Debar Torah: Jewish Views of Dynastic Monarchy

by Hazzan Rabbi Ira Rohde

"A Prince of God are you among us..." (Gen. 23:6)

In the storyline of this week’s Torah reading, the establishment of a rightful succession is assured for Abraham’s dynasty through his son Isaac. In the haftarah, the establishment and designation of Solomon as the rightful heir, Abraham has already acted as a statesman in dealing with other potential candidates, and this Parasha is filled with "courtly" motifs. Indeed, only a prince or king (like Pharaoh) would purchase a royal tomb for himself and his "Ephoretes," Sarah, the way Abraham does here. So it is legitimate to consider the focus of the upon the dynastic succession of this "Prince of God" means.

Though dynastic monarchies, and we know them, as well. In effect, all lieutens are princes and rightful heirs of the dynasty of Abraham. Kohanim and Levites among us belong to special sub-dynasties. Only the return of the Dynasty of the House of David can bring ultimate Re- demption. We are dazzled by royal dynastic grandeur and charmed by the earthly loves, grace and disciplined culture born of princely breeding. At the same time, we hate Pharaoh, the greatest dynastic monarch, who remains. All those kings who usurped the place of God, enslaved their people, and overtaxed their economies, but of their last fort papers, etc., were likened to Pharaoh. The Bible is filled with abuses of dynastic monarchies, and yet admires them, at the same time. Of course, it's natural for all those who consider themselves kings and noblemen (as we all do) to find with the ruling Crown. But, at the same time, we recognize that royal dynasties give protection and stability, in which the rule of law is executed consistently and vigorously, justifying authority to all elements of society, especially those likely to be subverted.

Now, monarchies could be dictatorial, but what makes democracy the primary form of monarchy, elevating the importance of the dynasty, success? Well, to continue my theme from last week's Debar Torah, we instinctively prefer models of political/social organizations which are organic. The basic unit of social/political order is family, building from those bonds to the clan. From the family to the tribe, proceeding from there to the attachments to city and commonwealth. We then see security, and order throughout the world lowest most naturally afforded and assured through familial connections, as well. Throughout history, if a social order is assured on the lower levels through respect for our brethren and relations, then surely it could be enhanced on the higher levels by respect for brethren and children of the same kingly father-figure, modeling the dynasty after the family. A holistic continuity of law and order would seem to be most reliably assured thereby.

And yet, familial, dynastic models are serious political ventures. Jewish views of political leadership sometimes parallel Jewish views of divine rule. Jews view pagan gods as either doing too little, or a lack of concern or power, or else as doing too much. Gods (and politics) who do too little out of a lack of concern or because of conflicts with other gods (and politicians) allow everything to go on smoothly. On the other hand, gods (and politicians) who order men around overwhelm according to the differing whims of differing gods (and political). God is known to cause evil, or at least give an active excuse for it, for example in creating children or in the pursuit of justice. Pagan religion and thought could either mean that each man in the hands of the logical working out/ungodliness of an unceasing destiny for this or divine law, or else preordained might leave man at the mercy of the direct blows and stay the same man from divine caprice and intrigues among powers at war, each way resulting in miscarriage of justice. So it is with human monarchies. And even when the ruler, human or divine, is properly concerned, the rule's authority may be too cruel and heartless, or else too merciful in the undeserving and thereby unfair. Or there may be a lack of a consistent, logical law, ruling instead by fear, instead of the wisdom of lawful wisdom. Alternately, unfairness may arise from legalistic overconsistency and a lack of organic humane insight and wisdom as to how to improve society.

At other times, Jewish views of human political leadership run counter to, rather than parallel to, the views of divine rule. Since Adonai is the only True King, then properly, in some senses, there can be no real dynastic power; there is, at least, an automatic Jewish check upon the power of dynastic monarch. The monarch’s power and the very continuance of his dynasty itself are in God’s hands. The pagan king, by contrast, can rival a god, if he wishes, although he’s subject to the whims of the populace as well as the workingout of the larger cosmic events. The Jews view of Law and Justice being sacred and coming from a Revelation of God means that the Jewish monarch is subject to that Law. His job is to execute that law and carry out Divine justice and retribution, not to impose his own law, unlike the typical pagan monarch. The monarchs, on the other hand, is subject to common custom and precedent, but not checked by it to such an extent.

Still, all in all, for Judaism, the dynastic model of leadership remains important as an ideal of divine rule. The organic, humane way the members of the Jewish community, a subject to each other: as brethren, descendants of the same dynasty and fellow-citizens and subjects of a common Dominion, subject to the consistent and caring Commands and Regulations of a lawful, yet Merciful Monarch.
THANKSGIVING AT SHEARITH ISRAEL
THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 23, 2017
Morning Services with our Special Thanksgiving Hallel | Main Sanctuary | 7:45 am
Rabbi Soloveichik’s Address | Main Sanctuary
Children’s Hesed Craft Activity (during the Rabbi’s Address and Pack-a-thon) | starting 8:30 am
Hot Cocoa & Refreshments | Elias Room | 9:00-11:00 am
Parade Viewing for Youth | Portico
Hunger Alleviation Pack-a-thon (registration required) | 9:30-11:30 am | Levy Auditorium
SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 25
Young Couples and Families Thanksgiving Luncheon
See inside center panel for details

Would You Like To Sponsor Our Thanksgiving Festivities?
Visit shearithisrael.org/thanksgiving.

THIRD ANNUAL THANKSGIVING PACK-A-THON
Thursday, November 23, 9:30 am | Levy Auditorium
Building on the success of the past two Pack-a-thons, this year we have expanded our circle of UWS faith community partners to include our founding partner, the West End Collegiate Church, The Jewish Center, and, this year, the Church of Latter-day Saints.
We are also delighted to announce that, like last year, every dollar you donate to this initiative will be TRIPLED through the generosity of an anonymous matching grant.
Help us reach our goal of $18,000 and register to participate or donate at shearithisrael.org/pack-a-thon-2017.

FROM THE DISTRIBUTOR THAT BROUGHT YOU “THE WOMEN’S BALCONY”
The Film Critics are Calling a “Must-See” and “A Masterpiece” “1945”
Now playing at Lincoln Plaza Cinemas, with a special screening to be held at Shearit israel, on
Yom Hashoah, April 11.
On a summer day in 1945, an Orthodox man and his grown son arrive in a small village in Hungary while the villagers prepare for the wedding of the town clerk’s son. The townspeople—suspicious, remorseful, fearful, and cunning—expect the worst and behave accordingly. A superb ensemble cast, lushrous black and white cinematography, and historically detailed art direction contribute to this eloquent drama.

REGISTER NOW: Young Couples and Families Luncheon
Shabbat, November 25 | Following Morning Services
Young couples and families are invited to a Thanksgiving Weekend Shabbat Lunch with Rabbi and Layaliza Soloveichik & Co. Join us for a family-friendly afternoon of Torah and good company. For registration and sponsorship details, visit shearithisrael.org/thanksgiving-luncheon

SAVE THE DATE: Sisterhood Pre-Hanukkah Hands-On Jewelry Making Workshop
Sunday, December 3 | 4:00 pm
Please join the Sisterhood for a family-friendly workshop with handcrafted jewelry designer Ofra. For adults and children 5 and older. Details to follow.

SAVE THE DATE: Shabbat Luncheon Featuring A Conversation Between Rabbi Soloveichik and Historian Andrew Porwancher
The Jewish Friends and Clients of Alexander Hamilton
Saturday, December 9 | Following Morning Services
This extraordinary event will reveal incredible, little known details about Alexander Hamilton’s relationships with Jews in New York, mostly members of Shearit Israel. We will discuss fascinating court cases in which Alexander Hamilton represented Jews, and the story of Jews at Columbia College. Hamilton’s alma mater. Questions to be addressed include: How friendly was Alexander Hamilton with New York’s Jews? How did his Jewish friends help form his own views about the future of the United States? Most tantalizingly, what do these relationships tell us about Jewish links in Hamilton’s own past?
Andrew Porwancher is the author of the forthcoming The Jewish Founding Father: The Secret Life of Alexander Hamilton, to be published by Harvard University Press.

Hebra Based Va’Amet Screening of No. 17 is Anonymous
Sunday, November 19 | 4:00 pm
Join the Hebra for this special screening of this Israeli documentary, set in the aftermath of a suicide bombing that killed 17 on a bus, in which all but one of the victims were identified. The filmmakers document the search to identify the man no one had reported missing. The film runs 75 minutes, and is in Hebrew with English subtitles.
The screening will be followed by a discussion led by psychiatrist and Shearit Israel member, Dr. Rebecca Chapl (Nathan). Childcare will be available and light refreshments will be served. This event is FREE thanks to the Hebra’s sponsorship, though registration is encouraged (and required for childcare). Donations to the Hebra are welcome.
Visit shearithisrael.org/Anonymous17 to sign up.

COMMUNITY ANNOUNCEMENTS
Mazel Tov to Talia Berman on becoming a Bat Mitzvah. Congratulations to her mother, Sara Berman, and her father, David Berman.
Mazel Tov to Daniella Roberts on becoming a Bat Mitzvah. Congratulations to her parents, Joy Saleh and Bruce Roberts.

Thank you to all our sponsors, donors, and contributors for this past week’s Balfour Centennial lecture:
Sponsor: The Solomon Family
Donor: Lynette & Jonathan Tulloff
Chai Contributor: Rachel and Dr. David Vorheims
Contributor: Warren R. Stern

Hazakins U’Barakimos to our participants in the NYC Marathon: Shari Sussman Goldberg, Alex Levi, Samuel Neumark, and Amy Schachter.
We mourn the loss of our member James Powell.
Condolences to his wife, Connie Lu Powell, and to his entire family.

Executive Director, Barbara Reiss, was quoted in Atlas Obscura, a guide to the world’s wondrous and curious places, in their cover article about Louis Comfort Tiffany’s foys into Judaica, including our sanctuary and stained glass windows. You can find the article at shearithisrael.org/press.