

# Saving American Nationalism from the Nationalists

The creed of an “almost chosen people” is as vital today as it was in Lincoln’s time

By Meir Y. Soloveichik

*Get thee from your land, from your birthplace, from your father’s house, to the land that I will show thee. And I will make thee into a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and through thee will be blessed all the families of the earth.*

— Genesis

*I always consider the settlement of America with reverence and wonder, as the opening of a grand scene and design in providence, for the illumination of the ignorant and the emancipation of the slavish part of mankind all over the earth.*

— John Adams

**I**N FEBRUARY 1861, Abraham Lincoln left his home in Illinois and embarked on the journey to his inauguration. He faced, Lincoln publicly mused, a challenge greater than the one that had faced George Washington. Several states had already seceded; others, including Virginia, would soon follow. To Lincoln fell the extraordinary task of not only saving the Union, but also of making the case to the country that the Union was worth saving. This he did in

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a series of extraordinary remarks along the way to Washington. Standing in Trenton, addressing the New Jersey state legislature, Lincoln recalled Washington’s own heroic struggles in that very city and how powerfully his reading about the Revolution had impacted him in his youth:

I recollect thinking then, boy even though I was, that there must have been something more than common that those men struggled for; that something even more than National Independence; that something that held out a great promise to all the people of the world to all time to come; I am exceedingly anxious that this Union, the Constitution, and the

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liberties of the people shall be perpetuated in accordance with the original idea for which that struggle was made, and I shall be most happy indeed if I shall be an humble instrument in the hands of the Almighty, and of this, his almost chosen people, for perpetuating the object of that great struggle.

In this remarkable reflection, Lincoln coins a fascinating phrase. America, he argues, is an “almost chosen people.” Lincoln seems to suggest that the original chosen nation, biblical Israel, was formed not merely for a national existence, but for something higher and greater, so that all families of the world would be blessed. America’s story is parallel to, and an imitation of, Israel’s. The story of the birth of the American founding is about more than “national independence”; it is about an “original idea” of liberty and equality, one that holds out “a great promise” for all the world. This imitation of Israel, for Lincoln, is the heart of American exceptionalism.

At the same time, Lincoln stresses, America is not chosen, but “almost chosen.” Unlike European nations that saw themselves as superseding the Jewish people, America imitates Israel but does not replace it. Moreover, whereas Israel, for the biblical promise, will be redeemed by God no matter how much it strays, an “almost chosen” nation must remain loyal to the ideas that make it exception, or it will cease to exist.

Lincoln’s words in Trenton remind us that one cannot understand America without studying biblical Israel and the way that the Bible viewed nationhood. It is with this in mind that we consider Yoram Hazon’s new book, *The Virtue of Nationalism*. Hazon deserves enormous credit for his philosophical mission of placing the Bible at the center of political thought, and his latest work has been celebrated by many as a worthy expression of the nationalistic moment in which America, and much of the world, finds itself.

At the same time, we must ask whether the version of nationalism that he puts forward reflects the richness of Lincoln’s understanding not only of America—but of biblical Israel as well.

In *The Virtue of Nationalism*, Hazon contrasts two political philosophies, nationalism and imperialism. In his reckoning, nationalism “regards the

world as governed best when nations are able to chart their own independent course, cultivating their own traditions and pursuing their own interests without interference.” This, he says, “is opposed to *imperialism*, which seeks to bring peace and prosperity to the world by uniting mankind, as much as possible, under a single political regime.”

Who are the imperialists to whom he refers? First and foremost, those leaders of postwar Europe who dreamed of a union in which European identity overrode that of unique nations—the ultimate anti-nationalist endeavor. Yet the term also encompasses enthusiasts for empire in the 19th and 20th centuries. Thus the book would place Benjamin Disraeli and European Union President Jean Claude Juncker in the same category, not to mention Churchill.

Yet it is not only EU enthusiasts and Victorians who are the target of Hazon’s opprobrium. The heart of imperialism, he suggests, is the desire to advance a single truth among differentiated nations. He singles out the late Charles Krauthammer and his fellow neoconservatives as targets for critique. With the fall of the Soviet Union, Krauthammer diagnosed our age as a “Unipolar Moment” in which American power could best be utilized for the furtherance of American ideals. This, Hazon writes, is “consciously part of an imperialist political tradition.”

It may seem strange to count Krauthammer as an imperialist, as he himself stressed many times that America is unique among historic superpowers in its disinterest in acquiring new lands. Hazon notes this in a footnote and responds by asserting that imperialism does not express a desire for territory; rather, it is “the expression of a hunger to control other nations,” which he believes Krauthammer’s thesis expresses.

What is the problem with utilizing power to exert an influence on other nations? For Hazon, it violates the political wisdom of the Bible, which, he insists, was embraced by the best of Protestant political thought. This biblical nationalism, he says, is founded on two theses:

*Moral minimum required for legitimate government.* First, the king or ruler, in order to rule by right, had to devote himself to the protection of his people in their life, family,

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and property, to justice in the courts, to the maintenance of the Shabbat, and to the public recognition of the one God.

*Right of national self-determination.* Second, nations that were cohesive and strong enough to secure their political independence would henceforth be regarded as possessing what later came to be called a right of self-determination...while it was accepted that there exist natural minimal requirements for maintaining a civilized society, and that, in line with the first principle, these were binding upon all governments, it was not expected that all nations would become as one in their thoughts, laws, or ways of life.

Hazony further argues that this approach stands in stark contrast to the internationalism of the last three decades, whose champions “would have a single regime of law and a single economic system, governed by Americans and Europeans in accordance with liberal political doctrines. And when a nation ‘broke the rules’ of this new world order, as was the case in Serbia, Iraq, and Libya, the American military, with allied European contingents, was going to go in and reestablish these rules.”

One can certainly criticize the wisdom or prudence of the military operations in these countries, but it is not clear why they constitute imperialism as Hazony defines it. Did Iraq, Libya, and Serbia maintain the “moral minimum required for legitimate government”? If so, then the biblical moral minimum is minimal indeed.

**L**ET US ASK: Does the story of biblical Israel teach us that the independence of nations is an inherent good?

The best theological response to this query is a paraphrase of Reverend Lovejoy from *The Simpsons*: “Short answer, ‘yes’ with an ‘if’; long answer, ‘no’ with a ‘but.’” As Hazony argues, the nation Israel was indeed born in the overthrow of a mighty, immoral, tyrannical empire. The nation did ultimately establish a state in its land and largely eschewed the allure of empire. While it preached an eschatological vision, in

which all nations recognize the God of Israel, it did so without assuming the assimilation of these nations into Israel, with each people instead forming its own unique covenant with God. The biblical vision certainly can be contrasted with that of John Lennon’s “Imagine,” which yearns for a world in which there are “no countries,” as the sole solution for peace on earth. There is no question that the most utopian proponents of European assimilation propound a perspective in tension with the biblical approach.

At the same time, Israel’s founding was noticeably different from the origins of other nations. Indeed, its very origins are meant to remind us that its liberty as a nation was and is not an independent end, but a means to a covenantal calling. Moreover, Israel existed and exists not only for itself but for the unfolding of God’s plan on earth, so that all the families of the earth will be blessed.

The theologian Michael Wyschogrod noted that while the Jewish people are a nation, their nationhood is not formed within the boundaries of its land. Israel, according to the Bible, came into being at Sinai *before* entering the Holy Land. “Nowhere else in the memory of peoples is *entry* into the land remembered,” Wyschogrod writes. In all other cases, “a people is born out of a soil which is its mother. The people does not pre-date the land.” Israel becomes a nation through the covenant at Sinai; or rather, the Israelites’ union to one another takes place only through its pledging a loyalty to the God of Israel and to His Torah. All this is meant to remind Israel that once it enters the land, and takes on the trappings of a standard polity, it still has a calling higher than the state itself.

It is with this in mind that we should consider Hazony’s biblically based argument. He suggests that the Hebrew Bible proposes an array of independent nation states as the best political arrangement, in that it avoids both the anarchy of tribalism and the tyranny of imperialism. For the Bible, he argues, a free state is founded when leaders of tribes “participate in the selection of the ruler of the nation and sit in his councils when important decisions are to be made. The loyalty of the individual is thus given to the state out of loyalty to his parents, his tribe, and his nation.” The most famous case of such a unification of tribes, he

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continues, “is that of ancient Israel, which has served as the model of a national state.”

The problem is that this is not quite how Israel comes into being. The Israelites become a nation at Sinai, and through the re-acceptance of the covenant with Moses on the banks of the Jordan. The leaders of the tribes do not participate in the selection of their leader, because Moses is God’s elected, as is his successor Joshua. When the Israelite tribes are united under kings, both Saul and David are anointed not by the people but by God, and those who suggest that another leader might be a better choice are considered not only traitors but heretics, deniers of God’s election. Biblical Israel is a nation, but it is constantly reminded that the nation exists for the covenant, or *brit*, not the other way around.

Thus Moses, in his valedictory, praises the Levites, who punished the worshippers of the golden calf, for placing loyalty to the covenant *above* what Hazony calls loyalty to parents, tribe, and nation: “Who said of his father, and of his mother: ‘I have not seen him’; neither did he acknowledge his brethren, nor knew he his own children; for they have observed Thy word, and keep Thy covenant.”

Thus, there are key moments in the biblical narrative where the apparent Biblical preference for nationalism is totally overridden for covenantal purposes. Israel’s monarchy is split into two as punishment for Solomon’s failure to fully comply with the Torah. Jeremiah orders Zedekiah to show faith in God by surrendering to Babylonia, which the king fails to do—whereupon he and the people are punished for their insistence on national independence. Most striking, the Almighty embraces the empire of Persia under Cyrus, proclaiming him God’s anointed, or messiah, for his role in returning Israel to its land to restore its covenant under Ezra: “Thus saith the LORD to His anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have holden, to subdue nations before him...For the sake of Jacob My servant, and Israel My chosen, I have called thee by thy name.”

If there is a central political message for Israel throughout the Bible, it is this: For Israel to deserve independence, it must remember that it exists for a calling more important than independence itself. Israel’s story is thus not easy to compare to that of

other nations. Making a noteworthy biblical reference, Hazony argues that freedom can be experienced not only individually but also collectively, that national independence can serve as a foundation for human flourishing: “Is it really possible to speak of the freedom of a nation? To be sure, Israel is said to have rejoiced in its escape from the bondage of Egypt at the Red Sea, and it is this kind of freedom of the nation from empire that is celebrated every year on independence days in Czechia, Greece, India, Ireland, Israel, Poland, Serbia, South Korea, Switzerland, the United States, and many other countries.”

Again, this is not quite accurate. What is so striking about the song the former Egyptian slaves sing on the shore of the Sea of Reeds is that there is very little celebration of “freedom of the nation from empire.” What Israel celebrates is God, who has made His power manifest to the world: “I will sing unto the LORD, for He is highly exalted; the horse and his rider hath He thrown into the sea. The LORD is my strength and song, and He is become my salvation; this is my God, and I will glorify Him; my father’s God, and I will exalt Him.” The Hebrews sing of the exodus not as a national liberation but in the collective voice of a nation that now owes everything to God, a nation that has a destiny far beyond liberation itself.

One doubts, therefore, that Switzerland, or Greece, celebrates its independence today the way Israel did at the sea. America, however, *does* celebrate in this way, or at least it once did. In 1776, a committee made up of Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, and John Adams recommended to the Continental Congress that the seal of the nascent nation should feature Moses and Pharaoh at the Sea of Reeds. The motto they suggested as an accompaniment to this image referenced not the colonists’ liberation but something much higher and more universal: *Rebellion to tyrants, obedience to God*. There have been many nationalist movements in the history of the world; yet only America, in its own extraordinary moments, has seen itself as “almost chosen.”

Yet still a question remains. The covenant of the people of Israel is the Torah, which forms them as a nation at Sinai, and again on the banks of the Jordan. What is the covenantal document of Lincoln’s “almost chosen people”?

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## America joins Lockean social-contract theory and biblical covenantal concepts, which allows for both a language of individual freedom and collective national purpose.

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THE VILLAIN IN HAZONY'S BOOK is John Locke. For Hazony, Locke's enlightenment theories spawned Rousseau and Kant, who are to blame for European anti-nationalism. And for Hazony, to the extent that America and England achieved greatness, it was because these nations learned from philosophers other than Locke.

What could be so egregiously problematic about this important 17th-century thinker? In propounding the theory of the social contract, Hazony writes, Locke helps bring into being a state that "is the product of consent alone: Individuals feel that their life and property are insufficiently secure, so they choose to form a pact to defend those interests." Locke's focus is on individual liberty. His *Second Treatise on Government* has little to say about the bonds of family, tribe, and nation. In real life, however, "nations are communities bound together by bonds of mutual loyalty, carrying forward particular traditions from one generation to the next."

Did not Locke have an enormous impact on America? Did not his theory of individual freedom and the origin of government fundamentally influence our country's understanding of itself? For Hazony, the answer seems to be no. In an interesting exchange in *Mosaic*, Peter Berkowitz stresses the importance of Locke's theory of liberty to America, noting that we owe to Locke "our notions about the proper limits of government power and the effective means for restraining it—questions central to the modern tradition of freedom." Hazony responded by denying the philosopher's impact on the Anglo-American political tradition and ultimately on the United States: "It was not Lockean radicals but English nationalists and common lawyers led by Edward Coke and John Selden, the true political conservatives of early-17th-century England, who heroically stood against the Stuart theory of divine right.... It was the freedoms defended by these men that were then instated by their students in the English Bill of Rights of 1689, which in turn gave birth to the American Constitution and Bill of Rights. None of these documents makes mention of Lockean universal-rights theories (though the American Declaration of Independence does)."

The truth, however, is that the Declaration of Independence does more than "mention" a Lockean universal-rights theory; it locates that theory at the

heart of the American idea. As Hazony implicitly acknowledges, the notion that all men are created equal, endowed with inalienable rights, is taken directly from the opening of Locke's *Second Treatise*. There was no question about this at the time, or indeed at any time since. Richard Henry Lee, who introduced the resolution for American independence in the Continental Congress, insisted that the Declaration's central theses had been "copied from Locke's treatise on government." Later, Jefferson's Federalist enemies insisted that Jefferson "stole from Locke's essays." Jefferson himself conceded that he wrote the document "neither aiming at originality of principle or sentiment," but rather as an "expression of the American mind," drawing on the most important political thinkers, including Locke.

This does not mean that Locke alone influenced the Declaration. Hazony is right to note all that Locke's theory lacks, but the Founders remedied what was lacking in Locke by adding biblical concepts to the Declaration. Jefferson delivered a draft of the Declaration that made little reference to Hebraic ideas. It was other members of the Continental Congress who joined them with biblical ones. Their revisions ensured that the individual rights Jefferson had placed at the center of the American experiment were not only endowed by our Creator but would function only under His aegis: "We, therefore, the Representatives of the united States of America, in General Congress, Assembled, [appeal] to the Supreme Judge of the world for the rectitude of our intentions." Whereupon the signers then bound themselves together in covenant under God: "And for the support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes, and our sacred Honor."

Language like this helped turn the Declaration into what the late historian Pauline Meier has called "American scripture." As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks has argued, America is unique because it joins Lockean social-contract theory and biblical covenantal concepts, which allows for both a language of individual freedom and collective national purpose. The covenantal conception of the United States, Sacks suggests, allows for "integration without assimilation," both individual freedom and collective destiny. The

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American polity was profoundly influenced by Locke while transcending the more problematic aspects of his *Second Treatise*.

What is the *brit*, the covenant of America, that marks its higher calling? For Lincoln, it could only be the Declaration of Independence. One day after his speech in Trenton, he arrived in Philadelphia and made reference to Independence Hall, where the Declaration was approved, as nothing less than the Jerusalem of America: "I have never asked anything that does not breathe from those walls. All my political warfare has been in favor of the teachings coming forth from that sacred hall. May my right hand forget its cunning and my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth, if ever I prove false to those teachings."

America does not date its founding to the ratification of the Constitution, but to the adoption of the Declaration, not only as its creed but as its *covenant*. It was on that day, not during the Constitutional convention, that for Lincoln, "our fathers brought forth a great nation." It is the Declaration, more than any other document, that defines who we are. If aspects of America's *constitutional* structure were altered, we would remain America—and, of course, its Constitution has been altered 17 times since its original passage. Yet if Congress voted unanimously to affirm that all men are *not* created equal, that they are *not* endowed by their creator with inalienable rights, and that government does *not* exist by virtue of the consent of the governed, then American would no longer exist. The flag might still have stars and stripes, the country's borders might still stretch from sea to shining sea, it might still have a president, a Congress, and a judiciary, but it would not be the country founded on July 4, 1776.

There is no America without Locke, but America is not a merely Lockean people. The DNA of the American polity is a double helix consisting of political Hebraism and Locke. There are, at times, tensions between these two, between Hebraism and the Enlightenment; but nevertheless it is the Declaration that defines who we are. It is because of this covenantal-Lockean document that we are a creedal nation.

Yet Hazony seems to challenge the inherently creedal character of America, bemoaning how a "love of the founding documents (or the 'American creed' that they supposedly contain) is now frequently in-

voked as a substitute for an attachment to the American nation itself." Reverence for the central documents of the United States, he argues, must be founded on love of one's people. Hazony cites the reverence that the Jewish community shows the Torah scroll in synagogue when it is lifted up above the heads of all worshippers:

I sensed this veneration in the way the adults stepped forward to kiss the scroll when it was brought out....I knew that if the *tora* were ever dropped to the floor, the congregation would fast for a month in penance....In these and many other ways, I experienced the reverence of the clan—for the congregation has long been, among Jews and Christians, the equivalent of the clan—as my own. This is to say that reverence for the *tora* and loyalty to it [are] learned by children as an inseparable aspect of their loyalty to their family and clan, who themselves display their veneration for the *tora* as an inseparable aspect of their loyalty to the Jewish nation.

This is only partially true. The reading of the Torah is, for Jewish law, a re-creation of Sinai, of Israel's covenantal founding. The lifting of the Torah above the community emphasizes exactly this point. For Jews, loyalty to the Torah is *above* loyalty to the community, and when the two come into conflict, the former supersedes the latter, just as when loyalty to the Torah comes into conflict with familial bonds, the former supersedes the latter. Observant Jewish parents do indeed teach their children to revere the Torah, and children do indeed originally imbibe this reverence out of reverence for their parents. But it is our hope that our children will come to understand that it is ultimately the Torah, not us, to which their most profound loyalty must adhere—and that their dedication to the Jewish nation should ultimately be an extension of their dedication to the Torah, not the reverse. If they do not come to revere Torah *more* than they revere us, we will have failed, both as parents and as Jews.

In a similar sense, for America, attachment to country and countrymen can indeed teach one to revere the sources of the founding. But ultimately we are

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called to learn that the American *idea* must be revered more than national self-interest, and that ultimately our loyalty to one another as Americans should be founded on loyalty to America's founding ideas, not the other way around. This, too, Lincoln himself reflected, standing next to Independence Hall:

I have often inquired of myself, what great principle or idea it was that kept this Confederacy so long together. It was not the mere matter of the separation of the Colonies from the motherland; but that sentiment in the Declaration of Independence which gave liberty, not alone to the people of this country, but, I hope, to the world, for all future time. This is a sentiment embodied in the Declaration of Independence. Now, my friends, can this country be saved upon that basis? If it can, I will consider myself one of the happiest men in the world, if I can help to save it. If it cannot be saved upon that principle, it will be truly awful. But if this country cannot be saved without giving up that principle, I was about to say I would rather be assassinated on this spot than surrender it.

These are eerie and prophetic words from a man who would do so much to reify the Declaration's principles in America, and who would become the first president to be assassinated precisely because of his defense of these principles. Yet what Lincoln stresses is this: His desire for American unity stems from his loyalty to the Declaration, not the reverse. Whatever American nationalism might be, for Lincoln, it is inseparable from the belief that the Declaration is the covenantal heart of America and that it contains a truth that is not for America alone. Hazony contends that in "the eyes of liberal imperialists, every dissident and every dissent looks the same," whereas nationalists "do not and never will possess a single worldview that they seek to advance. They share no universal doctrine that they offer for the salvation of all mankind." But if Hazony is right, and nationalists "share no universal doctrine that they offer for the salvation of all mankind," then the greatest of all Americans cannot be considered a nationalist. For it was Abraham

Lincoln who explained why the author of the Declaration of Independence, for all his faults, was so central to America's self-understanding: "All honor to Jefferson—to the man who, in the concrete pressure of a struggle for national independence by a single people, had the coolness, forecast, and capacity to introduce into a merely revolutionary document an abstract truth, applicable to all men and all times, and so to embalm it there, that to-day, and in all coming days, it shall be a rebuke and a stumbling-block to the very harbingers of reappearing tyranny and oppression."

**Y**ET IT WOULD BE ABSURD to say that the man who saved the Union was no nationalist. And rightly understood, Americans are a nationalistic people. The key here is understanding this correctly. Rich Lowry and Ramesh Ponnuru have persuasively argued that the time is ripe to push back on a purely liberal and internationalist understanding, and to embrace all that American nationalism might include:

It includes loyalty to one's country: a sense of belonging, allegiance, and gratitude to it. And this sense attaches to the country's people and culture, not just to its political institutions and laws. Such nationalism includes solidarity with one's countrymen, whose welfare comes before, albeit not to the complete exclusion of, that of foreigners. When this nationalism finds political expression, it supports a federal government that is jealous of its sovereignty, forthright and unapologetic about advancing its people's interests, and mindful of the need for national cohesion.

Even so, America remains a creedal and exceptional nation in a world that still needs American leadership. And America's biblically based understanding of its story, and of its role in the world, means that its covenantal ideals of liberty and equality impose on us at times a higher calling than mere self-interest. One can certainly be wary of entanglements overseas while still asserting that American power can, and at times should, be wielded to advance the principles of the

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American idea, which America considers a calling that extends beyond national self-interest itself.

The political period in which we find ourselves is a fascinating one. This can indeed be a healthy moment for the embrace, not only of patriotism but also of nationalism, and it can as well be a moment in which we return to the Hebrew Bible in conceiving of what nationalism should be. But it should not—it must not—embrace a version of nationalism that defines America, and biblical Israel, down. Hazony muses that in an age shorn of tradition, we require “an alliance of Old Testament-conscious Protestants and nationalist Catholics and Jews” to rediscover the Hebraic politi-

cal vision of the West and restore it “as the basis for a new era.” I could not agree more. But this vision must include an understanding of the covenantal callings of the “almost chosen people” who, inspired by the chosen people, believed that they came into being for “something even more than National Independence”—for “something that held out a great promise to all the people of the world to all time to come.”

In this time of national fragmentation and fevered debate, it is this vision—Lincoln’s vision—that, please God, may help us “achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.”