

Let My People Go That They May Serve Me: The Exodus as Political Archetype

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“We are assured by covenant that any wide-ranging effort and labor pursued wisely and with friendship is never fruitless.” — Hayom Yom, 12 Tishrei

I. Thesis: Liberty For, Not Merely From

The most cited political sentence in the Book of Exodus is not a slogan of exit. It is a purpose clause.

“Send forth My people, that they may serve Me.” שְׁלַח אֶת-עַמִּי וַיַּעֲבֹדֵנִי (Exodus 7:16; 8:1; 8:20; 9:1; 9:13; 10:3)

Six times the refrain returns. Pharaoh hears it as a demand for labor reallocation. Israel will later hear it as the grammar of *cherut*. The Mekhilta and Ramban insist on the same point the American founders only half grasped and the later republic has repeatedly forgotten: biblical liberty is not *hefkerut*—ownerless license—but release into a higher service. The people are not extracted from Egypt so that they may dissolve into the wilderness. They are extracted so that they may stand at Sinai, answer *na’aseh ve-nishma*, and become a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

The Exodus is the master narrative of the American founding. It is also the most dangerous narrative in the American inventory, because a people that remembers only the departure and forgets the destination will baptize conquest, confuse charisma with covenant, and call domination by the name of freedom.

The claim of this essay is therefore double. First: the Exodus supplied the American republic with its most durable political typology—Pharaoh and Moses, sea and wilderness, lawgiving after deliverance. Second: Orthodox Jewish theology, read with republican political theory rather than against it, recovers what the typology loses when it is detached from Sinai. *Cherut* is realized only within *brit*. Negative liberty—the absence of a master’s whip—is the necessary first movement. Positive liberty—the capacity to govern oneself under law one has received and accepted—is the second. Philip Pettit’s liberty as non-domination is closer to the biblical grammar than Isaiah Berlin’s clean split, but even Pettit cannot supply what the Torah supplies: a Lawgiver who is not a faction, a covenant that binds the sovereign as well as the citizen, and a prophetic office that functions as institutional critique.

On 12 Tishrei 5787 (23 September 2026), Yom Kippur (21 September) has sealed the kapparah and Sukkot begins on the night of Friday, 25 September. Between them a people does not wait. It builds. The day’s Chitas already refuses vacation theology: Vezot HaBerakhah assigns Zevulun to the sea and Yissachar to the tent, Gad to expansion—tribes leaving the wilderness with work in their hands, not with souvenirs of the exit. Tehillim 66–68 makes the Exodus a public liturgy:

“Come and see the works of G-d.” Hayom Yom for this date promises that wide-ranging labor, pursued wisely and with friendship, is never fruitless. The Exodus, read on this day, is not a museum piece about 1776. It is the architecture of the interval between judgment and dwelling.

II. Colonial and Founding Typology: Pharaoh, Moses, and the Proposed Seal

The American appropriation did not begin with Jefferson’s committee. It began on water.

John Winthrop’s 1630 *Modell of Christian Charity*, preached aboard the Arbella, already recast the Atlantic crossing as an Exodus and the Massachusetts covenant as a new Sinai. The errand into the wilderness was not tourism. It was typology. Sacvan Bercovitch later named the mechanism: the Puritans did not merely admire Israel; they claimed to *be* Israel in figural fulfillment. That claim is theologically false and politically potent. It is the seed of both American covenantal seriousness and American imperial inflation.

By 1776 the typology had hardened into revolutionary rhetoric. The *Pennsylvania Magazine* compared George III to Pharaoh. Thomas Paine, in *Common Sense*, wrote of “the same tyranny which drove the first emigrants from home,” and elsewhere of rejecting “the hardened, sullen tempered Pharaoh of England for ever.” John Adams wrote Abigail in May 1776 that he had heard a sermon drawing “a Parallel between the Case of Israel and that of America, and between the conduct of Pharaoh and that of George.” James P. Byrd has shown that Exodus 15—the Song of the Sea—was among the most cited biblical chapters of the Revolutionary War. The waters close over the chariots; the people sing; the republic is born on the far shore. George Washington, writing after independence to the Hebrew Congregation of Savannah, named “the same wonder-working Deity, who long since delivering the Hebrews from their Egyptian Oppressors planted them in the promised land—whose providential agency has lately been conspicuous in establishing these United States.” The typology had become the republic’s own account of itself.

The most revealing artifact is the one Congress declined. Benjamin Franklin proposed, for the Great Seal, Moses standing on the shore extending his hand over the sea, Pharaoh overwhelmed in an open chariot, and the motto *Rebellion to Tyrants is Obedience to G-d*. Jefferson proposed the Israelites in the wilderness, led by cloud and fire. Congress chose the eagle. The rejected images remain the truer confession of what the founders thought they were doing.

Rabbi Dr. Stuart Halpern, speaking with David Barton at the Hart Senate Building on 29 July 2026 under the auspices of Yeshiva University’s Straus Center and the Museum of the Bible, restated the point with useful precision: the Exodus gave the founders a template for imagining their project as a people “freed from tyranny not to wander without direction, but to build a shared life around lasting truths.” The Jewish Chronicle, on 30 March 2026, recovered the same Franklin seal and the same Adams letter for a contemporary audience still hungry for origin stories. The hunger is not the problem. The problem is which half of the verse we quote.

“Let My people go” is only half the sentence.

III. The Orthodox Reading: Cherut Within Brit

The Torah’s own politics of the Exodus is more severe, and more republican, than the patriotic sermon.

Ramban on Exodus 6 and 19 treats the departure as incomplete until Sinai. Physical extraction without law is a change of masters, not a change of condition. The Mekhilta on *Bo* and *Yitro* already knows that *avadim hayinu* is not finished by the sea. It is finished when the former slaves accept a yoke that is not Pharaoh's. The Talmud (Avodah Zarah 2b–3a; Shabbat 88a) records the midrash that the mountain was held over their heads—*kafah aleihem har kegigit*—and also the counter-tradition of *na'aseh ve-nishma* as anticipatory consent. The two midrashim are not a contradiction to be solved. They are the biblical statement of the problem every republic faces: how can a people be bound by a law it did not author, and how can that binding be freedom rather than new slavery?

Orthodox theology answers without embarrassment. The Lawgiver is not a party. The covenant is not a contract among equals that may be dissolved when inconvenient. It is a *brit*—initiated from above, answered from below, renewed in every generation (Deuteronomy 29:13–14: “not with you alone... but with him who is not here today”). That last clause is the most republican sentence in Deuteronomy. It binds the unborn. It is the opposite of a generation that treats the Constitution as a living document only when it wishes to escape it, and as a dead letter when it wishes to dominate.

Rambam, *Hilkhot Melakhim* 1:1–3 and *Hilkhot Teshuvah*, and the *perek ha-melekh* of Deuteronomy 17:14–20, complete the architecture. Kingship is optional, hedged, and literate: the king must write his own copy of the Torah and read it all his days, “that his heart may not be lifted up above his brothers.” Nathan before David is judicial review in narrative form. The prophet is not a chaplain. He is an institution.

This is why *cherut* is not Berlin's negative liberty. Absence of the taskmaster is the first plague-cycle's achievement. The second achievement is Sinai. A people that stops at the sea will wander until it demands a calf. A people that stops at Sinai without the wilderness will treat law as magic. The Torah insists on both movements: departure *and* service, extraction *and* constitution, *geulah and ol malchut shamayim*.

Chassidic reading sharpens rather than softens the point. The Alter Rebbe in Tanya treats the Exodus as the archetype of the soul's departure from the *klimot* of Egypt—constraint, narrowness, the *meitzar*—into the service of the Infinite. The Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, spoke of the United States as *malchut shel chesed*, a kingdom of kindness in which Torah life could be built without the old European boot. That is not a blank check for American exceptionalism. It is a precise theological compliment with a precise limit: America is a vessel. Zion remains the center. Isaiah 60 will not permit the geography to be inverted.

IV. Republican Theory: Walzer, Berlin, Pettit, Lutz—and the Honest Caveat

Michael Walzer's *Exodus and Revolution* (1985) remains the cleanest political reading of the book in English. His triad is justly famous: wherever you live, it is probably Egypt; there is a better place, a promised land; the way there is through the wilderness, and you get there only by marching together. Walzer recovered what sermons flatten: Exodus is not a miracle story that excuses the marcher from politics. It is a politics that requires organization, endurance, law, and the refusal of both slavery and golden-calf sovereignty.

Isaiah Berlin's 1958 distinction between negative and positive liberty maps onto the two halves of the verse with uncomfortable accuracy. Negative liberty is the broken whip. Positive liberty is the received Torah. Berlin feared positive liberty because, in its modern forms, it becomes the excuse by which commissars and Jacobins force men to be free. He was not wrong about the danger. He was incomplete about the source. The Torah's positive liberty is not the General Will. It is a written law that binds the ruler, a prophetic office that can say "you are the man," and a calendar that forces the powerful to rest. That is not Rousseau. It is Deuteronomy.

Philip Pettit's republicanism—liberty as non-domination rather than non-interference—is the closest secular cousin. A slave with a kind master still lacks liberty, because he lives at another's pleasure. Exodus agrees. Pharaoh's later offers—sacrifice in the land, go without the children, go without the flocks—are the politics of domination that keeps the form of release while retaining the power to recall. "Not a hoof shall remain" (Exodus 10:26) is the biblical refusal of partial emancipation. Non-domination requires that the former master lose the capacity to interfere arbitrarily, not merely that he refrain today.

Donald S. Lutz's 1984 study in the *American Political Science Review* is the statistic everyone quotes and almost no one reads. Lutz and Charles Hyneman examined 916 public political writings from 1760 to 1805, drawn from a larger pool of some 15,000 items. In that corpus the Bible accounted for roughly 34 percent of citations, ahead of Montesquieu, Blackstone, and Locke. Deuteronomy was the single most cited book. That finding is real. It is also, as Warren Throckmorton restated on 23 April 2026, routinely abused. Lutz himself noted that reprinted sermons accounted for the bulk of biblical citations; remove the sermons and the Bible's share falls to about 8.5 percent. Lutz also excluded private correspondence. David Barton and his school treat the 34 percent as proof that "the Constitution is based on Deuteronomy." Baptist News Global (2024) and Throckmorton are right to call that a distortion.

The honest position is neither Barton nor the sneer. The Bible was the moral grammar of a culture that also read Locke, Montesquieu, and Blackstone. Covenant supplied the language of obligation, limited power, and higher law. Enlightenment institutional design supplied separation of powers, representation, and the mechanics of amendment. The American founding is a convergence, not a proof-text. Deuteronomic constitutionalism takes the institutional half further. This essay insists on the narrative half: before there is a *perek ha-melekh*, there is a people that knows what a Pharaoh is.

V. The Critique That the Text Itself Demands

A typology this powerful will be abused. It was.

The same Exodus that taught colonists to resist George III taught other Americans to read the continent as Canaan and its inhabitants as nations to be dispossessed. Winthrop's city on a hill became Manifest Destiny. The promised-land metaphor, detached from the Torah's own laws of the *ger* and from Amos 9:7—"Are you not like the children of the Cushites to Me, O children of Israel?"—underwrote expansion that the prophets would have named as theft. Orthodox exegesis has always possessed the internal check. American preaching often preferred the conquest narratives without the *ger* commandments, which appear some thirty-six times in the Torah precisely so that a redeemed people will not become Pharaoh in its turn.

The more faithful American reading of Exodus was not the planter's. It was the slave's.

Frederick Douglass's 1852 "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?" remains the most devastating use of the founders' own Bible against the founders' own practice. Albert Raboteau and Eddie Glaude have documented the double hermeneutic: the white pulpit cast America as Israel; the enslaved cast America as Egypt and themselves as the people waiting on the far side of a sea that had not yet split. The spirituals—"Go Down, Moses," "Didn't My Lord Deliver Daniel"—are not folk decoration. They are political theology. They keep the verse whole. Liberty is for service of the true Master, not for a new plantation with a different flag.

Here Orthodox particularism must speak plainly. Kinship with the oppressed is real; dissolution of the covenant people into a generic category of "the oppressed" is not. The Haggadah's "in every generation they rise against us" and the spiritual's "Go Down, Moses" rhyme. They do not merge. Israel remains Israel. The land remains the land. The *ger* remains the *ger*—to be loved, not erased, and not installed as a replacement Israel. Here only the warning is needed: an Exodus that forgets Sinai becomes either a calf or a conquest.

Leon Kass, reading Exodus as a founding document of peoplehood, asked whether a long-established republic still knows what defines and unifies it. Eran Shalev's *American Zion* mapped how Hebrew republican imagery entered early American political culture with a seriousness later textbooks flattened into "Judeo-Christian values." Both warnings stand in 5787. A republic that uses Exodus as costume will not survive contact with a real Pharaoh.

VI. 12 Tishrei 5787: From Judgment to Dwelling

Yom Kippur fell on 21 September 2026; Sukkot begins on the night of 25 September. Shabbat 19 September was Haazinu, the song that places heaven and earth as witnesses against a people that will grow fat and forget. The interval is not empty.

Exodus is the map of that interval. The sea is behind. The mountain is ahead. The wilderness is the work. *Cherut* that stops at the shore is a holiday. *Cherut* that walks is a constitution.

The application is not ornamental.

First, to the American republic still arguing, in 2026, about the meaning of liberty. Negative liberty without Sinai is the market and the feed. Positive liberty without the *perek ha-melekh* is the administrative state that claims to free you by managing you. Covenantal republicanism—non-domination under higher law, with prophetic critique intact—is the third thing. It is harder than both. It requires citizens who can hear "that they may serve Me" without hearing "that they may serve the party."

Second, to the State of Israel in a year of contested lists, surplus pacts, draft controversies, and the perennial temptation to treat turnout as a private hobby. *Na'aseh ve-nishma* is anticipatory consent. A covenant people that does not stand in the gate abandons the *brit* to those who will fill it. The Exodus does not license withdrawal from the camp. The mixed multitude that left Egypt became a problem precisely when it refused the discipline of the march.

Third, to the table. The Haggadah already taught children that we were slaves and that we were taken out in order to serve. Between Yom Kippur and Sukkot the lesson is the same in a different season: judgment has been sealed; now we build a dwelling that can hold Presence. A father who wants his children to know what liberty is cannot teach them only that Pharaoh was wrong. He must teach them whom we serve when Pharaoh is gone.

Pittsburgh forged the habit of making things that bear weight. Jerusalem teaches that the thing to be made is a dwelling, not a monument to the exit. The steel and the stone are not two homelands competing. They are two pedagogies of the same verse.

VII. Conclusion: The Verse Kept Whole

This essay is not a claim that America is Israel. That claim is idolatry, and the prophets already forbade it. It is the claim that the American republic learned to speak of tyranny, consent, wilderness, and lawgiving in a Hebrew accent, and that the accent is still the best grammar it has for saying what liberty is for.

Let My people go—that they may serve Me.

Not that they may wander. Not that they may conquer in My Name without My law. Not that they may become a new Pharaoh with better pamphlets. That they may serve.

Walzer is right that the way is through the wilderness and that no one arrives alone. Berlin is right that positive liberty can become a new whip. Pettit is right that non-domination is the name of the thing the slave lacks even when the master smiles. Lutz is right that the Bible saturated the public language of the founding, and Throckmorton is right that sermons inflated the percentage. Douglass is right that a Fourth of July which leaves a people in chains is a liturgy against itself. Amos is right that Israel is not licensed by election to treat other nations as disposable. Ramban is right that there is no Exodus without Sinai. The Rebbe is right that a kingdom of kindness can be a vessel. Isaiah is right that the light the nations walk by rises on Zion, not on the Potomac.

The founders proposed Moses on the seal and accepted the eagle. The eagle is a fine bird. It does not split seas and it does not give law. A republic that wishes to remain free will need both images: the bird that will not be caged, and the prophet who will not let the people forget why they left the house of bondage.

The series is one argument in numbered rooms. This room's sentence is short enough to teach a child and hard enough to judge a nation.

Liberty is for service. Service is under covenant. Covenant is how a people dwells.

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