

Rabbi Jon Roos

“No Kings” - Rosh Hashanah 5786 Morning Sermon

Main Sanctuary, Temple Sinai, Washington, DC

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Video available here: <https://vimeo.com/1121551814>

Friends, today I will try to address two things: First, the Jewish perspective on authoritarian rulers; and second, the Jewish perspective on culture and the types of environments that create authoritarians. In that second part, I will focus especially on each individual’s responsibility for creating and fostering a culture that produces authoritarians. My goal is to offer a Jewishly informed reading of the state of American civic life today and to present you some Jewish ideas about how to respond if you want to change things. I want to be clear and show my cards in advance: the first part is a critique of President Trump and the second part is a critique of you and all of us.

There is tension in Judaism about kings and kingship. On one hand, having a king is a mitzvah that first appears in Deuteronomy and comes to life in our history of biblical kings. We also pray about kings. In all our blessings we pray to “*melech ha-alom*” literally King of the Universe. This Rosh Hashanah service is all about loving and honoring the king in *Avinu Malkeinu* and with the sounding of the shofar. On the other hand, we have a very strong “No Kings” ethos that starts in the same verses of Deuteronomy and continues through our history in the stories critical of the Kings of ancient Israel. It is in the voice of the prophet Samuel and the stories of our fight against Pharaoh and other rulers.

The two positions – “No Kings” of the Bible and “Yes, King” of *Avinu Malkeinu* – reflect a two fold message especially relevant for our contemporary times. In Judaism, sometimes the kings symbolize authoritarianism that we must oppose. And sometimes, the king symbolizes our subservience and our restraint before a higher power, which are characteristics Judaism ascribes for a good society. This core principle of Judaism is at the heart of most discussions of king and kingship: Prolonging our existence on earth and cultivating the conditions for that existence in accordance with the good life that Judaism

envisions, requires us to balance the pursuit of individual gratification with some degree of self-restraint.

The Torah's "No Kings" ethos is contained in the very same verses of Deuteronomy chapter 17 that make having a king a mitzvah. Those verses contain more warnings against kings than anything supporting them. I will highlight only two of those warnings but you should check it all out for yourself. Let me also say that the Torah does not apply perfectly to contemporary life. It is an ancient text talking about kings in a Jewish sovereign kingdom and doesn't envision modern democracy and society. But, I think it certainly contains kernels of wisdom that should both shape and require us to ask some pointed questions about what's happening here.

The Torah warns that one of the worst things a leader can do is disregard the law. Deuteronomy 17:18-19 instructs that a legitimate, good ruler will have a complete copy of the Law written by the Levites and priests – produced by another party, not written by the king himself - and that copy must stay by the king's side at all times. Torah commands that the king must study the law, he must respect that there is a power higher than himself, he must guard all the laws, and he must implement them and do them. It says:

לְמַעַן יִלְמַד לִירְאָה אֶת־יְהוָה אֱלֹהָיו לְשָׁמֹר אֶת־כָּל־דְּבָרֵי הַתּוֹרָה הַזֹּאת וְאֶת־הַחֻקִּים הָאֵלֶּה לַעֲשׂוֹתָם

The Torah's warning lists factors that are just like the multi-pronged assault on the law that we are experiencing today. Legal experts have been quoted widely about the unprecedented extent of this administration's disregard for the law. I am sure you don't need me to repeat the shocking list of examples that grows steadily. These verses remind us that the institution of law is a bedrock Jewish value for how to structure and operate any civil society in which we live. When a national leader disregards so many laws, and indeed disregards the institution of law itself, we are in the "No Kings" territory that our Torah warned explicitly against.

Deuteronomy also warns us clearly and directly against leaders who use their office for excessive financial enrichment. Deuteronomy chapter 17 verse 17 says: "the king shall not many wives, nor shall the king amass silver and gold to excess." The problem here is not amassing wealth per say. Unlike other religions or philosophies, Judaism does not oppose

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or forbid anyone from being or becoming rich. Underneath this warning about the king getting excessive gold and silver is Judaism's concern with the degenerative effects on society that result from individual behaviors, or systems of law and culture whose purpose is to satisfy the desires of any one person with enough power to get them. The Torah is less concerned with the implementation of monarchy or any specific form of government than it is concerned with us giving national power to individuals who live with no restraints on satisfying their ego and their insatiable appetites. Many sources have cataloged Trump's excesses in this regard, so I won't list them all for you. Except to note that recently, *Forbes Magazine* estimated that Trump's worth had more than doubled over the past year alone to more than \$5 billion. 'It pays to be king,' Forbes wrote."<sup>1</sup>

Friends, we are not facing the threat of authoritarianism. We are already living under an authoritarian regime. I also want to take a moment to clarify something important. I know some of you really don't like it when we give sermons like this from the bima. You call them "too political" and you ask me to stick to "religious" sermons. I need to remind you, again, that Judaism is not just about your personal ritual observances and Jewish holiday foods. Look through the machzor and you will not find much about apples and honey but the words "King" and "Peace" and references to community are all over the book. Jewish history and the stories of those Jewish holidays are all about fighting against authoritarian rulers and never acceding to them. Think Moses and Aaron versus the Pharaoh, Elijah versus Ahab and Jezebel, the Maccabees, Mordechai and Esther. These are the heroes for whom we applaud and to whom we should be looking. We need some serious guidance from the ancient wellspring of Jewish wisdom about what to make of the state of our country, how to frame our thinking about the fact that we sit right now in a city with military check points and a leader who has given himself permission literally to arrest, deport, defame, destroy and kill anyone he thinks is an enemy.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ezra Klein, "Stop Acting Like This is Normal," The New York Times, September 7, 2025. <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/09/07/opinion/trump-senate-democrats-shutdown.html>

<sup>2</sup> Not coincidentally, the morning after this service, the New York Times editorial board published a warning against the danger of Trump using the US military to kill suspected criminals. "No President Should Have This Kind of Power," *NYTimes*, Sept. 24, 2025. <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/09/24/opinion/trump-caribbean-sea-boats-military.html>

“No Kings” is, however, an empty slogan if we focus only on this president and direct our energy and anger at him and his excesses alone. More than anything else these days, people concerned about the state of our country and world ask: What can we do? As important as it is to work against an authoritarian leader, it is even more important that we attend to the deeper roots of what we are experiencing. This administration is the product of a culture that is decades in the making. In his book from fifty years ago, *The Culture of Narcissism*, historian Christopher Lasch argued that culture has “an impact on personality [and] that every culture works out distinctive patterns of behaviors, which have the effect of producing a distinctive personality type suited to the requirements of that culture.”<sup>3</sup> We get the leaders who are the ultimate manifestation of the culture we create. Many of you might bristle or outright reject the assertion that you have anything to do with the rise MAGA or the ascension of Trump. These high holidays, however, require us to examine ourselves and our deeds. So let’s look, again with some Jewish texts and Jewish values, at how we may be responsible for this culture and what we can do to change the soil from which such authoritarians arise.

At the core of Judaism’s discussion about kings and their meaning and whether we should enthrone or oppose kings is a focus on our deeds. Deeds, actions – in Hebrew “*Ma’asim*” – is the link between the biblical and the *Avinu Malkeinu* attitudes towards kings and kingship in Judaism. The biblical Book of Samuel describes the first time that the Israelites did the mitzvah of having a king. They approached the prophet Samuel with their demand for a king and Scripture says, “It was a terrible thing in Samuel’s eyes.” He gives some reasons aligned with Deuteronomy as to why he is so upset but the context tells us everything we need to know. I think Samuel was an astute reader of the culture and what it would produce. For about 400 years after the Israelites settled in the promised land, from the time of Joshua until Samuel, they lived under a tribal confederation known as the period of Judges. That period was characterized by instability and immorality. The cultural problem is described bluntly by the book of Judges itself (17:6; 21:25):

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<sup>3</sup> Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in An Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1979, paperback with new afterword, 1991), 238.

בְּיָמֵים הָהֵם ... אִישׁ הָיָה עוֹשֶׂה בְּעֵינָיו יְעָשָׂה:

In those days... each person did whatever deeds they thought were right in their own eyes.

A culture without limits wherein individuals do whatever is good for themselves is the kind of culture that one might think needs a strong leader like a king. But in fact, it's also the very kind of culture that will produce a leader who himself is without limits and restraints.

*Avinu Malkeinu* is based a similar recognition that something is missing in terms of our actions. We plead, *Avinu Malkeinu, hoshi-einu* – save us, “*ki ein banu ma’asim*” – because we don’t have any deeds or actions worthy or capable or saving us. But, unlike our biblical ancestors, we do not look to a human king. *Avinu Malkeinu* says that we need to re-align ourselves personally so that our culture is not based on unrestrained self-gratification. We turn to the Holy One, and we ask, *Aseh Imanu Tzedakah va’chesed* – Do acts of justice and loving kindness **WITH US** – not *Aseh Lanu* – we are not asking for a king to do this for us or on our behalf. We have to be part of the *ma’asim*, the deeds and actions.

Assessing the state of American culture almost 40 years ago, Professor Lasch concluded that our deliverance, “lies in acceptance of that fact that the world does not exist merely to satisfy our own desires.... The way to achieve happiness and a good society is to accept limitations in a spirit of gratitude and contrition instead of attempting to annul those limitations or bitterly resenting them.”<sup>4</sup>

Rabbi Eugene Borowitz, our teacher, z”l, at Hebrew Union College, was the preeminent theologian of modern Reform Judaism. He offers a Reform Jewish ethos that could be the antidote for our cultural degradation. He wrote, “We must think in terms of a self-discipline that .... honors each person’s selfhood with a contextually delimited measure of autonomy.” His Reform Jewish theology has five components of covenant: First, we are individuals and each of us should be respected equally as autonomous selves, but

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<sup>4</sup> Lasch, 242. See also Bernadette Grubner, “Narcissism in Cultural Theory: Perspectives on Christopher Lasch, Richard Sennett, and Robert Pfaller,” *Frontiers of Narrative Studies*, vol. 3, no. 1, 2017, pp. 50-70. <https://doi.org/10.1515/fns-2017-0004>) and Kristen Dombek, “The Selfishness of Others: On the Fear of Narcissism” for other perspectives on the topic.

we restrain from the absolute freedom that might lead us to adopt in our actions. Because... Second, we are connected to, and must be in relationship with, people and events from our past. We limit our autonomy in deference to the debt we pay and burden we carry from our ancestors and what they experienced. That's not true for all the world's religions and all philosophies, but ours limits us in the present because we honor our past. Third, we are obligated to the people and events of our future. Our commitment to passing the Torah to our offspring and their future descendants requires consideration today and limits our options to those things that foster sustainability. Fourth, we are in an abiding relationship with other members of our community across the world. Belonging to a people, a sacred community, imposes on us an obligation to defer to the greater good in order to insure the continuity of the collective. We must consider the impact of our decisions and actions on other members of the Jewish community – and all humanity - wherever they are. Finally, his fifth principle is that we are connected to God, not literally a controlling deity who sits on the heavenly throne, but a higher power transcending all of us and all time and space. We hold ourselves back out of humility before the universe and the mystery of what is beyond it.<sup>5</sup>

This ethos must be more than theology if it will have impact on the state of our world. It requires *ma'asim*, every day actions that are counter cultural in today's America. Consider these are three examples of self imposed restraints inspired by Rabbi Borowitz's covenant theology and the impulses behind Deuteronomy and *Avinu Malkeinu*. These are choices that we might think we just cannot possibly make. But if you're my age or older, and you can remember back to a day when nobody wore seatbelts and no authority could give you a ticket if you did not click it, you remember a moment of change after we all finally realized or at least accepted that the assumptions behind our actions were wrong. Sometimes we choose to limit our freedom for the sake of our own and the collective safety. Sometimes we have a moment where we finally act in alignment with truths we had simply allowed ourselves to ignore. So, friends, first I urge you to get off social media

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<sup>5</sup> Selection of Eugene Borowitz, *Renewing Covenant* (1991), in Marmur and Ellenson, eds., *American Jewish Thought Since 1934* (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2020), 66-69

entirely. I know there are people in our congregation who will respond that their livelihood quite literally depends on the popular social media platforms to spread their work. Again, I don't think you need me to regurgitate for you all the ways that every social media platform uses manipulative algorithms and allows or simply cannot stop fake accounts and malicious actors. Your insistence that you must use these platforms is fueling the flames of the very forces you know to be destructive in our society. Two, stop buying things and using shopping platforms just because they are super cheap and they enable you to have whatever you want delivered to your doorstep or anyplace you want within a few hours without ever interacting with another human being. We know all the things to which we close our eyes in order to live this way: the destruction of the environment, the dehumanization of workers, and disruption of sustainable local economies. It's harder, I know, and I'm guilty as well. But we can no keep doing whatever we want and pretend it's having no serious impact. Third, don't sell out. Sometimes I serve as a kind of confessor to people, they come to me with regrets and realizations of where they've gone wrong. One common theme in the confessions I hear from people – you guys – is regret for having taken the opportunity to make a lot of money helping companies and other parties in ways that you would have previously fought against. It is important to have that exchange of talent and wisdom flowing into and out of the government, the public sector and private sector. That must continue, but sometimes, as you tell me, you wake up and find yourself in positions that are perfectly legal and culturally encouraged but destructive and misaligned from the true self and values you believe in. It is not so crazy that Trump's worth doubled to \$5 billion in this past year alone when some of the most morally and civically minded people in this town can be convinced to bury their principles and life's work for major pay day.

Judaism has seen it all and survived it all – so far. And our sages and ancestors our texts and our traditions warns us against authoritarianism that arises from radical individualism; from the idea that each of us can and should do whatever we want or whatever we can so long as it's good for us. Our holidays and our theology impel us to look deeply at ourselves, to recognize the ways in which we have created a culture of narcissism

and to turn – to do teshuva. *Avinu Malkeinu haneinu va'aneinu ki ein banu maasim*. Our father our king answer us graciously. We do not yet have the worthy and right deeds. We are making choices without restraint and without consideration for the covenants we have that transcend this place, this time, and these people. *Aseh imanu tzedakah va chesed v'hoshianu*. Help us to act with a sense of justice for all, for grace and kindness to everyone, and please god help us to save ourselves. THAT would make this a *shanah tovah*, a good year.