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State Versus Commune in Israel

Nathan Chofshi

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1950

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From 'Resistance', April 1951, New York City

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Nahalal
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Excerpts from Nathan Chofshi's letter to 'Jewish Newsletter' of New York (1959)

"If you really wanted to know what happened, we old Jewish settlers in Palestine who witnessed the fight could tell you how and in what manner we Jews forced the Arabs to leave cities and villages... Some of them were driven out by force of arms; others were made to leave by deceit, lying and false promises. It is enough to cite the cities of Jaffa, Lydda, Ramleh, Beer Sheba, and Acre from among numberless others...

Here we have people who lived on its own land for 1,300 years. We came and turned the native Arabs into tragic refugees. And still we dare to slander and malign them, to besmirch their name. Instead of being deeply ashamed of what we did and of trying to undo some of the evil we committed, by helping those unfortunate refugees, we justify our terrible acts and even attempt to glorify them."

Do they know that there had existed great possibilities for Jewish-Arab understanding as well as for a large Jewish immigration, and that it was only the state-mania which destroyed these possibilities and led to war with all its attendant fears and dangers?

Instead of a large and peaceful immigration based on Jewish-Arab understanding, as we had proposed with the agreement of some prominent Arab leaders, we now have a mass-immigration exploiting the war-horror, occupying the villages and towns of the hundreds of thousands of Arabs who fled from their homes under fire, filled with fear of the victorious Jewish forces, a fear based on the horrible experiences under the victors. And the state is pleased: homes, business, properties, fields and gardens cultivated by generations of Arabs, all came as a mighty and blessed inheritance to the Jews.

The Jewish refugee of yesterday became the heir of the Arab refugee of today who in masses is suffering from homelessness, hunger, cold. Is the Jewish anarchist indifferent because we are dealing here “only” with Arab refugees and not with Jewish refugees?

Let me close here altho there is still much to say, but let me at least suggest to our anarchists that they consider more carefully the very basic question of future development of the forms of free life in the face of increasing centralization and concentration by our Israel government. Daily the government penetrates ever more deeply into the lives of people and groups, in a manner which is as distant from libertarian socialism as is east from west. We would bless every expression of help for the freely creative life in Israel, but we cannot overemphasize the abyss which exists between nation and state, between free and creative men and governmental coercion.

Must mature Jewish anarchists, at this late date, start memorizing their ABC's?

—Nathan Chofshi

We believe that the following “open letter”, published in FREIE ARBEITER STIMME, despite its concern with a particular discussion in the Jewish press, will be of interest to our readers for its picture of the Israeli State.

—Resistance.

After a long interval I have again begun to receive the “Freie Arbeiter Stimme” and was pained to discover a number of very strange reactions and news items regarding the State of Israel. A few examples will suffice.

In an article dealing with our Parliament (Knesseth), the author, (perhaps Nisenson; the issue is not at hand) writes that our State of Israel is being governed in the spirit of the Prophets. In the issue of 11 November, there is a report on a discussion held by a group of Los Angeles anarchists regarding the spirit of the Israeli-State. The veteran anarchist, Comrade Isguir, maintained that “inasmuch as a great part of the anarchist ideal has been realized in the life of Israel, he therefore sees no contradiction between his ideal which is still that of ‘libertarian socialism’ on the one hand, and the work of the Histadruth (labor federation) and of *the state of Israel* on the other.”

The same issue reports discussions amongst Jewish anarchists in England which conclude that “Israel will fulfill the ideal of free socialism.” There have also been enthusiastic references to the “Miracle of Israel.”

These ideas and expressions of opinion have created doubts in my mind in two separate areas:

1. Is anarchism really the ideal I have believed it to be for many years, namely: life without rulers, force, or governments, founded on the voluntary co-operation of free men — or was I mistaken and is anarchism really something different?
2. After 40 years of life and work in Palestine I considered myself well acquainted with conditions of life in this country.

But reading the opinions and news accounts submitted by Comrade Isguir and others, I wondered if they, in America and in England, can perceive the truth more accurately than I can, living here.

It is really very important to clear up these matters. Let me dwell on these two points:

(1) I am strongly convinced that the libertarian ideal which opposes all rulers and states, makes no exceptions, grants no privileges to a Jewish or Israeli state.

Jewish history provides endless examples of the hardships caused by oppressors and governments on the Jewish people, hardships greater than those caused on all other nations by their own rulers.

It is therefore strange to note the ecstatic response of Jewish anarchists to the emergence of a Jewish state, a state which in daily life means governmental bureaucracy, wars, military conscription, endless armaments consuming the national income, police, prisons, censorship, etc. Under these circumstances we should perhaps offer our loyalty to the concept of *Jewish State-Anarchism*? This would perhaps be in keeping with the universal poverty of human life and shabbiness of human thought.

(2) The majority of men have always found it difficult to differentiate between nation and state. Rulers of all times and kinds, statists of both right and left, have directed all their energies toward the implanting and strengthening of this horrible untruth.

Freedom-loving men, however, have always taught that such identification was false, and now this lie is particularly obvious in regard to the state of Israel. When a new arrival in Israel is shown the communes, the rural cooperatives, the workers' organizations, the various cultural organizations and movements as well as the technical advances, both rural and urban, when these are all identified with the State, it is only natural to express great admiration in the face of such unique advances on the part of the government in

the short time of its existence. It is indeed miraculous, and sharply contradictory to the negative anarchist attitude to governments in general.

But it is the exact contrary which is actually true. All these wonders were achieved voluntarily, freely, without coercion, and these proclaim precisely, and over many years, what the free will of man can create. We have always been saddened by the fact that our peaceful pioneering and creation were not only misunderstood, but also condemned by anarchists and socialists, and that it was therefore natural that our comrades throughout the world gained nothing from our rich experience. We were considered fanatic Zionists who deserted the struggle elsewhere to settle in far-off Palestine, in Asia! Terrible reactionaries!

But then, suddenly, we became like other people: Jews created a government, complete with soldiers, wars, victories; with the glare of shells and the bursts of cannon. It was perhaps the glare of these shells which permitted the discovery of Palestine, and the impression, seemingly, also registered on the retinas of Jewish anarchists. And so now they also speak of the wonders created by the State of Israel, and all in so short a time! ... Shall we laugh or weep?

The naked truth is that the State of Israel arrived on the scene to discover a fully developed community which the state is now exploiting for its very existence! And the only creation for which the state is solely responsible — a creation which is inseparably tied to its own creation — is the war with the Arabs. The war can be ascribed equally to the Arab States and to the newly-created Jewish State, and in this respect they are functioning properly.

The praise heaped upon the Jewish state, the jubilation provoked by the Miracle of Israel amongst Jewish anarchists, disregard completely the stark fact that this state, as naturally with all states, was built on blood and ammunition. Are Jewish anarchists acquainted with the efforts of "Ihud" ("Union", a group working for a bi-national state based on Arab-Jewish equality), of the late Dr. Judah Magnes, and of our own pacifist group to avoid war?