

Zionism or Socialism?

Chaim Zhitlowsky

English working translation, combined from the two uploaded translation PDFs. Only the essay section is included; the foreword, other essays, and the following section on Yiddish have been omitted.

The last twenty-five years - from the time Lieberman and Zundelewicz first published Ha-Emes in Vienna in Hebrew, the first socialist paper for Jews, until today - will surely be counted by the future Jewish historian among the most important periods in the life of the Jewish people. One may go even further and say that these years are more important than the whole last thousand years which Jews have lived through in exile.

Since the Jewish people ceased fighting with weapons in hand for its own freedom; since it saw that its own forces were too weak to free it from the yoke; since its only hope came to consist in faith in miracles and wonders, in a supernatural Messiah who would redeem it by a miracle from its terrible condition - from that time the Jewish people ceased to live as a people ought to live.

It is true that various false messiahs came from time to time and persuaded the people that they were the redeemers for whom it had so longed. But how many wounds remained when the people had to see, once again, that it had erred; that the Messiah for whom it had waited through so many dark years was, at best, a simple madman, mad on the same point on which the whole people had lost its senses. Like one sunk in a heavy enchanted sleep, the Jewish people lived in exile until it became ever more dreamlike and ever farther from real life, until its powers were weakened and the life of the people had almost completely died away.

This terrible time, when the Jewish people lived as if suspended between heaven and earth, more in heaven than on earth, lasted until the time of Moses Mendelssohn, the Jewish philosopher and reformer who lived more than a hundred years ago in Germany. His disciples, the few enlightened ones of the Jewish people who tore themselves out of the enchanted sleep, began a new period. They opened a window toward European culture and toward life. Yet even this awakening had to ask: shall the Jewish people be revived through socialism, through life and labor where it is, or shall its hopes be diverted elsewhere?

The earlier Jewish enlighteners had undertaken a difficult task: to awaken the Jews from sleep, to shake them out of inherited habits, and to make them useful both to themselves and to the peoples among whom they lived. They did not accomplish this by their own strength alone. Modern economic life itself helped them. The rise of the bourgeoisie created new needs. The Jewish bourgeoisie, occupied with trade and commerce, needed equal rights in the countries where Jews lived. It therefore understood that if it took on European education and renounced the appearance of being a separate people - if it claimed to be Jewish only by religion but German, Russian, Polish, or something else by nationality - then it could demand civic equality with greater

force than when it appeared as a distinct people.

Source pp. 49-50 The work of the maskilim began in Germany roughly a century earlier and in Russia some fifty or sixty years earlier. It left a great mark on Jewish history. Among the people itself, among the broad masses, its effect was small. The enlightened and educated looked down from above on the supposedly fanatical crowd and often did not even wish to speak to the people in its own language. They called that language a jargon and tried by every means to tear it out by the roots and plant in its place the language of the ruling people. Even their propaganda for enlightenment and civilization was carried on in the old, long-dead holy tongue, which the majority of the people, the working class, and the women of almost all classes could not understand. It is therefore no wonder that their labor achieved little among the people. But it transformed the Jewish intelligentsia. It brought it down from heaven to earth, taught it to turn away from dreams of miracles and messiahs, and placed it face to face with practical life. In that practical life the opposition between bourgeoisie and workers came clearly into view. The best part of the Jewish intelligentsia began to see the only remedy for the sick Jewish people in the workers' movement and in socialism.

Internationalism and the Jewish people

At first, Jewish socialists too wanted little more than to help Jewish workers not as Jews but as workers, as human beings in general. But the more deeply they understood socialism, the clearer it became that socialism does not aim to abolish all peoples, knead them into one dough, and bake from that dough one large loaf called Humanity. On the contrary, socialism wants each people to be able to display its own qualities, everything in which it is richer than others. It wants only that peoples should live in peace, help one another in the great struggle with nature and in the great struggle for life, and that no people should be able to rule or dominate another. Socialism recognizes no aristocratic peoples, no chosen peoples. For socialism all peoples are equal. Each people has its virtues and its faults; each has something to give and something to learn. This is the real meaning of internationalism: all peoples are equal brothers and must live with one another as brothers. The closer Jewish socialists came to the Jewish people, the more they had to recognize that the Jewish people too is neither worse nor better than other peoples. It too has the right to live as a people, as an equal member of the great human family. Instead of merely civic equality - the equality demanded by the bourgeoisie - Jewish socialists wrote on their banner the demand for national equality with all peoples. They prepared themselves to struggle for this highest ideal of the Jewish people, confident that sooner or later the international socialist movements of all peoples, the great workers' armies of the world, would accept this new thought, which is in substance the old thought of socialism, and would help the Jewish people attain its goal gradually, wherever and whenever possible. The stronger those international workers' armies become, the greater the hope for the Jewish people.

Source pp. 51-52: the rise of Zionism At the same time that the best part of the Jewish intelligentsia and the Jewish workers joined socialism and found in it the only correct means of helping the Jewish people, a great change took place in the ideas of the

enlightened section of the Jewish bourgeoisie. That section too renounced its earlier ideal - to cease being Jewish - and wrote Jewish nationalism on its banner. It set before the Jewish people a new ideal: to return home to the Land of Israel. This new ideal is called Zionism. At first glance Zionism appears to be nothing more than the old belief in a miraculous messiah, dressed and decorated in European fashion. But if one looks more closely, one sees that Zionism is in truth a new movement: a movement of the Jewish bourgeoisie. Its roots are in the position of the small and middle Jewish capitalists. In the fiery Zionist melodies sung to the words Return us, one may hear not only the tears of a people but also the groans of Jewish capital, for whom life in European society is becoming narrower and more difficult.

Antisemitism and the Jewish middle class Jewish capital is pressed by antisemitism. Jewish commercial skill, the mobility of the Jewish trader and shopkeeper, and the ability of Jewish merchants to compete in trade have called forth terrible hatred against them and, by extension, against the whole Jewish people. Jewish shopkeepers, who struggle among themselves for every bite, do not hesitate to reach for the bite in the mouth of the non-Jewish competitor. The non-Jew, who thought that his portion was secure, becomes furious when he sees that a whole camp of Jews are struggling over the crumbs of what he considered his share. The more capitalism develops, the faster the wheel of commerce turns. The competition between Jewish and non-Jewish middle capital becomes sharper, hatred of Jews grows stronger, and

antisemitism becomes more bitter. Zhitlowsky points to the clothing trade as an example. Ready-made clothing and shoes ruin the old non-Jewish artisan. In whose hands, he asks, lies much of the clothing trade? In Jewish hands. The non-Jewish craftsman passes Jewish stores, which multiply and grow larger, and thinks: how can I get rid of this foreign competitor? How can I strike down the enemy whose single crime is cheapness? The goods may be worthless, but they are cheap. The same rule operates in almost all trades that serve the needs of the masses: worthless, but cheap. No one has known how to exploit that rule as well as the Jewish merchant. The non-Jewish artisan, the middle shopkeeper, the professional, the lawyer, doctor, engineer, journalist, and other educated competitors answer Jewish competition with antisemitism. Thus antisemitism grows in modern society and obstructs the Jew wherever he can make a living. Even where paper equality exists, governments find ways to exclude Jews from desirable positions; and where such equality never existed, as in Russia and Romania, the government needs no excuse at all.

The bourgeois dream of a Jewish state Sooner or later this pressure naturally produces in the Jewish bourgeoisie a longing for the old home, for a land of its own in which it would be mistress of the whole state. There it could live by its own rule - worthless, but cheap - and no one would disturb it. Its sons could study in their own universities and then receive the well-paid positions in the Jewish state, in Jewish journalism, law, administration, and public life. Zhitlowsky says openly that he has no grievance against the bourgeoisie for its Zionism. Every person and every class seeks the place where life is better. As long as the Jewish people remains divided into workers and bourgeoisie, the bourgeoisie will carry around Zionism or some other dream. Since it

always imagines that the fortune of the whole people depends on its own fortune, it sincerely believes that whatever is good for it is good for all Israel. Zionism is the movement of the Jewish bourgeoisie just as socialism is the movement of the working masses and of all who are interested in making life better for the worker. Since there can never be real peace between bourgeoisie and workers, there can never be real peace between Zionism and socialism.

Source pp. 55-60: against socialist Zionism Some people nevertheless believe that Zionism can go hand in hand with socialism, that there is no contradiction between them. Zhitlowsky replies that if someone hopes that a Jewish state in Palestine will from the start be built on socialist foundations, that person is a fantasist. To imagine that what cannot yet be carried out in Europe can easily be carried out in Turkey, while the European governments quietly watch Jews demonstrate the possibility of socialism before the whole world, is a dream unworthy of serious politics. The Zionists reproach Jewish socialists by means of a simple parable. Suppose, they say, you live in a dark, damp, unhealthy cellar apartment. You spend all your strength repairing the walls, speaking with neighbors, fighting the landlord, and making the place slightly more bearable. Would it not be better to spend your energy getting out of that dark dwelling altogether? So, they argue, Jews should devote their forces not to the endless struggle in the diaspora but to the creation of a Jewish home. Zhitlowsky answers that this parable is false. Jewish workers cannot abandon the actual struggle in the countries where they live. Every coin, every day of labor, every ounce of energy that is sacrificed to a distant national project is taken away from the immediate class struggle and the

real work of organizing Jewish workers. To subordinate the socialist movement to Zionist diplomacy would be to ruin the movement. He presses the point with irony. If Zionist socialists wish to obtain permission, land, and support from Turkey and from Jewish financiers, will they speak openly about class struggle and socialist revolution? No. They will have to ingratiate themselves, to assure everyone that the Jewish people is a pious, innocent creature, that Jewish workers will not bring the dreadful plague of socialism and class struggle into Turkey. Thus even before beginning, the socialist Zionists would have to silence precisely what makes them socialists. The fight for land would stand above the fight for the workers.

Palestine cannot solve the Jewish question No serious Zionist can believe that his party will be able to transfer the majority of Jews to the Land of Israel. Palestine, even if Syria were added, is a small country. Zhitlowsky uses contemporary geographical estimates to show that the numbers do not work. Even if one imagined an unusually dense settlement, the land could not absorb the millions of Jews living in Eastern Europe. If at most one and a half or two million Jews could be brought there, what would become of the rest? Would antisemitism disappear for the Jews left behind? Would the Jewish question be solved? He then imagines a tiny state, a little Judenland, which the Zionists present as a world force. Would this small state terrify Russia, Austria, Germany, Romania, and the other powers? Would it stop the expulsion of Jews from Moscow, the beating of Jews in Galicia, the exclusion of Jews from schools and offices? Would great states tremble because assemblies in Judenland protest their antisemitic policies? The

thought is absurd. A small Jewish state would not abolish the hatred directed at Jews elsewhere. As long as Jewish masses remain in the diaspora, and as long as social and economic conditions produce antisemitism, the struggle would remain. For the sake of such a worthless and barren dream, should Jewish workers turn their eyes away from their urgent tasks at home? In Russia and Poland the Jewish people is surrounded on every side by restrictions, poverty, oppression, pogrom dangers, and economic misery. It needs schools, unions, political rights, and socialist organization now, where it lives. To direct its hopes toward a distant solution is to disarm it in its actual battlefield.

Answer to the Zionists As long as there is a Jewish bourgeoisie, it will carry around such ideals as Zionism. But as long as there are Jewish workers and Jewish socialists, they will oppose those ideals and explain to the people what its real tasks are. Zhitlowsky emphasizes that he is not attacking every private feeling of attachment to the old land or to Jewish historical memory. He is attacking a political movement that turns that feeling into a bourgeois national program and tries to make the workers serve it. In later reflection he notes that he had underestimated the possibility of a fusion between longing for a Jewish home and socialist aspiration. The emergence of Poale Zion later showed that this fusion could become a living movement. But in the argument of the essay itself, his central point remains that socialist politics cannot be subordinate to Zionist national-territorial politics.

Jewish socialism and Jewish national work Zhitlowsky turns next against those who accuse him of being too national in the Jewish question. He replies that the Jewish socialist must indeed bind together Jewish workers in all lands. The

New York Jewish worker and the Vilna Jewish worker have common interests; both are part of the Jewish people and both also belong to the international proletariat. To love one's own people is natural, not a crime; what matters is what one does with that love. The socialist future will abolish the division between rich and poor, capitalist and worker. All human beings will live honorably by labor. In that future the Jewish people will be free of its bloodsuckers too. But before that future arrives, Jewish workers have special tasks. They must cultivate Jewish popular literature, expand secular Jewish culture, develop Yiddish as a language of thought and struggle, and organize Jewish proletarians everywhere. Zhitlowsky hopes that Jewish proletarians in all countries will create one independent general Jewish workers' bond. Such an organization would defend the interests of the people everywhere and would also help the peoples among whom Jews live to reach socialism and freedom more quickly. Such an organized Jewish proletariat would not isolate Jews from the world; it would make the Jews an active, conscious part of the world workers' movement.

The practical tasks of the Jewish socialist movement Jewish socialists must be proud of their people, its education, and its culture, for only culture ennobles human beings and awakens in them a thirst for higher development. They must develop and improve the language because without a cultivated language they cannot transmit to the people the high and subtle ideas of modern socialism. They must raise popular literature to a higher level, since Jewish workers have the same right as all workers to beauty, thought, and

knowledge in their mother tongue. They must also fight the poverty and ignorance that allow Jewish capitalists to misuse the people. The unorganized poor immigrant, the worker driven by hunger, can be turned into a cheap weapon against organized labor. Jewish socialists must therefore organize workers so that they do not fall into the hands of Jewish capitalists and, for a few pennies of charity, sell the interests of the working class or compete against their organized brothers with cheaper labor power. Reality itself, life itself, lays the foundation upon which Jewish socialist national work can be built. The facts of Jewish life demand this work. The question, therefore, is clear: with whom should the Jewish worker stand - with Zionism or with socialism?