

Do Judaic Political Views Belong either to Leftists or Rightists?



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Andrew Schumann: In the beginning of 20th century, the Jewish traditionalism became so sensitive to the left-wing political views from anarchism to socialism. For example, many Rabbis became Jewish ideologists of anarchism. Many others were human rights advocates. Until the middle of 20th century, the left-wing ideology was not a rare phenomenon among Rabbis. We can remember Rabbi Abraham Joshua Herschel who participated in the Selma Civil Rights March with Dr. Martin Luther King. How is it possible to explain such a strong influence of the left political views on the Judaic communities of that time?

Furio Biagini: Judaism is usually associated with capitalism, but within it there are the faintest glimmerings of modern socialism. Socialism is an ideology of the nineteenth century that is deeply rooted in the human longing for justice on earth. Prophets and Socialists share common social goals. At the bases of all the commandments in the Law of Moses there is the denial of the concept of property. “For the land is mine, but you stranger and resident with me”. The man is a guest in the world of Ha-Shem and the property is given to him only as a pledge. There are many other social ideas in Judaism. Jews are obligated to provide for all the poor people in the community, support the widow, protect orphans. Also, the land division in Israel among the tribes was according to population. Besides, the laws concerning the Kohanim and Levites have a social foundation. Lastly, we can not forget the voice of the prophets against the political power and their hope for a better

world. As wrote Moses Hess in 1862: “The Jewish spirit is a social-democratic spirit down to its very essence”. Of course, Judaism and Socialism are different, but certainly among them there are many elective affinities. For this reason, many Jews believed that Socialism was a part of their background.

An high percentage of Jews in the Socialist movement, was revolutionary or reformist, it is an undeniable historical phenomenon, at least until the middle of the last century. Even in past centuries groups of Jews fought for freedom and social justice, or for establishing forms of utopia. Socialism was seen as the modern, secular version of messianism and of the promise of a better future advocated by the prophets.

Other factors come into play in recent times. On the wake of the French Revolution the world offered to the Jews freedom and equality, even if not exactly fraternity, opening opportunities that until that moment were only a dream. The Jews took full advantage, but at the cost of a radical change in their way of living and feeling Judaism. The cosmopolitan message, the vision of a fairer society attracted the members of a minority anxious to free themselves from the status of “pariah”, to use a term of Hannah Arendt. The betrayal of the expectations, the manifestations of modern anti-semitism, combined with the emergence of the figure of a new Jew secularly educated, strengthened the utopian aspirations for a new world of freedom and justice and certainly explain the presence of many Jews in the ranks of revolutionary movements. In Germany the Jews became the pioneers of the Socialist movement. We remember: Moses Hess, Karl Marx and Ferdinand Lassalle, who son of a merchant Jew founded in 1863 the “Allgemeinen Deutschen Arbeitervereins”, predecessor of the modern Sozialdemokratischen Partei Deutschlands. Even in Russia, the Socialist movement emerged when Jewish workers founded in Vilnius, on October 7, 1897, the “General Jewish Labour Bund in Russia and Poland”. The name was inspired by workers’ party in Germany and the organization sought to unite all Jewish workers in the Russian empire into a united Socialist party, and also to ally itself with the wider Russian socialdemocratic movement to achieve a democratic and Socialist Russia. At the turn of the 19th century there were numerous Jews among the leadership of all major revolutionary movements: Rosa Luxemburg, Otto Bauer, Eduard Bernstein, Rudolf Hilferding, Karl Radek, Anna Kuliscioff, Gustav Landauer, and so on. We cannot also forget that the Socialist utopia was also present in the Zionist movement. I think about Ber Borochov, one of the founders of the Labor Zionism and the Kibbutz, a concrete and lasting expression of the utopian communitarianism.

Andrew Schumann: Recently, the right-wing political views have dominated in the Judaic communities. What is a reason for such dramatic changes? After all, the radical right-wing views are popular among some Orthodox Jews now. Let us recall the social activity of Rabbi Ovadia Yosef and his sometime scandalous political statements. Why is there no voice of leftist Rabbis now?

Furio Biagini: The Shoah and the Stalinist persecutions deleted from Europe the Jewish proletariat. Survived only the bourgeois élite integrated into the establishment, and as such oriented on conservative positions. It is the end of a happy anomaly, as Enzo Traverso argues in his book *La fin de la modernité juive: histoire d'un tournant conservateur* (Paris: La découverte, 2013). Today, the main representatives of Jewish thought, for the most part, are linked organically to the liberal conservative culture, for example Raymond Aron, Leo Strauss, Saul Bellow and Elie Wiesel. As Enzo Traverso says, this change is represented by two protagonists in the history of the ‘900: Lev Trockij, emblem of internationalism, and Henry Kissinger, German Jew naturalized American citizen, symbol of American imperialism. Of course, these two souls, the revolutionary and the conservative, always have been part of the Jewish political culture (This is true for every culture). Disraeli was a contemporary of Marx, as Kissinger of Chomsky. But, in the past, the Jews were the

forerunners of modern globalization, in spite of their wishes, and their cosmopolitanism was the natural enemy of nationalism. From Spanish and Portuguese marranos to the forced pariah status described by Hannah Arendt, Jews have been alternatives to the system. Even those who were far from the religious traditions, non-Jewish Jews, to paraphrase Isaac Deutscher's well-known term, were the enthusiastic bearers of the greatest Jewish heritage, the messianic hope, even if this hope was only literary or political.

This world has disappeared with the destruction of the Jewish presence in Europe, the mass emigration to the United States and the birth of Israel (the establishment of a Jewish State, which was a forced choice or, in some way, necessarily determined as a result of growing anti-semitism). Of course, it was not an automatic change and a critical wing is still alive, wing that often clashes with Zionism. However, it is a minority view. Today, the Jewish messianism takes Israel as providential event of redemption, especially after the Six-Day War in 1967. So, was born a civil religion that believes Israel the sole legitimate representative of the Jewish people and of the victims of the Shoah. For this reason, for the first time in history, Jews and European right are no longer incompatible (the European right who wants to mend the guilts of his anti-semitism), since the barrier of anti-semitism has fallen: a link often reinforced by an islamophobic common feeling.

Andrew Schumann: Relationships between the Judaic and Islamic worlds have been worse and more stressful. What or who can contribute to normalisation of their relationships? How far can the Islamic traditionalism be compatible with the Jewish traditionalism? Is it possible to expect any political or cultural dialogue between Iran and Israel?

Furio Biagini: Judaism and Islam have a lot in common; but are opposed to Christianity which is the product of an interaction between Greek and Hebrew culture; for Judaism and Islam Christianity is an impure form of monotheism because of the concepts of incarnation, Trinity, adoration of Saints and the use of effigies. Judaism and Islam have a Book, *Torah* and *Koran*, and also oral tradition from which derives a law (*halacha* and *sharia*). The study of this law is also considered a value in both religious traditions and their legal, mystical and philosophical systems have significantly interacted over the centuries and learned from each other. Both Judaism and Islam are essential "anarchist theocracies" because the only entity with which they relate themselves in a way of obedience is God; besides, they do not have clergy and religious authority: it is essentially a function of individual mastery of the religious sources the ability guide the community in accordance with their teachings. The Judaism saw Islam as a pure form of ethical monotheism.

In addition, these traditions see their role as applying to all spheres of life, which means that inevitably they are political to a greater or lesser extent. Then it is not at all surprising that when meetings of Rabbis and Imams are arranged, they find they have much in common. Historically the Jews were certainly better off under the Muslim rule than under the Christian rule. In the Muslim world the Jews were free to practice their religion without interference and the Jewish communities were generally protected but, of course, as long as they accepted their second class status codified in the Pact of 'Umar, lived peacefully and cooperatively with their Muslim neighbors. The collapse of Ottoman Empire and the rise of modern nationalism led to the clash between the Jewish nationalist aspiration for self-determination in the ancestral homeland of the Jewish people and the struggle for national self-determination on the part of the regional and local Arab populations. This territorial conflict that seems to assume the character of a religious conflict is a fight between two nationalisms claiming ownership of the same land.

Furthermore, there are other deeper links. Judaism and Islam both exist outside the mainstream Western intellectual discourse which lies at the heart of liberal democracy and the modern nation state. This has a number of profound implications. Both religious traditions have to confront the

conflicts between their world views and modern democracy. Additionally, in countries where Jews and Muslims are in a minority, they face prejudice based on common misunderstandings which means that anti-Semitism and Islamophobia are in fact two sides of the same coin.

The way to confront these misunderstandings is to learn more about each other's religious traditions. I think that a worthwhile dialogue requires focus on text study and social responsibility projects. There are, of course, many examples in Europe and Israel where Jews and Muslims cooperate and work together: school, medical institutions, university course, religious institutions.

In this framework are include the relationships between Israel and Iran. Jewish and Iranian people have lived in peace over millennia. For hundreds of years Iran has consisted of multi-ethnic and multi-religious groups living side by side. The country has the second largest Jewish community in the Middle East outside Israel and the Iranian Jews have their own representative in the Iranian Parliament (Majlis) and arguably face less discrimination than religious minorities elsewhere in the region. Iran wants to be recognized as a regional power that cannot be excluded from the geopolitical games of the region. Briefly, Iran claims a role in the political, economic and military fields. An understanding between Israel and Iran would help the cause of peace regionally and globally and also serve the interests of the two nations. An Israeli-Iran dialogue makes sense sooner rather than later.

Andrew Schumann: The heyday of the Jewish culture took place in the period between two world wars. Yiddish was a language of this culture mainly. We can refer to some masterpieces of Judaic cinema, such as the *Dybbuk or Between Two Worlds* directed by Michał Waszyński in 1937 in Poland, which have so organically put the Judaic culture into the modern forms of art. Now the Orthodox and Chassidic Judaic communities are conservative enough and are badly put into the recent world trends of culture. They are rather encapsulated. What or who can contribute to the recent heyday of the Judaic culture? Where are those forms of art, science within which it can be put into the modern trends?

Furio Biagini: The nineteenth century, in fact, saw the abandonment of Jewish orthodoxy by a large sections of European bourgeois society. It was the period in which the presence of a Jewish intellectualism, first in Europe and then in the United States, reached its maximum relief. In the development of contemporary Jewish thought these were the most diverse tendencies, increased especially during the years of Nazi persecution; while the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 constituted an event of capital importance in the history of international Jewry, whether under the religious profile or cultural profile. In fact, the concepts of identity as "people" and "homeland", in some ways absents in past centuries, have now assumed a prominent position in the social and religious context. The consequences of these circumstances, whether ethical or historical-philosophical, are still to understand and evaluate at all. Maybe the actual culture of the State of Israel, combined with the Jewish american culture, can contribute to the recent heyday of the Judaic culture. The culture (art, science, etc.) that now is elaborated in the life of the Israeli society and the Jewish community on the United States represents the major contribution to the general evolution of the Judaic culture. Today more than yesterday, Jerusalem and New York are the principal focus of the development of Jewish culture.