When the promise survives: cruel optimism and biblical kingship

Why do we stay attached to a job, relationship or political order when what we rely on to make life better is also wearing us down? Berlant calls this cruel optimism. Biblical kingship lets us follow that bind across centuries. Reading 1 Samuel, Sanhedrin 20b and the Ishbitzer Rebbe, we ask how promises of the good life survive and change.

The concept of cruel optimism

1. **Lauren Berlant, Cruel Optimism** (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), Introduction – *optimism as a cluster of promises & the concept of cruel optimism*

A relation of cruel optimism exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing. It might involve food, or a kind of love; it might be a fantasy of the good life, or a political project. It might rest on something simpler, too, like a new habit that promises to induce in you an improved way of being. These kinds of optimistic relation are not inherently cruel. They become cruel only when the object that draws your attachment actively impedes the aim that brought you to it initially. All attachment is optimistic, if we describe optimism as the force that moves you out of yourself and into the world in order to bring closer the satisfying *something* that you cannot generate on your own but sense in the wake of a person, a way of life, an object, project, concept, or scene (pp.1-2)

When we talk about an object of desire, we are really talking about a cluster of promises we want someone or something to make to us and make possible for us (p.24)

Optimism is cruel when the object/scene that ignites a sense of possibility actually makes it impossible to attain the expansive transformation for which a person or a people risks striving; and, doubly, it is cruel insofar as the very pleasures of being inside a relation have become sustaining regardless of the content of the relation, such that a person or a world finds itself bound to a situation of profound threat that is, at the same time, profoundly confirming. (p.2)

2. **Lauren Berlant (2012) Desire/Love**. Brooklyn: Punctum Books, pp. 6–7. – *cruel optimism in love and intimacy*

Desire describes a state of attachment to something or someone, and the cloud of possibility that is generated by the gap between an object's specificity and the needs and promises projected onto it. This gap produces a number of further convolutions. Desire visits you as an impact from the outside, and yet,

inducing an encounter with your affects, makes you feel as though it comes from within you; this means that your objects are not objective, but things and scenes that you have converted into propping up your world, and so what seems objective and autonomous in them is partly what your desire has created and therefore is a mirage, a shaky anchor. Your style of addressing those objects gives shape to the drama with which they allow you to reencounter yourself. By contrast, love is the embracing dream in which desire is reciprocated: rather than being isolating, love provides an image of an expanded self, the normative version of which is the two-as-one intimacy of the couple form. In the idealized image of their relation, desire will lead to love, which will make a world for desire's endurance.

3. **Lauren Berlant, Cruel Optimism**, pp. 163–64.
   Discussing Dardenne, Jean-Pierre, and Luc Dardenne, directors. 1999. Rosetta. Film. Belgium – *cruel optimism in work and belonging*

With a job, Rosetta's fantasy is not at a grandiose scale but evokes a scene of an entirely imaginable normalcy whose simplicity enables her to rest without anxiety and, for the first and only time in the film, to have a good night. It matters not that she is still unofficial, off the books in all the bureaucratic senses. Even in an extremely informal economy the goodness of the good life now feels possible to her and thus feels already like a confirming reality, calming her even before she lives it as an ongoing practice. The ongoing prospect of low- waged and uninteresting labor is for Rosetta nearly utopian; it makes possible imagining living the proper life that capitalism offers as a route to the good life. That the route is a rut matters not to Rosetta: when the world exists between the routinized rut and the ominous cracks, she chooses the rut.

4. **Lauren Berlant, Cruel Optimism** (2011), pp. 259–60. – *cruel political optimism*

The compulsion to repeat a toxic optimism can suture someone or a world to a cramped and unimaginative space of committed replication, just in case it will be different. Political realism can be tyrannical; it can become a foundation for change. Political fantasy can be ridiculous and self- defeating; it can ground and sustain an aspirational thinking beyond pragmatics that insists on a new materialism. Facing the fact that no form of being in the political or politics—including withdrawing from them—will solve the problem of shaping the impasse of the historical present, what alternatives remain for remaking the fantasmatic/material infrastructure of collective life? Is the best one can hope for realistically a stubborn collective refusal to give out, wear out, or admit defeat? In that case, optimism might not be cruel at all, but the bare minimum evidence of not having given up on social change as such.

5. **Lauren Berlant, Cruel Optimism**, pp.97-8 – *when we want to think about cruel optimism, it might be helpful to compare with what we hope from political or individual sovereignty.*

Sovereignty, after all, is a fantasy misrecognized as an objective state: an aspirational position of personal and institutional self-legitimating performativity and an affective sense of control in relation to the fantasy of that position's offer of security and efficacy. But it is inadequate for talking about agency outside of the power of the King's decree or other acts in proximity to certain performances of law, like executions and pardons. It is also a distorting description of the political, affective, and psychological conditions in which the ordinary subjects of democratic/capitalist power take up positions as agents. These states might best be redefined as only partially (that is to say fantasmatically or not) sovereign. But some may want to continue using the concept because of the history of investment in it as a marker for the liberal sense of personal autonomy and freedom, or because of its association with democracy and with the legal protection of the body politic and subgroups within it. To take a page from Ernesto Laclau's and Paul Gilroy's strategic defenses of universality, one might argue legitimately that renouncing a popular or civil society politics of sovereign persons and publics in self-relation and relation to the state would cede to the groups who benefit from inequality the privilege to define the procedures of sovereign representation, authority, and conceptualization of the human in a self- ratifying way. **I am persuaded enough by these kinds of reservations not to push for a wholesale exorcism of sovereignty's spirit by a dramatic act of taxonomic substitution; legal and normative ghosts have precedential power, after all**.

Hopes and fears for the king

6. **Deuteronomy 17:14–20.** (NRS translation) – *permission to have a king, under God*

14 When you have come into the land that the Lord your God is giving you, and have taken possession of it and settled in it, and **you say, 'I will set a king over me, like all the nations that are around me', 15 you may indeed set over you a king whom the Lord your God will choose**. One of your own community you may set as king over you; you are not permitted to put a foreigner over you, who is not of your own community. 16 Even so, he must not acquire many horses for himself, or return the people to Egypt in order to acquire more horses, since the Lord has said to you, 'You must never return that way again.' 17 And he must not acquire many wives for himself, or else his heart will turn away; also silver and gold he must not acquire in great quantity for himself. 18 **When he has taken the throne of his kingdom, he**

shall have a copy of this law written for him in the presence of the levitical priests. 19 It shall remain with him and he shall read in it all the days of his life, so that he may learn to fear the Lord his God, diligently observing all the words of this law and these statutes, 20 neither exalting himself above other members of the community nor turning aside from the commandment, either to the right or to the left, so that he and his descendants may reign long over his kingdom in Israel.

7. **1 Samuel 8:4–20** (NRS translation) – *the people request a king to govern us, like other nations*

4 Then all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah 5 and said to him, “You are old, and your sons do not follow in your ways; appoint for us, then, a king to govern us, like other nations.” 6 But the thing displeased Samuel when they said, “Give us a king to govern us.” Samuel prayed to the Lord, 7 and the Lord said to Samuel, “Listen to the voice of the people in all that they say to you, for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them. 8 Just as they have done to me from the day I brought them up out of Egypt to this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so also they are doing to you. 9 Now then, listen to their voice; only, you shall solemnly warn them and show them the ways of the king who shall reign over them.”

10 So Samuel reported all the words of the Lord to the people who were asking him for a king. 11 He said, “These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen, and to run before his chariots, 12 and he will appoint for himself commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties and some to plow his ground and to reap his harvest and to make his implements of war and the equipment of his chariots. 13 He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. 14 He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his courtiers. 15 He will take one-tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and his courtiers. 16 He will take your male and female slaves and the best of your cattle and donkeys and put them to his work. 17 He will take one-tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves. 18 And on that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves, but the Lord will not answer you on that day.”

19 But the people refused to listen to the voice of Samuel; they said, “No! We are determined to have a king over us, 20 so that we also may be like other nations and that our king may govern us and go out before us and fight our battles.” 21 When Samuel heard all the words of the people, he repeated them in the ears of the Lord. 22 The Lord said to Samuel, “Listen to their voice and set a king over them.”

Interpreting the introduction of kingship

8. **Mordechai Yosef Leiner (the Ishbitzer Rebbe) on Deuteronomy 17:14.** Leiner, M. J. (2001). Living Waters: The Mei HaShiloach: a Commentary on the Torah. Rowman & Littlefield, pp.368-9 – *kingship as political form is attractive because it makes otherwise invisible (or diffuse) relations visible*

“When you come to the land … I will place a king over me like all the nations….” (Devarim, 17:14). On this it is said in the holy Zohar (Vayikra, 12a), “(the other nations were each suited to an angel), and he asked, ‘where did he place Israel?’ and he answered, ‘God placed them in the firmament of the heavens.’ (They are only connected to God.)” This is saying that all the other nations give off an appearance of the good with which they serve, so they are granted ministering angels, and from this they experience fear. Israel, on the other hand, is completely without surface appearances. This is why it says “I will place over me a king,” where by means of him we will take on an appearance (of good).

9. **Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 20b** - *distinguishing different things people might want from a king rather than treating the desire as homogeneous*

Rabbi Nehorai says: This biblical passage about appointing a king was stated only in response to the Jewish people’s complaint, as it is stated: “When you come unto the land that the Lord your God gives you, and shall possess it, and shall dwell therein, and shall say: I will set a king over me, like all the nations that are around me” (Deuteronomy 17:14). The verse indicates that appointing a king is not a mitzva and that when Shmuel spoke to them it was to frighten them so that they might regret their complaint and retract their request entirely

Rashi on Sanhedrin 20b

The unlearned ruined it - because while the elders asked [Shmuel for a king] in order that he may judge them and take down the rebellious ones among them, the unlearned piled another request about their wars: "That he may go before us and wage our wars"

10. **Isaac Abarbanel, Commentary on 1 Samuel 8** (Sefaria Community Translation)

Abarbanel, Isaac. 1964. Perush ‘al ha-Torah. 3 vols. Jerusalem: Benei Arabel. – *government is a good idea, kingship not the only way to do it*

And even though these analysts reason that monarchy insures three things – the first being unity and the absence of [division], the second being continuity and the lack of [instability], and the third being absolute power – [in fact], their thinking about the obligation and necessity of a king is actually false… Look and see the lands the leadership of which is with kings, and [by contrast,] today we have seen many lands the leadership of which is with temporary judges and leaders that are chosen among them and the King God is with them. Their law is refined by ordered limits... And all of this shows that the presence of a king is not necessary for a nation.

How Deuteronomistic kingship turns out

11. **1 Samuel 11:6–15.** (NRS translation) – *the king delivers on promise of military power*

6 And the spirit of God came upon Saul in power when he heard these words, and his anger was greatly kindled. 7 He took a yoke of oxen and cut them in pieces and sent them throughout all the territory of Israel by the messengers, saying, “Whoever does not come out after Saul and Samuel, so shall it be done to his oxen!” Then the dread of the Lord fell upon the people, and they came out as one. 8 When he mustered them at Bezek, those from Israel were three hundred thousand and those from Judah seventy thousand. 9 They said to the messengers who had come, “Thus shall you say to the inhabitants of Jabesh-gilead: Tomorrow, by the time the sun is hot, you shall have deliverance.” When the messengers came and told the inhabitants of Jabesh, they rejoiced. 10 So the inhabitants of Jabesh said, “Tomorrow we will give ourselves up to you, and you may do to us whatever seems good to you.” 11 The next day Saul put the people in three companies. At the morning watch they came into the camp and cut down the Ammonites until the heat of the day, and those who survived were scattered, so that no two of them were left together.

12 The people said to Samuel, “Who is it that said, ‘Shall Saul reign over us?’ Give them to us so that we may put them to death.” 13 But Saul said, “No one shall be put to death this day, for today the Lord has brought deliverance to Israel.”

14 Samuel said to the people, “Come, let us go to Gilgal and there renew the kingship.” 15 So all the people went to Gilgal, and there they made Saul king before the Lord in Gilgal. There they sacrificed offerings of well-being before the Lord, and there Saul and all the Israelites rejoiced greatly.

12. 2 Samuel 7:8–16. (NRS translation) – *the king becomes a complex model for messianic promise*

Also: Kenneth E. Pomykala (1995) The Davidic Dynasty Tradition in Early Judaism: Its History and Significance for Messianism. Atlanta: Scholars Press

8 Now therefore thus you shall say to my servant David: Thus says the Lord of hosts: I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep to be prince over my people Israel; 9 and I have been with you wherever you went, and have cut off all your enemies from before you; and I will make for you a great name, like the name of the great ones of the earth. 10 And I will appoint a place for my people Israel and will plant them, so that they may live in their own place, and be disturbed no more; and evildoers shall afflict them no more, as formerly, 11 from the time that I appointed judges over my people Israel; and I will give you rest from all your enemies. Moreover, the Lord declares to you that the Lord will make you a house. 12 When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. 13 He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom for ever. 14 I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me. When he commits iniquity, I will punish him with a rod such as mortals use, with blows inflicted by human beings. 15 But I will not take my steadfast love from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away from before you. 16 Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure for ever before me; your throne shall be established for ever.

13. **1 Kings 4:20–25 + 1 Kings 5:13–18** (NRS translation) - *Kingship as abundance, safety, vine and fig tree; and as levy, burden-bearing and conscripted labour.*
Also: J. Daniel Hays (2003) “Has the Narrator Come to Praise Solomon or to Bury Him? Narrative Subtlety in 1 Kings 1–11,” Journal for the Study of the Old Testament 28, no. 2 (2003): 149–174.

1 Kings 4:20–25

20 Judah and Israel were as numerous as the sand by the sea; they ate and drank and were happy. 21 Solomon was sovereign over all the kingdoms from the Euphrates to the land of the Philistines, even to the border of Egypt; they brought tribute and served Solomon all the days of his life. 22 Solomon’s provision for one day was thirty cors of choice flour, and sixty cors of meal, 23 ten fat oxen, and twenty pasture-fed cattle, one hundred sheep, besides deer, gazelles, roebucks, and fatted fowl. 24 For he had dominion over all the region west of the Euphrates from Tiphsah to Gaza, over all the kings west of the Euphrates; and he had peace on all sides. 25 During Solomon’s lifetime Judah and Israel lived in safety, from Dan even to Beer-sheba, all of them under their vines and fig trees.

1 Kings 5:13–18

13 King Solomon conscripted forced labor out of all Israel; the levy numbered thirty thousand men. 14 He sent them to the Lebanon, ten thousand a month in shifts; they would be a month in the Lebanon and two months at home; Adoniram was in charge of the forced labor. 15 Solomon also had seventy thousand laborers and eighty thousand stonecutters in the hill country, 16 besides Solomon’s three thousand three hundred supervisors who were over the work, having charge of the people who did the work. 17 At the king’s command, they quarried out great, costly stones in order to lay the foundation of the house with dressed stones. 18 So Solomon’s builders and Hiram’s builders and the Gebalites did the stonecutting and prepared the timber and the stone to build the house.

14. 1 Kings 12:13–16. (NRS translation) – *Rehoboam: my father [Solomon] laid on you a heavy yoke, I will add to your yoke*

13 The king answered the people harshly. He disregarded the advice that the older men had given him 14 and spoke to them according to the advice of the young men, ‘My father made your yoke heavy, but I will add to your yoke; my father disciplined you with whips, but I will discipline you with scorpions.’ 15 So the king did not listen to the people, because it was a turn of affairs brought about by the Lord that he might fulfil his word, which the Lord had spoken by Ahijah the Shilonite to Jeroboam son of Nebat.

16 When all Israel saw that the king would not listen to them, the people answered the king,

‘What share do we have in David?
We have no inheritance in the son of Jesse.’

Loosening kingship's cluster of promises?

15. **Zechariah 9: 9-10.** (NRS translation) - *a king without the apparatus of war*

Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion!
Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem!
Lo, your king comes to you;
triumphant and victorious is he,
humble and riding on a donkey,
on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

16. **Matthew V. Novenson, The Grammar of Messianism: An Ancient Jewish Political Idiom and Its Users** (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017) , p.14 – *kingship as an inherited language through which promises can be redistributed, intensified or transformed*

What we call messianism is most basically a way of talking about the world, a set of linguistic resources—and, equally important, linguistic constraints—inherited from the Jewish scriptures. Ancient Jewish and Christian texts about "messiahs"—from Second Isaiah to the Talmud Bavli, and at myriad points in between—are participants in one great ancient Mediterranean language game.

Some closing questions

- What does sovereignty (individually, or politically) promise that makes attachment to it compelling, including when its costs are known?
- What relations of dependence, labour and extraction make sovereign agency possible while allowing it to appear autonomous?
- If protection, coordination, continuity and justice have become attached to sovereignty, which of these goods require the sovereign form, and which might we achieve in other ways?
- Can a promise remain alive without allowing any political form or individual to present itself as its fulfilment?