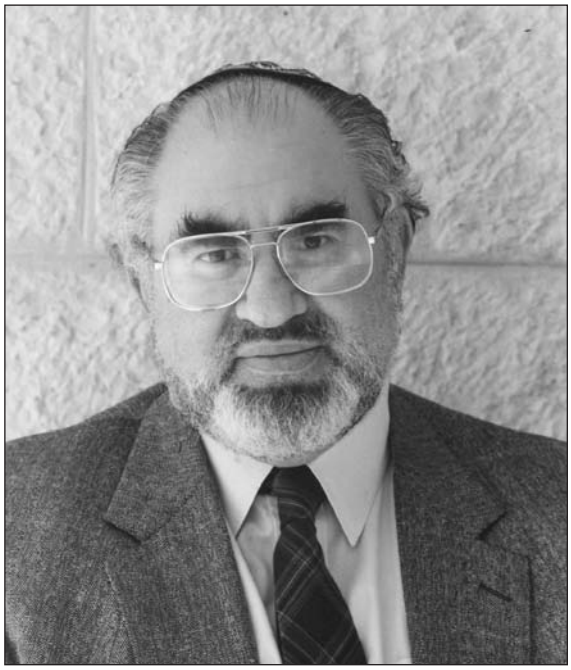
Jewish Political Studies

A Founding Father

Alan Mittleman

Any consideration of Jewish political studies must attend to the work of Daniel J. Elazar (1934–1999). Elazar was a highly accomplished political scientist—one of the leading scholars of federalism in the world—who turned his attention to the political experience, thought, institutions, and culture of the Jewish people. Elazar's range was immense. As an empirical political scientist, he could study contemporary intergovernmental relations in the cities of the American Midwest, in federal polities such as Switzerland, or in confederal arrangements such as the European Union. As a theorist, he reached back into the wellsprings of Western civilization and traced the career of political ideas and values, such as consent, across the centuries. The interplay of the empirical with the theoretical, of the ancient with the contemporary, typifies his work, especially his work on the Jewish political tradition.

There is another interplay in his work that must also be taken into account. As Jonathan Sarna and other historians have noted, American Jews have been fond of finding connections between the republican elements of the Bible and the constitutional design of the American polity. Elazar participated fully, for the best of scholarly reasons, in this so-called "cult of synthesis." Elazar's work on American federalism is closely connected to his reconstruction of the Jewish political tradition. In both, he found an expression of what the historian of political thought, Quentin Skinner, has called "liberty before liberalism" or of what the Puritans called "federal liberty" and Madison called "republican liberty." These terms refer to a political system of self-rule and limited government, often under the aegis of shared transcendent values, in which the common good weighs more heavily than ideas of individual good or rights. Rights there are, but rights are coordinated with political obligation and overriding concern for the commonweal. Elazar thought that republicanism was the ideal type of Jewish polity, as well as the ur-type of American government.



Daniel J. Elazar. Courtesy of the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs.

Elazar often cited Hamilton in *Federalist*, no. 1 as a key to how the American founders understood the formation of political communities and gauged the possibilities for liberty in a nutshell. "It has been frequently remarked that it seems to have been reserved to the people of this country, by their conduct and example, to decide the important question, whether societies of men are really capable or not of establishing good government from reflection and choice, or whether they are forever destined to depend for their political constitutions on accident and force." Elazar took this text to indicate a threefold model whereby polities come into existence: "reflection and choice," "accident," and "force." Accident here refers to the slow growth of organic institutions evolving and adapting through the vicissitudes of history. Think of the British constitution, as celebrated by Edmund Burke. Force refers to conquest, to the coercive absorption of one society by another. An accidental or natural political society typically has a powerful, historic aristocracy at its center, with real but diminishing power in the concentric rings of the periphery. The polity founded on force is typically a power pyramid, with a point of godlike power at the top and a descending hierarchy of bureaucratic and military castes to govern the masses at the bottom. Only a polity formed of "reflection and choice," a political society composed of essentially free and

equal agents, is capable of liberty. Elazar saw in the ancient Jewish idea of covenant a profound political expression of federal (from Latin *foedus*, covenant) or republican liberty. He saw covenant as a "theo-political" concept, a way of thinking through the possibility of liberty ordered by transcendence, of freedom under divine law. He did not view covenant primarily as a theological notion or metaphor or symbol but as a form of organization. Covenant, as a core political concept in biblical and rabbinic Judaism, as well as in Christian experience, had both vertical ("theo-") and horizontal ("political") dimensions. The social contract theories of early modern political thought were secularized, that is, purely "horizontal" versions, of Reformed Protestant covenantalism. The constitutional experience of the American colonies leading up to the Founding relied heavily on Reformed Protestant understandings of a proper covenantal political order. Biblically derived covenantalism remains alive to the present in American political ideals and institutions, as well as in Jewish ones. Elazar's four volume magnum opus, *The Covenant Tradition in Politics*, traces in detail the employments of covenantal ideas both in Jewish political tradition and in the West up to the present day.

A key feature of covenanting is that the initial liberty of the covenanting agents is to be preserved by limited, republican or constitutional-monarchic government. Such government will be characterized by internal pluralism—by power divided against itself. There is no one political center but competing loci of power. A political society organized along covenantal lines will have a diffusion of authority, as is clearly the case in the U.S., where local control competes with statewide control, which competes with national prerogatives in the complex negotiation of authority that is American federalism. Elazar contended that Jewish polities in every period, from biblical regime types to contemporary voluntary diaspora communities, exhibited the same mechanism of internal power pluralism. He called this feature of Jewish political culture the "three crowns" (*shalosh ketarim*) after the mishnah in Pirkei Avot, which he understood to be a metaphoric extension of an originally political usage. In his view, all of Jewish political history—which he outlined in his co-authored book, *The Jewish Polity*—could be analyzed in terms of the relative position of competing authorities within the Jewish tradition. The "Crown of Torah" was variously occupied by prophets, sages, and rabbis. The "Crown of Kingship" was held by actual kings, by ethnarchs and *roshei golah*, by medieval *parnasim* and by contemporary "civil servants" in federations, communal agencies, etc. The "Crown of Priesthood" became diminished after the destruction of the Second Temple, but religious functionaries, such as cantors and, in their purely ritual dimensions, rabbis, continue to represent this *keter*.

This feature of Elazar's approach has been criticized as overly mechanical. His postulation of an ongoing Jewish political tradition characterized by covenant and internal pluralism has also been attacked as insufficiently empirical and essentialist. Nonetheless, one must appreciate Elazar's attempt to bring the tools of comparative political analysis to the Jewish experience. One also sees, beyond the details of his analysis of any given political system, the work of a political philosopher, concerned about the eternal quest for liberty and order, for power and justice, for Jews and non-Jews alike.

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