romans, recognized the reality of war and its necessity. At the same time, Jews have been careful never to idealize warfare and have avoided glorifications of military might as an end in itself. "Jews as much as Romans viewed war as a natural condition but, unlike Romans, they sometimes expressed a hope that this might change." Despite all the violent exhortations in the Hebrew Bible, "the biblical prophets Isaiah, Micah and Joel all looked forward with longing to a time when there would be no more war at all." Thus the famous words of Isaiah's eschatological vision: "They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruninghooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more." Although exaltations of military might have their place in the Jewish tradition, that has never been an end in itself. This, notes Goodman, was one of the greatest differences between Jews and Romans. "This notion of permanent peace, shalom, and an end to war, espoused by Isaiah was quite different from the Roman notion of *pax*, which constituted little more than a pause to take stock between victorious and glorious campaigns."

Thus the logic of God's refusal of David's desire. Had he concluded his career by building what would inevitably have been seen as a monument to his might—had Israel's greatest warrior built a Temple "of exceeding magnificence, of fame and of glory throughout all countries"—the Israelites would have been tempted to see David's lifetime endeavors of war and bloodshed as achievements to glorify and events to celebrate on a par with their worship of the divine. Thus David's dream was denied lest Judea become Rome, and David become Vespasian, who constructed a colosseum as an eternal testament to his own conquests. God's Temple in Jerusalem would be built by Solomon. This clarifies the ultimate purpose of all of David's efforts, including his military triumphs: "For from Zion shall go forth Torah, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem." David could not build the Temple, for in so doing he would create a symbolic equivalence between his own glorious victories and God's greater purpose for the entire world. Thus, God's final frustration of David's ambition reinforces rather than diminishes his greatness, for it lies in the fact that the figure of David reminds Israel that, ultimately, all success flows from God.

Politics, in Judaism, is important, but it is a means to an end; only our relationship with God is an end in itself. The Temple in Jerusalem embodied this central truth. The Cambridge historian Simon Goldhill, in this vein, offers the following remarkable reflection on Pompey, the Roman general who conquered Jerusalem in 63 b.c., after a three-month siege.

> Pompey walked straight in, we are told, to see what he no doubt expected to be a glorious statue to match the significance of the Temple for the Jewish people. Romans regularly took cult statues of other cultures and transported them back to Rome in triumphant appropriation. He was amazed to find nothing there and remained baffled by the whole experience. This story is told by Tacitus, the Roman historian, but it is retold by the Jews. History is not always controlled by the victors. The contrast of the emptiness of the shrine and the practical man of war's confusion is eloquent—and for once allows the non-material its moment of assertion over the powerful realities of war and conquest.

David died without a monumental structure to glorify his reign, and just such an absence makes his political and spiritual triumphs more visible to biblical readers.

While killing Goliath was an impressive feat, there is no question that David's greatest military victory was the conquest of Jerusalem, the Jebusite city that Israel had failed to capture in all the centuries following Joshua. After making Jerusalem his capital, the Bible informs us that David constructed a palace for himself. Yet archaeologists searched in vain in the original Jebusite Jerusalem for the remains of such a structure. It was the archaeologist Eilat Mazar who first suggested, using the Bible as a source of evidence, that the palace would have been built just beyond the original walls of Jerusalem, further up the mountain on which the city was located. Digging in the predicted location, she uncovered a massive and impressive structure. The nature of her find continues to be debated today, but the theological question remains noteworthy: Why would David have built his palace outside the city walls, rather than within?

The answer, perhaps, as Mazar herself suggests, lies in David's dream: to build not merely a house for himself, but one for God, a temple that would ultimately crown the summit of the mountain, standing higher than his palace and his city. Interestingly, for the Jewish sages, the name "Yerushalayim" is a combination of "Shalem," the political entity that was conquered by David, and *Yirah*, which means awe,

reverence, a word that refers not to the Jebusite city but rather to the place where Abraham bound his son, and where the Temple was destined to be built.

The meaning of this midrash, perhaps, is that Jerusalem is meant to be both the capital of Judaism and Judea, and that one precedes the other; *yirah* precedes *shalem*, faith takes precedence over politics. Following this line of thinking, building a palace beyond the city walls may have served to point to Jerusalem's ultimate expansion to include the center of Israel's faith. David, then, intended his palace to be, for his subjects, the conceptual bridge between Jerusalem's political successes and its sanctity, between Jerusalem as it was and Jerusalem as it was meant to be. Though his capital embodied his military success, there are achievements higher than that. That which was to be highest, geographically as well as religiously, was not the nation as a political entity, but the nation of Israel in relationship with God.

David's legacy—biblical, Talmudic, and archaeological—challenges us to reflect on how Jews can create a society that can celebrate its successes but not idolize itself. David challenges us to envision a double project: sustaining a functioning, prosperous polity that points beyond its worldly achievements to God's higher purposes.

A wide variety of Israelis, deep down, struggle with this question. The most famous and beloved photograph in Israel is not that of Ben Gurion's declaration of the state, Menachem Begin's peace agreement with Anwar Sadat, or the raising of the flag over the newly conquered Eilat in the War of Independence. Israel's most enduring image is David Rubinger's arresting photograph of three simple soldiers at the Western Wall, gazing with reverence into the distance. The Six Day War was itself a David and Goliath story, and what makes the picture so memorable is that, like David, the soldiers seem to be celebrating more than themselves. As Yossi Klein Halevi puts it, "The image endures, in part, because of the humility it conveys: At their moment of triumph, the conquerors are themselves conquered. The paratroopers, epitome of Zionism's 'new Jews,' stand in gratitude before the Jewish past, suddenly realizing that they owe their existence to its persistence and longing."

How can Israel be a vibrant democracy that celebrates its independence and even at times its power, while creating a civic structure that embodies the Jewish story and mission, which transcend the modern state? This is one of the most critical questions facing Israel today, and it must look to David's life and his

character for inspiration in seeking an adequate answer. At the same time, David's example is important for countries throughout the West, especially now, with the advent of a resurgent nationalism.

On the one hand, the Jewish political tradition sees national identities as part of God's plan. Even its eschatology, as the political philosopher Daniel Elazar writes, depicts "what properly may be termed a world confederation of God-fearing nations federated through their common acknowledgment of God's sovereignty and dominion, with Jerusalem, where all go up to worship God, as its seat." On the other hand, the Bible warns us lest nationalism—and our celebration of the state—become an end in itself: "Behold, the nations are as a drop of a bucket, and are counted as the small dust of the balance. . . . All nations before him are as nothing; and they are counted to him less than nothing, and vanity." In the seventeenth century, political thought inspired by the Hebrew Bible led to the political birth of the West as we know it today; perhaps political Hebraism can inspire the West again.

While few thinkers have embraced Michael Wyschogrod's political proposal, they ought to recognize David as a central figure in any serious account of Jewish politics, statesmanship, and sovereignty. Perhaps in this respect, at least, Jewish philosophers and theologians—and those who recognize the importance of particular loyalties that are open to the transcendent—can embrace "the return of the king."

Meir Y. Soloveichik is rabbi of Congregation Shearith Israel in New York City and director of the Straus Center for Torah and Western Thought at Yeshiva University.