

Henry Balsler

Religious Socialism

Religious Jewish socialism seems very natural to me. The Torah is the soul of the Jewish people. Without it, we would not survive for more than a few generations, and that survival would not be particularly joyous or meaningful. But the only way that I can render Torah into action, *l'maaseh*, is by some form of socialism, yet Judaism and socialism have not always been a happy combination.

As our people emerged from the ghettos of Europe in the last century and a half, they encountered modern ideas. Two basic responses to the challenge of western modernity emerged. One was to accept the language and terms of the West and to view the traditions of the Jewish people as backward, the other to reject virtually all western thought and western ways.

The split of the Jewish world into religious and secular parts has become a bitter reality. The contrast of "enlightened" Jews having gala balls on Kol Nidre evening versus Hasidim throwing stones at Sabbath non-observers in Jerusalem, has characterized much of our history, particularly until the Second World War.

Since the war, however, the Holocaust, the Americanization of most Jews here, and the establishment of the state of Israel have created major counter-forces bridging the gulf between religious and secular communities, and these once bitter feuds are subsiding.

The marvel of the earlier split was that the strengths of the Jewish people were preserved. The tragedy was that these strengths were divided among different sectors of our people who were not able to communicate with each other. The secularists welcomed the new era and learned much from the new knowledge and wisdom, for they inherited the creative, questioning part of our heritage; new truths could not be ignored. Contributions in the arts and sciences, psychoanalysis and nuclear physics in particular, have been gifts to the world from secular Jews.

The messianic spirit of the people of Israel also passed on to the secularists—socialism, communism, bundism, Zionism—these have all been secularist movements. The Jewish labor movement, resistance

to the Nazis, and the creation of the state of Israel were mainly the accomplishments of secular Jews.

Meanwhile, the religious community preserved the inherited wisdom of our people. The Bible, the Talmud, the Midrash, the Kabbalah, the codes, would all be dead books if it were not for the faithful passing on by generations of observant Jews. The ways in which Jews have sanctified their lives, the insights into life and into the cosmos, these have been preserved. Thanks to them, there still exists a relationship between the people of Israel and the God of Israel.

Yet what has been preserved by the one has been deserted by the other. Along with the wisdom the secularists learned the arrogance of the West. Those who knew science and technology were thought to be advanced, while those who clung to "superstition" were thought to be backward. There was faith in progress and in western culture, but the Sabbath was forgotten. Parents could no longer teach their children how to greet the sunrise or the sunset. One could no longer sanctify those ordinary but potentially holy moments when one sits down to eat or gets up from the toilet or puts on one's clothing. Holiness was lost in the bargain of exchange for progress and a vision of a just world.

And yet even where holiness was preserved, the moving spirit behind it was sapped. Holiness was observed primarily in rituals and not so much in economic matters. The love of Israel, *ahavat Yisrael*, was limited to observant Jews. Hasidism, which had been an aggressive spiritual force, closed in and cut itself off from the rest of the Jewish world. Some Hasidim even opposed Zionism with more energy than they had used against Nazism, and orthodoxy as a whole became a defensive island determined to keep afloat in a sea of modernity. Rabbis taught fewer Jews and condemned more.

The Jewish world is not close to any unity of thought except the survival of the state of Israel. I, as a traditional but non-orthodox Jew, cannot see any possibility of ending the gap between orthodoxy and me, much less between more radically separated groups.

But somehow I believe that the world has changed in such a way that the secular and religious traditions can now learn from each other.

Always at the core of the Torah has been an egalitarian vision of society. The basic common experience that we are supposed to recall every day, every Shabbos, every festival, is our emerging from slavery in Egypt. This is not an idle symbol; without Yetsiat Mitzraim (the coming out of Egypt), there would be no Israel, no Sinai, no Torah—nothing. I do not mean that in the physical sense we would still be slaves to the Pharaoh, for Yetsiat Mitzraim transcends the actual event. This is why we are commanded to remember it every day of our lives.

In earliest Israelite society the vision of a just and egalitarian society was established in the institutions of the Shmittah and Jubilee years. We do not know to what extent these practices were actually followed, but the Torah insists that the land of Israel was divided evenly among families, and that this even distribution would be re-established every fifty years. The rights of an Israelite who fell into poverty and had to sell himself into slavery are protected by the laws concerning the Hebrew slave.

Implicit in the legal codes of the Torah is an egalitarianism that was revolutionary for its time. Alone among the codes of the ancient world, it stated that capital crimes are crimes against persons and never against property. And there is no distinction made between people of wealth and poverty.

For the prophets, there were two great crimes: idolatry and oppression of the poor. In fact, there seemed to be a relationship between the two—leaving the God of Israel leads to oppression of the poor. Socialism is never mentioned in the Bible or the Talmud, of course, but it seems that modern capitalism by its very nature causes one to transgress major portions of the halacha, the religious law.

One of the most important sections of the Talmud, Seder Nezikin, is devoted almost exclusively to laws pertaining to property and economic relations as is one of the four divisions of the Shulchan Aruch, Hoshen Mishpat. Yet we rarely hear of these sections from the leaders of Orthodox and Conservative Judaism, those two branches of Judaism that recognize the authority of the halacha. Lubavich Mitzvah-mobiles try to recruit Jews to put on tefillin or to light Shabbos candles but not to return lost objects or charge a fair rent to tenants. People can run corrupt nursing homes and remain honored members of the Orthodox community but they may not violate

the Sabbath. The rabbinate in Israel worries about how far one can stick one's fingers into the Western Wall, not how to deal with the inequities of society.

Several Jewish laws appear to be in opposition to modern capitalism. The rabbis of the Talmudic period were no less concerned that mitzvot concerning economic justice be observed than mitzvot between humans and our Creator.

The Torah strictly forbids a Jew from charging another Jew interest on a loan, or from paying interest. The Chief Rabbinate in Israel now permits interest to be charged and paid. This may be understood in the short run, but essentially the spirit, and possibly the letter of the law is being violated every day.

Onaah, an important law in economic dealings, says that one cannot charge or pay one-sixth more or less than the item is worth, and in the days when there was a free market, it might have been easy to decide value. One could check the cost elsewhere. But at the heart of monopoly capitalism is the elimination of the free market. Our experiences with gas prices, sugar prices, and telephone rate increases—to name a few—show that monopoly capitalism inevitably leads to unfair prices.

The halacha deals with rents and with honesty in commerce, with paying workers a fair wage and giving them decent working conditions. The basic thought is that a people living a holy way of life should not only be interested in observing and sanctifying the Sabbath and observance of ritual laws, but also in securing economic justice for all and observing all of the laws concerning relations between people.

Socialism is the kind of economic system that can co-exist with the Torah in modern technological societies like ours in America and in Israel. If we can achieve a just, socialist society while enthusiastically renewing the relationship between the people of Israel and God, then I believe the time of the Messiah will not be far off. It will be seen that the state of Israel has indeed been the first flowering of our redemption, and not just a temporary staving off of annihilation.

"Shake thyself from the dust, arise, put on the garments of thy glory, O my people! Through the son of Jesse, the Bethlehemite, draw Thou nigh unto my soul, redeem it." (From L'cha Dodi, a song to greet the Sabbath bride.)