

# The Field of Free Will: Non-Domination, Limited Kingship, and the Architecture of Covenant on the Threshold of the Year

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In the closing days of Elul the King is still in the field. The classical image, drawn from the teachings of the Baal Shem Tov and elaborated by the Alter Rebbe and subsequent Chabad masters, is not mere pastoral sentiment. It is a precise theological and political claim. While the King remains outside the palace walls, accessibility is maximized and the protocols of hierarchical distance are suspended. Ordinary subjects may approach without formal petition or courtly mediation. The field is the domain of free initiative. The verse that names the month—*Ani le-dodi ve-dodi li*—places the human movement first. Divine responsiveness follows human turning.

This structure is not accidental. It is the temporal embodiment of the deepest claim of Torah regarding the human person and the polity: free will is real, non-negotiable, and constitutive of both individual responsibility and collective constitutional order. Rambam, in *Hilchot Teshuvah* chapters 5–6, places the affirmation of free will at the center of the laws of repentance itself. A person is free to choose the good or the opposite; Divine foreknowledge does not coerce; and even when Heaven withholds the opportunity for repentance as a measure of justice, the underlying capacity for choice remains the premise of moral accountability. The very mitzvah of teshuvah presupposes that the agent can turn. Without that capacity the entire architecture of reward, punishment, and covenantal renewal collapses.

Chassidic thought intensifies rather than softens this insistence. The King in the Field does not abolish hierarchy; it temporarily suspends its formal barriers so that the subject's free movement toward the King can be exercised. The revelation of the Thirteen Attributes of Mercy in Elul generates the possibility of human initiative; it does not replace it. The service of Elul is therefore the service of *bechirah chofshit*—free choice exercised under conditions of maximal accessibility.

This theological claim finds a precise political counterpart in the classical and modern republican tradition that has repeatedly drawn upon Hebraic sources. Philip Pettit's neo-republican conception of freedom as non-domination insists that liberty is not merely the absence of interference but the absence of arbitrary power—the structural condition in which no agent stands in a position to interfere with another at will and with impunity. A person or a people is free only when the possibility of domination has been constitutionally closed. Yoram Hazony's recovery of biblical particularism and national covenantalism, and Daniel Elazar's work on covenantal federalism, both locate the deepest resources for such non-domination in

the Hebraic political tradition itself. The Torah's limited monarchy (Deuteronomy 17), the requirement that the king write and read his own Torah scroll, the prohibition on multiplying horses, wives, and silver, and the prophetic critique of royal overreach all function as constitutional constraints designed to prevent domination by the very office created to protect the people.

Within Orthodoxy the spectrum of views is real. Some streams emphasize the necessity of strong hierarchical authority as the only reliable guarantor of communal survival under conditions of exile or existential threat. Others, drawing more heavily on the republican and covenantal strands visible in Rambam's *Hilchot Melachim*, in the political readings of the Book of Joshua, and in the classical sources that treat the *edah* as a federal-republican body under Divine sovereignty, insist that legitimate authority is always limited, accountable, and oriented toward the prevention of arbitrary power. The constructive criticism that Torah itself supplies is that pure hierarchical models risk sliding into domination, while pure procedural liberalism risks dissolving the particular covenantal people into an abstract individual. The corrective is the covenantal republican synthesis: authority is real, but it is bounded by higher law, by the requirement of public accountability, and by the permanent reservation of free will as the ground of both individual and collective responsibility.

The current geopolitical and political moment makes the synthesis urgent rather than academic. The ongoing contest over the Strait of Hormuz is a textbook case of domination versus non-domination. Iranian assertions of unilateral administrative control, the use of force against shipping that does not accept Iranian routing, and the explicit claim of sovereign management of a global maritime chokepoint constitute an attempt to place commercial traffic, energy security, and regional states under a form of arbitrary power. The counter-effort—whether American, Omani, or multilateral—to maintain open passage under rules that no single coastal power can rewrite at will is an attempt, however imperfect, to institutionalize non-domination in a strategic waterway. Torah does not romanticize power politics; it does, however, supply a normative language in which the difference between a regime that seeks to dominate a commons and a regime that seeks to prevent such domination can be named and judged.

Closer to home, the Israeli elections scheduled for 27 October 2026 place the question of covenantal accountability on the domestic calendar. Turnout, the formation of lists, the threshold, and the subsequent coalition arithmetic are not merely mechanical. They are the contemporary mechanisms through which a people exercises—or fails to exercise—the free will that the King in the Field makes accessible. High, deliberate turnout is itself a form of *teshuvah* at the level of the body politic: a turning toward responsibility rather than resignation or fragmentation. The classical republican demand that citizens not be dominated by those who govern them finds its Hebraic intensification in the knowledge that the ultimate Sovereign remains the One who stands in the field, inviting approach rather than compelling submission.

*Nitzavim–Vayeilech*, read on the preceding Shabbat, already placed the entire people—leaders and woodchoppers, men and women, those present and those not yet born—under the renewed covenant. *Ha'azinu*, whose weekday reading has already begun, will soon place heaven and earth as witnesses. Between these two moments stands the final stretch of *Elul*: the field in which free will is exercised under conditions of Divine nearness, the constitutional demand that power remain limited and accountable, and the geopolitical reality that domination remains a permanent temptation for both regimes and movements.

The synthesis is therefore neither a soft liberalism nor a sacralized hierarchy. It is the hard, demanding claim that free will is real, that non-domination is a structural requirement of justice, that limited kingship under higher law is the Torah's preferred political form, and that the accessibility of the King in the Field is the temporal invitation to exercise that freedom before the gates of the new year close. The work of these days is to approach—freely, deliberately, and without the illusion that any earthly power can permanently occupy the place of the One who waits in the field.

#### Extended Bibliography (selected, with hyperlinks)

##### Primary Classical Sources

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##### Republican and Hebraic Political Theory

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##### Contemporary Geopolitics and Israeli Politics (selected recent reporting)

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