

Wisdom in the Sight of the Nations

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Va'etchanan, Monotheistic Clarity, Covenantal Fidelity, and Republican Resilience on 6 Av 5786

A Learned Essay Integrating Orthodox Jewish Theology, Chassidic Thought, and Covenantal Republican Political Theory

Developed in cooperation with Grok for comprehensive Torah synthesis

Introduction: The Nine Days and the Demand for Visible Wisdom

On 6 Av 5786 (20 July 2026), during the Nine Days of intensified mourning that precede Tisha B'Av, the daily Chabad portions speak with particular force into a fractured geopolitical moment. The second portion of Parshat Va'etchanan (Devarim / Deuteronomy 4:5–40) insists that the statutes and ordinances given to Israel must appear as “wisdom and understanding in the sight of the peoples,” that God draws near when called upon in truth, and that one must “know this day and take to heart that the Lord is God in heaven above and upon the earth below; there is none else” (4:39). Tehillim 35–38 give voice to the plea for justice amid adversaries, confession of sin, and trust under affliction. Tanya, Iggeret HaKodesh, Epistle 2, records the Alter Rebbe's letter upon his release from the Petersburg imprisonment—a moment of vindication after calumnies aimed at silencing the dissemination of Chassidus, and an affirmation that adversity does not cancel the mission of transmission. Hayom Yom for Menachem Av 6 transmits the Alter Rebbe's brief maamar upon that return: “Raise your hands in holiness and bless Havayah. G-d bless you from Zion, Maker of heaven and earth.” The elevation of the emotive traits (middot) by intellect (sechel), the drawing forth of the Name Havayah from the essence of the soul, and the consequent maintenance of the worlds.

These texts do not counsel withdrawal. They demand that moral clarity, covenantal fidelity, and the transmission of enduring wisdom shape engagement with power. The Nine Days themselves, as the Rebbe taught, are not only for mourning destruction but for increased Torah study—especially of the laws of the Beit HaMikdash—and tzedakah, so that “Zion shall be redeemed with justice and her returnees with righteousness” (Isaiah 1:27). Against this spiritual backdrop stand the developments of 20 July 2026: ongoing U.S. operations targeting Iranian coastal surveillance, air defenses, maritime assets, and missile-drone sites amid continued threats to Strait of Hormuz navigation; Israeli allocation of approximately \$400 million (1.3 billion shekels) for West Bank settlement expansion together with advanced outposts and reported control of roughly 65 percent of Gaza under transitional arrangements; the formal transition of Andy Burnham as United Kingdom Prime Minister following the resignation of Keir Starmer; European trade recalibrations with China; and oil prices (Brent) hovering in the \$88–91 range, elevated and highly sensitive to Middle East developments.

The central question is not whether power politics will continue—it will—but whether the wisdom that Moses insisted must be visible to the nations can still govern the exercise of that power. Pure transactionalism risks the idolatry of short-term expediency. Pure idealism risks inviting predation. A covenantal-republican synthesis insists on a third path: non-domination

under higher law, reciprocal obligation, moral clarity that is also strategically competent, and the daily elevation of middot by sechel so that personal, national, and international orders are maintained rather than allowed to fracture further.

This essay expands the analysis through sustained engagement with classical mefarshim, Chassidic sources, and the Hebrew Republic tradition in political theory. It weighs competing interpretive approaches, maps theological concepts onto republican categories of non-domination and formative civic practice, and applies the resulting framework to the contemporary landscape.

I. Deep Exegesis of Devarim 4:5–40: Wisdom Visible, Nearness Conditional, Absolute Monotheism, and the Imperative of Transmission

The second portion of Va'etchanan opens with Moses' declaration of the statutes and judgments that Israel is to observe "in the land which you are going over to possess" (4:5). The immediate purpose is not merely internal obedience but external witness: "for this is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples, that, when they hear all these statutes, shall say: 'Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people'" (4:6). The nearness of God is then linked to truthful calling (4:7), and the uniqueness of the revelation at Horeb is recalled so that the people "do not forget the things your eyes have seen" and transmit them diligently to children and children's children (4:9–10). The climax is the absolute monotheistic assertion of 4:35 and 4:39: "To you it was shown, that you might know that the Lord is God; there is none else besides Him... Know therefore this day, and lay it to your heart, that the Lord is God in heaven above and on the earth beneath; there is none else."

Classical mefarshim open multiple layers. Rashi, drawing on earlier midrash, emphasizes the pedagogical and comparative dimension: the nations will recognize the wisdom of the Torah's moral and civil order when it is lived. The statutes are not esoteric secrets but a public curriculum of justice and holiness. Ramban stresses the uniqueness of the Sinai theophany and the danger of forgetting its experiential force; the statutes are not arbitrary but rooted in the nearness of the Divine Presence that other nations lack. For Ramban, the "wisdom in the sight of the peoples" is both apologetic and missional: Israel's distinctive way of life is intended to provoke recognition of the God who is near. Ohr HaChaim deepens the psychological and spiritual reading: the call in truth is not mere verbal petition but alignment of inner disposition with outer action; idolatry begins with the subtle elevation of intermediate causes—power, wealth, military strength, diplomatic cleverness—into ultimate realities. The command to transmit is not optional pedagogy but the mechanism by which the covenant survives generational attrition. Ibn Ezra and Sforino add further nuance on the rational accessibility of the statutes and the pedagogical responsibility of parents and teachers.

Chassidic thought, particularly in the Tanya tradition and the Rebbe's teachings, intensifies the ontological claim of "none else." Sha'ar HaYichud VehaEmunah insists that divine energy is the sole true substance of all existence; apparent multiplicity is concealment that permits finite beings to exercise genuine agency. Hayom Yom's elevation of middot by sechel and the drawing of Havayah from the etzem ha-neshama is therefore not private mysticism but the inner work that maintains the worlds. When the emotive forces of fear, ambition, and factional passion remain unilluminated by intellect and higher purpose, the political order itself becomes unstable. Epistle 2 of Iggeret HaKodesh, written in the shadow of imprisonment and calumny,

models the response: physical adversity does not halt the mission of dissemination; divine providence vindicates and commissions continued transmission of the teachings in forms accessible to the generation. The Rebbe repeatedly taught that the Nine Days are a time of heightened potential for redemption precisely because intensified study of Beit HaMikdash laws and increased tzedakah construct the spiritual architecture of the future Temple in the present.

Different interpretive approaches must be weighed. Strictly historicist readings treat the portion as ancient Near Eastern treaty language adapted for Israel's self-understanding. Comparative religionists note parallels with other monotheistic or monolatrous claims. Post-colonial critics sometimes frame the "wisdom in the sight of the peoples" as an early expression of civilizational superiority that later justified conquest. Each captures a partial truth and each falls short. The historicist risks evacuating the enduring claim; the comparative risks relativizing the uniqueness of Sinai; the post-colonial risks reading modern categories of power and domination back into a text whose primary concern is fidelity to the One who is not subject to domination. The Orthodox synthesis retains the historical particularity while insisting that the monotheistic claim and the demand for visible wisdom remain normative for every generation that inherits the covenant. Transmission is not cultural preservation alone; it is the ongoing work of making the nearness of God intelligible and the statutes attractive as genuine wisdom.

II. Republican Political Theory and the Hebrew Republic Tradition: Non-Domination, Covenant, Ordered Liberty, and the Critique of Thin Transactionalism

The monotheistic and covenantal architecture of Va'etchanan finds a striking resonance—and mutual illumination—in classical and neo-Roman republican political theory. Philip Pettit's conception of freedom as non-domination (the absence of arbitrary power or the capacity for interference) rather than mere non-interference maps onto the Torah's rejection of idolatry of intermediate powers. A people or a nation remains unfree if another actor retains the structural capacity to dominate its core choices, even if that capacity is not exercised on a given day. Domination is a status relation, not merely an act. Daniel J. Elazar's extensive work on the covenant tradition in politics recovers the biblical berit as a mutual, purpose-driven bond rooted in shared narrative, obligation, and telos—distinct from a thin contract of convenience that can be discarded when calculations change. Covenant creates a people; contract merely coordinates interests.

The Hebrew Republic tradition, reconstructed by Eric Nelson and others, demonstrates how early modern republican thinkers (Harrington, Milton, the American founders) drew directly upon Hebraic sources for ideas of limited kingship, mixed constitution, agrarian laws restraining domination, and liberty under higher law. James Madison's Federalist No. 10 on factions and No. 51 on checks and balances finds a deeper grammar in the biblical insistence that human authority is derivative and accountable. The Liberty Bell's inscription of Leviticus 25:10 is not decorative; it encodes the jubilee principle that land and persons cannot be permanently alienated under arbitrary human power. Michael Walzer's just-war criteria and Thomas Schelling's deterrence theory supply complementary analytical tools: power must be exercised with discrimination, proportionality, and credible commitment if it is to serve non-domination rather than become a new source of arbitrary interference.

These frameworks allow a structured critique of prevailing approaches. Pure structural realism (Mearsheimer and others) correctly diagnoses the anarchic pressures of the international system and the primacy of survival, yet it systematically underweights the corrosion that pure transactionalism produces in the moral and institutional fabric of free societies. When every alliance is reduced to momentary leverage, the republican virtue required for long-term cohesion atrophies. Liberal institutionalism correctly values repeated interaction, reputation, and rules-based constraint, yet it often under-specifies the moral and civic preconditions—shared telos, enforceable red lines, non-arbitrary structures—without which institutions become arenas of contest or façades for domination. Constructivist emphasis on identity and narrative is useful for understanding why material interests alone do not predict behavior, yet it risks relativism unless anchored in a substantive account of human dignity and justice. Pure isolationism or maximalist nationalism can protect short-term autonomy at the cost of the alliance depth and moral clarity that Va'etchanan demands be visible to the nations.

The covenantal-republican synthesis insists that power and deterrence are indispensable (hishtadlut), yet they must be exercised within a framework of higher law, reciprocal obligation, and non-domination. Alliances that leave one party with the structural capacity to weaken the other's core security constitute domination, not partnership. Domestic orders that permit factions or elites to dominate without contestatory institutions violate the same principle. The salt of the covenant—preserving, stinging corruption first, elevating the offering—supplies the practical metaphor for seasoning both domestic policy and international engagement. The three pillars recovered in the Hebrew Republic literature—republican exclusivism (Abravanel and Milton on 1 Samuel 8 as political idolatry), Sabbatical and Jubilee economics (Cunaeus and Harrington on mechanisms restraining oligarchy), and Erastian toleration grounded in Noahide natural law (Selden)—further deepen the bridge: human authority is always derivative, property and power must be structured against domination, and universal moral minima coexist with particular covenantal obligations.

A further layer of synthesis concerns formative practice. Hayom Yom's elevation of middot by sechel parallels the republican emphasis on civic education and the cultivation of virtues that sustain non-domination. Institutions and daily practices that train citizens (or a people) to subordinate passion to principle, to remember founding narratives, and to transmit them across generations are not secondary to security; they are constitutive of it. Zikui ha-rabbim—the merit of drawing the many into greater sanctity—finds a republican counterpart in the priority of formative influence over purely private excellence.

III. Critical Analysis: Strengths, Risks, and Boundary Conditions of the Synthesis

The strengths of the covenantal-republican synthesis are considerable. It supplies a language of non-domination that is both theologically grounded and politically operational. It resists the reduction of alliances to pure calculation while avoiding the naïveté that ignores power. It recovers the Hebrew sources of early modern republicanism without requiring confessional uniformity, and it insists that moral clarity and strategic competence are not opposites. The Nine Days framing further strengthens the analysis by linking present geopolitical decisions to the long memory of destruction born of internal disunity and forgotten covenant.

Risks must also be named. One risk is over-theologizing politics, treating every strategic choice as a test of monotheistic fidelity in a way that short-circuits prudential judgment. Another is the inverse: diluting the distinctiveness of Sinai by absorbing it too readily into a generic republican vocabulary. A third risk is instrumentalizing Torah for contemporary policy preferences rather than allowing the text to critique those preferences. The safeguard is methodological humility: the synthesis is a heuristic for analysis and formation, not a closed ideological system. Competing readings—realist, liberal, post-colonial—must continue to be engaged, even as their limitations are exposed.

Boundary conditions are equally important. Non-domination does not entail pacifism; *milchemet mitzvah* remains a legitimate category under carefully delimited conditions (Rambam, *Hilchot Melachim*). Covenant does not dissolve particular obligations into universal humanitarianism. Transmission does not require cultural isolationism; the demand that the statutes appear as wisdom to the nations presupposes contact and visibility.

IV. The Fractured Landscape of 6 Av 5786: Regional Analysis Through the Twin Lenses

The United States. The administration continues to prioritize border security, energy dominance, and assertive enforcement against Iranian threats to shipping and personnel in the Hormuz theater. Ongoing airstrikes targeting coastal and missile infrastructure, intensified naval presence, and signals of readiness for further action if nuclear thresholds are crossed reflect a break from prior patterns of prolonged ambiguity. Domestic polling shows economic approval still challenged and midterms approximately four months away; polarization remains a structural constraint on long-term continuity. From the *Va'etchanan* vantage, the test is whether American power can be exercised and communicated as “wisdom in the sight of the peoples”—consistent, values-anchored, and capable of inspiring rather than merely coercing allies—or whether over-transactionalism will leave partners guessing and adversaries testing. Non-domination requires that commitments to core allies, especially Israel, not be treated as bargaining chips subject to momentary recalculation. The elevation of *middot* by *sechel* has institutional analogues: deliberative processes, intelligence discipline, and strategic culture that subordinate short-term political passion to long-term principle.

Israel and the Middle East. The allocation of roughly \$400 million for West Bank settlement expansion, the advancement of outposts, and reported control of approximately 65 percent of Gaza under transitional governance represent post-conflict consolidation aimed at strategic depth and deterrence. Parallel efforts include public-affairs advocacy in the United States to sustain bipartisan support. Lebanese talks focus more on Hezbollah scaling than full withdrawal. These moves are defended as defensive necessity after years of rocket fire, tunnel infrastructure, and October 7-style atrocities. Critics invoke international law, demographic realities, and the risk of diplomatic isolation. The covenantal lens evaluates them against the criteria of *milchemet mitzvah* (Rambam, *Hilchot Melachim*), purity of arms, and the long-term requirement that Israeli actions appear as wisdom rather than mere force. During the Nine Days the parallel is stark: destruction was born of internal disunity and forgotten covenant; rebuilding requires both physical security architecture and the moral-spiritual infrastructure of Torah and *tzedakah*. Transmission to the next generation is itself a strategic and covenantal

imperative. The dual-authority model of the Ran (Sanhedrin ideal justice versus king pragmatic order) and Maimonides' limits on executive power supply tools for evaluating how security consolidation can remain non-arbitrary.

Europe, including the United Kingdom. The formal transition of Andy Burnham as Prime Minister marks another chapter in Britain's post-Brexit turbulence and signals a potential pragmatic pivot toward closer European coordination on trade, defense, and energy. France–Germany alignment on a tougher China trade roadmap, persistent NATO burden-sharing debates, and energy-price sensitivity to Middle East spillovers all point to a continent seeking strategic autonomy while remaining exposed to external shocks. Fragmentation risks handing space to revisionist actors. Va'etchanan's insistence on shared statutes that create visible strength warns against both naïve integration that erodes accountability and pure divergence that weakens collective resilience. Civic and institutional sechel—the capacity to elevate short-term national passions by longer-term strategic intelligence—remains in short supply.

China, Energy, and the Multipolar Stage. China's demonstrated economic resilience, stockpile strategies, renewable push under the 15th Five-Year Plan, and continued BRI/CPEC advancement illustrate long-game adaptability. Oil volatility in the \$88–91 range underscores the strategic multiplier of energy security. QUAD, AUKUS, and Abraham Accords frameworks gain renewed relevance precisely because thin transactional arrangements have proven fragile. The monotheistic clarity of “there is none else” supplies a higher vantage: human power structures are never ultimate. Enduring strength flows from fidelity to principles that outlast any single administration or market cycle. Energy independence and technological resilience are not merely material goals; they are conditions of non-domination.

V. Forward Recommendations and the Work of Transmission

Bolster the U.S.–Israel–Europe axis with hybrid frameworks that combine transactional incentives with explicit shared-values training and institutional checks against arbitrary interference. Alliances must be structured so that no party retains the capacity to dominate the core security of the others.

Accelerate genuine energy independence and diversification across the democratic camp—domestic production, alternative routes, responsible nuclear and renewables—so that no single chokepoint can dominate global stability. Energy security is a precondition of political non-domination.

Counter systemic challenges through coordinated technology and supply-chain resilience, public education on authoritarian risks, and the consistent modeling of “wisdom in the sight of the nations.” Soft power that is merely performative will not suffice; it must be grounded in actual practices of justice and restraint.

Treat increased Torah study (especially Beit HaMikdash laws) and tzedakah during the remaining Nine Days not as pietistic add-ons but as spiritual infrastructure for strategic resolve and generational transmission. The Rebbe's teaching on these days remains operative: the work of redemption is constructed in the present through study and righteous action.

At the civic and institutional level, model the elevation of middot by sechel: cultivate leaders and citizens who understand that security without moral clarity is brittle and that moral clarity without competent strength is vulnerable. Equal civic contribution (including in milchemet

mitzvah contexts) and decentralized communal autonomy remain essential structural safeguards against domination. Formative education—transmission of founding narratives, practices of gratitude and restraint, and habits of deliberative speech—is not optional for free societies.

Closing: Raising Hands in Holiness from Zion

The Alter Rebbe's maamar on the sixth of Av reminds us that the elevation of the emotive by the intellect, and the drawing of divine energy from the essence of the soul, maintains the worlds. In a season of mourning that is also a season of potential rebuilding, Va'etchanan's call remains urgent: know this day and take to heart that there is none else; transmit the wisdom so that it is visible; call in truth so that the nearness of God is experienced. Alliances worthy of higher sovereignty, power seasoned with the salt of covenant, and daily fidelity that turns concealment into revelation remain the path forward.

May the remaining days of the Nine Days yield renewed resolve. May future generations inherit not only security but the wisdom to sustain it. Chazak chazak ve-nitchazek. Am Yisrael Chai.

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