Is Judaism Democratic?

Leonard J. Greenspoon

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Since the State of Israel defines itself, for certain purposes, as both Jewish and
democratic, presumably these elements, while not the same, nevertheless can
combine in a useful or even complementary fashion. Democracy, whatever else
one might say about it, must be termed a form of government and, like all
such forms, promotes some aims and purposes more effectively than others.
From a Jewish perspective, then, the question must arise what contributions
democracy—or, practically speaking, liberal democracy—can make to key
Jewish goals. But what are these goals? Fukuyama’s influential analysis suggests
that the mutuality of egalitarian democracy, combined with the economic
productivity of liberal capitalism, makes liberal democracy the optimal solu-
tion to the political problem and hence the “end of History.” Since freedom
from slavery or domination and material prosperity express central goals of the
Torah, liberal democracy can fill an important role in Judaism. But Judaism
also seeks other aims, so that liberal democracy should serve it, rather than
as some ultimate endpoint or man-made solution, instead as a platform or
springboard for approaching the divine.

The concept of democracy, as the name suggests, emerges from the
Greek logic of regime analysis. Experience of a variety of polities—multieth-
nic empires, traditional kingships, new tyrannies, revolutionary egalitarian-
isms—raised for the Greeks an interlocking set of questions that focus on the
politieia or form of government. First, can one systematically outline all the
basic forms? Rule by one, by the few, by the many? By the rich or by the poor?
Under law or not? Virtuous or corrupt? To this day, most of the names in use
to describe forms of government come from classical Greece: oligarchy, aristoc-
racy, monarchy, tyranny, anarchy. Second, can one articulate rules of political
causality or change from one form to another, such as the tendency of a cor-
rupt oligarchy to be overthrown by a public-spirited popular movement? Does
rule by any one person tend to deteriorate into corrupt tyranny? Does the
instability of all forms lead, ultimately, to a cycle of regimes? Third, and most
characteristically, which regime form is the best? Rule by the philosopher-
kings of Plato’s Republic? Obeying the laws set down by a wise lawgiver? Or
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is Polybius correct to judge the mixed regime—which includes elements of rule by one, by the few, and by the many and that he attributes to Republican Rome—the most stable, and hence the best? The living relevance of this last emerges most clearly from the US Constitution, which not only provides for a president (one), a small Senate (few), and a large House of Representatives (many), but also explicitly guarantees to each of the several states a “Republican Form of Government” (IV.4). While the term democracy has received many different meanings, none of them is coherent outside this essentially Greek logic of regime analysis.

The foundational texts of Judaism display no interest in this Greek politeia discourse. Biblical texts, of course, display awareness of the various ways rulers exercise their authority; compare, for example, the decision-making process of Pharaoh as depicted in the first part of Exodus with that of Ahashverosh depicted in the scroll of Esther. But no biblical text itself makes a comparison of this kind nor seeks any more systematic taxonomy. In the absence of the Greek logic, language alone does not decide when a biblical melekh qualifies as a monarch—as opposed to, say, an elected but dominant figure like Pericles. With no taxonomy, there can be no investigation of causal interconnections and no concern for identifying the best form of government. This same systematic lack is just as evident—though raising more complex historical questions—in the corpus of rabbinic texts of Mishnah, Talmud, and midrash. Many Greek loanwords stud rabbinic language, but there is no sign of the vocabulary—and, more important, the logic—of politeia analysis. Indeed, without imagining a “pure” or “uninfluenced” Judaism pristinely divorced from historical context, the generalization still holds that Jewish authors do not engage with the themes and logic of Greek political philosophy, in the first instance, as Hebrew speakers. Since this Greek tradition forms the core of Western political thought in general, there is, in a strict sense, no comparable native Jewish tradition—as indeed the lack of a native Hebrew term for “politics” suggests.

The significance of this negative conclusion can hardly be overstated. If Aristotle is right that man is “a political animal by nature,” then this must include the Jews as well. Jewish thinkers show no shortage of interest in struggles for power and rulership—one need only think of the authors of Judges and Kings. But this does not by any means entail that thinking in the Greek terms of political analysis comes to humans “by nature.” To the contrary. Consequently, when scholars apply to Jewish texts and thinkers terms that grow (ultimately) out of the Greek political tradition—such as “elected
representatives,” “checks and balances,” “equal rights,” “separation of powers,” and of course “democracy”—this must be understood as importing concepts that do not spring from the intellectual tradition of the works in question.\(^7\)

There is nothing illegitimate in this practice—despite the risk of mistakenly imputing one’s own conceptual framework to the object of one’s studies—but it does have the unfortunate tendency to obscure the Jewish terms and approach to collective matters of rule and authority. These latter cannot, at the risk of begging the question, even be termed “political matters.” But once the Greek tradition becomes clearly identified, it can then be set aside and methodologically suspended so that the Hebrew texts have the opportunity to speak in their own terms and voice—without a Greek accent, as it were.

While the logic of *politeia* analysis neither engages nor appeals to Jewish thought overall, the logic of collective goals—what rule and authority should aim to accomplish—very much does. Whether the goal in question is the conquest of the Land of Israel, the purification of Temple worship, or the establishment of peace among peoples, many biblical characters and prophets exhort their audiences (and readers) toward large-scale collective actions. The rabbinic corpus similarly overflows with communal purposes and aims: from rescuing the aggrieved and supporting the poor, through providing public infrastructure and regulating the market, all the way to uprooting idolatry and pursuing the “paths of peace.” A particularly telling talmudic passage takes up the issue of whether and how one can sort out or in any way simplify this welter of imperatives.\(^8\) If the central questions of the Greek tradition are “Who should rule and how?” the Jewish thinkers focus primarily on “What is the aim to be accomplished? For what purpose should rule be exercised?” In this context, the distinction between the Greek and Jewish traditions can perhaps best be termed a difference of logic.\(^9\)

If this is an appropriate characterization of the logic of Jewish thinking about rule and community, then the emphasis in analysis should be to determine what Judaism has to say about goals. Quite a bit, it turns out. In the first instance, three goals stand out with particular salience. First, Egypt serves as a negative pole, the “iron furnace” and “house of bondage” that must be left behind before any other purpose can hope for realization. Physical removal, however, does not, unto itself, suffice. The people of Israel are exhorted to leave also the ways of Egypt, lest they merely reproduce a “house of bondage” in a new location.\(^10\) In a summary slogan, the goal is freedom from oppression. Second, as the Israelites are quick to point out, liberation without food is simply starvation. They are therefore offered not only water, manna, and
quail, but eventually also land, bread, well-being of every kind, the opportunity to sit each “under his vine and under his fig tree.” In a slogan, prosperity. The conjunction of these two goals forms precisely the divine plan or promise as laid out to Moses at the Burning Bush: “I will descend to save them from the hands of Egypt and to raise them from that land to a wide, good land, a land that oozes milk and honey” (Exod 3:8). This pair similarly structures the threats of suffering and retribution should Israel fail in its devotion to the covenant: “You will serve your enemies that God your Lord will send against you thirsty, hungry, naked and utterly lacking, and he will place an iron yoke on your neck until he destroys you” (Deut 28:48). Exile means losing both freedom and prosperity.

The aims of prosperity and freedom from oppression take their place within the overall framework of the covenant, of the relationship of Israel to her God. In some contexts there is haziness regarding the ends–means relations here; the Israelites at times appear to be motivated only by prosperity and freedom, for the sake of which the divine seems to serve as an effective means. But viewing God this way leads to problems—for example, of the sort raised by the accuser in the opening of the book of Job. But as far as the collective is concerned, there is ultimately little doubt that closeness to God—displayed through the pillars of cloud and fire, the Tabernacle and the Ark, or through expressions like “going before you,” “coming to you,” and especially “dwelling among you”—enjoys independent, indeed, ultimate status in its own right.

At the risk of imposing a ham-fisted unity on the rich variety of the Bible, and, a fortiori, of rabbinic and later strata, one can consider a “toy model” Judaism boiled down to these three aims: the negative goal of leaving “the house of bondage” (not just Egypt), the positive goal of inheriting a land of “milk and honey” (not just Canaan), and the relational goal of living in a covenant of divine intimacy (not just in Jerusalem). But even this artificial simplicity suffices to generate a raft of questions and difficulties and sets up what may be termed the central dilemma of Judaism: the biblical texts show these three aims systematically conflicting with and undermining one another. Egypt, for example, is itself a land of milk and honey, but it is also a house of bondage. The wilderness makes available contact with the divine, but the menu generates recurrent complaints. Perhaps most salient is the worry that the experience of freedom combined with prosperity will extinguish awareness of the divine grounds of these very attainments: “Beware, lest . . . when everything that is yours increases, your heart grow high and you forget God your
Lord who brought you out of the Land of Egypt” (Deut 8:11–14). If even so simplified a picture leads to the conclusion that the main aims of Judaism are in practice incompatible, this raises the possibility that Judaism is not merely difficult but perhaps ultimately futile.

This central dilemma can be confronted, but not solved. Genesis shows the trade-off between freedom and prosperity already at work among other nations as well, for example when the Egyptians, but not the Canaanites, choose to sell themselves into slavery under the pressure of famine (Gen 47:13–26). One possibility is that the divine covenant—including the restrictions divine law imposes on royal prerogatives and on ownership of the Land of Israel—allows Israel to escape from an apparently universal dynamic. But even if this is correct, such an approach (once again) converts God into a means for achieving human goals—which therefore makes it more a restatement of the dilemma than its dissolution.

Liberal democracy—though appearing in the first instance as a Greek-style politeia form—also remains caught in the central dilemma. On the one hand, individual liberty plays a decisive role in the technological capitalism that has lifted billions out of starvation. Judaism lauds this, fulfilling as it does the first human mission of “filling the earth and subduing it” (Gen 1:28). At the same time, liberal democracies also prevent as many people as possible from suffering oppression and injustice and seem to allow for indefinite improvement in this regard. There is less slavery—both formal and not—in democracies than elsewhere. The Jewish logic of aims thus justifies liberal democracy to a very considerable degree, seeing in this form of government—in the Greek sense—a valuable means for accomplishing essential goals. But precisely as a humanly devised means, liberal democracy threatens our awareness that all human deeds are founded on divinely given capacities: “Lest you say in your heart ‘My power and the force of my arm have brought me this success.’ But remember God your lord, for he gives you the power to succeed” (Deut 8:17–18). Indeed, taking liberal democracy as some kind of ultimate—as the best man-made solution to the human problems—risks running afoul of even the injunction against bowing down to the works of one’s own hands. Furthermore, liberal democracy also seems exposed to various kinds of perversions, corruption, and decay. It remains an open—and increasingly pressing—question whether these are best captured and ameliorated by the biblical goal-oriented warnings against success-worship and outright idolatry or perhaps better by the Greek politeia-oriented warnings against the tendency of democracy to decay into mob rule or tyranny.
Methodological suspension of the Greek perspective requires first a clearer view of just what this point of view entails, and here it is useful to begin with Herodotus, who gives the earliest account of systematic *politeia* analysis. As he sets the scene, the rule of Persia has been usurped by an imposter, and in response a cadre of loyalist nobles undertakes a bold strike against the usurpers. They succeed, but finding that the heirs of Cyrus are no more, they debate the future of Persia. Otanes advocates handing power over to the many, to the middling Persians, since they are not given to the profligacy, insolence, and instability of power-mad kings, ruling instead through equality and accountable, public deliberation. Megabyzus responds that, while he agrees with the critique of one-man rule, the many are basically ignorant and foolish, tending to deteriorate into a useless mob. The best decisions will be made by the best men, who are likely to be few—an aristocracy. Darius replies that the few can go just as bad as the many, while if we take any form of rule at its best, rule by one has the advantage. It prevents factional infighting and the risk of plans leaking to the enemy. In fact, the tendency of both popular and elitist movements ultimately to lead to one-man rule proves the superiority of monarchy. Thus ends the debate. But the set speeches Herodotus presents here have all the hallmarks of Greek rhetoric, and even though he insists on their veracity, no one who knows the Greek intellectual tradition is willing to accept at face value his attribution of the debate to the Persians.  

Perhaps the most famous *politeia* analysis is that offered in Plato’s dialogue of that name, *Politeia*—known in English as *Republic*. Here, Socrates details what he takes to be the best way to organize a city, which, as ruled by philosopher-kings, deserves the name *aristocracy*, rule of the best. But like all human things, this regime too will eventually fall into decline. Even a city focused on the pursuit of truth, Socrates explains, will eventually fail to propagate its education and will decay into a city focused instead on success, power, and glory. This latter city, in its turn, will be corrupted by pursuit of wealth into an oligarchy, which will in time be replaced in a revolutionary movement by a popular democracy. Democracy, as Socrates presents it, is typified not by focus on any one goal in particular, but rather by a refusal to focus, granting instead equal legitimacy to all aims. Openness of this kind, Socrates warns, is genuine openness and hence also openness to transgression. Eventually, he predicts, the openness in such a democracy to any craving will bring a transgressive tyrant to power.
Do democracy—as Plato understands it—and Judaism go together? From the perspective of Judaism, this kind of democracy offers genuine advantages in that its openness to all ends also allows Jews to pursue Jewish ends. Jewish ends in such a democracy are just as legitimate as any others; they are equal. But this pseudoequality is necessarily temporary. All forms of government, Socrates explains, create an environment in which the young are educated, and so too does democracy create a public culture in which the norms, both written and unwritten, train and educate its young. This democratic education, however, does not aim at Jewish ends but rather at the defining democratic end: the essential equality of all purposes. So if Judaism teaches any goals in particular—aside from the equality of all purposes—Jewish education will suffer limitations, perhaps severe, in such a democracy. Judaism will become private, clandestine, or even countercultural, and the younger generation will tend to feel psychic conflicts between devotion to the aims of Judaism and to the equality of all aims as taught by democracy. Such mental tension may be found among Jewish youths even in non-Athenian democracies.

Aristotle’s analysis of regime types aims to be more complete and is for that reason less clear and simple. He begins from the approach reported by Herodotus—rule by one, by few, by many—and then distinguishes whether the ruling segment rules for its own benefit or for the common good. This allows him to define one “correct” and one “perverse” regime type for each size of the ruling group, so that, for example, aristocracy is rule by the few for the common good, while oligarchy is rule by the few for the good of the few. So there seem to be six basic regime types. But then he points out that, while oligarchy seems to be defined by the fewness of its ruling class, this misses its essence. Oligarchy is primarily rule by the wealthy, while democracy is rule by the poor; it is merely coincidental that the wealthy are few and the poor many. Then it turns out that there are four or five different kinds of democracies, and so too of oligarchies.

Among the recommendations that Aristotle puts forward, one with a very rich afterlife is the idea of a mixed regime. Aristotle presents several versions here of both the rationale and the implementation, but the general thrust seems to be that, since each form of government offers different strengths and weaknesses, one should (ideally) be able to blend the forms so as to maximize the strengths while minimizing the weaknesses. Thus, for example, freedom, wealth, and excellence are each legitimate claims to a share of the rule, and each, if followed exclusively, would lead to democracy, oligarchy, and aristocracy respectively. But in an aristocracy, the great mass of men—who have little
share in excellence—would also have little share in rule and would be therefore embittered. Similarly, if the great mass of freemen—the poor—were given access to the common purse, the temptation to feather their own nests would be overwhelming. But if the masses can serve in groups—such as on juries—then their strengths can be brought to bear while minimizing exposure to their weaknesses. Executive power, by contrast, such as military leadership, should rest with those who are most able. If the blend is successful—as Aristotle suggests that Sparta’s was—one could name this regime either a democracy or an oligarchy, but actually neither would be strictly appropriate; the right name is the generic politeia.

Writing some two centuries after Aristotle, Polybius offers a stripped-down and systematized version of this kind of politeia analysis. Book six of his Histories not only follows a schema of six basic regime types similar to Aristotle’s, but also proposes two laws of evolution: healthy regimes decay into corrupt ones and these in turn are ousted by the public-spiritedness of a larger group. Thus a monarch will tend to become a tyrant, and a tyrant will tend to be overthrown by a virtuous elite and its aristocracy—which will eventually decay into an oligarchy, and so forth. The instability of all forms leads Polybius to assume a never-ending cycle and to propose that the best regime is one that can escape this cycle. It must therefore be a mixed regime, balancing the strengths and weaknesses of the one, the few, and many. Polybius sees in Republican Rome—with its king-like consuls, its elitist Senate, and its popular plebs and tribunes—an instantiation of this mixture and a demonstration of its superiority.

Modern republicanism can mean many things, but in the first instance it refers to something like this interpretation of the Roman constitution. Thinkers of the later Roman and medieval periods offer many approaches that emphasize virtuous, legitimate, or even divine kingship, but from at least the Latin translation of Aristotle’s Politics in the mid-thirteenth century, the notion gains traction in the West that proper rule is shared, limited rule. By the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries (at least), Venice, Florence, and other Italian city-states begin to develop some kind of republican self-understanding and this—on at least some readings of the evidence—eventually finds its way into an “Atlantic” republican tradition including (in various ways) English and American thinkers and politicians such as James Harrington, Henry St. John Bolingbroke, John Adams, and Thomas Jefferson. The various discourses of corruption and virtue, constitutionalism, opposition to tyranny, separation of powers, and checks and balances form a rich backdrop to seventeenth and
eighteenth century Anglo-American political thought, study, and dispute, but regardless of whether any given thinker works with terminology from Polybius, Livy, Tacitus, or even directly from Aristotle, one basic fact remains: the entire discussion presupposes the search for the correct or best form of government. The logic of Greek *politeia* analysis thus remains prominent—indeed, dominant—to this day, and it is this logic that will need to be put in abeyance so as to allow a clearer view of the Jewish thinkers.

THREE GOALS OF THE JEWISH TRADITION

Whatever account one gives of the rich variety exemplified in the Pentateuch, one cannot mistake the central thrust of the composite whole. From the blessings of land and progeny offered to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to the blessings—and apposite curses—dealt out by Moses at both Sinai and Moab, the core issue remains surprisingly consistent. The Torah concerns itself above all else with the fertility of man, plant, and animal. Blessing, in the first instance, means children, plain and simple—immediately followed by the agricultural productivity for feeding and supporting same. As the key to all such growth resides in the rain, God can appear as sitting in the sky, all but literally opening and closing the spigot of precious water—hence, of food and life itself. While mere life is the minimal, bottom-line goal, the pinnacle or complete fulfillment of this aim and blessing comes to be expressed in various symbols: in the prophetic writings, each sits “under one’s vine and under one’s fig” (1 Kgs 5:5, Mic 4:4; cf. Isa 36:16, Amos 9:14, Zech 3:10); but in the Pentateuch, the preferred expression is simply to inherit “a land that oozes milk and honey” (cf. Joel 4:18).

This last expression performs such important work in the Pentateuch that it deserves somewhat closer analysis. *Devash*, usually rendered as “honey,” refers more broadly to the sticky, sweet ichor that drips from any appropriate source, be it fruits like dates or figs, or from actual bees’ hives. But the sugary sweetness of *devash*, no matter how delicious, does not exhaust the category of good things to eat. In particular, fruits that are sweet are not fatty or rich, and conversely fatty, rich fruits—like the olive or the modern avocado—are not sweet. If the combination of sweet with fatty-rich cannot be found in creation, it must arise from human artifice. But in other contexts the Torah’s law imposes various restrictions on the power to effect novel combinations of either plants or animals, perhaps the most obvious example being the prohibition of cooking a kid in its mother’s milk (Exod 23:19, 34:26; Deut 12:21).
The artificial combination of sweet and fatty-rich—still, to this day, all but definitive of desserts such as ice cream—stands out not only for being subject to no restrictions but also for serving as unqualified praise for the land that can produce it. This praise, incidentally, applies not only to Israel, since Egypt too is a land of milk and honey (Num 16:13, on which more below). But put more broadly, milk-and-honey is the paradigm of dessert and so serves as an appropriate figure for the goal of fertility reaching its zenith.

One further remark on the verb *zavat*, often translated as “flowing.” This is the usual term for bodily discharges, either specifically menstrual or more generally discharges from the sexual organs of male or female. This verb thus emphasizes the spontaneous, perhaps even undesired, character of the discharge in question. The land of Israel thus receives praise as a land that, in a sense, could not help exuding sweet, creamy desserts. Certainly the need to work, farm, and herd is not to be literally obviated, but the figure implies that the land offers an almost automatic source of luxurious delicacies (cf. TB *Ketubot* 111b).

Starting from the core concern of children, land, and fertility, the next issue is security, as in “May God bless you—and guard you” (Num 6:24). Already the Patriarchs are struggling with their neighbors—such as Egypt and Gerar—and so receive blessings expanded to include success in these confrontations (Gen 15:1, 13–14, 28:15). By the time that Israel has grown into a nation of multitudes in Egypt and been subjected to slavery and Pharaoh’s genocidal policies, suffering under hostile domination begins to eclipse even the core issue of prosperity and fertility. At the Burning Bush, God commissions Moses for the leadership role in a plan that will dominate the entire Pentateuch: “I will descend to save [my people] from the hands of Egypt and to raise them from that land to a wide, good land, a land that oozes milk and honey” (Exod 3:8). Eventually, the blessings at Sinai and Moab will gloss this secondary goal as military victory over enemies, supremacy, and peace (Lev 26:3–13; Deut 28:1–14).

This Burning Bush pair—leaving the house of bondage to inherit a land of milk and honey—has become a cliché, but really requires highlighting and analysis. The first and more urgent goal presents a negative character: escape from, release from, salvation from. But from what? Leaving Egypt means more than just leaving slavery. After all, slavery will be permitted in the Land of Israel, indeed, even the enslavement of Israelites. Egypt not only allows slavery, but is itself “the house of bondage”—the homepage of slavery, as it were. Egypt houses systematic slavery, even independently of the fate of the Israelites.
(Gen 47:18–26). Leaving the “iron furnace” of Egypt (Deut 4:20) thus means escaping this collective, pervasive, and systematic oppression and entering a shared existence that is no longer structured by relations of domination. Other Israelites are “your fellow,” “your companion,” and “your brother”—which last category must also include Israel’s king—while the stranger in one’s midst must be loved and not oppressed. The positive goal, of course, is good food—in fact, dessert—serving to symbolize a form of life that affords enjoyment: plenty, prosperity, and leisure. As a pair, these two goals frame communal motion: from negative to positive, from oppression and misery to freedom and plenty. These goals form the structural background to the story of the Exodus and—since the reverse motion always remains possible—to the stories of exile and of redemption as well. In a sense, this pair sets the evaluative background stage-set against which the “plot” of the various large-scale Jewish stories unfolds.

Together with the movement toward freedom and prosperity—or however we gloss the Burning Bush plan—the Torah also holds out a special relationship with God as an aim of the community. Whether in the context of freedom from slavery—“And I will take you to me for a people and I will be your Lord and you will know that I am God your Lord who has brought out from under the oppressions of Egypt” (Exod 6:7)—or of providing food—“At evening you will eat meat and in the morning you will sate yourself with bread and you will know that I am God your Lord” (Exod 16:12)—experience and recognition of God’s involvement with the fate of the Jewish people stands as a goal in its own right. This stands out most clearly after Moses has pacified God’s anger in the wake of the Golden Calf. God makes clear that he will uphold the terms of his covenant and will bring the people into the land promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, a land of milk and honey, but “I will not go up in your midst, for you are a stiff-necked people, lest I consume you on the way” (Exod 33:4). This bad news precipitates mourning among the people and generates further rounds of negotiations among Israel, Moses, and God such that, eventually, God relents. Moses urges God to return his relationship with Israel from one at a “hands-off” distance to one of direct proximity (cf. Exod 33:13–16 with 34:9–10). The tedious reiteration in Exodus 35–39 of the Mishkan [Tabernacle], in all its design and execution details, thus constitutes reaffirmation that the consequences of the Golden Calf have been finally averted and God is willing to take up residence, as it were, in the midst of the camp. God’s absence, apparently, constitutes bad news unto itself, even when freedom and prosperity are not at issue.
Even this simplified three-goal Judaism generates many questions and problems. In the first instance, one might wonder about this relationship with God that is not merely described or assumed but also expected, demanded, and indeed commanded: “Love God your Lord with all your mind, all your life and all your power” (Deut 6:5). In some passages, it appears as if God serves merely as the gatekeeper of certain blessings—most obviously rain and progeny. Here, relationship with the divine seems to exercise no independent attraction, but to serve rather as an extrinsic means for getting what one really wants. Indeed, the rhetoric of Deuteronomy returns over and over to something like this extrinsic relation, using locutions such as “in order that” [le-ma’an], as if the truly motivating end-goals are leveraged by God to extract some kind of cooperation and submission: “All this commandment which I command you this day shall you take care to perform, in order that you may live and increase and come and inherit the land God promised to your ancestors” (Deut 8:1). “And write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. In order that your days and the days of your children on the ground that God your Lord swore to your ancestors to give to them shall be as the days of the sky over the land” (Deut 11:21). “For today I command you to love God your Lord, to walk in his ways and to keep his commandments, statutes and judgments, and you will live and increase and God your Lord will bless you in the land to which you are going to inherit it” (Deut 30:16). In short, “you” should do what God wants in order to get the good things “you” want. As a matter of logic, any role God might take as redeemer, protector, or provider of any good or blessing has lurking within it the potential for such a mercenary, give-and-take approach—though, of course, Deuteronomy clearly insists on the unique and intimate relationship that arises from God and Israel choosing and cleaving to one another (e.g., Deut 26:16–19). Still, the worry that this genuineness might be undermined precisely by God’s generosity powers the thought-experiment in the prologue to Job.

THE CENTRAL DILEMMA OF JUDAISM

The ice-cream prosperity implied by the expression milk and honey serves not only as the positive moment in the divine plan of redemption, but also as a term of legitimation in disputes over rulership. Though at numerous points in the trials of the wilderness the issue arises as to whether Israel might not prefer to be in Egypt (e.g., Exod 13:17, 14:11–12, 17:3; Num 11:5, 14:3–4, 20:5, 21:5), in none of these cases does the text record an actual confrontation or
struggle over leadership and policy. The only case of outright rebellion involves one Korach leading a coalition of the disgruntled against the primacy of Amram’s children, Moses and Aaron. Korach, representing the Levitical house next in line after Amram’s, conspires together with representatives of the tribe of Reuven (Israel’s first born), who presumably nurture resentment against the primacy of the tribe of Judah.\textsuperscript{24} Moses initiates separate negotiations with each faction, but the Reuvenites Datan and Aviram reject these overtures:

\begin{quote}
Is it so little that you have brought us up from a land that oozes milk and honey to kill us in the wilderness that you should also flaunt your rule over us? But you have not brought us into a land that oozes milk and honey and given us an inheritance of field and vineyard. Will you put out these people’s eyes? No, we will not come! (Num 16:13–14)
\end{quote}

The first thing to note about this speech is that, on the level of principle, the Reuvenites advance here what could be called the milk-and-honey standard for Jewish leadership: he who can provide the ice cream deserves to rule. “You, Moses,” they seem to say, “would have a good claim to rule if you were to give us ice cream—or at least, reliable sources of bread and wine. But you have not done that, now have you?” Not only do they invoke the milk-and-honey standard, but—more important—they expect it to be clear that these are the proper terms for conducting the debate. Their claim is not open to rebuttals like, “But you are no longer slaves, right? That must be worth something?” Indeed, the Reuvenites take their complaint as so irrefutable—and Moses makes no effort to refute it—that it eliminates room for any real negotiations.\textsuperscript{25}

A second thing to note is the status of the land of Egypt. Of course Egypt offers flesh-pots and abundant fish and vegetables, and is simply called “the garden of God” (Gen 13:10). But here, the Reuvenites add that Egypt, like the Land of Israel, is also a land of milk and honey. It is not vaguely attractive in some fashion or other but in fact fully satisfies the positive plank in the Exodus plan. Nothing better is to be found in Canaan, at least as far as this matter is concerned. The claim against Moses amounts to a sharpened version of the old “Why did you take us out of Egypt?” complaint: “Even at best, the most you could do is restore to us what we gave up when we left Egypt—and even that you have not done.”

Now the deep problems begin to show themselves. Egypt is itself a land of milk and honey, but unfortunately it is also the house of bondage. Even
worse, it seems that these two facts are not unrelated. Genesis relates how, after
Joseph has stored up the surplus of the seven years of bounty under Pharaoh’s
control, the ensuing famine eventually brings the Egyptians voluntarily to
offer themselves as slaves:

“We will not hide from our master. Our money and cattle are com-
pletely given to our master, and there is nothing to offer our master
but our bodies and our land. Why should we die before your eyes,
both we and our land? Buy us and our land with bread and we and
our land will be slaves to Pharaoh. You give seed, and let us live and
not die, that the land may not become desolate.” So Joseph bought
all the lands of Egypt for Pharaoh, for the Egyptians each sold his
field, since the famine was hard on them, and the land become
Pharaoh’s. . . . They said: “You have revived us. May we find favor in
your eyes that we be slaves to Pharaoh.” (Gen. 47:18–20, 25)

Systematic slavery, on this account, is not merely accepted but actually
chosen. The Egyptians’ reasoning here is simple: better to be slaves than to
starve—as the Israelites will later agree when contemplating starvation in the
wilderness. Since famine is not unique to Egypt—the land of Canaan suffers
from it regularly—this specific form of reasoning is made possible, ironically,
precisely by Egypt’s prosperity; if there were no surplus to be prudently stored
up, there would be no choice but to accept the ravages of famine. The survi-
vors might be few, but they would remain free. Indeed, the narrative points
silently to the possibility of preferring this outcome. Once Joseph has gathered
all the money in Egypt and in Canaan, his next offer is to buy cattle. This, the
Canaanites decline to do; they keep their cattle and presumably starve—but
remain free. The Egyptians, by contrast, sell their cattle and then, at the next
stage, sell themselves. But selling oneself is only possible because, in Egypt,
there is something to buy.

This insight raises the harrowing thought that becoming a house of bond-
age is not a uniquely Egyptian phenomenon. Buying someone’s freedom is
expensive, which means that prosperity (for some) is a precondition of slavery
(for others). But if prosperity contains within it the seeds of oppression, then
perhaps Egypt is merely an exemplar of a general tendency. Perhaps lands of
milk and honey will always tend to become houses of bondage.26 If this is so,
then the entailed conclusion cannot be emphasized too strongly. The Exodus
project of leaving Egypt to enter a prosperous land might turn out, in the end,
to be self-undermining and self-defeating. Israel might leave Egypt only to
inherit the land of Canaan—and then turn this into a new house of bondage.
This is the central dilemma of Judaism; if prosperity must always lead to systematic oppression, then Judaism as understood in the Pentateuch is impossible. Clearly, this conclusion is intolerable. But precisely for that reason its possibility must be thought through with the utmost care. 27

The first explicit spokesman for a version of the central dilemma turns out to be none other than the prophet Samuel. In his notorious—and controversial—speech against the establishment of a kingdom, he outlines the oppression that a king can be expected to impose on his subjects:

Samuel said “This is what you can expect from the king who will rule over you: he will take your sons to appoint them for his chariots and cavalry, that they will run before his chariot, and to appoint captains of thousands and of fifties, and to plow his fields and reap his harvest and to make his tools of war and chariotteering. Your daughters he will take for perfumers and cooks and bakers. Your best fields and vineyards and olives he will take and give to his servants. Your seed and vineyards he will tithe and give to his eunuchs and servants. Your male and female slaves and your best youths and your donkeys he will take and use for his labors. Your flocks he will tithe and you will be his slaves. On that day you will cry out because of the king you have chosen for yourselves, but God will not answer you on that day.” But the people refused to listen to Samuel’s voice and said: “No, but rather we will have a king over us.” (1 Sam 8:11–19)

The talmudic sages are already debating whether Samuel outlines here permitted behavior of the king or whether he takes these acts to be wrongful, but nevertheless predictable, outcomes of giving any man such royal authority. 28 But whether the takings in question are legitimate or not, it is hard not to hear in Samuel’s warning familiar overtones. Your king will make you slaves—just like you were in Egypt. But when you cry out [ve-za’aqtem] in the face of your oppression—as you did in Egypt—now God will not answer your cries—as he did in Egypt. This king, unlike Pharaoh, you have chosen for yourselves.

Samuel’s exhortation indicates how systematic subjugation can emerge from prosperity. Only because one already possesses “fields, vineyards, and olives” can these be confiscated. The more productive one’s land and flocks, the more these can be taxed. The more children one has, the more who can be conscripted. These takings then have a twofold effect. On the one hand—as in the case of the starving Egyptians—the relationship of exploitation can come into being only in the context of the gifts of prosperity. If a good does not exist, it cannot change hands as a sign of submission. On the other hand, prosperity
fuels the mechanism of domination. Though less explicitly, Samuel’s warning implies that the more goods become available for confiscation, the more the king’s activities and personnel can expand. Presumably the king’s horses and men have useful functions to perform, but one of their uses can be to oppress the people and extract more and still more resources—limited, as always, by the available measure of prosperity.

Samuel’s warning qualifies as prophecy in the sense of predicting the future. Saul is not a particularly oppressive king—if anything, he is chastised for leading too gently (1 Sam 15:17)—and while David apparently lays the foundations for a royal bureaucracy, his labors are presented as funded not by taxation, but by pillage from foreign wars and as aimed, not at royal aggrandizement, but at building the Temple of God (1 Chr 26–28). The first signs of oppression come in Solomon’s reign. The royal bureaucracy can now put endless dainties on the king’s table, and while internal taxation clearly receives a substantial boost from foreign tribute, impressed Israeli labor reaches four months a year for each of 30,000 men (1 Kgs 4–5). Eerily, the text pictures the wonderful prosperity of the Israelites hand-in-hand with the growing power of the king and his coercive machinery:

Judah and Israel were as numerous as the sand by the sea, eating, drinking and merry. Solomon ruled all the kingdoms from the River and the land of the Philistines to the border of Egypt, paying tribute and serving Solomon all the days of his life.

And the bread of Solomon’s table for a single day was thirty kor fine flour and sixty kor of meal. Ten fine cattle and twenty pastured cattle and a hundred sheep, besides deer, gazelles, antelopes and fed fowl. For he held power out to the River Euphrates, over all the kings on this side of the River from Tifsach to Gaza, and he had peace in every direction roundabout. Judah and Israel dwelt securely, each one under his vine and under his fig, from Dan to Beersheva, all the days of Solomon.

And Solomon had forty thousand horse stables for his chariots and twelve thousand cavalry. These officials, each for his month, provisioned King Solomon and whoever was close to King Solomon’s table so that nothing was lacking. Each in his turn brought to the proper place barley and hay for the horses and steeds. (1 Kgs 4:20–5:8)

At this point, the role of the governing machinery still appears innocuous, but its capacities lay the foundations for what will come. Eventually,
Solomon will violate enough of the covenant that his kingdom is doomed to division after his death. But his ability to carry out these violations depends on the executive power built into his burgeoning bureaucracy.

At its conclusion, Solomon’s reign comes in for public review and scrutiny as his son Rehoboam is about to ascend to the kingship. Rehoboam goes to Shechem for this sensitive occasion, and there the gathered crowd petitions him thus: “Your father made our burden hard, but if you now ease the hard labor [‘avodat ‘avikha ha-qashah] and the heavy burden that your father put upon us, we will serve you” (1 Kgs 12:5). Rehoboam promises a response in three days, during which time he takes counsel. The elders who served during Solomon’s lifetime advise Rehoboam to relent and gain the confidence, affection, and obedience of the people, whereas the youths who grew up with him recommend threats and a show of strength. He chooses the latter, answering the people thus: “Now my father loaded you with a heavy burden, and I will add to your burden; my father punished you with whips and I will punish you with scorpions” (1 Kgs 12:14).

The central dilemma begins here to show itself. Obviously, the narrative points to the insolence and imprudence of youth raised in power and prosperity, as opposed to the level-headed sobriety of their elders—who presumably worked to achieve these goods. But greater analytical importance must attach to the retrospective view shared by all parties—the elders, the youth, the populace, and even Rehoboam himself: that Solomon imposed heavy burdens on Israel. No one advises Rehoboam to reply: “Why are you complaining? My father never burdened you at all.” All parties agree that Solomon imposed the “hard labor” [‘avodah qashah] that resounds with the memory of Egyptian slavery (cf. Exod 1:14; Deut 26:6). Perhaps the advice of the elders could have laid the foundations for a better future, but there is little room for doubt that, by the end of his reign—not coincidentally, after marrying Pharaoh’s daughter (1 Kgs 11:1)—Solomon had begun to turn the Land of Israel, oozing with milk and honey, into a house of bondage; he had begun to produce an Israeli Egypt. This outcome can hardly be called inevitable, but the course of events that makes it plausible—indeed, likely—exemplifies the central dilemma of Judaism.

From the perspective of Moses at the Burning Bush, the question “Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh and that I should take the Children of Israel out of Egypt?” now seems laden with bitter irony (Exod 3:11). If exodus from Egypt ultimately leads Israel back into bondage—only this time under God’s anointed in Canaan—then, indeed, why bother?
CONFRONTING THE CENTRAL DILEMMA

The Torah’s laws evince awareness of this central dilemma and include explicit legislation apparently aimed at avoiding the slide of a prosperous Israel into systematic servitude. Clearest of these are the restrictions imposed on the king. On the practical level, he is to limit the number of his wives—presumably, for diplomatic marriage—and of his horses—the core of his military power—as well as the overall extent of his amassed wealth (Deut 17:16–17). On the level of loyalties, he must be an Israelite, committed to the same law and covenant as all his brothers, and he must diligently study the law, “To prevent his heart from being lifted up above his brothers, and to prevent him from turning aside from the commandment right or left” (Deut 17:20).

Solomon violates these restrictions systematically. His annual income in gold is registered as 666 talents, so that “silver was thought of as nothing in Solomon’s time” (1 Kgs 10:14, 21). His stables count 1,400 chariots and 12,000 cavalry, the horses of which are sourced—no surprise—from Egypt (cf. Deut 17:16). His wives end up numbering 700—in addition to 300 concubines—so that they “turn aside his mind” (1 Kgs 11:3–4). Solomon also violates the covenant and turns to other gods, and though he is not explicitly described as thinking himself above his brothers, this too seems to belong to overall picture.

Comparison of the Deuteronomy laws and the Solomon narrative suggests how the laws are aimed at evading the central dilemma. If the king can be restrained from certain critical forms of self-aggrandizement, then the Solomonic outcome can, apparently, be prevented. Presumably, for such a law-abiding king, his capacity—and indeed, willingness—to oppress his brothers will be decisively curtailed. In contrast with Solomon’s son, who inherits only a fragment of his father’s throne and power, the laws justify themselves as “in order that his days of rulership may be lengthened, his and his sons in the midst of Israel” (Deut 17:20).

The Torah’s efforts to confront the central dilemma emerge in other contexts as well, since Israel can become a house of bondage even without an oppressive king. While the enslavement of one Jew by another is permitted, it is even more carefully delimited than the powers of the king. Such enslavement must not exceed six years, may not be enforced harshly, must allow midterm redemption, and must conclude with a substantial severance package. Most importantly, the alienation from one’s patrimonial land—precisely the concern that led the Egyptians to opt in favor of slavery—must itself be limited by the
Jubilee year. Since slavery is closely related to economic difficulties, the law seeks to inhibit each stage of the slippery slope down to financial ruin—from debt, to interest, to selling land, and finally to selling oneself—by carefully leaving at each stage an opening for return to independence and stability of some sort. Debts are cancelled every seven years; the taking of interest is prohibited; family members can, at will, redeem the enslaved as well as sold land; and every fifty years the land-ownership basis of the economy is reset. Now, the situations regulated by these laws come into being only in a land sufficiently productive that someone has the means to beggar another, buy him out, and then buy him outright. Prosperity thus sets the stage for systematic slavery “from the bottom up,” as it were, without the need for an exploitative ruler. The legal framework of which Leviticus 25 is the epicenter makes best sense as a preemptive cure for this “decentralized” version of the central dilemma.

This antislavery regime fails in Judea no less spectacularly than the regulations on the king do in Solomon’s case. Jeremiah relates how, in the fading years of the kingdom of Judea, King Zedekiah calls on his people to let their Jewish slaves go free—making a covenant to proclaim liberty [dror] in the land. This the Judeans indeed do—for a moment. But having set their slaves free, the people, led by the nobility, promptly turn around and recapture these newly freed individuals and take them back into bondage (Jer 34:8–11). Perhaps Zedekiah embarks here on a last-ditch attempt to turn Judea into something better, into something that does not deserve divine wrath or betray the entire thrust of the Exodus. But it does not work. Even the leadership of the king is not enough to turn what has apparently become an Israelite house of bondage into something that deserves to stand. The response is straightforward. Just as you, says God, have failed the covenant from when I took you out of the house of bondage, to proclaim liberty and to limit slavery, so will I proclaim to you “liberty to the sword, to plague, and to famine, and I will make you a horror to all the kingdoms of the land” (Jer 34:17). Judea delanda est.

As law clearly suffers severe limitations in confronting the central dilemma, the Torah also works to do so through its rhetoric. Deuteronomy in particular repeatedly sets out to undermine the confidence, pride, and swagger that prosperity can generate, emphasizing the dependence of Israel’s freedom and prosperity on the divine covenant:

When God your lord brings you into the land that he swore to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob to give to you—large and good cities that you did not build, houses full of all good which you did not fill, carven cisterns that you did not excavate, vineyards and olives that you
did not plant—and you eat and are satisfied. Beware lest you forget God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage. (Deut 6:10–12)

God did not crave you and choose you because you are more numerous than other peoples, for indeed you are the least of all the peoples. Rather, because of God’s love for you, and because of his keeping the oath that he swore to your ancestors did God take you out with a strong arm and redeem you from the house of bondage, out of the arms of Pharaoh, king of Egypt. (Deut 7:7–8)

Beware lest you forget God your lord, so that you do not keep his commandments, judgments and ordinances which I command you today. Lest—when you eat and be satisfied, build good homes and settle in them, your cattle and flocks increase, you gain much silver and gold and everything of yours increases—your heart grow high and you forget God your lord who brought you out of the land of Egypt from the house of bondage. . . . Lest you say in your heart “My power and the force of my arm have brought me this success.” But remember God your lord, for he gives you the power to succeed in order to fulfill the covenant which he swore to your ancestors as if it were today. (Deut 8:11–13, 17–18)

This near-obsessive rhetoric, like the legal restraints, seems ultimately fruitless. Indeed, both God and Moses announce by the end of the book that they know the Jews well enough to predict that they will fail so that the central dilemma overcomes them (Deut 31:16, 29).

One can imagine a spiritual-minded complainer who finds a bitter satisfaction in this whole picture. “Of course the pursuit of prosperity and freedom from oppression, unto themselves, must ultimately fail,” such a one might insist. “We must relate to God directly, intimately, lovingly, or the whole business is pointless. Was not establishing that sort of special relationship precisely one of the three central goals of Judaism? If only Israel had remained committed to the covenant, she would have enjoyed all the freedom and prosperity that God continually promised—and that offer still stands.” This complaint certainly captures a main thrust of the Pentateuch and seems to summarize the analysis of the central dilemma so far. Combining the goals of leaving slavery and inheriting milk and honey seems impossible, since insisting on freedom leads to poverty while gaining prosperity opens the way to oppression. So the spiritualist offers a way out: if only one can remember the divine origins of both freedom and well-being and perform the covenantal obligations that follow from this recognition, then all will be well.
The king will not become oppressive, bound as he must be by the law, and so too the laws of debt, land, and manumission will prevent society from splitting apart into slave-drivers and slaves. Israel will not forget, glory in its own power, or allow its heart to become "high." Pursuing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with her God, Israel will fulfill Micah’s prophetic vision, and more besides.

This approach, despite its admittedly solid textual and analytic foundations, nevertheless generates problems in the ends-means relations analogous to those noted above, if higher level and more refined. The covenant-centric view points to the critical position of devotion to the divine, since without it the central dilemma will remain unsolvable. But even if this is completely correct—precisely if it is correct—it leaves the worry that God will enter Israel’s consciousness as merely a means to solving these collective contradictions. Such a relationship to God need not be as crass as searching for some divine ATM to dish out rain and fecundity and beat up one’s enemies. The problems embodied in the central dilemma cut much deeper into the collective life and soul of the nation, and invoking devotion to God as the only solution to these is hardly so reductive. But on such a view, relationship with God remains a means—the highest means—that is only extrinsically related to one’s real goals. If Israel could just enjoy the fruits of freedom and prosperity without worry about the consequences of her own future behavior, there would be no need for all this law, exhortation, and covenant. Confronted with the central dilemma, Israel might choose God—as the least bad option. This, God does not want—though he may be willing to tolerate it. Such grudging devotion may prevent national disaster, but, ultimately, God does not want Israel to conclude that it is simply prudent long-term policy to love and obey him. This would not constitute a true relationship.

Determining whether a collective’s relation to God is genuine or mercenary may require a reversal of the test that opens Job. There, the accuser submits for divine consideration the thought that Job’s piety is founded on quid pro quo, that as long as the divine goodies keep coming, Job will remain solicitous and obedient. Conversely, should this alleged payment cease, so too will Job’s piety. This suspicion turns out to be ill founded: Job retains his devotion even when his blessings—goods, family, health—are systematically revoked. In a sense, one can say that the experience of the Exile proves that Israel can pass a collective version of this test. Even deprived of land, wealth, security, and the Temple as a clear symbol of God’s presence and favor, Israel retained a fundamental devotion to her covenant and her God.
But the reverse test applies to the central dilemma. In the hopes of retrieving—and retaining—her land and the blessings of prosperity, security, and freedom that come with independence, Israel might very well turn to God for help, support, and blessing. The question then arises whether this call is fundamentally utilitarian in intent, and the test for this turns on what happens after these hopes are fulfilled. Will leaving bondage and inheriting a land of milk and honey give Israel the opportunity to forget her God, her covenant, and eventually fall prey to the central dilemma? Will the threat of the central dilemma keep Israel in line, while caring for her provider and protector in precisely those terms, and no more? Put differently, if the freedom and prosperity were reliable or even guaranteed, would Israel still feel that something is lacking, something missing? Who would then say, with the sons of Korach: “Like a buck panting for streams of water, so does my life pant for you, Lord. My life thirsts for the Lord, for the living Power. When will I come and see the face of the Lord?” (Ps 42:2–4)

This issue remains, at the present time, open.

HISTORY’S “END” AND TWO CHEERS FOR LIBERAL DEMOCRACY

The Bible assigns to each of the kings of Judah and Israel an overall assessment regarding his impact on the people and the divine covenant. Of Amaziah, for example: “He did what was right in God’s eyes, but not like his ancestor David; everything that his father Joash did, so he did” (2 Kgs 14:3), or, more briefly: “He did what was right in God’s eyes, but not with a whole heart” (2 Chr 25:2). Some kings are praised—Josiah outstanding among them—while many others are reviled as doing “what was bad in the eyes of God.” Kings, the Bible makes clear, rule for a purpose and can therefore be judged as to how well or poorly they further that purpose. The logic of goals enjoys priority over the logic of regimes.

Presumably, the same is true of melekh. Was Prime Minister Levi Eshkol good for the Jews? Independent of the answer—probably a big “yes”—the analytic emphasis needs to fall on the question. The institutions of Jewish communities from Cairo and Poland to Cape Town and Kansas City have always acted through some unstable, often ill-defined combination of oligarchic gevirim, rabbinical leadership, and rank-and-file populism. The mixture in this mixed regime form remained fluid, changing with time, place, and circumstance. But this flexibility was possible because there was rarely serious
doubt as to the aims of these institutions, the standards by which their success
or failure could be judged. For example, R’ Meir of Rothenburg concluded
a complex thirteenth century legal ruling with this warning and exhortation:
“And this would lead to grievous feuds without end. May God bless us that
we become one nation and a unified brotherhood. I pray that we manage to
survive amidst our enemies.”

In short, Judaism takes the goals of collective life—with all their com-
plexities and contradictions—as logically prior to the various political regime
forms; these latter can and must be judged and adjusted according to their
value for and contribution to the former. The *politeia* is a means, not an end.

In present circumstances, the most urgent such judgment concerns the
value, from the Jewish point of view, of contemporary liberal democracy. Is
liberal democracy, as Francis Fukuyama famously suggested, the “final form of
human government”? Does the combination of liberal capitalism with egalitar-
ian democracy produce a form of political organization in which humanity
can be “completely satisfied”? The prima facie case in favor of this judgment
enjoys considerable strength, indeed, precisely with reference to the Jewish cri-
teria outlined above. Liberal capitalism has produced in the past two or three
centuries fabulously more prosperity—more milk and honey, more ice cream—
than mankind has ever before experienced. Billions have been lifted out of
starvation, while hundreds of millions live in a comfort and luxury previously
unimagined for any but the wealthiest and most powerful of men. What could
qualify as a better fulfillment of the imperative to “fill the earth and subdue
it” (Gen 1:28)? At the same time, egalitarian democracy, founding the legiti-
macy of government in the consent of its citizens, grants to every one of them
some share, however small, in the decision-making process. There are thus
built-in limitations on the enslavement of the citizens of a democracy (though,
of course, these limitations have been at times effectively circumvented).
More importantly, however, such democracies see themselves as committed
to solidifying and improving these limitations over time. In general, citizens
of democracies are freer from oppression than any others and can expect to
become even more so. What to make of all this, from a Jewish perspective, is
probably both the most urgent and important question. But first it is useful to
examine an account of liberal democracy arising from the Greek perspective.

Fukuyama’s sophisticated case for liberal democracy as the stable point—
indeed, end-state—of human social change consists of two branches, one
seemingly economic but ultimately scientific-technological, the other based on
the what is termed “the desire for recognition.” The first branch begins from
the accumulative character of modern natural science as it constantly progresses to new understanding and research based on its earlier stages. The application of such rational inquiry—to productive or military technology, to rationalized social practices like accounting and bureaucracy—thus also develops a progressive character. Next, in order to benefit from these ever-renewed practical fruits of rationality, society must acquire flexibility of various kinds: in its markets for goods, services, and labor, in the social structures that support these, and so forth. One of the central lessons of the twentieth century experience with communism is that central planning of the Soviet style simply cannot set and adjust the myriads of prices that represent these ever-changing needs and their interrelations. The core of the flexibility that can handle the dynamism that follows from rationalization is summed up in the classic slogan “Laissez-faire!” Only liberal capitalism reliably turns scientific-technological innovation into social benefits. Furthermore, once some countries have adopted this kind of flexible, progressive liberalism, others—through the desire to imitate the benefits of a prosperous lifestyle or merely through the pressure of military competition—have little choice but, sooner or later, to come into line. The market-oriented reform movements of the 1980s in China and the then-Soviet Union stand as the outstanding examples of this tendency toward rational convergence. In short, science and technology lead to liberal capitalism.

The other branch of Fukuyama’s case for liberal democracy appeals to the deep human need for recognition. On Alexandre Kojève’s influential interpretation of Hegel, which Fukuyama largely follows, human self-consciousness arises when the basic animal power to change the world into something it previously was not comes to focus, not on things in the world, but precisely on this capacity for innovation. Such a creature is no longer an animal that desires this or that object, but a human who desires desire, who wishes to be the object of another’s desire. “Thus, in the relationship between man and woman, for example, Desire is human only if the one desires, not the body, but the Desire of the other. . . . Human history is the history of desired desires.” Kojève calls such desired desire the desire for recognition and suggests that, taken to its ultimate form, it leads to competition, to a struggle for prestige, and eventually to a duel to the death. Such a duel will determine who deserves the nonnatural nonthing that is human desire and recognition and who will show oneself bound by animal fear for preservation of one’s mere creaturely life.

The relationship of domination and submission established here leads to the so-called master-slave dialectic, for which Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* is famous. Even the winner of such a competition will remain dissatisfied as
long as one’s worth is affirmed and acknowledged only by one who is, in a
decisive sense, unworthy. Only the recognition of equals is satisfying, and
this—skipping over intermediate historical stages—eventually underpins the
rationality of democracy. Mutual recognition of the equal humanity of all is
the resolution of the dissatisfactions and contradictions inherent in any other
arrangement of humanity, that is, of the “desiring of desire.” Democratic
societies recognize the equal dignity of each by grounding rule and power
not on domination and violence, but on respect for each one’s self-legislat ing
autonomy and fully human desire for desire. In short, egalitarian democracy
alone can resolve the paradoxes that Kojève diagnoses as following from the
moment human self-consciousness transcends its merely animal state.

These two branches of analysis add up to a theory of capital-H History,
that is, not of events but of humanity’s sequential search for self-understanding. If rationality applied to desire and the nonnatural struggle
for recognition leads to democracy and rationality applied to nature and the
satisfaction of natural wants leads to liberal capitalism, then the fully rational
and self-conscious outcome for humanity seems to be liberal democracy.
Democratic capitalism is thus the endpoint of History—that is, it brings the
human search for fulfillment and self-understanding to its conclusion—and
therefore exerts a powerful pressure on events, history in the ordinary sense.
As it becomes increasingly clear that monarchy, theocracy, communism, fasc-
ism, and all other regime types create intolerable dissatisfactions of various
kinds, dissatisfactions that only liberal democracy can alleviate, the long arc
of political actions and historical events will be more and more pressured in
the direction of what Kojève calls the “universal and homogenous state.” This
cosmopolitan but classless and egalitarian world society extends the principles
of liberal democracy to all of humanity. Whether the EU or the UN or some
other institution forms the kernel of this future universal state, the core issue
is not how long it will take to get there—perhaps millennia—since if the
analysis is correct, ultimately nothing else will satisfy. The real question, rather,
is whether this understanding correctly describes how the institutions of the
future really ought to look.

Having argued for liberal democracy, Fukuyama then registers some
doubts—from both Right and Left—regarding the ultimate desirability of
Kojève’s universal and homogeneous state. The Left suspects that any market
free enough to count as capitalist will not only inevitably determine economic
winners and losers but also thereby decide who will be important and who
will be a nobody. If economic liberty thus undermines equal and mutual
recognition, liberal democracy cannot be the “fully satisfying” arrangement it purports to be. The Right, on the other hand, suspects that, since some humans will always exhibit more daring, innovation, and plain old success than others, their inevitable desire to be recognized for this—in essence, to be recognized as superior—can neither be fulfilled nor eliminated in the envisioned liberal democratic order. This already shows that liberal democracy cannot be called “fully satisfying” without qualification and will moreover give such individuals the incentive—quite possibly coupled with the ability—to undermine and perhaps overthrow such a liberal democratic order.

Fukuyama’s assessment of liberal democracy, both in its general outlines and in many significant details, looks uncannily familiar when viewed through the Judaic lenses of analysis outlined above. Liberal capitalism attracts due to its promise of prosperity, of comfort and luxury. Many lands—from Spain and Canada to Japan and Singapore—have become lands of milk and honey. Crucially, the land of Israel too has once again become a home where one can sit “under one’s vine and under one’s fig.” At the same time, the promise of democracy has lessened the bondage of nation after nation, from Korea and Thailand to Czechia and (perhaps) Kurdistan. Both prosperity and freedom can, in principle, spread to other lands as well.

Judaism cannot see all this as anything but a shower of blessings from God. Indeed, the blessings accruing at the present time to Jewry in particular are utterly unprecedented. It is difficult to overemphasize the degree to which the Jewish people, both in the Land of Israel and in the Diaspora, enjoy greater material prosperity—whether measured in GDP, in charitable giving, or in ice cream consumption—and suffers less enslavement—be it systematic oppression such as in medieval Europe or the USSR, endemic discrimination such as persecuted Alfred Dreyfus, or military menace such as Egypt posed to the State of Israel until 1977—than at any time before in history. One might say that the plan announced at the Burning Bush is coming to fulfillment.

But one might also say that the Jews are reentering the grip of the central dilemma. Humans crave both freedom and prosperity, but over the long term, these two aims can undermine one another; lands oozing milk and honey tend to become houses of bondage. This may be due to the overweening pride and ambition of a ruler, as in the case of Solomon and Rehoboam, or it may come from below, as more and more of the privileged dispose hhighhandedly of the livelihoods and persons of their servitors, as with the recapturing of the slaves briefly freed under Zedekiah. These two scenarios—which certainly do not exhaust the possibilities—roughly correspond to the complaints against liberal
democracy that Fukuyama attributes to the Right and the Left respectively. While some supporters of liberal democracy assume that economic success and political liberty inevitably go together—even reinforcing one another, as in some cases they clearly do—Judaism focuses on longer term trends that suggest deep tensions between them. Once alert to the thought that it may not be possible indefinitely to continue pursuing prosperity while avoiding oppression, one becomes alert to such trends and can find signs of them in many a contemporary news item.

Mosaic rhetoric has already suggested how to confront the central dilemma. One must remember that blessings come from God, that success springs from power that is not fully one’s own, and that one must not bow down to the works of one’s hands. At a minimum, this requires cultivating virtues like gratitude, modesty, and piety. Better yet, if Israel will keep to its covenantal obligations—especially the systematic brakes on the slippery slope to oppression—then God promises to play rainmaker, both literally and figuratively. The latter-day prophets exhorting on opinion pages and in social media in defense of the poor, the widow, and the stranger and exposing the wrongdoing of the connected and protected—in short, guarding justice and doing righteousness—shoulder their share of Judaism’s central burden. But the liberal democrat’s central tools—“more rational productivity” and “more egalitarian recognition”—cannot be counted on to bear this burden (useful as they may be in many circumstances). There is no formulaic solution to what depends on the choice of goodness, justice, and life over evil, sin, and death. Even if humanity’s capacity for moral choice can become the subject of some sort of history, imagining an end to that history seems meaningless.37

Without in any way denigrating such moral diligence and rectitude, it must be admitted that they aim at a resolution that—as crucial and difficult as it may be—is from God’s perspective tolerable, but still not ideal. The threat of social dissolution might constrain Israel to the terms of the covenant as she refrains from trampling divine decrees. Israel would thus become comparable to a middling king like Amaziah, doing what was right [yashar] in God’s eyes, but no more. This would surely be better than setting the stage for corruption, oppression, and eventually exile. Such a roughly stable outcome might be tolerable, but in Israel’s eyes would it be ideal? Would freedom from oppression and inheriting a land of milk and honey, unto themselves, genuinely satisfy—with obedience to the Torah accepted as a least bad concession to the inevitable corruptions of the human heart? Or is it possible, precisely because prosperity and freedom are no longer rarities to be craved but commonplaces
to be offhandedly appreciated, that other demands will come to the fore? Might life—however wealthy and secure—come to seem limited and unsatisfying without experiencing the indwelling of the divine presence?

Just because God wants Israel—indeed, all of humanity—to want him, does not mean that we in fact do. Determining for ourselves whether we really want a relationship with the Creator that transcends pragmatic obedience remains the biggest challenge raised by the indisputable successes of liberal democracy.

EPILOGUE

How much of the goal-discourse discussed above applies to nations other than Israel? As in so many other fields, also regarding the relation of the Gentiles to the covenant and the central dilemma, the prophets of Israel agree on important basics while disagreeing on specifics. This is not the place for detailed examination, but it seems that the following summary points enjoy broad support. (1) The central dilemma applies to the Gentiles just as much as to the Jews. Egypt is a land of milk and honey, as well as a house of bondage, without reference to the fate of the Jewish people. Other nations can be “vomited out” of their lands in punishment—the Canaanites as the foremost example—and they can also be restored to these homes. Liberal democracy can thus win only two cheers across the board, and not only in the special case of the children of Israel. (2) The Gentiles are not given the Torah, but they can—and should—fulfill a divine covenant. On one version, the covenant in question is the Noahite covenant that includes all humanity and demands of them the minimal regimen of basic justice and piety. On another approach, the experience of the nations—very much including their understanding of Israel’s own experiences—will bring the nations to recognize that they must learn from the God of Jacob, and they voluntarily come up to do so: “For out of Zion shall go forth instruction and the word of God from Jerusalem.” (3) Ultimately, all will “know God”—as waters cover the sea—but what exactly that means is a matter of disagreement. Surprisingly, the resolution of these disputes may no longer be relegated merely to some obscure, far-off future.

NOTES


3. On this lack, see J. Weinstein, “*Yishuv Medinah* and a Rabbinic Alternative to Greek Political Philosophy,” *Journal of Jewish Thought & Philosophy* 23 (2015): 165.

4. Exceptions to the general disinterest in *politeia* analysis among Jewish thinkers display the validity of the generalization. Those Jewish thinkers who take up Greek philosophy as a whole—most importantly Maimonides—include also its political aspects; but this is no surprise. Abravanel, in a context apparently independent of such philosophical concerns, objects to kingship while praising a structure explicitly inspired by the then-current constitution of Venice (*Commentary* to Exod 18 and Deut 1). Though his critique flows from a well-rooted biblical and rabbinic debate, the appeal to republican forms and traditions arises from avowedly external influences and experience. Abravanel’s engagement with republicanism and the roots of this engagement are addressed in greater depth in R. Kimelman, “Abravanel and the Jewish Republican Ethos,” in *Commandment and Community: New Essays in Jewish Legal and Political Philosophy*, (ed. D. Frank; Albany: SUNY Press, 1995), 195–216. Much earlier than these examples, Josephus already declares it among his aims in the *Antiquities* to outline for the Greek-reading public the special characteristics of the Judaic *politeuma* (1.5). For the name of this form of government he elsewhere offers the—admittedly forced—locution *theokratia* (*Against Apion*, 2.165). Josephus’s audience, Maimonides’ philosophical commitments, and Abravanel’s practical experience do not derive their inspiration from biblical or rabbinic texts.

5. Some scholars have claimed to identify a Jewish political tradition. For references and discussion, see Weinstein, “*Yishuv Medinah*,” 162.


7. An important caveat complicates the analytic framework here. Early modern Europe, while reengaging with the political thought and experience of the ancient world, very much included Hebraic thinking together with the Greek and the Latin. Consequently, it can be very difficult to tease out how much contemporary political discourse and terminology owes in its origins and conceptualization—often in a subterranean fashion—to the very Hebrew sources to which it might happen to be applied. Nevertheless, the essentially Greek contribution of searching for—or claiming to have identified—the right, just, or best political order continues to dominate political thought and discourse. It thus remains methodologically prudent to suspend the presumption in favor of political discourse as such when dealing with Jewish materials. Hebraism in early modern political thought—very much including such rabbinic sources as the Babylonian Talmud and Maimonides’ Code—is discussed, both in its general outlines and in some particularly salient exemplars, by E. Nelson, *The Hebrew Republic: Jewish Sources and the Transformation of European Political Thought* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010); G. Schochet,


9. Ideally, even Greek-origin terms such as “logic,” “method,” and “ideally” would be suspended as well. The closest Judaic term to “logic” might be “measures by which to infer”—middot derash (cf. T San. 7.11; *Sifra, Baraita de-R’ Ishmael*).

10. The general command to avoid the ways of Egypt appears at Leviticus 18:3.

11. The triptych freedom-prosperity-divinity shows its importance most clearly in the blessings promised for fulfillment of the covenant at Leviticus 26:3–13 and Deuteronomy 28:1–14. For analytic purposes, military success and preeminence are here included under freedom from oppression, while prosperity includes fertility overall, but most especially progeny.


14. The *Republic* details several examples of the psychological stresses that youths experience when their education sends mixed messages: 549c–550b; 553a–554e; 559d–561a; 572c–573b.


16. *Politics* 1291b30–1293a34.


20. Perhaps there exist tropical exotics—such as the durian or the cupuaçu—that can be both sweet and fatty-rich. Such fruits were, of course, unknown in the ancient and classical Near East and Mediterranean.

21. The mixing of plant and animal species in planting, plowing, weaving, and breeding is prohibited at Leviticus 19:19 and Deuteronomy 22:9–11.
22. Note that “the blessing of Abraham” that Isaac gives Jacob intentionally (Gen 28:3–4) concerns only land and progeny, not power, while the stolen blessing intended for Esau includes prosperity as well as dominion—but not the Land (27:28–29).


24. The importance of priest-warrior coalitions in the Bible’s depiction of Jewish rulership is deserving of separate study. In particular, it is no coincidence that Aaron’s wife, Elisheva bat Aminadav, is sister to the prince of the tribe of Judah.

25. Of course Moses takes their refusal to negotiate as unjustified by their complaint, invoking instead a different—perhaps procedural—standard. Perhaps the claim against Moses’s leadership is well taken, but that is not, unto itself, grounds for refusing to meet with him—given that the Reuvenites have no claim of personal harm or misconduct.

26. Among the Greeks, Plato, Aristotle, and a Hippocratic author all associated Asia—especially Egypt and Phoenicia—with a preference for prosperity and easy living over the rigors of military struggle and fighting for one’s independence. To the degree that they sought to explain this, they fingered the mostly stable climate of this region, in comparison with unpredictable Europe: Republic 436a; Politics 1327b23–32; Airs, Waters, and Places, 16.

27. The Greeks offer analyses that might turn out to be logically equivalent to the central dilemma, but the terms in which they would need to be couched are far less direct than those of the Jewish tradition.

28. TB Sanhedrin 20b.


30. An example of accepting poverty as the price of freedom might be found in the Rechavites discussed in Jeremiah 35. Of course the figure of drinking wine here functions as more than just a symbol of wealth. The behavior of the Canaanites silently implied in Genesis 47 shows the same dynamic.

31. Plato raises a similar worry in the Republic: Is justice something we desire only for its consequences, or do we want it because it is good in its own right (357b–358a)?


33. Fukuyama, End of History, xi, xxi.


36. Kojève’s view here seems to conjoin both Greek and Jewish conceptions, but a fuller assessment of this matter is beyond the present scope.

37. Even Nietzsche, who pioneered the possibility of moral history and genealogy, never imagined that such choice could come to an end without thereby constituting the end of humanity.