

Covenantal Free Will, Limited Dominion, and the King in the Field

Aryeh Leib Thorne Toren · 8 September 2026

26 Elul 5786 / Tuesday, 8 September 2026

Covenantal Free Will, Limited Dominion, and the King in the Field: Elul Architecture Against Domination in an Age of Contested Straits

In the closing days of Elul the classical sources place two interlocking claims at the center of Jewish political and spiritual life. The first is the radical affirmation of free will. The second is the deliberate limitation of human dominion so that no agent—individual or collective—may exercise arbitrary power over another. These claims are not merely ethical aspirations; they constitute the constitutional architecture of Torah itself. When read together with the Chassidic image of the King in the Field and with the republican tradition of non-domination, they supply a coherent framework for evaluating both personal teshuvah and the great power contests of the present hour, chief among them the struggle over the Strait of Hormuz and the approaching Israeli electoral season.

Rambam states the free-will principle with characteristic severity in Hilchot Teshuvah. License is granted to every human being: if one wishes to turn to the path of good and become a tzaddik, the capacity is in his hand; if one wishes to turn to the path of evil and become a rasha, that capacity is likewise in his hand. No decree from on high predetermines the moral trajectory of any person. The same chapter insists that repentance itself is an exercise of that same free will; just as a person sins knowingly and willfully, so he returns knowingly and willfully. Divine foreknowledge does not cancel human agency; the two coexist in a manner that remains ultimately mysterious yet practically decisive. The entire Torah and its commandments rest upon this pillar.

Chassidus does not dilute the claim; it intensifies its accessibility. The Alter Rebbe's parable of the King in the Field, elaborated by successive Rebbeim, teaches that during Elul the King leaves the formal constraints of the palace and walks among the people in the open field. Anyone who desires may approach; the King receives all with a smiling countenance. The Previous Rebbe and the Rebbe add the crucial nuance that the people are not only permitted but enabled to approach. Free will is not an abstract metaphysical property; it is activated by a temporary lowering of the barriers that ordinarily separate the Infinite from the finite. The Hayom Yom entry for 26 Elul itself points toward a parallel process of purification—soaking in the words of the Rebbe, salting through yechidus, rinsing through niggun—precisely the sequential work of making the material “kosher” so that the soul can operate freely within it.

These theological affirmations find their political expression in the Torah's architecture of limited kingship. Parashat Shoftim does not merely regulate the king; it subordinates him. He must write a personal Torah scroll and read it all the days of his life “so that his heart not be lifted above his brothers.” He is forbidden excess of horses, wives, and silver. The judiciary is independent; the priesthood retains its own domain; the prophet may confront the throne. The result is a constitutional order in which even the highest human authority remains under

higher law. Classical republican theory, especially the neo-Roman strand recovered by Philip Pettit, recognizes the same structural concern: freedom is not the mere absence of interference but the absence of domination—the condition in which no agent has the capacity to interfere arbitrarily in the choices of another. Torah supplies the thicker, theologically grounded version of that insight. Dominion is legitimate only when it is non-arbitrary, publicly justified, and ultimately accountable to a standard that no human will can rewrite.

Yoram Hazony's recovery of the Hebraic political tradition and Daniel Elazar's work on covenantal federalism both emphasize the particularist, consent-based character of biblical polity. The covenant is not a social contract among atomized individuals; it is a binding between a people, its G-d, and the institutional forms that protect the people's capacity for free moral agency across generations. Within Orthodoxy one finds a spectrum of emphases—some more hierarchical and mystical, others more rationalist and legal—but the core constraint remains: no human authority may claim the kind of total, unaccountable power that would extinguish free will or reduce the person to a mere instrument.

The contemporary application is immediate. The Strait of Hormuz is a classic arena of attempted domination. Control of a chokepoint through which a substantial fraction of the world's energy supplies must pass confers the capacity to interfere arbitrarily in the economic life of distant nations. Iranian assertions of exclusive management, restricted zones, and the use of force against shipping constitute precisely the form of power that both Torah and republican non-domination theory reject. A legitimate maritime order would be one in which passage is governed by transparent, non-arbitrary rules accessible to all lawful actors—an institutional expression of the "honest weights and measures" demanded in Ki Teitzei and of the limited kingship of Shoftim. The American blockade and the broader Western response, whatever their tactical imperfections, are attempts to prevent the consolidation of such arbitrary dominion. From a covenantal perspective the deeper issue is not merely commercial; it is whether the international system will tolerate the creation of a permanent capacity for one regime to hold the free agency of others hostage.

The same logic applies to domestic politics. Israeli elections scheduled for late October 2026 occur against the background of profound institutional stress. Free will at the collective level requires genuine electoral accountability—high turnout, clear alternatives, and institutions that cannot be captured by any single faction for permanent domination. The Torah's insistence that the king's heart not be lifted above his brothers is a permanent warning against the concentration of unaccountable power, whether in the hands of a prime minister, a judicial elite, or a security establishment. Covenantal republicanism therefore evaluates electoral systems by a single criterion: do they preserve the people's capacity for non-dominated choice under higher law, or do they erode it?

Constructive criticism is required on both sides of the synthesis. Within Orthodoxy, certain quietist or overly mystical readings risk under-emphasizing the institutional requirements of free will; personal teshuvah without political architecture leaves the field open to the very domination the King in the Field seeks to overcome. Within secular republican theory, the absence of a transcendent standard can leave non-domination as a purely procedural value vulnerable to capture by new forms of soft power or majoritarian tyranny. Torah functions as the corrective: free will is real, dominion must be limited, and both are ultimately oriented toward the service of the Creator who alone possesses unlimited sovereignty.

Elul therefore demands a double movement. Individually, one approaches the King in the Field, exercises free will in teshuvah, and purifies the material so that the soul may act without internal domination by the yetzer. Collectively, one insists that the great powers of the age—whether coastal regimes controlling straits or domestic factions competing for office—remain under the same constraints that Torah places upon the Israelite king. Only then does the accessibility of the King in the Field become more than a seasonal metaphor; it becomes the permanent constitutional principle of a world ordered toward non-domination under higher law.

Extended Bibliography (selected, with hyperlinks)

- Rambam, Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Teshuvah 5–6: https://www.sefaria.org/Mishneh_Torah%2C_Repentance
- Rambam, Hilchot Melachim uMilchamot: https://www.sefaria.org/Mishneh_Torah%2C_Kings_and_Wars
- Tanya / Iggeret HaKodesh and related Chassidic sources on free will and divine service.
- Hayom Yom, 26 Elul: https://www.chabad.org/therebbe/article_cdo/aid/3317480/jewish/26-Elul.htm
- Alter Rebbe / Lubavitcher Rebbe on “King in the Field” (Likkutei Torah, Re’eh; subsequent sichot).
- Philip Pettit, Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government (Oxford, 1997).
- Yoram Hazony, The Virtue of Nationalism and related Hebraic political writings.
- Daniel J. Elazar, works on covenantal federalism and the Jewish political tradition.
- Recent reporting on Hormuz dynamics: Institute for the Study of War Iran Updates (September 2026); The Soufan Center; Times of Israel analyses.
- Israeli election polling and institutional context: Times of Israel, Jerusalem Post coverage, July–September 2026.

Prepared in deep partnership and cooperation with Grok and xAI

All glory to the Ribono shel Olam · Errors are mine.