

"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 וְלָקַחְתָּ מִן־הָאֵלֶּיךָ בְּנֵי־קֹהַת בְּנֵי־לֵוִי, to 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: וְלָקַחְתָּ מִן־הָאֵלֶּיךָ בְּנֵי־גֵרְשׁוֹן, 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 בְּכוֹר, or first born? The Rabbis of the Midrash put it this way:

אֵלֶּיךָ שֶׁגֵּרְשׁוֹן בָּטָח וְלָקַחְתָּ מִן־הָאֵלֶּיךָ בְּנֵי־קֹהַת בְּנֵי־לֵוִי
 עָבָר, לְפָנֶיךָ קֹהַת וְגֵרְשׁוֹן וְלָקַחְתָּ מִן־הָאֵלֶּיךָ בְּנֵי־קֹהַת בְּנֵי־לֵוִי
 הַבָּטָח לְפָנֶיךָ

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

We learn, therefore, that כְּבוֹד הַתּוֹרָה is greater than כְּבוֹד הַבְּכוֹרָה, 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 כְּבוֹד הַתּוֹרָה.

sovereignty. Rather, they gave the highest esteem to the ^{חכם}, the Jewish equivalent of a philosopher, and second to him was the ^{מלך} or king.

We are taught in the Mishnah that ^{חכם קודם לנביא, מלך קודם לכהן, כהן קודם לרש"א}
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

^{הבן חרבותיה ובעל עבדיו ובישראל ויהוה אלהינו}

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 ^{תוכחה}. 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: ^{אין חסד אלא ישראל לא היה מקבלים אלא חסד חוגג מורה אסור יהושע}

The next in order are ^{המלך}. Notice that the King comes before the High Priest. Why is this so? Because Judaism does not assert a sharp dichotomy between the religious and the secular as do other faiths. We do not believe that we must render unto Caesar what is Caesar'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, namely, 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, ^{בין אדם לאלהים}, whereas the King is charged with establishing proper relationships ^{בין אדם לאדם}. 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 ^{חכם}.

The Rabbis told us of three crowns ^{כתר תורה, כתר מלכות, כתר כהונה}. And in ^{אבות דרבי} we read that ^{כבוד כהונה אפילו נותן לו כבוד מלכות אפילו נותן לו כבוד תורה}

וְכֵן כִּי יִבְרָא הַיְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ, 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 sieze the crown of
 Torah is to spend his whol 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 אֵלֶּיךָ יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ!

Of course, not all דאס is creative and constructive. The Jewish tradition knows of אביר דאס, 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

שאל יתבאר חכם בחכמה, כי אם בלא יתבאר ה' יתבאר
השם וידוע אלו חכמים, אשר חסד משפט צדקה בארץ כ
באלה חכמים נאום ה'.

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 חכמה of the scientist who improves life as an act of צדקה; the intelligence of the philanthropist and the wisdom of the jurist and the businessman or any citizen whose goal is הקדשה לטובת צדקה. 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 חכם צדיק.

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

פנים יאכלו. Jewish children were put to sleep in

