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Should observant Jews pray for a king to lead modern Israel? It seems anachronistic and out of place in modern times, but something that Jews pray for three times a day, every holiday and at every meal. The below considers the complex biblical record and advances the necessity of an ethical, constitutional ‘monarchy’ interpreted for contemporary times.

As modern Israel grapples with many open-ended issues in its governing, understanding the Bible’s position for the future of the Jewish State is more relevant than ever. Weak governments have consequences- invasion, abduction, murder and anarchy as witnessed on October 7$^{th}$. It seems even small disagreements within the delicate legislative coalition can trigger immediate elections, with many important decisions being continually deferred for fear of civil war or disruptive protests. An activist judiciary increasingly referendums elections and a legislature which questions the legitimacy of a court without constitution.

Several thinkers from Israel’s intellectual elite have recently proposed the Biblical vision as a decentralized system with the lack of a sovereign. Proponents of this decentralization point to the book of Judges and read the well-known refrain “In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did as they pleased”[1] as a positive statement. This is not the common interpretation, although an alluring observation as it emphasizes freedom of the individual. This school additionally points to the Prophet Samuel’s opposition along with the subsequent failures and abuses found in the book of Kings. We explore this record below.

**Judges**

Proponents of decentralization point to the nation's ability to mobilize in crisis despite the lack of a sovereign in the book of Judges. One can counter that this was precisely the reason why the King is needed in the first place. Only after massive death and oppression by enemies on all sides do the tribes rise to action. Indeed "an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure" holds true when it comes to human life on the national scale. The period of Judges crescendos in anarchy with the cult of Michah, the gang- rape- murder of a concubine and another bloody civil war in which the tribe of Benjamin is nearly wiped out.

To suggest that the period of judges is successful, is to abrogate the importance of borders, security and sovereignty. Such a reality when ancient Israel was invaded dozens of times and occupied by eight different nations leaves little room for Israel to reach its potential as a light onto nations. Individuals may have prospered, or experienced freedom but only temporarily. In a situation akin to the newly founded United States under the Articles of Confederation, the tribes ultimately opt for Federalism with a strong centralized leadership and standing army.

**Samuel**

An outstanding personality, Samuel reinvigorates the monotheistic mission of Israel after decades of foreign subjection, civil war and failed direction. Samuel represents a leadership style reminiscent of Moses and Joshua, where the religious leader's authority is combined as the supreme political power. The people reject this leadership recipe and demand an independent political sovereign with a standing army.

Samuel warns the people of Israel of the cardinal sins of all monarchs: coercion of property and conscription of citizenry. The people reject Samuel's advice and insist on a sovereign. God therefore instructs Samuel to proceed as it is ultimately the people who have referendum and self- determination of their destiny.

After Samuel, the Prophet becomes a secondary figure in ancient Israel. This new separation of powers is a shifting of authority. The Prophet's role is now a voice of morality and counterbalances to power of the monarch. Nathan's reproach of David or Elijah's rebuke of Ahab are prime examples of outstanding religious figures who fulfill an essential but non- political role.

We might understand the ultimate social contract stuck in Samuel's time as the people willing to accept the principle of "absolute power corrupts absolutely" in exchange for security. The book of Samuel links security as a necessity to establishing a more just society explicitly: "I will establish a home for My people Israel and will plant them firm, so that they shall dwell secure and shall tremble no more. Evil men shall not oppress them any more as in the past" (Samuel II 7:10).

**Kings**

The period of the Kings is presented with King David and King Solomon as the Pinnacle of achievement. It is the paradigm for which Jews pray three times a day and the underpinnings of messianic yearnings. Solomon centralizes worship, builds a capital with infrastructure throughout the land while the common people experience peace and unprecedented prosperity. "All the days of Solomon, Judah and Israel from Dan to Beer-Sheba dwelt in safety, every family under its own vine and fig tree." (Kings 5:5)[2]. Surrounding nations pay tribute and visit Solomon in envy of the society he has created. Cyrus Gordon remarks that the Davidic Dynasty is the second longest ruling hereditary kingdom from Antiquity in the Middle East.

Yet, there are many abuses – even during David and Solomon's rule. A careful analysis of the Solomon narrative demonstrates an intertextual play between Solomon's abuses and those predicted by Samuel and the book of Deuteronomy. In a nuanced manner, the intertext reminds the careful reader, though political power may be necessity, it leads inevitably to abuses if not performed within the prescriptions of Deuteronomy.

There are several "good" kings such as Hezekiah or Josiah who fully repent and uphold the covenant while the people lapse, and there are many "bad" kings like Menashe that murder his own subjects. The existence of corruption is ubiquitous to all societies. This reality does not negate the benefits of centralized authority and bureaucracy or a government. The exile is ultimately caused by failed leadership and failure of the people. It would be an oversimplification of the narrative to suggest that only abuses of the monarch caused the exile.

**Deuteronomy**

In the Biblical Cannon, The Pentateuch outranks in the hierarchy of authoritative texts followed by the Prophets, Writings and Rabbinic tradition. Being a part of the Pentateuch, Deuteronomy dictates a sovereign king. While non- traditionalists will argue this portion as a later addition, one can counter that the redactor ultimately included this version in this final form that has been received in the Masoretic tradition. Regardless, on face value Deuteronomy's canonical authority still outranks Judges, Samuel and Jeremiah.

From a modern democratic point of view the people's election of a king in the book of Samuel presents a paradox. The request highlights the shortcomings of a democratic system- what happens when citizens democratically elect a despotic king? This is perhaps the anxiety of modern Israel's judiciary. As Modern Israel's traditional labor left loses election after election the same party headed by the longest reigning premier in modern Israel history continues to win majority after majority in the county's legislative branch. This lack of a defined executive branch in modern Israel carries risk.

Deuteronomy provides a balanced vision. A limited, constitutional monarchy which bounds the king is required to be hand copied by the sovereign and always kept with him. The King is beholden to the Almighty and covenant embedded in the Hebrew scriptures. In other words, the sovereign's power is limited by a constitution. This social contract must be recited publicly by the people every seven years. Additional safeguards such as holiday readings of the constitution and public posting of laws serve as principles to which the King must serve.

**Summary and Discussion**

On October 6$^{th}$ It seemed all at once that Israel was on the brink of success and failure all at once. The cutting edge of technological innovations and peace with Saudia Arabia on one hand and endless protests of judicial reform and legislative dysfunction on the other. To add onto the contentious environment, we also find ourselves in a US election year marked by particularly vitriolic partisanship when it comes to Israel.

There is something romantic about a society free of political class, executive branch or formal leadership. Perhaps the allure of unbounded freedom and frontier living fosters nostalgia of America's West or modern Israel's pioneering kibbutzim. Practically, creating such a society builds silos and a culture without shared values. Individuals must agree to limit personal freedom for overarching

social contracts of fidelity and accountability to ensure peace, prosperity and nation building. We would like to not limit our personal freedom and drive as we please without red lights or stop signs, but realize the value in creating a system that recognizes the needs of others. Without a strong central government capable of enforcing law and order, no great project- spiritual of physical are possible.

In the same manner that a company cannot function by committee and requires a single executive leader, so too with a country. In the United States, a balance was stuck by hard compromises of competing interests to establish a federalist system with an executive branch. This system is one very much based on the Bible and emerged out of the failed Articles of Confederation. The main innovation of the constitution is the adoption of a President. In an ironic way, it is now modern Israel which must take a cue from Untied States history to connect to its biblical precedent.

As modern Israel continues to face existential threats, we pray that a superior system will emerge that prioritizes the human rights of her own citizens and her own legitimacy above all else. Israel's current parliamentary system is modeled upon a watered-down version of England's, but notably without a king or magna carta. These aspects could be incorporated in an Israeli national constitution and carried out by an executive branch with proper checks and balances to promote law and order, sovereignty and justice.

Externally a unique society such as Israel requires a strong border and national security to safeguard her interests. Internally a centralized system with a strong executive branch prevents tribalism, relegates the other branches of power and thwarts special interest groups that can dominate a legislature. An executive branch protects against tyranny of the majority in the legislature by building bridges amongst interests and holding the power to veto and execute. The Bible's prescription to promote law and order, sovereignty, peace and prosperity to Israel and her people: constitution and an executive branch.

This election season let's strive to elevate the political discourse amongst our friends and families. The American system's architects understood the value of reading the Bible to guide their intentions. When we pray, we do so with the intent that Israel's leaders will merit divine enlightenment to emerge victorious and stronger from the current conflict.

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[1] This is the final verse in the Book of judges. It appears prior to the cult of Micha (18:1) and again before the raping of the concubine in 19:1

[2] CF “Judah and Israel were as numerous as the sands of the sea; they ate and drank and were content.” Kings 4:19