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Lessons in Leadership From the Hebrew Bible

An orthodox rabbi grapples with the evident shortcomings of America's political class.

By [Barton Swaim](#) [Follow](#)

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New York

America's political class isn't at its best. Public life lately seems to consist mainly of self-generated disasters, easily preventable crises and media-driven hysteria. Political leaders behave like spoiled children, outrage the public to no purpose, and loudly champion ideas they know to be infeasible. Worst of all are the decisions apparently calculated to achieve the opposite of their stated goals: pandemic measures that didn't mitigate the virus and shredded the social fabric and inflicted lasting damage on children; climate regulations that punish the poor and working class but don't affect the climate; a military withdrawal so poorly planned that it provokes a new war; billions sent to a regime that funds genocidal attacks on an American ally; ill-advised, sometimes cockamamie prosecutions of a former president that make him more likely to regain the presidency.

Do our educated VIPs and powerbrokers have the slightest idea what they're doing? Do they care?

So aggressively counterproductive has the country's political leadership become that one feels the need of a metaphysical explanation to make sense of it all. That was my thought when I read Rabbi Meir Y. Soloveichik's "Providence and Power: Ten Portraits in Jewish Statesmanship," published in June. The book doesn't address today's political controversies, but it suggests ways to think about the deeply perverse unwisdom into which so many American political leaders appear to have fallen.

Early in the book Rabbi Soloveichik refers to a 1996 essay by the Russian-born British political philosopher Isaiah Berlin (1909-97) titled "On Political Judgment." Berlin asks: Do statesmen learn their craft from a discipline consisting of hypotheses and laws arrived at by experimentation? The answer is no, the discipline called "political science" notwithstanding. They develop a sense of practical wisdom, Berlin writes—"a capacity, in the first place, for synthesis rather than analysis, for knowledge in the sense in which traders know their animals, or parents their children, or conductors their orchestras, as opposed to that in which chemists know the contents of their test tubes, or mathematicians know the rules that their symbols obey."

I arrive at Congregation Shearith Israel, Rabbi Soloveichik's Upper West Side synagogue, to ask what the Hebrew Bible tells us about political judgment. My starting point is that observation from Berlin. If a wise leader knows his people the way parents know their children or conductors know their orchestras, do leaders in 21st-century America fail primarily because they don't *get* Americans? That might explain why so many officials during the pandemic imposed heavy-handed dictates suited to a far more conformist and collectivist society.

Rabbi Soloveichik answers by distinguishing between "strategic" and "transcendent" judgment. The former is something like intelligent circumspection. "Even during Covid," he says, "we had a few leaders who said, 'Let me read and try to understand this before we jump in. Let me study and see if we're making the right choices.'"

It's the second sort of judgment, he thinks, that many Americans long to see in their leaders. The rabbi cites Abraham Lincoln: "His greatness lay in his ability to answer the questions 'What is unique about America?' and 'Which parts of it must be changed and which parts preserved?'" Slavery had to go; republican government and equality under the law would remain.

But couldn't any far-left progressive or right-wing radical ask the same questions and come up with plausible answers? Maybe, but what made Lincoln a transcendent leader, Rabbi Soloveichik argues, is that he asked the question in humility before God. In the last months of the Civil War, a spiritually enlivened

Lincoln “was asking: Why is God doing this to us? What is his plan for America?” Thus Lincoln’s Second Inaugural described the nation, both North and South, accepting the condign punishment of God and going on to achieve a “just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.”

Rabbi Soloveichik’s rather imposing name—he is the great-nephew of the Talmudist and philosopher Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik (1903-93)—might tempt the reader to imagine him as an ancient hoary-headed sage. In fact, he’s 46 and clean-shaven. He and his wife, an assistant U.S. attorney, have six children ages 8 to 20, and he can talk in detail about a dizzying array of pop-cultural topics, particularly Cecile B. DeMille’s “The Ten Commandments” and “The Simpsons.” He wears a black suit and a yarmulke, as you would expect, but his brightly colored socks bear the image of Menachem Begin.

Our conversation drifts to the first chapter in his book, about King David. Rabbi Soloveichik jokes that if he ever runs for president and someone asks him what his favorite Bible verse is, he has the answer ready: I Samuel 16:7. The rabbi quotes the verse in the original Hebrew; I know it only in the King James translation: “Look not on his countenance, or on the height of his stature; because I have refused him: for the Lord seeth not as man seeth; for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart.”

God says these words when the prophet Samuel goes to Bethlehem to find the young king God has chosen to succeed the ruined Saul. Samuel looks for a tall, soldierly-looking man, in Saul’s mold. Instead, David—an unremarkable teenager at the time of Samuel’s visit—turns out to be the monarch who, uniquely in biblical history, would combine humility before God with brash human agency.

I mention the David and Goliath episode in I Samuel 17, in which the teenage future king is outraged by the giant’s blasphemy and incredulous that no Israelite has the courage to take him on. Before I can explain my meaning, the rabbi quotes the relevant verse, first in Hebrew, then in English. David, still too young for the battlefield, vows to take Goliath on. To support his claim, he notes that he once killed a lion, and on another occasion a bear, when these beasts attempted to steal sheep from his herd. “Thy servant slew both the lion and the bear,” David tells Saul, “and this uncircumcised Philistine shall be as one of them, seeing he hath defied the armies of the living God.”

Here, Rabbi Soloveichik says, we see humility (David’s concern with God’s honor) coupled with individual pluck (his insistence that *he* would dispatch Goliath).

“By humility,” the rabbi clarifies, “we don’t mean passivity. What we see in the greatest American statesmen is a complex dialectic or balance between bold independent action, on the one hand, and a deep faith and reliance on God, on

the other.” He finds the same balance in the story of Esther, subject of another chapter. Orphaned and raised by her uncle, the unpretentious Esther was made a queen, and her keen sense of political timing saved the Jews of Persia from annihilation.

Is it too simplistic to say that political leaders who don’t acknowledge any authority from above are likelier to impose their will by force? If we’re nothing more than globs of cells hurtling through a chaotic universe, why not coerce people into doing what you want them to do?

“This gets to a point made by my friend the late Rabbi Jonathan Sacks used to make all the time,” Rabbi Soloveichik says. “There have been four revolutions in modern times, Rabbi Sacks said—the Russian, the French, the English and the American. The first two descended into murder and tyranny, the latter two produced an expansion of liberty. The driving force behind the French and Russian revolutions was philosophy, secular philosophy. The driving force behind the English and American revolutions was God.”

Rabbi Soloveichik teaches courses on Jewish thought and political philosophy at Yeshiva University’s Straus Center for Torah and Western Thought (of which he is director) and the Tikvah Fund. On a walk through the synagogue, he says that its spiritual leader in the 18th century, Gershom Mendes Seixas, participated in the first inauguration of George Washington, at Federal Hall in New York in 1789. “That probably makes Mendes Seixas—I think this is true—the first Jewish spiritual leader to take a ceremonial role in the installation of a head of state since the fall of Jerusalem.”

The fall of Jerusalem in the year 70?

“Yes,” he says. “I can’t think of another time between those years that a Jew would have been treated as an equal.”

The connections between American political history and ancient Jewish thought are Rabbi Soloveichik’s preoccupation. He doesn’t think the great European statesmen of the 19th and 20th centuries exhibited the sort of bold humility, or humble confidence, that he finds in David, Esther and Lincoln. “The British statesmen I most admire—Palmerston, Disraeli, Churchill—humility was not their calling card,” he says.

What about American statesmen? He names Ronald Reagan, which I would expect, and Harry S. Truman.

By this point I’m used to the way in which, in what I take to be the rabbinic fashion, Rabbi Soloveichik hardly ever makes a point without quoting someone else. To explain his Truman reference, he grabs an iPad, squints over his wire-

framed glasses into it, and reads the last two paragraphs of a 1956 review of Truman's "Memoirs" by 26-year-old Norman Podhoretz. Truman had his flaws, Mr. Podhoretz wrote, but "we can see quite another moral significance in his career when we contemplate the fact that this extraordinary man who has probably done more than anyone else to keep the world alive on the edge of an apocalypse, was able to emerge into greatness only by becoming, in his own eyes and in the eyes of the nation, a perfect symbol of the average American."

Rabbi Soloveichik looks up and says, "That's what we're talking about. A true leader has to—well, has to lead. He can't just go along with the masses. But a genuinely successful leader must have some emotional communion with the people he leads. The ordinary people, the average people."

Which brings us back to the question of what's wrong today. Rabbi Soloveichik points to Deuteronomy 17, in which God warns of the perils of monarchy. "One from among thy brethren shalt thou set king over thee," God says (again in the King James version): "thou mayest not set a stranger over thee, which is not thy brother." A stranger, God continues, is likely to become arrogant and detached from the people and take from them their wealth and property.

The passage might be read simply to mean the king would have to be an Israelite, but Rabbi Soloveichik sees a deeper meaning. Quoting someone else again, he notes that Maimonides, the 12th-century Jewish thinker, "thought the most instructive verse in that passage is the concluding one: 'that his heart be not lifted up above his brethren' . . . The point, as [his great-uncle] Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik noted, is that a leader must not cut himself off from the people."

You don't have to engage in complex Talmudic interpretations to find some simple applicability to present-day American politics. Why are Washington's decision-makers and their well-heeled defenders making profoundly stupid decisions? Maybe because they don't much care for the people they pretend to serve.

Mr. Swaim is an editorial page writer at the Journal.

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