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
      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*
Ruth Wisse, *Jews and Power*