



Abba Hillel Silver Collection Digitization Project

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Series IV: Sermons, 1914-1963, undated.

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The Jewish scene, 1943.

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It is highly interesting to note how persistent and dominant has been the democratic impulse in Jewish history—alike in the political life of the people as in its economic and religious life.

When our nomadic forbears appeared on the frontiers of Canaan to begin their amazing career in the world, they had already been acted upon and determined by countless generations of desert experience and mores. The hard, uncertain and migratory conditions of desert life make for a rude equality and a primitive freedom among the wandering tribes. There are no kings in the desert. The tribal head is only the first among equals. The desert knows of no military aristocracy, for all adult males are fighters. No family claims especial nobility of ancestry, for all members of a clan are blood relations. The rule of the rich is unknown, for the disparity between rich and poor is slight and many tribes are communistic in structure. No priestly hierarchy exists and ritualistic functions are in most instances performed by the lay head of the family. The nomadic tribe is a rudimentary political, economic and religious democracy. Numberless centuries stamped these features upon the character of our desert ancestors long before they entered the settled agricultural life of Canaan.

From their scattered entrance into Canaan until the establishment of the monarchy, centuries elapsed—turbulent and formative centuries, during which the tribes of Israel in their various groupings were led by war chieftains, summoned by the people to command whenever an emergency arose. These chieftains returned to civilian life when the emergency was past. The desert tradition strenuously resisted national consolidation under one sovereign ruler. Only the threat of foreign invasions, particularly that of the Philistines, forced the tribes to seek political unification under a monarch. A reading of the Biblical records shows how distinctly distasteful this compulsory monarchization proved to the best spirits of the people. Constrained to yield to a necessity, they nevertheless refused to make any intellectual concessions to it. The prophet Samuel interpreted the demand for a king as rebellion against God, as evidence of the people's sinfulness and degradation and as a culpable mimicry of the heathen. Contrast this Judaic point of view with the Greek of Plato and Aristotle. The ideal polity, Plato maintained, was the monarchy and the ideal ruler of his Republic was the king, who is also philosopher and warrior. Aristotle regarded kingship as "the primary or most divine form of government."

Among the peoples of antiquity, even among the most enlightened, kings were deified, sacrifices were offered to them, and the most extravagant titles and attributes were ascribed to them. Thus the kings of Egypt were addressed as "Lord of heaven, lord of earth, sun, life of the whole world, lord of time . . . creator of the harvest, maker and fashioner of mortals . . . giver of life to all the host of gods." . . . There was no king-worship in Israel, and a Hebrew king to whom an heathen ruler sought to attribute miraculous healing powers replied: "Am I a God, to kill and to make alive?" . . . The highest tribute which the Bible pays to a ruler is: "He did that which was right in the eyes of the Lord." . . .

No revolutionary literature of mankind breathes a profounder distrust of royalty and indicts in harsher terms the way of kings, their despoilations and corruptions, than the eighth chapter of the First Book of Samuel. Reflected in the Biblical account of the rise of the monarchy, one finds

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1) "Democracy is fundamentally Jewish, not Germanic" - Hitler
 "If freedom is ever to speak again everywhere, its speech will have to be heard" - Heine
 The so-called Aryans must trace his "pol. traditions" back to the
 Oriental despotisms of ancient Persia and to the caste
 system of India - both countries - the cradle of the Aryan.
 Even the Greeks had no consistent dem. traditions.
 Rome & the East

Plato and Aristotle generally opposed the democratic form of govt. Aristotle defended slavery as a natural division of labor - King = philosopher + warrior
in ancient Israel. But it was never defended. It was sharply restricted, and laws were enacted to protect the slave from the tyranny of the master.

Desert Service

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2/ T. E. Lawrence - "Revolt in the Desert" - writing of the Arabs of To-day -
"Among the Arabs, there were no distinctions, traditional or natural, except the universal power given a famous sheikh by virtue of his accomplishments; and they taught me that no man could be their leader except he ate the rank's food, wore their clothes, lived lived with them, and yet appeared better in himself!"

Prof. Adolphe Rods - Sorbonne - "Israel" - speaking of the clan
"Neither the elders, i.e. the heads, the most important families, who
usually guided the clan, nor the single chief who led it in war-
time, possessed autocratic power." But he quotes another
authority - J. H. Burckhardt - : "The Bedouin sheikh only possesses
a moral authority arising from his personal courage. Even
when he acts as a judge... he has no power to enforce his sentence.
Even the poorest Arab takes orders from no one. He will only yield
to the advice and entreaties of his kinsman."

This character, the Semite Arabs persisted thru the ages. ^{His language has pointed} following the rise of Islam, which for example, & for centuries through, a "highly earnest" but the Arab race which lived heavily and the Persian (Aryan) race accustomed to slavish submission."

3/ This has been true, the Arabs. It has even been more dramatically true, the Hebrews & old-ty Jews up to present.

(Read)

Dictators hold man in contempt. Hitler called the masses "eine Hammelherde von Hohlköpfen". ^{sheep-head} Otto Strasser (collaborator) declared that Hitler surrounded himself with deproved and vicious accomplices because they confirmed his profound conviction that man is essentially vile. ^{shallow-brained}

Hermann Rauschning - "The Revolution, Nihilism" - "It may be said in general that at the back, the whole tactics and method of propaganda, National Socialism there is a complete contempt, humanity. the whole system is based on taking men as they are and pandering to their weakness and their bestiality."

But not so the prophets & seers of Israel. They took man at the highest level of his nature & capacities ^{little lower} and challenged him to rise to that level - and demanded a social environment which would make that possible.

(Read)

Thomas Huxley (p 140.)

Unfolded ~~the~~ our Western Civilization

Hard was the road which royalty traveled in Israel. Its kings, with rare exceptions, never arrived at that absolutism possessed by the potentates of other ancient Oriental kingdoms. Straightway upon the selection of Saul, the prophet Samuel was quick to define and circumscribe the scope and powers of the king: "Then Samuel told the people the manner of the kingdom, and wrote it in a book, and laid it up before the Lord." The contents of this book may be gathered from the Deuteronomic code, where the king is forewarned



RABBI ABBA HILLEL SILVER

...n civilization has been marked by no characteristic as the
tion of the democratic impulse. In this article, reprint
s permission of Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver, from his re
mocratic Impulse in Jewish History," the eloquent and
d rabbi makes clear the strong Democratic tendency
been distinctive in the history of the Jew.
! was marked by the democratic impulse from the very
ory, Rabbi Silver points out. Their environment and their
contributed to develop this condition. The generations
nce had wrought their effect. "There are no kings in t
sert knows of no military aristocracy, for all adult n
" When Israel's status is advanced, and the people cl
"Samuel interpreted the demand for a king as rebellio
The democratic thread is woven throughout Israel's histo
ontends.
econd and concluding installment will be found in next
(The book may be obtained from the Bloch Publishing C
cents.)

not to multiply horses and wealth and wives, and, above all, not to permit his heart "to be lifted up above his brethren." Samuel loses no time in impressing upon the people that allegiance to the Lord must at all times be prior to allegiance to the king.

At decisive moments the people asserted their authority against the will of the king. Frequently they rebelled. Hot upon the heels of Saul's election a revolution broke out, led by people whom the dynastic chronicler terms "base fellows"—but revolutionists have always been called "base fellows." . . . These "base fellows" despised Saul and cried out: "How shall this man save us?" This revolution was seemingly of such proportions that the kingdom had to be "renewed" in Gilgal. Samuel himself anointed the rebel David, king, during Saul's lifetime, not because he disliked Saul—for the Bible takes occasion to point out that Samuel loved Saul and mourned for him when misfortune overtook him—but because Saul had usurped powers not delegated to him and because he did not follow rigidly the instructions of the



prophet. David's reign was beset with revolutions, and upon the death of his son, Solomon, the empire was rent in twain by a popular revolution against royal oppression and arrogance. At times the people dethroned one ruler and elected another in his place. At least in five instances the Bible clearly states that the populace elected the king.

The kings were constantly under the moral surveillance of the prophets—those stern monitors of the great democratic desert tradition of the race. In the name of a law higher than that of kings, Samuel faced Saul, Nathan denounced David, Shemaiah threatened Rehoboam, Jehu imprecated Baasa, Elijah anathematized Ahab, and Jeremiah pronounced doom upon Zedekiah, because "he humbled not himself before Jeremiah speaking in the name of the Lord."

The Babylonian exile put an end to the relatively brief era of kingship in Israel. Thereafter and for a period of almost half a millennium our forefathers were governed by priest-leaders and by assemblies and councils of their representatives—Judean Areopagites—who directed whatever of political autonomy the people possessed. There followed a brief interlude of Hasmonean sovereignty, and then the great dispersion of the people took place. Since that time and for nearly nineteen centuries our people, scattered all over the world, existed without king, pope, or potentate and yet retained a fairly integrated and disciplined national life. In many countries they possessed large measures of autonomy, and everywhere they developed an adequate technique for communal administration and for self-government, democratically controlled. Thus the first revolutionists of history who began their national life by an act of self-emancipation from the yoke of Egyptian bondage never quite lost throughout their colorful career the love of freedom and the pride of free men. Impressed with the dignity and the inalienable worth of the life of man, and aware of a noble ancestry commonly shared by all Israelites, they boldly and proudly proclaimed: "All Jews are the sons of kings!"

The economic thought of ancient Israel was likewise surcharged with a democratic idealism. The elaborate system of Biblical social legislation designed to shield the members of the community against exploitation, monopoly, loss of patrimony and enslavement was the expression of a mighty faith in human equality and solidarity. Great and exalted are the implications of the doctrine: "For unto me are the children of Israel slaves; they are not slaves unto slaves."

The great social message of Israel—its heroic code of justice—is incomprehensible without an understanding of the pervading democratic spirit of the race. Every individual life was conceived to be inviolable, a reflex of divinity and an end in the cosmic scheme. Every act of wrong and injustice which mars the life of a man defaces also the image of God. Oppression and exploitation are therefore more than violations of the laws of society. They are sacrilege and blasphemy. They thwart life—God's life in every man; they distort and mutilate that which is the end and goal of all being—the free, untrammelled unfoldment of every human personality.

And it was from the lips of men who had drunk deep of this democratic tradition of the race that the first great cry for justice and economic freedom leaped out upon the world. It was the intrepid spokesmen of the immemorial desert traditions of equality and mutuality who wielded the scorpion whip of their fury upon those who ground the faces of the poor and turned aside the way of the humble, and who pleaded the cause of the

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This democratic impulse is strongly in evidence also in the religious history of Israel. A bitter and determined war was waged through the ages upon ecclesiastical dictatorship. Among ancient peoples theocracy was tantamount to priestly domination and assumed the form of an ~~esoteric~~ ritualism presided over by a privileged and exclusive hierarchy. The racial genius of Israel lifted theocracy from the plane of sacerdotalism unto the plane of moral idealism and proceeded to summon all men, regardless of birth or station, to share in a kingdom of moral values, to live as equals in the free domain of the spirit.

Here again the prophet was the protagonist of the democratic tradition. He was the pitiless enemy of priestly privilege. Prophecy was not only the protest against idolatry—against the ~~hieromorphic~~ polytheism and the ~~anthropomorphic~~ monotheism of the day. It was not only a denial of the primacy of cult and ritual in religion. It was not only the up-reaching of the morally sensitized spirit of the race for a nobler and juster order of society. It was an impassioned claim, springing from the very depths of the people's essential self, for full lay participation in the spiritual heritage of the race and for unrestricted democratic leadership in religion.

The priest, to be sure, is privileged

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to teach the Law, and his lips may keep knowledge. But so also may the layman who qualifies himself for that service. And the word of God may come to all men, to the shepherd, the tradesman, the dresser of sycamore trees, to the humblest of the humble. The priest may perform the indispensable ritual of the sanctuary—but he is possessed of no occult powers, no inviolate office, no exclusive sanctity, no preferred moral status. He must submit to the same moral law which is binding alike upon king, priest, prophet or man of the people.

The prophet was as resolute in his denunciation of priests for moral delinquency as of kings, false prophets or common people. In a religious democracy there are no moral immunities for select groups. Jeremiah interprets his divine call to mean that he must become "a fortified city and an iron pillar, and brazen walls, against the kings of Judah, against the princes thereof, *against the priests thereof*, and against the people of the land." Jeremiah and his spiritual kinsmen dared to call the priests, bulwarked behind the ~~spurious~~ sanctity of their office, vile, profane, murderers, despisers of God's name, polluters of the sanctuary, violators of the Law, teachers for hire. . . . In none of the religious literature of ancient people can one find such unsparing criticism of priestcraft.

The great rebellion of Korah and of the leaders of Israel against the hierarchic claims put forth by the priestly class recorded in the Book of Numbers is the classic instance of the refusal of the Jewish laity to assign special sanctity and privilege to any group in Israel. The rebels were not nondescript malcontents. They were the "princes of the congregation, the elect men of the assembly, men of renown." "And they assembled themselves together against Moses and against Aaron [whose names are here used by the priestly writer for his own end] and said unto them: ye take too much upon yourselves seeing *all the congregation are holy, every one of them*, and the Lord is among them; wherefore then lift ye up yourselves before the assembly of the Lord?" It was, of course, no answer to have the earth conveniently swallow up these rebels alive. Korah's contention was echoed and reechoed through all the succeeding generations, for the racial daimon, the essential genius of the people spoke through him.

The priestcraft sought to make of the Jewish laity in relation to the sanctities of their faith "zarim"—strangers. Prophecy sought to make of them "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." Similarly the false prophets sought to restrict the privilege of prophecy to a few "concessionaires" or professionals. When Eldad and Medad began to prophesy in the camp, Joshua, who here acts as the spokesman of the older tradition of professional prophecy, cried out unto Moses: "My Lord Moses shut them in!" But Moses, who represents the true genius of Israel replied, "Art thou jealous for my sake? *Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, that the Lord would put His spirit upon them.*"

In post-exilic times the scribes and rabbis continued the democratic tradition of the prophets and extended it. With the destruction of the Temple democratic Judaism scored a major victory. Thereafter a new institution began its ascendancy in Jewish life—the Synagogue—the creation of

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Jewish laymen and the noblest and most democratic achievement of Israel. This lay institution soon became the spiritual center of Jewish life. Through the succeeding centuries it was the home of the democratic religious leaders in Israel who frequently felt themselves called upon to challenge the ecclesiastic hierarchy which had entrenched itself in the Temple. The Bible was edited and canonized largely by lay leaders. The right of teaching the Law and of interpreting it both legally and homiletically was steadily taken over by them. They simply repudiated the priestly monopoly of the *Torah*. They proceeded to ordain prayers and to fix the lay ritual.

The ritual of the synagogue was in itself a triumph of democratic thought. It depended upon no priest or Rabbi or other indispensable functionary. It called for no special locale or shrine or sanctuary. Its liturgy was completely dissociated from sacrifice and all forms of sacramentalism. Wherever ten Jewish laymen assembled for worship, there was a synagogue. Lay leaders framed laws and regulations for the guidance of the people. In the course of time, they even prescribed laws for the priests and supervised the performance of the priestly duties within the Temple itself. The status of the priest was radically changed. He came to be merely a commissioned agent of the people, possessing only delegated authority. Thus even the High Priest on Atonement Day was reminded by the Elders of the Tribunal, the *Zikkene Bet Din*, composed largely of laymen: "we are the representatives of the Tribunal and thou art our representative and the Tribunal's; we adjure thee by Him who caused His name to dwell in this House not to deviate in a single instance from the instructions which we have given thee."

The protracted struggle between the Sadducees and the Pharisees was but another phase of the historic conflict between the autocratic and democratic principles in Jewish life. The Sadducees, clinging to a tradition common to all the priestly classes of antiquity, maintained that they were the sole monitors of the Law and the exclusive repository of legislative power in matters religious. They resented what they regarded as unsecular usurpation and the unholy intrusion of laymen into precincts sacred unto themselves.

The Pharisees, on the other hand, who were the spiritual heirs of the prophets, declared that "God hath given unto *all* as an heritage—the kingdom, the priesthood and the sanctuary." "The *Torah* which Moses commanded *us* is the inheritance of the house of Israel." Hence every Israelite properly trained is qualified to share in the sovereign freedom of teaching and expounding the Law, of discovering its recondite meanings and of applying it to the problems and conditions of his time.

It is no accident of history that Israel was the first nation in the world to develop a universal system of popular education for both young and old, rich and poor. Among no other people was so much stress laid upon the education of children, of all children. The school took precedence over the synagogue. The first charge upon a community was the maintenance of its schools and the support of its teachers. A city without a school was to be shunned as doomed. A scholar who studied the *Torah* but did not teach it to others