"ARISTOCRACY IN JEWISH SOCIETY"*

The quality and the character of a society can usually be measured by the kind of people it chooses to honor. A nation's heroes are normally a good index of its mores. You can know a people by observing whether it esteems bull fighters or poets, cloak-and-dagger operatives or philosophers, politicians or musicians, men of wealth and success or spiritual personalities.

With this in mind, it is instructive to inquire what kind of society Judaism envisions for us, and how successful we Jews have been, in practice, in conforming to this normative society and the ideals laid down for it by our faith.

At the end of the last portion, Be'midbar, we read the commandment, 'I shall take the census and assign duties to the family of Kehat, of the tribe of Levi. This morning's sidra, Naso, continues with the commandments of the census: to take the census and assign the duties to the family of Gershon.

Now, it has been asked: why is Kehat given precedence over Gershon, especially since Gershon is the first born? The Rabbis of the Midrash put it this way:

Although Gershon was older, Kehat received priority because his task was to carry the Ark which contained the Torah.

We learn, therefore, that is greater than , that scholarship in Jewish life ranks over primogeniture.

Jewish law clearly lays down the priorities of respect and honor due to different categories of persons, and this order represents the ideal hierarchy of Jewish society. In it, primacy is given to -- the sage, the wise man, the scholar. Unlike Plato, the Rabbis did not place at the apex of society the Jewish version of the "philosopher-king." They did not identify the man of intellect with the man of political authority and civic

* This sermon is largely based on the ideas of the late Prof. Feivel Meltzer in his short book on " .
sovereignty. Rather, they gave the highest esteem to the 
^3 A , the Jewish equivalent of a philosopher, and second
to him was the ^3 or king.

We are taught in the Mishnah that
The order of priority is: sage, king, high priest, prophet.
These four are the heroes of Jewish society.

Consider the Prophet. The reverence for him is clearly
established in our tradition. Indeed, as part of the blessings
over the Haftorah, we bless God

Yet, the Prophet remains subordinate to the other three. Why
is this so? Because prophecy is a response to negative
conditions. Prophecy is not, as with soothsayers or magicians
in other cults, a matter of forecasting or predicting the
future, but primarily its task is to reproach and reprove and
rebuke the people and summon them back to God and to Torah.
The prediction of future consequences is but one aspect of the
Prophet's task of ^3 . Hence, the whole office of the
Prophet is called into being only when the people reveals
profound inadequacies and failures and backslidings. That is
why the Rabbis said: 

The next in order are ^3 . Notice that the
King comes before the High Priest. Why is this so? Because
Judaism does not assert a sharp dichtomy between the religious
and the secular as do other faiths. We donot believe that we
must render unto Caeser what is Caeser's and unto God what is
God's. All is God's realm, and the King has his role to play
in it. Political leadership has a "religious" function too,
that of establishing social peace and harmony and justice.
Indeed, the Priest has, as his main task, the ordering of the
relationships between man and God, whereas
the King is charged with establishing copper relationships
-. It is for this reason that the king
takes precedence over the high priest.

But at the very pinnacle of the ideal Jewish hierarchy
comes the ^3 .

The Rabbis told us of three crowns^3 , ^3 , ^3 
And in
we read that
One can never buy the crown of priesthood. Similarly, one can
never buy the crown of royalty (although the effort has been
made and it has been done -- but illegitimately). Actually,
both the High Priesthood and Kingship go from father to son.
But when it comes to the crown of Torah --

one not only cannot but
it, he need not pay a penny for it. It is available to
whoever desires it. All one must do to seize the crown of
Torah is to spend his whole life in it, to experience sleepless
nights, to suffer for it, to give up all the pleasures of the
world that stand in the way of acquiring greatness and wisdom
of Torah. No wonder that

Of course, not all is creative and constructive.
The Jewish tradition knows of , or evil genius.
True wisdom remains that which is based upon piety:

Not only do I refer to piety in the conventional sense, but
also to any intelligence applied to the improvement of man's
life in the face of God. Thus Jeremiah told us

True wisdom is the imitation of God, and God's personality is
one which seeks the establishment of love and justice and
righteousness in the world. Hence, any human being who uses
his mind and heart and intellect and will in order to realize
and implement these great qualities, is a wise man. Judaism hence
approves the of the scientist who improves life as an act
of ; the intelligence of the philanthropist and the
wisdom of the jurist and the businessman or any citizen whose
goal is . But, above all others, is the
wise man who is learned in the ways of Torah, who exposes himself
to the direct message of the will of God: the

Have we Jews succeeded? The answer is a fluctuating one.
Generally I believe that the answer is more positive than negative.
For instance, European Jewry, especially the pre-Emancipation
Jewry, and the part that remained in the shtetl of Eastern Europe,
as well as central Europe in some cases, was one which came close
to realizing this social hierarchy of Judaism. The greatest dream
of parents was not that their children become doctors or lawyers
or engineers or very wealthy people, but that they become
. Jewish children were put to sleep in
their cradles with the lullaby

Israel today, with all its problems and its military needs, still reverences learning. Of the four presidents of Israel, the first incumbent, Chaim Weitzman and the present President Prof. Katzir, are both men of science. Of the other two, Dr. Ben Zvi and that great Jew, Zalman Shazar, achieved renown in Jewish scholarship.

In the United States, we were not so fortunate. It used to be that any national Jewish organization -- even the Orthodox, or perhaps especially the Orthodox, even this very day -- felt that no convention meeting could be complete without a guest speaker who was preferably wealthy, non-Jewish, and either a politician or a humorist. Organizations vie with each other in getting "name" people, in the hope that by honoring them some of the honor would reflect back on themselves. But the people they chose to honor were certainly not those who could fit the prescription of the ideal Jewish structure.

Fortunately, the pendulum is swinging away from that kind of self-abnegation and unworthy attitude. A younger generation is more sophisticated, more accepting of its Jewishness, more understanding, and less sycophantic. They understand that true Judaism calls for the Priest to have the highest rank in the Jewish world.

At Sinai we were told that we were going to be and must be a people who emphasized priesthood and prophecy. Yet our special pride above all else was told to us by Moses before he died.

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