

The Patriotic Mask — October 2026 Edition

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Covenantal Precision versus Performative Strength, from Mei Merivah to the Tower of Bavel

By Aryeh Leib Thorne Toren Jerusalem, 4 Cheshvan 5787 / 15 October 2026 (week of Parshat Noach)

Prologue: Why a new edition now

On 30 June 2026 I wrote that our public life is too often governed by a Patriotic Mask: national symbols, security rhetoric and displays of resolve used to cover for the absence of covenant-grounded leadership. I took the image from Mei Merivah (Bamidbar 20:1–13), where Moshe was told to speak to the rock and struck it instead. Water came out. The people drank. And still the verdict came down: "because you did not trust in Me, to sanctify Me before the eyes of the Children of Israel" (20:12). The result looked like success. The method failed the covenant.

That was a diagnosis, not a charge sheet, and it still is. It is aimed at no party and spares none, including the camp I tend to vote with. The test is not who wears the mask. The test is whether the strength we show is precise, true and answerable to G-d, or whether it is a performance.

Four months later the setting has changed. Israel goes to the polls on Tuesday, 27 October 2026. The region is living through the aftermath of the Iran war, and its fire has moved south, to Riyadh and Sanaa. And this Shabbat, 17 October 2026, we read Parshat Noach (confirmed on hebc.com for Israel), which gives the mask its oldest name.

I. The Tower: "Let us make a name for ourselves"

"Come, let us build us a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, v'na'aseh lanu shem, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be scattered upon the face of the whole earth" (Bereishit 11:4).

The generation of the Dispersion did not lack unity. "One people, one language" (11:6). It did not lack engineering or ambition. What it lacked was an address beyond itself. The tower was built to be seen. Its purpose was the name.

Then comes the line that should stop every campaign strategist in his tracks: "וַיֵּרֶד ה' לִרְאוֹת אֶת הָעִיר" — "And ה' came down to see the city and the tower" (11:5). Rashi observes that G-d did not need to descend to see anything. The Torah writes it this way to teach judges not to condemn before they have seen for themselves. So the parsha holds two lessons in one verse. The builders wanted a name, a reputation detached from truth. Heaven answered by modelling the opposite: look carefully before you speak.

The midrash (Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer 24) sharpens the picture. "If a man fell and died they paid no heed to him, but if a brick fell they sat down and wept, and said: Woe is us! When will another one come in its stead?" That is the mask at full height: the symbol has become more precious than the people it was meant to protect.

Bavel is the political sequel to Mei Merivah. At the rock, a leader chose the visible blow over the precise word. At the tower, a whole society chose the visible name over the covenant. In both cases the outward result looked impressive, and in both cases Heaven called it a failure.

II. Noach: "Righteous in his generations"

The parsha opens: "Noach was a righteous man, tamim in his generations" (6:9). Rashi brings the famous dispute (Sanhedrin 108a). Some read "in his generations" as praise: if he was righteous even in a corrupt age, how much more so in a generation of tzaddikim. Others read it as a limit: only measured against his generation was he considered righteous. In Avraham's generation he would have counted for nothing special.

For election season, that dispute is a mirror. Every candidate is "righteous in his generation" in the second sense: better than the rival on the next poster. That is a low bar, and the mask lives on low bars. The first reading asks more. It asks whether a person stays whole, tamim, when the whole environment rewards performance.

There is a second Noach lesson we tend to skip. Noach built for 120 years in full view, and the commentators say the long build was itself the message. He was meant to warn while he worked, so that the people would ask and return. Yet nowhere in the text do we find Noach pleading for his generation, as Avraham later pleads for Sedom. The Zohar faults him for exactly that: when told to save himself and his household, "he did not intercede on behalf of his generation," and so the Flood is called by his name, "the waters of Noach" (Yeshayahu 54:9), while Moshe at the Golden Calf offered his own life for his people (Zohar, Parshat Noach; Sefaria, Zohar, Noach 25). Building your own ark is not leadership. Leadership is precise, costly speech on behalf of others.

III. The daily daf: the covenant you cannot pay for

The Daf Yomi this week reached Bechorot 26 on 14 October 2026, and today's daf, Thursday 15 October 2026, is Bechorot 27 (per hebc.com). On 26b the Gemara asks why a kohen may not ask a farmer to hand over a firstborn animal early. Rav Sheshet explains that such a kohen looks like a kohen who helps out at the threshing floor so that he will be given terumah. The baraita there rules that kohanim, levi'im and the poor who assist at the shepherd's house, the threshing floor or the slaughterhouse may not be paid with terumah or tithe. Holy gifts cannot become wages. On such people it applies the verse in Malachi (2:8): "you have corrupted the covenant of Levi."

The halachic point is narrow. The principle is wide. What is owed to the covenant cannot be traded for service rendered to a patron. When the sacred becomes payment, the covenant is "corrupted," even if every individual act looks helpful. That is the logic of the mask in the language of the Beis Midrash: a symbol of holiness bought by favors.

IV. Contemporary examples, September–October 2026

What follows is offered l'toeles, for a constructive purpose: to help voters and leaders recognise the pattern before 27 October, not to shame any person. Claims are attributed to whoever made them. Where something rests on a single source, I say so.

1. The surplus-vote standoff. On 13 October 2026, Itamar Ben Gvir called Ofer Winter "Bennett 2" and said Otzma Yehudit would not sign a surplus-vote agreement with Winter's list (reported by Israel Hayom and Yinon News on Telegram, 13 October; also reported by i24 Hebrew and in a second TV report on the evening of 13 October). On 11 October, Amit Segal reported that Shas and UTJ had signed such an agreement, which the two parties confirmed in a joint statement (Times of Israel liveblog, Jerusalem Post and Haaretz, 11 October).

Why does this matter? Because a surplus agreement is one of the few places in our system where the arithmetic is public. Here is the equation under the Bader-Ofer method:

- Only lists that pass the threshold count: a list needs at least 3.25% of valid votes.
- Let V be the total votes of all lists that passed. The quota is $q = V \div 120$.
- Each list first receives $\text{floor}(V_i \div q)$ seats.
- The seats left over are given one at a time. Each round, the next seat goes to the list (or the surplus-agreement pair, counted as one) with the highest $V \div (s + 1)$, where s is the seats it already holds. Inside a pair, the same rule then splits the pair's seats between the two lists.

A worked illustration, with round numbers that are hypothetical and not a projection: if $V = 4,800,000$, then $q = 4,800,000 \div 120 = 40,000$. Two allied lists of 170,000 and 150,000 votes get 4 and 3 seats outright (160,000 and 120,000 used), with 10,000 and 30,000 votes left over. Combined as a pair, they hold 7 seats on 320,000 votes, so they compete for the next seat at $320,000 \div 8 = 40,000$ per seat, where separately they would have competed at $170,000 \div 5 = 34,000$ and $150,000 \div 4 = 37,500$. The pairing often decides one seat, sometimes none. Leftover votes are not discarded either way. Under Bader-Ofer they count toward remainder seats whether or not a list signs. What a refusal changes is whether two lists that share a camp pool their remainders.

So the question to ask is not "who is the bigger patriot," but: does refusing (or signing) serve the voters who trusted these lists, or does it serve the name? A refusal announced with an epithet is a tower brick. A signature made quietly to keep a camp's votes counting is speech to the rock. Each voter can judge which this is. I make no claim about anyone's motive.

2. Qatar: pledge and record. On Monday, 27 July 2026, at the INSS National Security Conference, Naftali Bennett pledged, "If I am elected prime minister, I will immediately declare Qatar an enemy state" (Times of Israel, Jerusalem Post and Ynet, 27 July 2026); he repeated the vow in a TV interview aired 1 August 2026 and at a platform press conference on 19 August 2026. On 13 October a separate clip was re-shared showing Bennett, as defence minister, explaining his support for allowing Qatari money into Gaza and placing responsibility on Avigdor Liberman (original broadcast date not confirmed; Bennett was defence minister from 12 November 2019 to 17 May 2020). Bennett's own account is that circumstances and responsibility were different then.

I state this as a question, not a charge. When a leader's present pledge and past defence point in opposite directions, which is the mask: the old explanation or the new vow? Or did he learn something real in between, which would be to his credit? Ask him to say which, precisely. Teshuvah needs words, not just a new poster. And the same standard applies to every leader who managed the Qatar file across several governments, in either bloc.

3. The fire moved south. On 10 October 2026, a Houthi missile struck King Khalid International Airport in Riyadh. The Saudi aviation authority reported 12 killed and 309 injured (AP and BBC, 11 October; NBC News and the Wall Street Journal also reported the attack). On 13 October the Houthis threatened Aramco facilities and Saudi airports (Al Jazeera, 13 October). The Saudi-led coalition issued evacuation warnings for a fuel station in Sanaa and then struck there and near Hodeidah (Reuters, via StreetInsider, 13 October; Xinhua, 14 October). Overnight on 13–14

October, a Houthi missile struck an Aramco administrative building in Dhahran, causing a limited fire and no casualties, as the Saudi Energy Ministry confirmed (AP, AFP and The National, 14 October).

The lesson for us is quiet. Prime Minister Netanyahu condemned the airport attack and sent condolences "on behalf of the people of Israel" (PMO statement, reported on three Telegram channels, 11 October). That was a precise word, spoken to the right address, and it cost nothing in posture. The mask would have used the moment for applause at home. Covenantal realism uses it to build the alliance that actually protects Jews.

4. The cost behind the headlines. The Iran war's aftermath shows up in budgets before it shows up in speeches. Qatar's emir said on 13 October that state revenue fell 42% in the first half of 2026 (Arab News, 13 October; Abu Ali Express on Telegram, 13 October). Earlier, Euronews reported on 9 September that Qatar's first-half deficit had already passed its full-year forecast amid LNG disruption. A region that pays this price is not impressed by slogans. Our neighbours and our enemies read our capability, not our captions.

V. Mei Merivah, revisited

In June I wrote about the staff. In October I would add the water. At Mei Merivah the people were really thirsty. The need was real. Moshe's error was not that he acted. It was that he acted in the visible way rather than the commanded way, and so lost the chance to sanctify G-d's Name before the people's eyes.

Our needs are real too: security after a war, a government after an election, alliances in a burning neighbourhood. The question is never whether to act. It is whether we act by the precise word or by the dramatic blow. Bavel adds the warning that a whole people can make Moshe's mistake together, if what it wants most is a name.

VI. Covenantal realism: a voter's practice for 27 October

Covenantal realism is not passivity. It is strength that answers to Heaven and to the facts. Four practices, for voters and candidates alike:

1. Look before you judge (11:5). Read the actual statement, not the clip of the clip. Don't share a claim you have only one source for, or label it as such.
2. Ask for the equation. Any candidate who tells you a vote is "wasted" or a seat is "secured" should be able to show the $q = V \div 120$ arithmetic. If they can't, it is a tower brick.
3. Separate the gift from the wage (Bechorot 26b). Ask of every alliance: is this serving the voters, or paying the patron?
4. Be tamim in the first sense. Do not grade leaders, or ourselves, only against the worst of our generation.

And one more, which this team keeps without exception: no campaign, no results night and no breaking crisis outranks Shabbat. On Friday, 16 October, at 17:26 Jerusalem candle lighting, the screens go dark, and that is the most precise political statement a Jew can make in an election month. Our sovereignty begins with the day on which we stop building towers.

Closing

The Tower of Babel was never finished. The ark was. The difference was not engineering. One was built for a name. The other was built because G-d said so, to the measurements He gave. May we take off the mask, speak to the rock, and build in this election season what is precise rather than merely tall.

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