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The democratic impulse in Jewish history, 1938.

THE DEMOCRATIC IMPULSE IN JEWISH HISTORY

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EINE, whose poetic insight frequently bordered on the prophetic, wrote somewhere of the time to come when "freedom will speak everywhere, and its speech will be Biblical." Hitler, whose hatred of freedom and democracy is surpassed only by his hatred of the Jews, somewhere volcanically erupts this pronouncement: "Democracy is fundamentally Jewish, not Germanic." Friend and foe alike seem to agree here that there is an organic relationship between Judaism or the Jew and the ideals of human freedom and liberty. Thomas Huxley called the Bible "the most democratic book in the world," and re-stated what many an historian had noted before him, that "throughout the history of the Western World, the Scriptures have been the great instigators of revolt against the worst forms of clerical and political despotism. The Bible has been the Magna Charta of the poor and of the oppressed." The role which the Bible played in all the Protestant reform movements, in the English and American revolutions, and in the movements for social justice and economic reform in the Western World is a story too long and too well known to warrant re-telling at this time and in this place. It is not therefore accidental that the attack upon human freedom and human rights under the Nazi regime, which alone of all Fascist regimes has dared to face the ideologic implications of its position, has gone hand in hand with a violent attack both on the Old and the New Testaments, and on the essential teachings of the entire classic Judaeo-Christian tradition.

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 the nomadic forbears of Israel 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

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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 these desert ancestors of Israel 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. Centuries later the Rabbis voice the same dislike and distrust of kings: "God said to Israel: My children, did I not wish you to be free of the fear of kings and royalty—even as the denizens of the wilderness are free of the fear of man. But you chose otherwise! . . ." Contrast this Judaic point of view with the Greek of Plato and Aristotle. The ideal policy, Plato maintained, was the monarchy and the ideal ruler of his Republic was the king who was 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 a 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 ways of kings, their despoliations 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 not only the struggle between the theocratic and the monarchic systems of government,—between priestcraft and kingcraft,—but also and more particularly the unrelenting conflict between the democratic and the autocratic principles which raged throughout the political history of Israel, and, as we shall see in a moment, through its economic and religious history as well.

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 forwarned 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 his 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



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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, Shem-aiiah threatened Rehboam, 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 millenium the Jews 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 Hasmon-ean sovereignty and of the Idumear dynasty under Roman tutelage, and checkered with rebellions, and then the great dispersion of the people took place. Since that time and for nearly nineteen centuries Israel scattered all over the world, existed without king, pope or potentate and yet retained a fairly integrated and disciplined national life. In many coun-

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tries 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 and 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 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. It was they who pleaded the cause of the orphan and the widow, the beaten and the broken of life.

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 theriomorphic polytheism and the anthropomorphic monotheism of the day. 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, was privileged to teach the Law, and his lips may keep knowledge. But so also may the layman who qualifies himself for that service. 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 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 peoples 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 non-descript 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 had the earth conveniently swallow up these rebels alive. Korah's contention was echoed and re-echoed through all 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 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 su-

pervised 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 **Zik-kene 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 was regarded as a contemner of God's word. On the other hand he who taught a child Torah was assured of a portion in the world to come. Especially praiseworthy was he who taught the child of an Am Ha-aretz—the unlettered common man. The watchword of the Men of the Great Community was "Raise up many disciples." It was no idle boast of Josephus when he declared: "Our principal care is to educate our children well"; and one need but read Nathan Hannover's account of the remarkable system of

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education which was in operation in the Polish Jewish communities, seventeen centuries later, to realize how uninterrupted the tradition of democratic education continued in Israel throughout the ages.

The Pharisees took the Bible injunction "And ye shall be called the priests of the Lord" to be more than a figure of speech. They set about to train the children of Israel into a discipline and a mode of sanctified living which would justify this appellation. Many of the regulations touching dress, conduct and food which they prescribed for the laymen were in the first instance intended for priests only. They wished to bridge the gap between priest and layman, to democratize the concept of sanctification.

Some of the extremists among the Pharisees, holding that sanctification was the prerogative of all Israelites and in an effort to outpriest the priests, organized the Haburah, a fraternity which in matters of Levitical purity was even more exacting than the code binding upon priests. Members of such a Haburah regarded even the uninitiated High Priest as an Am Ha-aretz. Back of this exotic fraternity was the thought that holiness even in its ritualistic sense belonged to no hereditary class but must be and can be acquired by anyone through a rigid discipline of self-purification.

There came a time however, when Pharisaism itself became undemocratic. Post-exilic leaders early maintained that prophecy ceased with the exile. Thereafter religious truth could come only by way of the interpretation of the Scriptures, not by way of revelation. In matters of law even the Bat Kol, the Voice echoed from Heaven,—a species of attenuated revelation—is to be ignored. The method of interpretation became as a matter of course more and more involved and technical as time went on. Only the skilled and the carefully trained students who were acquainted with all the intricacies of Rabbinic hermeneutics came to be regarded as qualified teachers. Religious leadership was again narrowly restricted. An ever-widening gulf set in between the Rabbinic scholars and the masses. When the legal system of the Rabbis was finally codified in the Talmud and assumed an authority second only to that of the Bible, Rabbinism became as strongly entrenched in it, as exclusive and domineering as the priests had been in the Temple. An aristocracy of learning—a dry, hard, exclusive learning, quite inaccessible to the common man, superseded the aristocracy of sacerdotalism. The masses were again excluded from their spiritual patrimony.

The people were bound to rebel; and they did rebel. In the popular

Messianic movements during the two centuries following the compilation of the Talmud we already find strong anti-Rabbinic tendencies. But the great rebellion expressed itself in two ways; Karaism and mysticism.

Karaism sought to break the domination of the Rabbis by completely repudiating their authority to interpret the Bible and by appealing to a literal reading of the sacred text. It is true that Karaism was, in a sense, a throwback to Sadduceeism but it was prompted by none of the older priestly presumptions of religious franchise and vested interests. It may also have been motivated by a resentment of the large infusion of Persian thought and superstition in the Talmud.

Jewish mysticism was an effort to re-discover a world in which the religious spirit of the race could again adventure free and undeterred, and where the souls of men, starved by Rabbinic formalism, could feed again upon the glories and glamour of new revelations. Like Karaism Jewish mysticism sought its freedom in the Bible, but unlike Karaism it sought it not in a literal reading of Scriptures, nor in Halachic or Hagadic interpretation such as Rabbinism adopted, but in an occult, mystic probing of its inner spiritual meaning. The Jewish mystic developed a technique quite as elaborate, as ingenious and as amazing as that of the Rabbis. Just as the Rabbis had employed Biblical phrases, words and letters in their dialectics to expound the law and the moral, so the mystics turned every phrase, word and letter of the Bible into a visible revelation of invisible truth. By means of his highly refined methodology the very letters of the Torah dissolved in a world of spirituality. And in that world the Jewish mystic found that prophetic freedom which was denied him elsewhere.

Centuries later Chassidism expressed the same spirit of revolt. It was a popular democratic uprising as evidenced by the astounding rapidity with which the movement swept through Eastern-European Jewries. It was a magnificent attempt to restore the treasures of the faith to the masses and to rescue Judaism from a cold, meager, subtilized Talmudism and from a coterie of Rabbis who had become estranged from the people, exclusive and to a degree also exploiting. Chassidism declared: "The essence of Judaism is that a man should walk in wholesomeness and simplicity of spirit without any subtleties." Chassidism was a great yearning of simple men for the wider spaces of the spirit. It was a wish to tap anew the clear springs of religious inspiration and to bring on a new age of faith and miracles and wonderment and revelation.

It should be noted however, that the continued demand for democracy in Israel was motivated largely by a desire not for things secular but for things sacred. It was not a clamor for mere political rights and for the rule of the many in place of the few. It went much deeper. At the heart of it was a tremendous dogma, the like of which is not to be found among any other people, — an astounding ideologic fixation, if you will, a spiritual "fiction" of marvelous potency woven by the racial psyche and forever after inseparable from the life and thought processes of the people. God had made an eternal covenant with the whole House of Israel, that Israel as a people should become His pledged servant and emissary. This covenant was made with every Israelite,—king, priest, prophet and common man. "Ye are standing this day all of you before the Lord, your God; your heads, your tribes, your elders, and your officers, even all the men of Israel, your little ones, your wives, and the sojourner that is in the midst of thy camp, from the hewer of thy wood unto the drawer of thy water; that thou shouldest enter into the covenant of the Lord thy God, and into His oath, which the Lord thy God maketh with thee this day; that

He may establish thee this day unto Himself for a people, and that He may be unto thee a God, as He spoke unto thee and as He swore unto thy fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob. Neither with you only do I make this covenant and this oath, but with him that standeth here with us this day before the Lord our God, and also with him that is not here with us this day."

For the first time in the history of mankind a whole people conceived of itself as having been consecrated into an everlasting priesthood and as having been commissioned to perform those functions which among other peoples were relegated to a small official group of priests. Religion was never so democratized

"And ye shall be unto me holy men!" Nothing is so basic in the religious philosophy of the Bible as this concept of the covenant and its implied sanctification of the whole people of Israel. And strange and difficult as this paralleled idea of the mass ordination of a whole people may appear, Israel clung to it tenaciously throughout its history. It became the essential tradition of Israel.

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