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***"Is democracy a Jewish idea?"***

***Response by Rabbi Peter Schweitzer***

Jews have a long history of overcompensating for our equally long history of victimization, belittling, and exclusion from society. We make up for this negative experience by extolling our great contributions to Western civilization.

So we have laid claim to inventing human dignity, freedom and equality; a system of equitable laws; a day off each week (even for our animals); and an elaborate system of care for the indigent and impoverished; and on it goes.

But can we say that we also invented democracy? Or, if we give this one to the Greeks, can we assert that we also embrace its ideals? It depends what time period we're talking about.

Historically, we were the people of theocracy, a system of government that is anything but a democracy. Theocracies are based on divine revelation, not deliberative debate. Leaders, like Moses, were divinely appointed, not democratically elected. Priests, and later rabbis, ruled autocratically. Theocracies stifle discussion and personal freedom. Democracies, on the other hand, guarantee freedom of expression and human rights.

Since the Enlightenment, however, democracy has been the best safeguard for Jews. Which is why we laid claim as soon as we could to our fair rights. And why we ought to work just as hard to protect the rights for all peoples, whose democratically guaranteed equality and freedom, will secure our own.