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Messianic Troublemakers

The Past and Present Jewish Anarchism

Jesse Cohn

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*It had an amazing scent, the anarchic flower
when I was young it flashed out of books and genealogies*

*and with a hand eased by the thwack of hope
I offered it to the world and you ...*

Meir Wieseltier, "The Flower of Anarchy" (translated
from the Hebrew by Shirley Kaufman)

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It's a bright May Day in Paris, 1926, a quarter after two in the afternoon. A middle-aged watchmaker named Samuel Schwartzbard, a veteran of the French Foreign Legion and the Red Army, is waiting outside the Chartier restaurant on Rue Racine. A man with a cane, a former foreign dignitary now living in exile, steps out of the restaurant.

Schwartzbard approaches him and calls out in Ukrainian: "Are you Mr. Petliura?"

The man turns.

"Defend yourself, you bandit," shouts the watchmaker, drawing his pistol, and as Petliura raises the cane in his right hand,

Schwartzbard shoots him three times, shouting, “This for the pogroms; this for the massacres; this for the victims.”

Thus Samuel Schwartzbard (1866–1938) – Shalom, as he was also called – assassinated General Simon Petliura, former leader of the independent nation of Ukraine, who between 1919 and 1921 had ordered a wave of pogroms which had taken the lives of sixty thousand Jews, including most of Schwartzbard’s own family. Escaping to Romania at the age of nineteen, Schwartzbard had since traveled, fought, written poetry, studied, and eventually fallen in with a crowd of like-minded expatriate Jews in Paris.

There were so many of them.

Exemplary vagrants, these Hebrews (from the Akkadian word *khabiru*, “vagrant”): Alexander Berkman (1870–1936), Mollie Steimer (1897–1980), Senya Fleshin (1894–1981), Leah Feldman (1899–1993), V. M. “Voline” Eichenbaum (1882–1945), the notorious Emma Goldman herself (1869–1940). Russian Jews who had fought with Nestor Makhno’s peasant rebellion in the Ukraine; or German Jews; or American Jews of Russian-immigrant parentage deported to Red Russia, which had no use for them either – too dangerous, too quick to catch on, too Red to be trusted – then deported to Germany, then ... here. Exemplars of *galut*, of exile as a condition and even a vocation, they were habitual border-crossers, trespassers. They believed in the nation but not in the State; they knew the Spirit in their bodies but rejected the Law. Iconoclasts *par excellence* – Messianic troublemakers. Their banner was empty of images, like God – black, not blank; not a *tabula rasa* but as if all the words of denunciation, rejoicing, mourning, defiance, prophecy, had somehow been crammed together into this anti-image: the black flag. These are my spiritual ancestors: Jewish anarchists.

Anarchists are back in the news today – not only in the ubiquitous protests/uprisings/street festivals that spring up wherever the WTO, IMF, World Bank, or G-8 meet, but also up and down the scar that runs the length of the West Bank, between the Israeli

magen david and the Palestinian tricolor, a puzzling negation of all the options on offer. But few know the rich history of Jewish anarchism, and the long tradition of struggle that it represents.

For example, the “Anarchists Against The Wall” initiative, part of the latest wave in post-Zionist activism, is, ironically, born of the same world as Zionism itself. In the face-offs between young Israeli anarchists and baffled Israeli riot cops, there is an echo of the *tsimmes* between Theodor Herzl, founding father of establishment Zionism, and fiery journalist Bernard Lazare (1865–1903), an early defender of Alfred Dreyfus from his antisemitic persecutors:

“Anarchist!” Herzl shouted.

“Bourgeois!” replied Lazare.

One forgotten footnote of history is that, for all his success as an organizer, Herzl’s statist/capitalist vision didn’t animate as many of the early Jewish settlers in Palestine as did Lazare’s. “We must live once again as a nation,” Lazare declared, “or more closely like a free collectivity, but only on the condition that the collectivity not be modeled after the capitalistic and oppressor states in which we live.” Martin Buber, echoing the sentiments of his anarchist friend Gustav Landauer (1870–1919), agreed: if there is to be such a thing as a Jewish nation at all, it can’t be like a *goyische* nation, with “cannons, flags, and military decorations”; it would have to be a kind of horizontal federation of little self-organizing communities, similar to the de facto Jewish government in effect in Poland and the Pale of Settlement during the nineteenth century. A decade or so later, these little communities started to spring up in Palestine: they were called “kibbutzim.” *Svoboda!* exulted a Russian immigrant to an interviewer at Rishon-le-Zion in 1905: Freedom! “This is a land without order and authority,” he declared. “Here a man can live as he pleases.” And for the next two decades, most of the kibbutzniks agreed with him.

(Today in Israel, the language is slightly different. In the words of a leaflet written by “the Anarchist Communist Initiative” and

distributed by “Israeli National Traitor Anarchists”: *Two States for Two Nations – Two States Too Many!*)

The Jewish anarchists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries sometimes thought of themselves as dipping into the well of their most ancient traditions to discover something already there. As a girl, Emma Goldman “used to dream of becoming a Judith,” she confesses in her epic autobiography, *Living My Life*, “and visioned myself in the act cutting off Holofernes’ head to avenge the wrongs of my people.” Others had a more complicated relationship with Jewish tradition. If you search for Lazare’s name on the web, you’ll find it quoted with alarming, but unsurprising frequency on the websites of antisemitic organizations: “The general causes of antisemitism have always resided in Israel itself, and not in those who antagonized it ... everywhere up to our own days the Jew was an unsociable being. Why was he unsociable? Because he was exclusive,” he wrote in the first half of his magnum opus, *Antisemitism: Its History And Its Causes* (1896).

The Nazi types who gloat over this, however, are not quite as excited by the second half of the book, written after an enlightening interregnum, in which Lazare repudiates the false racial “science” of Jew-haters like Edouard Drumont, and immersed himself in the words of the prophets, those excellent malcontents. Now Lazare wrote that antisemitism was “one of the last, though most long lived, manifestations of that old spirit of reaction and narrow conservatism, which is vainly attempting to arrest the onward movement of the Revolution.” Conversely, Lazare discovers a “revolutionary spirit” in Judaism itself, a tendency implicit in the this-worldly character of the tradition. Since, Lazare argues, “the Jew does not believe in the Beyond,” Jews “cannot accept unhappiness and injustice in earthly life in the name of a future reward” and have therefore continually “sought justice” in the here and now.

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your hands are full of blood.” Without justice and compassion – the ideals and values that bound the people together in the desert – ritual is empty. This is what a Jewish anarchist like Yanofsky was reminding his cousins when he wrote angrily in the *Arbeter Fraint* of the gross spectacle of Yom Kippur services attended by wealthier Jews “overdressed and overfed in seats set aside for the *sheine leit*” while poor Jews “pressed together by the door, hungry and ill-clad with no prospects of a sumptuous fast-breaking meal to return to.” I can hear an echo of Isaiah: “Bring no more vain oblations ... seek judgment, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow”!

So too in the lives of other Jewish anarchists – David Edelshtadt (1866–1892), sweatshop poet; Abraham Frumkin (1873–1940), itinerant writer and translator; Erich Mühsam (1878–1934) and Carl Einstein (1885–1940), committed artists; Manya Shohat (1880–1961), rebel without borders; Senna Hoy (1882–1914) and Paul Goodman (1911–1972), anti-war activists and defenders of homosexual rights; Etta Federn, founder of the revolutionary womens’ organization, *Mujeres Libres* (1883–1951); Rose Pesotta (1896–1965), tireless labor organizer – these men and women spent their lives fighting for civil liberties, womens’ rights, and for the rights of working people, gay liberation, ecology, peace and freedom; they endured terror, jail, separation from their loved ones, exile, and hardships beyond measure. They took care of people – as organizers, nurses, teachers, lovers, fighters, peacemakers, friends – and never submitted to the will of arbitrarily established authorities. For these activists, the coming of the Messiah was not something to pray for but to embody; the day of redemption was not something to await but to live. In heresy, in protest, they kept faith with Israel.

(No opiate of the masses for us, thanks.) Indeed, Lazare believed, “anarchy” was implicit in the First Commandment: if we are to have no other master before God, “What authority can, then, prevail by the side of the divine authority? All government, whatever it be, is evil since it tends to take the place of the government of God; it must be fought against.”

Still, there was a strong anti-traditional streak among Jewish anarchists, as in the tradition of the anarchist Yom Kippur Ball. In the late 1880s, “The Pioneers of Freedom,” a Jewish anarchist club based in Manhattan’s Lower East Side, passed out mock *Avinu Malkenus* written in Yiddish and partied through Kol Nidre. In 1889, they invited all Jewish workers to join the party – party with a lower-case “p” – in the Clarendon Hall, causing a “near-riot” when the proprietor tried to call it off at the last minute. In 1890, in Brooklyn, they threw a “Grand Yom Kippur Ball with theater” on Yom Kippur, advertising their celebration as “Arranged with the consent of all new rabbis of Liberty ... Kol Nidre, music, dancing, buffet; Marseillaise and other hymns.” This spectacle, which more than once provoked actual street skirmishes between believers and non-believers, was duplicated in London and in Philadelphia. Some tales even tell that in the heyday of the anarchist kibbutzim, a group held a Yom Kippur march to the Wailing Wall to eat ham sandwiches.

The rabbinic establishment fought back. For example, in 1888, the religious leaders of London’s Jewish community declared war on the Yiddish-language anarchist newspaper, the *Arbeter Fraint*. According to William J. Fishman’s exquisite history, *East End Jewish Radicals, 1875–1914*, “the back page of every issue carried the appeal in heavy type: ‘Workers, do your duty. Spread the *Arbeter Fraint!*’” But someone aligned with the rabbinic authorities bribed the typesetter, and issue number 26 appeared with the wording of the ad slightly changed: “Workers, do your duty. *Destroy* the *Arbeter Fraint!*” The typesetter promptly disappeared, fleeing the wrath of the editors; then, after that, they bribed the printer. Anarchists were as active in their reaction as in their provocation. When

the *Arbeter Fraind* started up again, it featured a full-bore attack on orthodox Judaism, including parodies of the Passover seder and Lamentations for good measure.

(Truces were sometimes declared, though; on at least one occasion, in 1890, the Russian-Jewish anarchists of Philadelphia actually called off their Yom Kippur Ball – which was to feature “pork-eating” – out of respect for the role played by the city’s orthodox rabbi, Sabato Morais, in mediating a crucial strike of cloakmakers that year.)

In London in the 1890s, Rudolf Rocker – a German gentile who had fallen in love with a young Jewish labor militant, taught himself Yiddish, and eventually found himself editor of the *Arbeter Fraind*, the de facto political leader of the East End Jewish working class – was asked to comment on the habit of some Jewish anarchists of demonstrating “provocative behaviour” in front of the Brick Lane synagogue on Shabbat. He answered that “the place for believers was the house of worship, and the place for non-believers was the radical meeting.” This, if you think about it, is a peculiarly rabbinical sort of exchange – it’s just the sort of question young men used to ask rabbis to answer: Rabbi, are the comrades right to demonstrate in front of the synagogue on the Sabbath? And indeed, Rocker functioned as a kind of rabbi, preaching revolutionary ardor and connecting with individuals in the movement. If Marxism was all about systems – economic mechanisms, stages of history, dialectical laws – anarchism was more prophetic in nature: it came from moral indignation, not sociological analysis. As a result, anarchism differed from Marxism in its regard for the individual. From Marx to Trotsky, the prescription had always been the same: assimilation into one grand, generic working-class identity and participation in the one grand, generic workers’ revolution. But Lazare despaired of “the ending of ... all differences in the world.” He wrote, “I am happy about every imponderable and ineffable thing that brings about exclusive bonds, unities, and also differentiations within humanity.”

mothers for the same reason that they rejected the established institutions of power and money – because they felt it was irrational. They believed that rational persuasion and education could overcome the irrational reign of force, and they had no conception of faculties that might lie beyond reason. At the same time, as rationalists, they yearned for a great ideal to embrace, for what even Noam Chomsky (a rationalist’s rationalist) has called a “spiritual transformation.” They were moralists, deeply motivated by ethical questions, incensed by injustices. They carried a very Jewish sense of righteousness, and rejected the idea of a life organized in pyramids of power and status, with a few Pharaohs on the top and masses of slaves underneath.

Landauer, sometimes called a “religious atheist,” embodies this seeming contradiction. Although he denied the existence of a God “beyond the earth and above the world,” Landauer also defined anarchism as a religion, a kind of spiritual mission, an earthly messianism. What Landauer calls “spirit” is not a supernatural force, but as the shared feelings, ideals, values, language, and beliefs that unify individuals into a community. The State only exists, he says, because the spirit that creates community has weakened: the community has fractured and turned against itself. Thus, Landauer speaks of revolution in spiritual terms, calling it redemption, using Jewish religious language to describe the need for social and political transformation.

When the Jewish anarchists of Brooklyn defied the call to atonement, calling themselves “the new rabbis of liberty,” they were behaving like the prophets, who themselves were holy teachers of liberty: they were being iconoclasts, rejecting the established religious cult as a hollow ritual, just like the prophets did. It’s Isaiah who thunders that the official ritual of Judaism has become an empty show, a hollow repetition of formal gestures, empty of spirit: “To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices unto me? saith the Lord ... when ye spread forth your hands, I will hide mine eyes from you; yea, when ye make many prayers, I will not hear; [for]

fundamentalist zealots will see attendance go down in mosque and synagogue alike.

Easier said than done – but it happened in the kibbutzim. Fractious, hard-headed, kibbutznikim managed to get it together anyway. As one sociologist of the kibbutz has noted, having done away with “any objective foundation for the traditional hostile relations” – dog-eat-dog marketplace competition, hierarchies of power and status, the war of each against all – the kibbutzniks found they had lost any need for the state. As a result, “aggressive manifestations are restrained, and the collective conscience becomes the primary force determining man’s way of life ... Life is conducted without the need for formal sanctions: work is done without a supervisor, morality does not need to be defended by priests, judges and police-men. Mutual aid is transformed into the highest law of life, and cooperation between comrades is the only guarantee ...” These folks had indeed translated Kropotkin’s anarchist vision into Hebrew.

Kibbutzim are, to an extent, exercises in utopia, and so it is no surprise that the discourse of Jewish anarchism frequently takes a spiritual, messianic turn, as in Gershom Scholem’s Kabbalistically-informed reading of anarchism as bringing about messianic consciousness. Shortly after leading Jewish sweatshop workers to victory in a 1912 strike, as Rudolf Rocker later recalled,

as I was walking along a narrow Whitechapel street, an old Jew with a long white beard stopped me outside his house, and said: “May God bless you! You helped my children in their need. You are not a Jew, but you are a man!” This old man lived in a world completely different from mine. But the memory of the gratitude that shone in those eyes has remained with me all these years.

Most Jewish anarchists, like the gentile Rocker, were staunchly atheist; they rejected the established religion of their fathers and

Anarchists also differed from Marxists on the question of ends and means. For anarchists, the question of ethics, of how one ought to live, was not something to be postponed until “after the revolution,” the Marxist equivalent of the Christian afterlife; it had to be addressed here and now, in the very process of creating a revolution. “There is no greater fallacy than the belief that aims and purposes are one thing, while methods and tactics are another,” wrote Goldman in the wake of her expulsion from Russia. “To divest one’s methods of ethical concepts means to sink into the depths of utter demoralization.”

Anarchist tactics – bombings, sabotage, assassinations – today seem redolent of terrorism. But this is more image than substance. True, as hot-blooded young militants, Goldman and Berkman plotted an attempt on the life of steel magnate Henry Clay Frick on behalf of the striking workers murdered by his Pinkerton goons at Homestead, Pennsylvania. It didn’t work: Frick lived, and Berkman went to prison. Other anarchists practicing “propaganda by the deed” were more successful than Berkman – Schwartzbard’s slaying of Petliura was only one of many examples (incredibly, the jury acquitted him out of sympathy!) – but this period of bombings and stabbings largely exhausted itself by 1894, when anarchists woke up and realized that all these sporadic, individual acts of violence weren’t accomplishing anything and only made the State stronger in the ensuing waves of judicial crackdowns and police reprisals. In fact, a favorite tactic of the powers that be, then and now, has been to manufacture “anarchist” bombs, bomb-plots, and even bombers, to terrify ordinary people. (Goldman’s comrades suspected that Leon Czolgosz, the self-proclaimed anarchist who shot President McKinley in 1901, was a police spy.) Even Berkman, in his later years, declared that he was no longer generally “in favor of terroristic tactics, except under very exceptional circumstances” – Nazi Germany being one of those circumstances.

Consequently, from 1894 on, anarchists emphasized positive, constructive activism, organizing clubs, neighborhoods, workers’

cooperatives, experimental schools, collective farms, mutual-aid societies, and anarcho-syndicalist labor unions. Far from being allergic to organization, anarchists advocated a kind of organization “from below,” in the words of Voline. They sought to replace coercive institutions with cooperative ones, to find ways of building a working society in a democratic, egalitarian, and decentralized fashion, using frequent face-to-face meetings of small groups to make decisions – rather like a kibbutz.

Nonviolent resistance to evil is always hard, and in a situation where even peaceful assemblies can be met with brutal repression – as in Homestead or Budrus (where Gil Na’amati, an anarchist and kibbutznik, was shot by IDF forces in 2003) – it may become all but impossible. Still, Landauer spoke for many when he wrote in 1907: One can throw away a chair and destroy a pane of glass; but ... [only] idle talkers ... regard the state as such a thing or as a fetish that one can smash in order to destroy it. The state is a condition, a certain relationship among human beings, a mode of behavior between men; we destroy it by contracting other relationships, by behaving differently toward one another ... We are the state, and we shall continue to be the state until we have created the institutions that form a real community and society of men. We are the state. We do it to ourselves, all of us, all the time, by obeying much and resisting little, by settling for a piece of the pie in exchange for our dignity, by accepting subordination in exchange for domination over the even less fortunate. If this ugly tangle of social relationships is “the state,” then all the gaudy regicides in the world can’t buy us our freedom. Revolution, these anarchists argued, begins in our hearts and in the space between us. Among the anarchist books translated into Hebrew and circulated in Jewish Palestine by the 1920s was Peter Kropotkin’s *Mutual Aid*, which argued that the dominant concept of Western politics, Thomas Hobbes’s vision

of the “state of nature” as a “war of all against all,” was a scarecrow designed to justify the existence of the authoritarian state. Just as “natural” as competition for survival, Kropotkin argued, was cooperation for survival. Anarchism, in Goldman’s words, it is “the philosophy of a new social order based on liberty unrestricted by man-made law; the theory that all forms of government rest on violence, and are therefore wrong and harmful, as well as unnecessary.”

Unnecessary? Hard to tell that to a Jewish mother in Haifa or a Palestinian mother in Jenin. In the absence of a Hobbesian state with a legal monopoly on violence, what protects us from those beasts, our neighbors? With all the fences and checkpoints gone, what’s to keep *them* from getting at *us*?

From an anarchist perspective, the hard truth is that aggressive forms of Arab nationalism, like the aggressive Jewish nationalism personified by Ariel Sharon, is rooted in an entire system of social relations that will have to be undone and reconstructed. “Anti-semitism,” (and by extension, the anti-arabism of right-wing Jewish zealots) predicted Voline on the eve of the Shoah,:

will disappear when the vast human masses, at the end of their sufferings and misfortunes, and at the price of atrocious experiences, comprehend, finally, that humanity must, on pain of death, organize its life on the sane and natural basis of cooperation, material and moral, fraternal and just, that is to say, on a truly human basis.

In today’s terms, take away the endless supply of recruits – young men with no money, no security, no water, no jobs, no hope – and the suicide bombings will eventually stop. Stop the flow of fear and money into the politico-religio-economic machine, and the Likudniks will be out of a job. Refocus everyone’s attention on arranging the real business of life, the common good, and the