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Grand Rapids, MI
June 2019

Judaism, the State, and the Idea of Limited Government

I. What's at stake?

I.A. State of Israel

A) background on State of Israel

- 1) challenge of restoration of Jewish sovereignty
- 2) Jewish state but not necessarily religious
- 3) does its political existence have theological significance?

B) Israeli Supreme Court: "Jewish AND democratic" – is there a tension?

- 1) democracy vs. monarchy vs. theocracy
- 2) Jews and Muslims
- 3) religious and secular Jews

I.B. America and the West

A) the priority of good citizenship

- 1) survive/avoid persecution
- 2) Jeremiah: pray for the welfare of this city
- 3) *dina d'malchuta dina*

B) limited government and Jewish conservatism

- 1) Eric Cohen, Tikvah Fund, *Mosaic Magazine*, "The Spirit of Jewish Conservatism"
 - a) family
 - b) nationalism
 - c) economic freedom
- 2) Meir Soloveichik, "What's Missing from Jewish Conservatism?"
 - a) what do Jews owe America? (moral, not just material, contribution)
- 3) David Novak, *The Jewish Social Contract; Covenantal Rights*
 - a) Judaism as the foundation of democracy/limited government
 - i) imagio dei → human rights
 - ii) covenantal theology vs. totalitarianism

II. Background and sources

A) absence of systematic political theory in Jewish tradition

B) sources of Jewish political theory

- 1) stories
- 2) laws

II.A. Tanach

A) stories

- 1) “three days in the wilderness” (Exodus 5)
- 2) Israel asks Samuel for a king
 - a) rejection of God (I Samuel 8:7-8)
 - b) invitation to oppression (I Samuel 8:10-18)
- 3) kings vs. judges: tyranny vs. insecurity

B) laws

“political Hebraism”: Jewish roots of modern political thought

- 1) limited power
- 2) constitutional monarchy (Torah as constitution)
- 3) separation of powers
- 4) laws of war: just war, limited warfare, etc.

II.B. Talmud

A) background on rabbinic tradition

- 1) not univocal
- 2) context: developed during time without sovereignty/political power

B) rabbinic attitudes toward politics/government

- 1) unconcerned with questions of politics and power
- 2) unserious/utopian view of sovereignty
- 3) skeptical of authority, want to limit power:
 - a) concerned with getting along with the rulers
 - b) responding to someone else’s demands
 - c) expectation of unsympathetic ruler

C) the Ran (AKA Rabbeinu Nissim AKA Rabbi Nissim of Gerona)

Suggested Reading

Yoram Hazony, *The Philosophy of Hebrew Scripture*

David Novak, *The Jewish Social Contract*

Gordon Schochet, et al, *Political Hebraism: Judaic Sources in Early Modern Political Thought*

Michael Walzer, *In God's Shadow: Politics in the Hebrew Bible*

Michael Walzer, et al, *The Jewish Political Tradition, Volume I: Authority*

Ruth Wisse, *Jews and Power*