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# Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik and Self-Governance as *Tselem Elokim*

## On Being American and Grateful for America

**1. Rav Soloveitchik, *Community, Covenant and Commitment: Selected Letters and Publications* (KTAV, 2005), 114, 117**

We are loyal citizens of our great country and we are committed to all its institutions, political, economic and educational, without any reservation or qualification, as are all other Americans. ...

Relative to the first theme, we must emphasize the duty of each and every Jew to live in accordance with the laws of our country and to exemplify all virtues of citizenry. By displaying a high sense of civic morality, the Jew sanctifies the name of God; conversely any infraction of the legal and moral code by a Jew is tantamount to a desecration of the Divine name. … We must try to dispel the erroneous notion that Jewish education and our unique way of life conflict, somehow, with genuine American ideals.

**2. *Community, Covenant and Commitment*, 116**

*Aug. 11, 1954. To R. Emmanuel Rackman, regarding the American Jewish Tercentenary.*

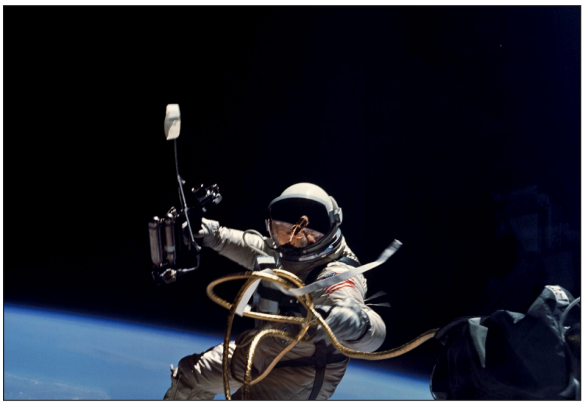
... First, the great historical miracle of the rise and growth of the United States—a country which has given the world true ideals of political democracy and dignity of the individual—ideas which are closely intertwined with the Biblical philosophical anthropology.

Second, the miracle of the development of a strong and materially rich Jewish community, which played a historic role in rehabilitating the remnants of European Jewry and in promoting the cause of Zion.

Third, the miracle of religious freedom that we all enjoy and which affords us Orthodox Jews, in particular, boundless opportunities to organize our lives along traditional halakhic lines and to develop institutions of learning at all levels from the primary to the academic.

**Self-Governance as *Tselem Elokim* and a Divine Task**

## Two Forms of Human Life



*Ed White, first U.S. spacewalk, Gemini IV, June 1965. NASA.*



*Rembrandt, The Sacrifice of Isaac, 1635. Hermitage.*

| Adam the First | Adam the Second |
|---|---|
| *"Fill the earth and subdue it"* | *"To work it and to keep it"* |
| Genesis 1:28 · Majestic Man | Genesis 2:15 · Covenantal Man |
| Reason | Values |
| Success | Failure |
| Sociality | Individuality |
| Power | Submission |
| Ownership | Sacrifice |

**3. Rav Soloveitchik, *The Lonely Man of Faith* (Doubleday), 12**

There is no doubt that the term "image of God" in the first account refers to man's inner charismatic endowment as a creative being. Man's likeness to God expresses itself in man's striving and ability to become a creator. Adam the first who was fashioned in the image of God was blessed with great drive for creative activity and immeasurable resources for the realization of this goal, the most outstanding of which is the intelligence, the human mind, capable of confronting the outside world and inquiring into its complex workings.

**4. *The Lonely Man of Faith*, 14–15**

Man is an honorable being. In other words, man is a dignified being and to be human means to live with dignity. … In other words, dignity was equated by the Psalmist with man's capability of dominating his environment and exercising control over it. Man acquires dignity through glory, through his majestic posture vis-à-vis his environment.

The brute's existence is an undignified one because it is a helpless existence. Human existence is a dignified one because it is a glorious, majestic, powerful existence.

**5. *The Lonely Man of Faith*, 76–78**

Let us not forget that the majestic community is willed by God as much as the covenantal faith community. He wants man to engage in the pursuit of majesty-dignity … He authorized man to quest for "sovereignty" … the same Bible which just enjoined man to withdraw from the periphery to the center commands him to return to the majestic community which, preoccupied with peripheral interests, anxieties, and problems, builds, plants, harvests, regulates rivers, heals the sick, participates in state affairs, is imaginative in dreaming, bold in planning, daring in undertaking and is out to "conquer" the world.

## Legitimacy and the Sacred:
## Political Theology and the Problem of Idolatry

**6. Rav Soloveitchik, *Vision and Leadership: Reflections on Joseph and Moses* (KTAV, 2013), 198**

Basically, Judaism disapproves of all forms of human government. There are definite streaks of political anarchism in our reluctance to recognize man as king. God governs; no one else may usurp this prerogative.

**7. *Vision and Leadership*, 145**

Judaism has always been very cautious in relation to political power-structures and displays little tolerance for power concentrated in the hands of an individual. Of course, we were compelled to reconcile ourselves with historical realities. No matter how imperfect government is, no matter how undesirable is the exercise of power on the part of an elected or appointed individual, anarchy is still worse. "Pray for the welfare of the government (*malkhut*)," said Hazal, "for without the fear of it, men would swallow one another alive" (Avot 3:2). Therefore Judaism reluctantly sanctioned the idea of a political community. I would categorize the attitude of the Torah vis-a-vis power-wielding by a political community as falling under the class of precepts of which Hazal said, "What the Torah said was aimed only at the evil inclination" (*Kiddushin* 21b).

**8. *Vision and Leadership*, 147–149**

The reason for the reluctance on the part of Judaism to set up permanent power structures such as a monarchy is due to two motives. First, as Lord Acton said, "Power tends to corrupt; absolute power corrupts absolutely." The greatest of all rulers, the most ideal, charismatic leader, is bound willy-nilly to step over the boundary line of legitimate authority and engage in some kind of tyranny, in arbitrary decisions and unfair practices. Second, man in general is unfit to rule. He has no right to exercise dominion over his fellow man.

Power is an exclusively divine potency to which man has no access. … The quest for power precipitated the oldest sin on the part of mankind. The serpent took advantage of the human urge to rule, to be mighty, to dominate, to emerge victorious from every engagement, to legislate his own laws. … Judaism, therefore, has always been confronted with an antinomy implied in the very core of the exercise of power, including the judicial power structure. On the one hand, it is convinced that due to the human situation, one cannot dispense with these structures; on the other hand, it has consistently argued that man is not entitled to sit in judgment over his fellow man.

**9. Rav Soloveitchik, *Yiddish Drashos un Ksavim* (OU Press, 2010), 310–312**

The Jewish diaspora tradition always demanded from Jews loyalty and devotion to the state of which he was a citizen. It demanded that he observe the state's laws, participate in political life, and also, when necessary, defend the country against its enemies. …

But not only wicked, but even good political systems—which we value, and which are in essence close to the traditional Jewish-political outlook, such as democracy—must also not be regarded as absolutely good and perfect. … Whoever preaches, for example, that in democracy lies the answer to all human problems and distresses, and that it can and should be transformed into a faith, is an idolater.

## The Tower of Babel, the Sin of Adam, and the Threat of Totalitarianism

**10.** ***The Lonely Man of Faith*****, 88–99, 97**

While the covenantal faith community is governed, erned, as I emphasized, by a desire for a redeemed existence, the religious community is dedicated to the attainment of dignity and success and is—along with the whole gamut of communities such as the political, the scientific, the artistic—a creation of Adam the first, all conforming to the same sociological structural patterns. … The Tower of Babel can be built high and mighty without beholding and acknowledging the great verity that Heaven is yet higher. … Successful man wants to be a sovereign not only in the physical but also in the spiritual world. ...

The situation has deteriorated considerably in this century, which has witnessed the greatest triumphs of majestic man in his drive for conquest. Majestic Adam has developed a demonic quality: laying claim to unlimited power—alas, to infinity itself. His pride is almost boundless, his imagination arrogant, and he aspires to complete and absolute control of everything. Indeed, like the men of old, he is engaged in constructing a tower whose apex should pierce Heaven. … When I say that modern man is projecting a demonic image, I am thinking of man's attempt to dominate himself, or, to be more precise, of Adam the first's desire to identify himself with the total human personality, declaring his creative talents as ultimate …

**11. Rav Soloveitchik,** ***Days of Deliverance: Essays on Purim and Hanukkah*** **(KTAV, 2007), 36–38**

Arrogant man is a tyrant, and he forms a tyrannical, arrogant society that is bold and aggressive, trampling upon individual freedom and personal dignity. … we are reminded of the Generation of Dispersion, who built the Tower of Babel. ...

We come across both motifs in the story of the first sin. Eve was fascinated by the beauty of the tree. The passion for enjoyment made her sin. "And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food and that it was a delight to the eyes" (Gen. 3:6). However, Satan, the serpent, malicious and sly, suggested a different solution. "On the day that you eat therefrom, your eyes shall be opened and you shall be as gods, knowing good and evil" (Gen. 3:5). The urge for power, the authority to discriminate between good and evil, to legislate the moral law, precipitated the original sin.

Again, the Torah abhorred arrogant man, and has forbidden metaphysical arrogance in the first and second commandments: "I am the Lord your God ... You shall have no other gods beside Me" (Ex. 20:2–3). Amalek is the typical representative of the arrogant, tyrannical society, of irrational man whose code is satanic, methods diabolical, and purpose destruction. ...

That happened in Germany in the late 1920s.

## The Social Contract and the Consent of the Governed

**12.** ***Vision and Leadership*****, 145–147**

The commandment concerning the appointment of a king is not without certain reservations. I once heard from my father zt"l that the validity of the commandment is dependent upon two prerequisites. **First, there must be a historical need for the choosing of a monarch.** If, for instance, a king is indispensable for the defense of the people and their land, then it is incumbent upon us to set up a monarchy. …

Another situation which may prompt the selection of a king is anarchy and the breakdown of law and order. The Bible emphasizes, "In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did as he pleased" (Judg. 21:25). … If law and order could have prevailed without the king, there would be no need for him. … In a word, a power structure is justified if it is created for the sake of an external goal which requires the setting up of such a structure. Only the attainment of the goal justifies the means. There is teleology to kingship, and the purposiveness is not in the power structure itself. ...

**The second prerequisite of kingship is that the people must request the appointment of the king.** The monarch cannot be imposed on them. "And you will say, 'I will set a king over myself, like all the nations that are around me'; then you may set a king over yourself" (Deut. 17:14–15). The initiative belongs to the people, not to the beit din, the court. If the people do not utter such a wish, the court has no right to establish a monarchy. ...

The only logical conclusion to be derived from Maimonides is that the request for a king is of central significance because it is the source of the norm. It legitimizes the power structure created by the appointment. … Whenever the appointment of a king is not mandatory or obligatory, it is sinful.

**13. T***he Lonely Man of Faith***, 27 (note)**

The social-contract theory is not to be interpreted in chronological terms. It never claimed that individuals ever existed outside of society. ... The most important practical inference to be drawn from this theory is the moral right of the individual or individuals to secede from an existing society and form a new one. This kind of thinking, as we know, played an enormous role in the American as well as in the French Revolution.

**14.** ***Days of Deliverance*****, 185**

Each one of these abominable decrees would have legitimized the rebellion of the Maccabees against the brutal government. Americans understand this in the basic thesis of the Declaration of Independence that rebellion is justified in certain situations where the oppressor dares to deny the inalienable natural rights of the individual, equality of all men, and the right of each individual to pursue happiness in freedom.

## Against Majoritarianism

**15. Rav Soloveitchik, "Confrontation," *Tradition* 6:2 (1964), 16–17**

He has developed the habit of confronting his fellowman in a fashion similar to that which prevails at the level of subject-object relationship, seeking to dominate and subordinate him instead of communicating and communing with him. The wondrous personal confrontation of Adam and Eve is thus turned into an ugly attempt at depersonalization. Adam of today wants to appear as master-hero and to subject Eve to his rule and dominion, be it ideological, religious, economic, or political.

**16. "Confrontation," 21**

It is self-evident that a confrontation of two faith communities is possible only if it is accompanied by a clear assurance that both parties will enjoy equal rights and full religious freedom. … A democratic confrontation certainly does not demand that we submit to an attitude of self-righteousness taken by the community of the many … We do not intend to play the part of the object encountered by dominating man. Soliciting commiseration is incongruous with the character of a democratic confrontation. There should rather be insistence upon one's inalienable rights as a human being, created by God.

**17. "Confrontation," 23, 25**

... any intimation, overt or covert, on the part of the community of the many that it is expected of the community of the few that it shed its uniqueness and cease existing because it has fulfilled its mission by paving the way for the community of the many, must be rejected as undemocratic and contravening the very idea of religious freedom. … I do not deny the right of the community of the many to address itself to the community of the few in its own eschatological terms. However, building a practical program upon this right is hardly consonant with religious democracy and liberalism. ...

I hope and pray that our friends in the community of the many will sustain their liberal convictions and humanitarian ideals by articulating their position on the right of the community of the few to live, create, and worship God in its own way, in freedom and with dignity.