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On Jewish Anarchism

Anarchist Tendencies in Judaism

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“God’s people, the people that received the revelation before Christ came on earth, that is most universally spread on the surface of the earth, has always seen that the Christian teachings of the Church fathers were incomplete, has always proclaimed that a great age would come called “kingdom of the Messiah” with the religious teachings presented as fully as possible, with the spiritual and worldly powers in balance and the human race united in one single religion and one single organisation... The golden age of the human race is not behind us but before us. It is to be sought in the perfection of the social order. Our fathers haven’t seen it but our sons will see it one day. For them we ought to level the road”

(Henri de Saint-Simon, *Le nouveau christianisme*).

As a socialist free from antisemitic sentiments Saint-Simon was probably one of the first to formulate the hypothesis that

socialism affirms values claimed as its own by the best Jewish tradition.

The modern revolutionary utopias, especially those of the libertarian and anti-authoritarian kind, with their belief in a forthcoming liberating revolution, originate from two different psychological attitudes. One is the critical examination of the essence of human life and of the substance of society; the other is the longing for a more genuine social life, for a human society based on love, mutual understanding and mutual aid. The former attitude springs from Western thinking, the latter from Judaism. The prophets were the first to transform this longing into a “political” message of equality and justice, the Hassidic Jews were the last collectivity trying to live this message as something absolute. At certain times expressed openly, at other times concealed / hidden the longing has never disappeared. When the Jews left the ghettos and joined the world society the two attitudes merged into the teachings and the apostolate of modern socialism.

Martin Buber, the famous Jewish philosopher who was inspired by a strong “religious anarchism”, defined Judaism as a synthesis of three basic concepts: the idea of unity, the idea of action and the idea of a future. The idea of unity takes shape in the idea of transcendental unity. God, creator of the world, is one and unique, and he alone must be loved as essence of all ethical perfection. The knowledge of God teaches us what man should be, the divine tells us what the human is. The basic teachings of Judaism as a whole are summarised in the prohibition of idolatry, which the prophets saw as the origin of all evil. As God is one, so, the morals as laid down in the Torah, the civil and social law of the people of Israel, must be one. Equality and justice are the basis of the law derived from Leviticus [one of the five books of which consists the Torah]. Equality involves recognition of the basic rights of man (the right to live, to own, to work, of asylum, of rest and of freedom), whereas justice

a despotic power. Singing, dancing, sacred gestures have become ceremonial acts and a reactionary spirit has taken the place of democracy. But in spite of the abuses and the degeneration of the movement, writes Gershom Scholem, the chassidim “as mystic moralists have found the way to social organising”, which is their main contribution.

I would like to end my essay with a chassidic parable of rabbi Uri from Strelice that seems most appropriate: “When I was still a boy and my teacher started teaching me how to read, he once showed me two minute letters in the book of prayers, which looked like square dots, saying: “Uri, do you see those two letters one beside the other? They are the monogramme of the name of God, and each time they appear together in a prayer you should pronounce the name of God, although the name is not written in full”. I read on together with the teacher till we found the two letters at the end of a sentence. They were also two square dots, yet not beside each other but over each other. I thought they were the monogramme of God and pronounced his name. But the teacher said: “No, no, Uri, this sign doesn’t indicate the name of God. Only where the dots are beside each other, where each sees the other as a friend equal to himself is the name of God; where one dot is under the other and the other dot is over the former, there the name of God is not”...”.

ought to translate itself into the acceptance of the obligations towards the weakest and the poorest.

The second idea is the idea of action. In its essence Judaism doesn’t demand theological adhesion but practical compliance with the law, from the oldest times onwards action was the core of Jewish religiosity. In all the books of the Torah there is very little talk of belief and much more of action. Every action, even the most insignificant one, is somehow linked to the divine and gets universal significance and importance. Every joint action becomes exemplary, as says a Chassidic saying: “When I went to see the rabbi that was not to hear his teachings but to see how he unlaces and laces his felt shoes”. The right praxis is important, important is to live in accordance with the Torah, to behave in accordance with the Torah in daily life. Action in the shape of work and study ought to aim at a transformation of reality towards a more just future. Max Weber showed already that this aspect of Judaism has a revolutionary potential when he tried to find an answer to the question why so many Jews adhered to revolutionary movements. According to the Torah the world is neither eternal nor unchangeable but created, and its orders are the product of actions of humans; it is a historical realisation aimed at making room again for a situation really wanted by God. As Weber observed, the whole attitude of Judaism in respect of life is marked by the idea “of a future political and social revolution guided by God”.

The third basic idea of Judaism is the idea of future. Jews should keep the future in mind. In this respect a traditional Jewish comment on the passage in Genesis (21.9 seq.) in which Sarah, Abrahams wife, chases Ishmael from the house of his father together with his mother Hagar [a maid of Abraham with whom he had got Ishmael]. The teachers have wondered how Sarah could behave so cruelly towards Hagar and her son. One of the answers has been that Ishmael “was playing”, as the word *metzacheq* is generally translated, with an explicit sexual connotation. In reality, the word *metzacheq* has the root *tzadi chet*

kof, which means ,to laugh' and is also in the name Yitzchaq. One of the possible interpretations then is that Ishmael wasn't playing but "laughed very loudly"; morphologically the word metzacheq is an intensive form of the verb, whereas Yitzchaq, on the other hand, is rather the one who "will laugh". Sarah shows her prophetic power here, as she understands before Abraham that somebody who is able to laugh loudly in a world so full of injustice and grief doesn't deserve to be his heir. But somebody who acts on something and in such a way that he can laugh one day in a more just world deserves to be his heir.

This orientation towards the future is connected with the hope of redemption in the messianic times. From the times of the Torah till the times of the chassidic fervours the messiah and the future in which the perfect life in truth and the unity of the world would have become reality, with the separation between good and evil abolished by the definitive annihilation of sin, were the final existential aspiration of the Jewish people. In Jewish as opposed to Christian thinking, the messiah will not bring an apocalypse or a horrible end of the world but the full realisation of man, also as a social being. The coming of the messiah will not take place in the other world but is being prepared in history. In the Jewish, as opposed to the Christian, thinking about the messiah, the redemption, writes Gershom Scholem, will be kind of "a public historical event in the Jewish community, a visible event unthinkable without this exterior manifestation. Christianity sees the redemption as a spiritual, invisible event that takes place in the soul, in the personal world of the individual human being requiring an interior transformation not necessarily accompanied by changes in the course of history... What Judaism has irrevocably placed at the end of history, as the event in which culminate the exterior events has become the centre of history in Christianity".

Man is the main agent of redemption, his actions alone which will speed up the coming of the messiah: "If all Israel respected the sabbath if only one single day, the Messiah

an elite and the thinking became dogmatic and ideological. The changes introduced by chassidism can be seen in the following story, that can be considered a paradigm of the cultural and existential revolution brought by chassidism: "A disciple sees his teacher, who asks him: "What have you studied?" The disciple answers: "I've gone three times through the Talmud", whereupon the Teacher says: "But has the Talmud gone through you?". Study is a political act because the freedom to interpret is also a freedom that affects life. In this sense study is revolution, an attitude of contestating tradition and the main obstacle to accepting the stereotypes of ideological thinking. But – a point on which rabbi Nachman insists repeatedly – one should not innovate with new laws that reinforce institutional thinking. Integrative laws are rejected because they strengthen the institutions and the custodians of ideologies instead of weakening and destroying them. As the individual affirms himself continuously by interpretation his task is not to repeat or to paraphrase verses [e.g. of the Torah] but, as Emmanuel Lévinas would say, to go beyond them, to go from the text to one's own text. This is, so to say, the whole political dimension and function of chassidism, its anti-ideological and revolutionary aspect "in respect of an order in which nothing, neither words, nor people, nor people's bodies or looks are allowed to communicate directly, but as values they have to go through models that generate and reproduce them in total "estrangement" of each other... Revolution is wherever there is a beginning of a change that makes models meaningless – whether that change is a minute change in appearances, a change of syllables in a poem, or the fact that thousands of people talk to each other in an insurgent city".

Chassidism showed again what Jewishness is basically about: lived religiosity, a religion of doing free from precepts. Life, man, community became supreme again in Jewish life. Unfortunately, this libertarian movement has turned into

sign of concrete love for all human beings including those at the bottom, the am ha-aretz, the simple minds and the sinners. Rabbi Jakob Jizchak from Lublin [Poland] used to say: "I prefer a sinner admitting he is one to a saint conscious of his saintness. The sinner admitting the truth passes his days in Truth. And Truth is God. So, the sinner lives in God too. But he who thinks he is a perfect saint lives in untruth, and God hates untruth. Nobody is perfect".

The chassidic word is also an ethics of the word, the rejection of the instituted word, of what has been said already. The chassidic word laughs, dances, it's joy, the opposite of the prefabricated language of the cliché, of publicity, of politics. The reasonings of the institutions and of public opinion correspond to prearranged models. They are incomprehensible because the institutions are committed to creating opinions, i.e. non-words and non-thoughts. As Marc-Alain Ouaknin says: chassidism is against the "we-all-say-the-same-and-together". Chassidic people are people of the Chidush, of the new, they have the task to seek freedom, to invent other forms of life. Chassidism is doing things every day but not just repeating the things done the previous day, in the language of rabbi Nachman: "it's forbidden to be old".

Historically, chassidism was a critique of the official rabbinic institutions of the time but this criticism can very well be extended to institutions in general. But the greatest contribution of chassidism is the democratisation of study, the possibility for everybody to start interpreting. As says rabbi Nachman: "a simple person who takes the time to read, to look at the words of the Torah can also see new things, new meanings; if one looks at the sayings intensely they begin to "make light", to blend, to combine (Yoma, 73b) and one can see new combinations of sayings, new words, things of which one hasn't thought at all. All this is also possible for simple people, without effort...".

This subjective relationship with the text existed already in the talmudic tradition but later on study became reserved for

would come immediately, for it is written: "To-day if you were to listen to his voice". The mentioning of the sabbath, the day devoted to rest, is not accidental. As say the teachers, the sabbath is "an example of the future world", an anticipation of the messianic times when man will no longer be another man's slave and be freed from daily alienation. The sabbatical year when all activities stop is also an announcement of liberation and of the exemption from daily work. The jubilee is also a revolutionary institution, as can be read in Leviticus. It restores social equality every fifty years by the redistribution of property. On this subject Gustav Landauer wrote: "Uprising as basic law, change and overthrow as a rule for all times... that was the greatness and the holiness of the mosaic social order. We need that again: new rules and a spirit of change that does not fix things and laws definitively but declares itself permanent. The revolution should become part of our social order, the basic rule of our basic law".

The election of the Jewish people involves in the first place the obligation for every Jew to take part in the anticipation of the day of redemption. The coming of the messiah on earth depends on the free efforts of individual human beings during their life. Not by chance did rabbi Nachman from Breslau, one of the most fascinating and original Chassidic teachers, conclude: "To become more perfect man should renew himself day after day". What is needed is a permanent mental revolution. Those who live to-day must work for social justice, as in the past those living then had to work for it in their time and as those living in the future will have to work for in the future: the coming of social justice depends on them.. As is said explicitly in the texts of the prophets, this "revolution" will take an international character and will be a universal movement involving all the States of the world. This shows another difference between Jewish and Christian messianism. Christianity has eliminated the political element of the redemption maintaining only the spiritual element. Christianity, writes rabbi

Elia Benamozegh, “speaks of ascetic morals, of an ascetic kingdom and of an entirely spiritual messianism; instead of political liberty it has spiritual freedom for its followers”.

In Jewish messianism, religious as well as political, two currents can be distinguished: a restaurative current and a utopical one. The restaurative current expects the return and the resurrection of a situation of the past but that has always been seen as an ideal in the collective imagination of the Jewish people. The redemption was seen as the return to an ideal state of the past, a lost golden age. The utopical current looked forward to a situation that has never existed and was nurtured by the dream of a radical overthrow of all that existed, of the coming of an absolutely new world, of the “the unheard of”, of “something that has never been, the peak of bliss”, as writes Walter Benjamin. Although each other’s opposites these two currents have always gone together, both can be tracked in the historical manifestations and ideologies of messianism and in almost all modern revolutionary currents. This combination of restoration and utopia, as stresses Michael Löwy, can also be found in libertarian thinking, where “revolutionary utopia goes always hand in hand with a profound nostalgia of forms of the precapitalist past, of the traditional peasant community or of the guilds..”.

Isaac Luria’s concept of the Tikkun, reparation or reintegration, is the most important example of this duality in Jewish messianism. Isaac Luria and his disciples of the Safed school in Galilea had formulated (end 16th century) a cosmologic doctrine directly linked to the belief in the messiah. According to this theory God had voluntarily limited or contracted his powers (tzimtzum) when creating the world. The imperfectness of the world was a symptom of the disintegration of the universe resulting from the Shevirat ha-kelim, the “breaking of the pots”, which had been too weak to contain the divine light. The scattered fragments of the pots had kept small sparks of the divine light, however, and are a harmful residue for the world. From

In chassidism, Martin Buber wrote, every human being represents something new that has never existed before. Everybody has to recognise that this particular person is unique in this world because of his particular character and that there has never been somebody like him, for, if there had already been somebody like him there would have been no need for him to come in the world. Every person is a new creature in this world called to fill it with his particularity. Every person has the task to realise his unique, unprecedented, never replicated possibilities, not to repeat things done already by others be they the greatest of all. Rabbi Sussja from Hanipol illustrated this idea shortly before his death saying “In the other world I won’t be asked: “Why haven’t you become Moses?” but I will be asked: “Why haven’t you become Sussja?”” . The difference between the kabbalah of Isaac Luria and the chassidic doctrine is the difference between the ontological-metaphysical and the psychological and personal. In this way the kabbalistic concepts became meaningful for individual life and accessible for everybody without distinction, whereas in rabbinic Judaism the kabbalah was reserved for the few elected, in Hebrew yechidei seguld, who had fulfilled the strict requirements for access to the esoteric aspect of the Torah considered extremely dangerous.

Chassidic mysticism seeks to make man take part in the divine life become history and to shorten the distances between heaven and earth. For God who has put limits upon himself in order to make room for the created man has the task to free the sparks hidden in all aspects of life. In this way simple and insignificant acts also become fundamental and universally relevant. Chassidism puts an ethics of the deed into practice that has to do with the human faculty to start things, to undertake things, to take initiatives. Chassidic action is the opposite of repetition, of lack of innovation. Chassidic ethics of the deed is interruption of the flow of life that leads to death, it’s continuous being born anew. It is freedom. Because we were born we are doomed to be free. Life ought, moreover, to be lived in the

In the beginning of the 18th century, while the wind of sabbatian and frankian messianic madness was still blowing, chassidismo started developing among the Jewish masses of Poland and Russia. This popular religious movement was started by Israel ben Eliezer (around 1700–1760), better known as Baal Shem Tov (master of the good name) or Besht (by the initials of this name). While not significantly innovating doctrine and writings, chassidism was, nevertheless, an explosion of creative religious energy against the old values that had become meaningless. The following story characterises chassidism: “Baal Shem Tov had changed the traditional order of prayers. Some protested: “This order has been established by the great men of our generation”. To which Baal Shem answered: “And who has said that those great men have gone to paradise?”. With study and erudition not considered central chassidism took an anti-elitist character and made the simplest acts of daily life holy, faith became democratic and popular, libertarian, a gigantic social revolution. The great importance attributed to intention, even if remained ineffective, and the fact that evil and sins were attributed some holiness, freed the humble and the weak from all guilt and allowed them to have their imperfections. There is chassidism, writes Marc-Alain Ouaknin, “when a society remembers that it is not enough to be but that we have to exist, that, if we want to live really, we must continually find new ways of life, invent ourselves continually..”.

In chassidism each person becomes the redeemer of the world which he is himself, that is one of the aspects of the great chassidic revolution. Man leaves the collective anonymity and becomes a subject in the strongest sense of this word. We may quote here a famous saying of rabbi Menachem Mendel from Kotzk: “If I am I because you are you, then I am not I and you are not you. But if I am I because I am I and you are you because you are you, then am I I and you are you”.

them come the Qelippot, the dark forces of evil. Man and Israel as a whole have the mission to lift the scattered holy sparks and to free the divine light from the domination of the Qelippot, which, historically, represent tyranny and oppression. This process is called Tikkun and all should contribute to it. The Tikkun will restore the ideal order disturbed by the “breaking of the pots” and Adam’s subsequent fall. Humankind has the task to repair the pots, to eliminate evil, to bring the absolutely perfect back, to restore the proper nature of things and to put them back in their [right] place.

In this context reparation and redemption become identical notions. When the world will have been repaired it is impossible that there will be no redemption [i.e. that it will not be free], as redemption represents the perfect state of the world, a harmonised world in which everything will be in its right place. The Tikkun leaves the purely mystical domain and drops its cosmic and ontological dimension becoming messianic and political. The Tikkun world, as rightly observes Michael Löwy, is thus the utopian world of the messianic reform, of the elimination of impurity, of the disappearance of evil.

Isaac Luria’s kabbalah, which blended old mysticism and traditional political messianism led to an explosive manifestation of the forces that created it and made it successful. The hope of an imminent redemption putting an end to sufferings and injustices found a dramatic historic and spiritual expression in the adventure of Sabbatai Zwi (1626–1676). Sabbatai Zwi was born in Smyrna [now Turkey] on the 9th of [the Jewish month] Av, the day on which the destruction of the First and the Second Temple is commemorated. Already as a young man he had started studying the kabbalah. In Jerusalem, where he had moved in 1662, his disciple Nathan from Gaza persuaded him that he was the messiah. The news that the messiah had come spread like wildfire and caused great excitement among Jews all over Europe. A true mass movement inspired by him developed upsetting life in the whole Jewish world. Sabbatianism,

“the most polyedric heretical movement of Jewish mysticism”, according to Scholem, became a definitive theoretical system thanks to Nathan from Gaza, who, on the basis of Isaac Luria’s kabbalah and the cosmogonic concepts of those days, imagined that the messiah suffered unspeakable pains when he set out to restore the initial harmony on earth. In order to overcome evil from the inside the redeemer had also to become impure so as to be able to purify the impure and to defeat the cosmic root of evil. Sabbatai Zwi’s anti-law behaviour – including his apostasy: in 1666 he converted to Islam – were seen by his followers as a descent into the abyss of negativity which would enable him to free the particles of divine light imprisoned in the dark. Animated by a strong religious nihilism the Sabbatianists interpreted the talmudic saying “an intentional transgression weighs more than the unintended fulfilment of a precept” (Nazir, 23b) in line with their conceptions and held that a sinner is good in God’s eyes because impurity brings the spirit to holiness. The doctrine of the holiness of sin was not limited to the violation of certain precepts but extended to all the prohibitions of the Torah, and the followers of the movement formulated the following law violating blessing: “Blessed be You, Lord our God, who allow what is prohibited”. Some went so far as to affirm that henceforth everything was pure because Sabbatai Zwi had definitively defeated evil.

In the course of the 18th century frankism, the movement developed around the person of Jacob Frank (1726–1791) took over the teachings of Sabbatai Zwi and developed them further. Jacob ben Judah Leib, as his real name was, was born near the border separating Podolia and Bucovina [now parts of Rumania]. He was a nihilist of a rare authenticity. Initiated into the secrets of Sabbatianism he became a guide for numerous followers and finally claimed an almost divine status as possessor of Sabbatai Zwi’s soul. He proclaimed that man should free himself from all laws, all conventions and all religions. Authentic life meant rejecting all religious acts and every posi-

tive belief. Franks belief in the redeeming force of destruction knew no borders: “Wherever Adam came a city was built, but where I go everything will be destroyed, because I have come only to destroy everything – but whatever I will build, will last forever”, one can read in the collection of aforisms which he published under the title *Sliwa Panskie* (Words of the Lord). This catastrophic-revolutionary view of emancipation is also clear in Mikhail Bakunin’s saying “a passion for destruction is a creative passion”. A merciless war was to be waged against the inadequate laws that govern the world: “And I say to you that all the fighters should be without religion. That is to say, they will have to conquer freedom by their own forces..”. This fight will affect all the layers of the soul that descends into the abysses in order to ascend: “In order to go up one must first go down. Nobody can climb over a mountain without having been at its foot. We have to go down to the lowest point if we want to attain the infinite. That is the mystical principle of Jacob’s Ladder which I have seen and which has the shape of a V. I have not come into this world to lift you up but to throw you into the abyss. You can’t go lower. We can’t get out of there by our own forces alone because the Lord alone can pull us from those depths by the power of his arm”. Man can only become truly free when he has been able to live a truly anarchic life: “The place where we go doesn’t allow any law because all laws come from death whereas we go to life”. How can one again think of Bakunin and his famous formula: “I don’t believe in constitutions or laws... We need something different. Passion, vitality, a new world without laws and, so, truly free”? The expectations and teachings of these last sabbatianists played a decisive role in the opening up of their souls to the apocalyptic wind of the time. They then came close to the spirit of the Haskalah, the Jewish enlightenment, and when the fire of faith weakened they became maskilim, enlightened people, religious reformers, indifferent prophets and true sceptics.