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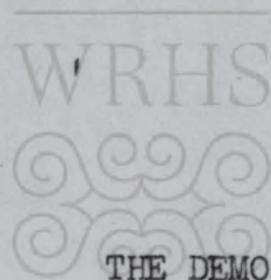
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The Democratic Society, 1949.



THE DEMOCRATIC SOCIETY

by

Dr. Abba Hillel Silver

Sunday, February 20, 1910

It was Hitler who declared that democracy is fundamentally Jewish, not Germanic, and he was absolutely right - one of the few instances in which he was right. Democracy is fundamentally Jewish, not Germanic. The roots of democracy in the Western world lie deep in the Hebraic tradition. The so-called Aryan must trace back his political traditions to the Oriental despotism of ancient Aryan Persia and the caste system of Aryan India. Even the Greeks, that very progressive people, had no strong, consistent democratic tradition. And certainly not Rome. Thucydides, Plato and Aristotle opposed the democratic form of government. The favorite political form of government of Plato was the monarchy, and the ideal ruler of his republic was the philosopher-king. His republic was not a representative democracy but a government at the head of which stood a philosopher-king with unlimited powers. Aristotle regarded kingship as the primary form of government, aristocracy as the next best form, and democracy as the lowest form. And Aristotle, of course, defended the institution of human slavery. Our Torah virtually abolished Hebrew slavery which was the first step in the abolition of slavery everywhere.

The spirit of ancient Israel was hostile to all forms of political absolutism. Our forefathers were Semitic nomads for untold centuries of time, and theirs was the desert tradition which they took with them later on when they settled in Canaan. The desert tradition does not favor despotism or royalty. The leader of a tribe is only the first among equals, and that, by the way, has persisted to this very day as far as the Arab nomads are concerned.

Mr. T. E. Laurence writes in his book, "Revolt in the Desert":

Among the Arabs there were no distinctions, traditional or natural, except the unconscious power given a former sheik 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 level with them, and yet appeared better in himself.

This was the tradition which prevailed among our ancestors and became part of the total pattern of the people. Well, as a result of the warring with the Philistines and other people centuries later in Canaan, they turned to their prophet, Samuel, and asked that a King be set over them. You will remember from what was read this morning how Samuel resisted that demand of the people. The demand for a King was looked upon by Samuel as a mimicry of heathen nations. That is a very informative chapter. The call for the rule of one man over the people was interpreted as being the act which despised the rule of the one God over the people. It was rebellion against God. And the Prophet warned the people against the choosing of a King. He told them what monarchy would do to them - make them serve the King, and their possessions would be expropriated by the King, and the tyranny would be hard upon them, but it would be too late. But the people said: Lo, we want a King to rule over us so that we may be like all other nations who have Kings to rule and lead them into war. And Samuel finally yielded under pressure. But the law in ancient Israel, when Kings were finally appointed, closely prescribed laws which curbed the power of the King.

In the Book of Deuteronomy definite laws are prescribed as far as the powers of royalty are concerned. In Chapter 17 we read:

And all the people shall hear, and fear, and do no more presumptuously. When thou art come unto the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee, and shalt possess it, and shalt dwell therein; and shalt say: "I will set a king over me, like all the nations that are round about me"; thou shalt in any wise set him king over thee, whom the Lord thy God shall choose; one from among thy brethren shalt thou set king over thee; thou mayest not put a foreigner over thee, who is not thy brother. Only he shalt not multiply horses to himself, nor cause the people to return to Egypt, to the end that he should multiply horses; forasmuch as the Lord hath said unto you: "Ye shall henceforth return no more that way." Neither shall he multiply wives to himself, that his heart turn not away; neither shall he greatly multiply to himself silver and gold.

Someone surely said that no loftier ideals of Kingship have ever been offered to the world. And when one contrasts this type of King with those in other nations, one realizes how much the spirit of democracy prevailed among our ancestors.

And these Kings were under the surveillance of the prophets. There was a higher law which the King had to observe as in the case of King David and Nathan, King Ahab and Elijah, and King Zedekiah and Jeremiah. In each instance the King had done wrong and abused his power, and the voice of conscience of the people faced the King and challenged him and denounced him. The principle was early established in Israel: If the King sets about to violate a law of the Torah, the people is not obligated to follow him. The right of rebellion against a King is proclaimed in the law of Israel. And it is clear from the records that the Kings in ancient Israel did not have an easy time of it. Whenever there was any outcropping of royal oppressions, this freedom-loving people rose in rebellion. There are at least five instances in the Bible where the people dethroned a King. It was a people which conceived of itself as "all Jews were sons of Kings". Every member of the people had status, had dignity, and in the case of that status and dignity, they challenged the King who which did not belong to them.

The ideal form of government was theocracy. Theocracy - the rule of the State by God. But even in this instance, here, too, Israel was different from other peoples. There were other societies which were theocratic, but in Israel the Priest, too, was subject to curbs and controls by Prophets who themselves were no rulers. A student of theocracy makes this very interesting observation. Professor Smith writes in the Encyclopedia of Ethics:

The typically theocratic state is that of the Jews. Founded by God and directly governed by Him, its Kings were no more than His servants, who, being guided by His prophets, enjoyed no personal right of initiative. In this attitude, to their Creator, and in respect of the covenant which they had made with Him, the Hebrew people stand practically alone in history so that theirs may be looked upon as a State of a unique kind.

And that is true. Israel fashioned the state of a unique kind in which the King was curbed by basic moral law and the Priest was similarly confined to definite functions and authorities. The struggle against religious tradition in ancient

Israel is very interesting. There ensued among our people a long struggle to universalize the preachings of the Priest, to grant full participation to the laity in the religious heritage of Israel, to establish a democratic leadership in Israel. That was true of the functions of the Priest; that was true even of prophesy.

You may recall a very interesting story in the Bible where two laymen suddenly begin to prophesy in the camp: "Oh, Moses, lock these people up. They dare to prophesy in the camp." And Moses said to the people: "Art thou jealous for my sake? Would that all the Lord's people were prophets that the Lord would put his spirit upon them!"

The greatest democratic victory in this struggle against the of religious privilege by caste in Israel took place after the destruction of the first Temple when our forefathers were exiled to Babylond, and so they built that unique religious institution called the synagogue, and it was built by laymen, and it required no ordained rabbi, but a group of Jewish laymen would meet and there, leaders among them would arise and lead the congregation in prayer. And this synagogue outlived the Temple when it was rebuilt, and this synagogue has remained to this day as the most characteristic religious institution in Judaism. To this day any ten Jews can organize a congregation and anyone can worship and teach the law. The ancient struggle which raged for centuries in ancient Israel was a struggle as to who had the right to teach the law and interpret the word of God, and the Pharisees won the day. We read in the Talmud: "Sanctity was not given to the Priest alone." The Priests and Levites and everyone - they all shared democracy in the religious privileges.

Now where did this democratic ideal in Judaism - in what basic idea did it have its roots? Why, that is clear. The democratic ideal of Israel had its roots in the concept that all men are created equal because all were created in the image of God. All are equal in the sight of God's law - rich and poor, native born and

stranger - because there is no foreign ruler, people or class. And the ultimate appeal of a man who is denied his rights is not in the will of the ruler, but is in God and in God's moral law.

I should like to read to you, if I may, a few paragraphs from my book, "The World Crisis and Jewish Survival", in which I discuss the roots of modern democracy in the Western world:

Modern democracy was born in the struggle for religious freedom in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The Protestant Reformation was not merely a reformation in the realm of doctrine and ritual and a repudiation of the authority of Papacy and the hierarchical system of the Church. It was much more than that. The early leaders of the Protestant Movement did not themselves fully appreciate the forces which they represented. They were confused, and at times were inconsistent. They did not grasp fully what was happening in the mind and heart of the world. What actually was happening was a new determined upreaching on the part of men in the Western World for spiritual liberty, for the emancipation of man from the strait jacket of Tradition and System.

The demand for spiritual liberty soon expressed itself in demands for other forms of liberty. Peasant revolts followed. Political and economic rights were demanded by humble people. By what authority? They had no authority. They had no human law to which they could appeal. In whose name did they speak? In the same name and by the same authority as the ancient prophets of Israel presumed to challenge the kings, the noblemen and the powerfully rich of their day. They spoke in the name of God, in the name of a revelation from God. All men were equal because God made all men equal. The things which they demanded were the things which the Bible, the revealed Word of God, conceded to them, and to all men. The social revolutions of the sixteenth century which were quenched in the blood of a hundred thousand peasants received their inspiration from religions and revelation.

"The full thunder-cloud of the Hebrew prophets," writes James Martineau in his Studies of Christianity, "stealing over a world in negative stagnation, waked the sleeping lightnings of the soul, and for a while streaked the atmosphere of history with fearful portents.....The downtrodden serfs of Franconia had not long heard the glad tidings from Wittenberg, ere they began to draw parallels between themselves and the old Israel when the desert had been passed.....The earth was the Lords, and the army of the saints was come to take it.....The time of jubilee was come, when every believer should have his field of heritage... Throughout the great movement which in the third decade of the sixteenth century spread insurrection from the Breisgau to Saxony, the peasants were animated with the belief that the Gospel, armed with the sword of Joshua, was to subjugate the world, and that all

the conditions of property, of law, of civil administration, under which secular communities exist, were to be superseded by institutions conformed to a divine model."

The quintessence of the spiritual idealism of the Protestant Reformation, which later on affected the life of the American people, lay with the various Anabaptist sects which sprang up in the wake of the Reformation. Some of these sects were hundreds of years ahead of their time. They believed in the absolute moral responsibility of the individual, in his inherent spiritual sovereignty, and in the right of private judgment in matters of religion. They held that the duty of the state was only to protect the good and to punish the evil, and beyond that the state itself was evil. The state had no right to circumscribe the freedom of the individual. These sects were the first to demand absolute disestablishment - the separation of church and state. They were the first to preach universal toleration and freedom of worship. They maintained that all property belonged to God. Some of them like the early Christians practiced voluntary communism, which is a very different thing from the secular, involuntary communism of our day - in fact, its violent negation in everything but surface similarity.

Thus, out of victories won for religious freedom on the battlefields of the spirit, there stemmed other victories for man's political, economic and social freedom. The absolutism of king and state was first curbed by the religious spirit of man demanding at the point of revolution the right, not of universal suffrage or of better living conditions, but the right to worship God as it saw fit.

These doctrines of the Anabaptists were carried over to Holland and England, and then to the American Colonies. The Founding Fathers of our country adopted many of the doctrines of these religious "fanatics". When they wrote into the Declaration of Independence: "We hold these truths to be self-evident - that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness", they were giving political expression to seminal religious Anabaptist doctrines. When they countered the claim of the Divine Right of Kings with the claim of the Divine Right of People to resist the tyranny of kings, when they proclaimed that resistance to tyrants is obedience to God, when they engraved upon the Liberty Bell the Biblical proclamation: "And Thou shalt proclaim freedom throughout the land unto all the inhabitants thereof", or when they placed on the first seal of the newborn republic of the United States the figure of Moses leading the children of Israel out of Egypt, they were marshalling religious truth, religious authority and religious tradition to underwrite and sanction their political freedom.

That is a chapter in the political history of our own country and the history of democracy that is frequently not remembered and not recalled. Thus, my good friends, one of the greatest and noblest contributions of our immortal faith to the progress of mankind was the concept of democracy, the vision of a society of free men living in voluntary political association under the divine laws of justice and brotherhood, and not only did Judaism give mankind the vision but it provided that impose to men to bring about this democracy even if it involved revolution and the challenge of entrenched privilege.

And so, I was personally deeply gratified when addressed the very first session of the new government of Israel established after more than 2,000 years, the newly-elected President, Dr. Chaim Weitzmann, in his address took especial pain to call attention to this fundamental democratic thesis of all Jewish life, and he said:

WRHS AMERICAN JEWISH ARCHIVES

In the ancient world this tiny country of ours raised the standard of spiritual revolt against the rights of tyranny and brute force. The law of Israel and the vision of her prophets sounded a new epic of relations between man and man, a new ordering of human society. The authority of the King of Israel was limited by law and tradition. The prophets of Israel did not fear to utter rebuke and reproof to kings and princes and with inspired words forged weapons to defend the poor and oppressed, strangers and slaves, and the orphan and the widow.

The very principle of the institution of kingship was hateful to the spiritual leaders of the people. "I will not rule over you nor shall my son rule over you. The Lord shall rule over us," declared the judge to the assembled people. The warnings of the prophet against the dangers of tyranny thunder from on high to the ears of people to our last generation.

In Israel this authority of one man was derived from the noble conception that people are naturally free and are freely accepting the rule that law and just judgment do not need compulsion from above to live as ordered by society. The root of the principle of the constitution of that novel state was the limit set for the authority of the king, and in this sense the ancient Hebrew policy was the mother of constitutional government in the modern age.

Yes, democracy is fundamentally Jewish and in the great struggle which is raging over the world today and which has for some decades been raging over the Western world as between various forms of dictatorship and democracy, it is really the spirit of Israel and of Judaism which is struggling for survival in the modern world. It is the Judeo-Christian tradition which has been assaulted which is fighting to maintain its supremacy in the world today. It is Judaism - vigorous, alive, challenging, which through manifold human beings and institutions which had their origin in Judaism which is still warring in the world to establish the Kingdom of God which is the Kingdom of free men banded together in human brotherhood doing the will of God in the world.

I have spoken of the Ethics of Judaism, the Law of the One World, the Mandate of Love and Justice, and the Democratic Society. I have endeavored to point out some of the ethical principles of our historic faith and their significance in society, in history, and in the world today. I shall conclude my series next Sunday morning with the implications of all of this for us as individuals - The Challenge to the Individual as Judaism sees it to establish the Kingdom of God.

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THE DEMOCRATIC SOCIETY

Sermon, The Temple,  
February 20, 1949

~~Hitler~~ Hitler ~~also~~ declared that democracy is fundamentally Jewish, not Germanic, and he was absolutely right <sup>one</sup> <sub>M</sub> of the few instances in which he was right. Democracy is fundamentally Jewish, not Germanic. ~~The roots of democracy~~  
 In the Western world, <sup>the roots of democracy</sup> lie deep in the Hebraic tradition. The so-called Aryan must trace back his political traditions to the Oriental despotism of ancient Aryan Persia and the caste system of Aryan India. ~~Even~~ <sup>Alertly</sup> the Greeks, that ~~very~~ progressive people, had no strong, consistent democratic tradition, <sup>and</sup> certainly not Rome, <sup>did not.</sup>  
<sup>Thucydides,</sup> ~~Thucydides,~~ Plato, and Aristotle opposed ~~the~~ democratic forms of government. The favorite political form <sup>for</sup> ~~of government~~ of Plato was the monarchy, and the ideal ruler of his republic was the philosopher-king. <sup>Plato's</sup> ~~His~~ republic was not a representative democracy but a government at the head of which stood a philosopher-king with unlimited powers. Aristotle regarded kingship as the primary form of government, aristocracy as the next best form, and democracy as the lowest form. And Aristotle, of course, defended the institution of human slavery. Our Torah virtually abolished Hebrew slavery, which was the first <sup>step</sup> ~~step~~ in the abolition of slavery everywhere.

The spirit of ancient Israel was hostile to all forms of political absolutism. Our forefathers were Semitic nomads for untold centuries, ~~of time,~~ and theirs was the desert tradition which they took with them later on when they settled in Canaan. The desert tradition does not favor despotism or royalty. The leader of a tribe is only the first among equals; <sup>attitude,</sup> and that, <sup>among the Bedouin.</sup> by the way, has persisted to this very day ~~as far as the Arab nomads are concerned.~~

Mr. T. E. Laurence writes in his book, "Revolt in the Desert":

extract

Among the Arabs there were no distinctions, traditional or natural, except the unconscious power given a former sheik 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 level with them, and yet appeared better in himself.

This was the tradition which prevailed among our ancestors and Centuries later, became part of the pattern of the people. <sup>^</sup> as a result of the warring with the Philistines in Canaan, Israel turned to the prophet Samuel, and asked that a king be set over them. Samuel resisted that demand. The demand for a king was looked upon by Samuel as a mimicry of heathen nations. The call for the rule of one man was interpreted as being an act which despised the rule of the one God. It was rebellion against God. Samuel warned the people against the choosing of a king. He told them what monarchy would do to them <sup>^</sup> forced service, the expropriation of their possessions. Tyranny would be hard on them. But the people said: "Lo, we want a king to rule over us so that we may be like all the other nations who have kings to rule and lead them into war." Samuel finally yielded under pressure. But the law in ancient Israel, when kings were finally appointed, closely proscribed and curbed their power. <sup>In</sup> <sup>^</sup> chapter <sup>17</sup> ~~seventeen~~ of the Book of Deuteronomy we read:

And all the people shall hear, and fear, and do no more presumptuously. When thou art come into the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee, and shalt possess it, and shalt dwell therein; and shalt say: "I will set a king over me, like all the nations that are round about me"; thou shalt in any wise set him king over thee, whom the Lord thy God shall choose; one from among thy brethren shalt thou set king over thee; thou mayest not put a foreigner over thee, who is not thy brother. Only he shalt not multiply horses to himself, nor cause the people to return to Egypt, to the end that he should multiply horses; forasmuch as the Lord hath said unto you: "Ye shall henceforth return no more that way." Neither shall he multiply wives to himself, that his heart turn not away; neither shall he greatly multiply to himself silver and gold.

When one contrasts this royal prerogative with those in other nations, one realizes how much the spirit of democracy prevailed among our ancestors. Israel's kings were under the surveillance of the prophets. There was a higher law which the king had to observe, as in the case of King David and Nathan, King Ahab and Elijah, <sup>^</sup> and King Zedekiah and Jeremiah. In each instance the king had done wrong and abused his power, and the prophetic voice of the people faced the king and denounced him. The principle was early established that if the king sets about to violate a law of the Torah, the people <sup>are</sup> not

obligated to follow him. The right of rebellion against a king is proclaimed in the law of Israel. From the records it is clear that the kings of ancient Israel did not have an easy time of it. Whenever there was any outcropping of royal oppressions, this freedom-loving people rose in rebellion. There are at least five instances in the Bible where the people dethroned a king. "All Jews were sons of kings." Every member of the people had status and dignity, and in the name of that status and dignity they challenged the king who usurped powers which did not belong to him.

The ideal form of government was theocracy. Theocracy <sup>is</sup> the rule of the state by God. But even in this instance, Israel was different from other peoples. There were other theocratic societies, but only in Israel were the priests, too, subject to curbs and controls by prophets who themselves had no legal prerogative.

A student of theocracy, <sup>C. Ryder</sup> ~~F. B.~~ Smith, makes this interesting observation:

The typically theocratic state is that of the Jews. Founded by God and directly governed by Him, its kings were no more than His servants, who, being guided by His prophets, enjoyed no personal right of initiative. In this attitude, to their Creator, and in respect of the covenant which they had made with Him, the Hebrew people stand ~~practically~~ practically alone in ~~the~~ history so that theirs may be looked upon as a state of a unique kind.

And that is true. Israel fashioned a state of a unique kind in which the king was curbed by the basic moral law and the priest was similarly confined within definite functions and authorities. There ensued among our people a long struggle to universalize the preachings of the priest, and to grant full participation to the laity in the religious heritage of Israel, and to establish a democratic leadership among the people. That was ~~the~~ true of the functions of the priest; that was true even of prophecy.

You may recall the biblical story wherein two laymen suddenly begin to prophesy, ~~in~~ in the camp. The people protest: "Moses, lock those people up. They dare to prophesy." Moses responds: "Art thou jealous for my sake? Would that all the Lord's people were prophets that the Lord would put His spirit upon them."

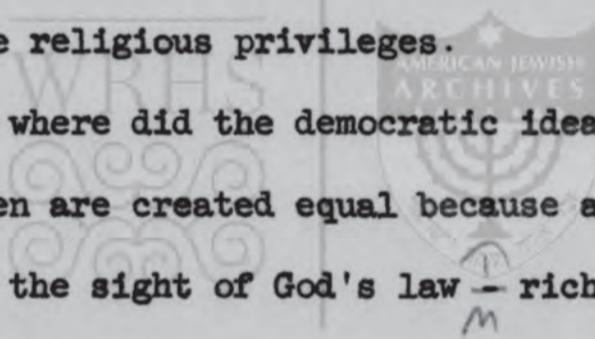
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excerpt

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The greatest democratic victory in this struggle in Israel against the assumption of religious privilege by caste took place after the destruction of the <sup>First</sup> Temple, when our forefathers were exiled into Babylon. There they built that unique religious ~~institution~~ <sup>institution</sup> we call the synagogue. It was built by laymen. It required no ordained rabbi. Laymen would meet and their leaders would arise and lead the congregation in prayer. This synagogue outlived the Temple when it was rebuilt, and this synagogue has remained the characteristic religious institution in Judaism. To this day any ten Jews can organize a congregation, and anyone can worship and teach the law. The struggle which raged for centuries in ancient Israel was a struggle <sup>about</sup> as to who had the right to teach the law and to interpret the word of God; the democrats, the Pharisees, won the day. So we read in the Talmud: "Sanctity was not given to the priest alone." Priests and Levites and everyone shared the religious privileges.

Now where did the democratic ideal have its roots? Clearly in the concept that all men are created equal because all are created in the image of God. All are equal in the sight of God's law - rich and poor, native-born and



stranger <sup>to</sup> because there is no <sup>superior</sup> ~~foreign~~ ruler, people, or class. ~~and~~ The ultimate appeal of a man who is denied his rights is not <sup>to</sup> the will of the ruler, but is <sup>to</sup> God and <sup>to</sup> God's moral law.

I should like to <sup>quote</sup> ~~read to you~~, if I may, a few paragraphs from my book, "The World Crisis and Jewish Survival", in which I discuss the roots of modern democracy in the Western world:

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Modern democracy was born in the struggle for religious freedom in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The Protestant Reformation was not merely a reformation in the realm of doctrine and ritual and a repudiation of the authority of Papacy and the hierarchical system of the Church. It was much more than that. The early leaders of the Protestant Movement did not themselves fully appreciate the forces which they represented. They were confused, and at times were inconsistent. They did not grasp fully what was happening in the mind and heart of the world. What actually was happening was a new determined upreaching on the part of men in the Western World for spiritual liberty, for the emancipation of man from the strait jacket of Tradition and System.

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The demand for spiritual liberty soon expressed itself in demands for other forms of liberty. Peasant revolts followed. Political and economic rights were demanded by humble people. By what authority? They had no authority. They had no human law to which they could appeal. In whose name did they speak? In the same name and by the same authority as the ancient prophets of Israel presumed to challenge the kings, the noblemen and the powerfully rich of their day. They spoke in the name of God, in the name of a revelation from God. All men were equal because God made all men equal. The things which they demanded were the things which the Bible, the revealed Word of God, conceded to them, and to all men. The social revolutions of the sixteenth century which were quenched in the blood of a hundred thousand peasants received their inspiration from religions and revelation.

"The full thunder-cloud of the Hebrew prophets," writes James Martineau in his Studies of Christianity, "stealing over a world in negative stagnation, waked the sleeping lightnings of the soul, and for a while streaked the atmosphere of history with fearful portents. . . . The downtrodden serfs of Franconia had not long heard the glad tidings from Wittenberg, ere they began to draw parallels between themselves and the old Israel when the desert had been passed. . . . The earth was the Lords, and the army of the saints was come to take it. . . . The time of jubilee was come, when every believer should have his field of heritage. . . . Throughout the great movement which in the third decade of the sixteenth century spread insurrection from the Breisgau to Saxony, the peasants were animated with the belief that the Gospel, armed with the sword of Joshua, was to subjugate the world, and that all

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extract

s/i

That is a chapter in the political history of our own country and in the history of democracy that is frequently not recalled. One of the grandest and noblest contributions of our immortal faith to the progress of mankind was the concept of democracy, the vision of a society <sup>of</sup> free men living in voluntary political association under the divine laws of justice and ~~freedom~~ brotherhood; and not only did Judaism give mankind the vision but it provided that spiritual thrust and impetus to challenge entrenched privilege and dare upheaval and revolution.

I was personally deeply gratified when, addressing the very first session of the new government of Israel, the newly elected President, Dr. Chaim Weizmann, took especial pains to call attention to this fundamental democratic thesis in Jewish life:

In the ancient world this tiny country of ours raised the standard of spiritual revolt against the rights of tyranny and brute force. The law of Israel and the vision of her prophets sounded a new epic of relations between man and man, a new ordering of human society. The authority of the King of Israel was limited by law and tradition. The prophets of Israel did not fear to utter rebuke and reproof to kings and princes and with inspired words forged weapons to defend the poor ~~and~~ and the oppressed, strangers and slaves, and the orphan and the widow.

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Ed: epoch

extract

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Democracy is fundamentally Jewish, and in the great struggle which is raging throughout the Western world between various forms of dictatorship and democracy, it is really the spirit of Israel and of Judaism which is struggling for sur-

vival. It is the biblical tradition which has been assaulted and which is fighting to survive. It is Judaism, vigorous, alive, challenging, and human beings and institutions which had their origin in Judaism<sup>sm</sup> which are the forces still <sup>fighting</sup> warring in the world to establish the Kingdom of God, which is the Kingdom of free men banded together in human brotherhood doing the will of God in the world.

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