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*Marx and the Kabbalah:
Aaron Shemuel Lieberman's Materialist
Interpretation of Jewish History*

Eliyahu Stern

Karl Marx is known as one of the great critics of religion in Western intellectual history. Other than his mentors Ludwig Feuerbach and Bruno Bauer, few are more closely associated with debunking heavenly truths. Born in 1818 to a Jewish mother, Karl Marx became a Lutheran by age six. He rarely engaged the subject of his ancestral Judaism, but, when he did, he was extremely critical. In “On the Jewish Question” (1844), he wrote about the secular practices of the Jew in the marketplace. He presented Pharisaic Judaism as a stealth carrier of capitalism and social antagonism. It thus demands explanation why, even within Marx’s lifetime, Jewish revolutionaries were referring to him as a second Moses and comparing his works to the Bible. In the 1870s, Jewish intellectuals were already assimilating Marx’s insights into messianic theories and even developing materialist readings of Jewish history. By 1899, the leading Marxist theorist of the time, Karl Kautsky, felt compelled to begin his introduction to the Yiddish translation of the *Communist Manifesto* with an admonition to his readers to stop referring to Karl Marx’s works as “Torah.”¹

Most notably, Aaron Shemuel Lieberman (1843–1880), known as “the father of Jewish Socialism,” was the first to interpret Marx’s works through a Jewish prism. Lieberman would use Marx’s theories both to critique the

¹ Karl Kautsky, “Forvert,” *Dos manifest fun di komunistishe partey* ([Geneva]: Algemeynem idishn arbeter bund in Rusland un Poyln, 1899), 15.

dominant philosophies that shaped medieval and modern Judaism and to reconceive its nature. While Lieberman's colorful biography and revolutionary activities have inspired numerous novels and hundreds of scholarly articles, his understanding of Marx has never been addressed in a sustained manner. In fact, his theory of Judaism has been almost entirely ignored. Though Lieberman is arguably the best-known and best-documented nineteenth-century Russian Jewish revolutionary, scholars have largely overlooked the content of his writings and their significance for understanding the early reception of Marx's ideas.

Lieberman was the first in a long line of theorists to identify historical materialism with strands of a Judaic tradition. Not only did Marx's influence on Jews extend to political projects such as Communism, Zionism, and Jewish Socialism, it also played a role in the worldviews espoused by those ranging from the American Reconstructionist Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan to the spiritual father of the Israeli settler movement, Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook. The lack of scholarship addressing Lieberman's own intellectual contributions reflects a more general historiographic trend that focuses on Marx in terms of Jews and politics but ignores his reception in the annals of modern Jewish thought.²

Like many other revolutionaries of his generation, Lieberman was raised in a traditional Jewish home in the northwestern provinces of the Russian Empire. As a child, he studied kabbalah with his grandfather, the town rabbi of Luna. His father, Eliezer, was among those "enlighteners" who supported the Russian government's program to reform its Jewish population.³ This program consisted of the conscription of Jews into the military, the establishment of government-sponsored Jewish schools, and the reformation of Jews' religious beliefs and practices. The end goal was for Jews to become loyal and productive citizens like their assimilated brethren in Western Europe. Lieberman, unlike his father, would turn against the Russian Empire and become an active member of the first Jewish revolutionary reading cell in Vilna. When this cell was liquidated by the Russian police in 1875, Lieberman fled west to Berlin, and then further to London, where he became a typesetter in the print shop of the Russian émigré socialist Peter Lavrov. By 1876, Lieberman had already established

² As noted by David Biale, "A systematic study of Marx as a Jew still awaits its author": *Not in the Heavens: The Tradition of Jewish Secular Thought* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), xii.

³ On the Russian government's reform project see Michael Stanislawski, *Tsar Nicholas I and the Jews* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1983), 15 and Eliyahu Stern, "Catholic Judaism: The Political Theology of the Nineteenth-Century Russian Jewish Enlightenment," *Harvard Theological Review* 109, no. 4 (2016): 483–511.

the first Jewish labor organization, the *Hebrew Socialist Union*, and soon thereafter the first Jewish socialist broadsheet, *Ha-emet (The Truth)*.

Lieberman's private life was just as tumultuous as his political engagements. He left behind a wife and children in Vilna, with whom he continued to stay in contact. But he was also known to have extramarital affairs. Some even claim that he was bisexual—in London he was said to have been sexually involved with the Anglican Minister, Isaac Salkinsohn.⁴ In 1879, Lieberman was arrested in Vienna and sent to Berlin where he stood trial with other Jewish revolutionaries for crossing borders with false identification papers using the alias, "Arthur Freeman." Following his release from prison, he travelled to Syracuse, New York, where, after being rejected by a woman, he took his life.

Historians have noted that Zionists and Bundists who appropriated Marx as one of their own⁵ often echoed Lieberman's bold declaration that Marx and Lassalle were "great prophets," that "revolution—is our tradition," and that "the commune was the basis of our legislation as quite clearly indicated by the ordinances forbidding the sale of land on the Jubilee and sabbatical years."⁶ But this passage is cited as if it were either a clever ploy to authorize a set of secular political positions or a self-evident assertion that requires no justification. A more careful analysis of Lieberman's writings reveals that this association was in fact based on a rigorous and highly intricate theory of Marxist thought and kabbalistic sources. Lieberman's worldview provides a starting point to chart those aspects of Marxism that so many identified as expressing Judaic overtones.

THE EARLY JEWISH RECEPTION OF MARX

Mistakenly, most discussions on Jews' reception of Marx revolve around his early essay "On the Jewish Question" (1844).⁷ In it, Marx ignored the

⁴ See the cryptic comments made by David Isaiah Silberbusch, *Mipinkas zikhronotai* (Tel Aviv: Hapoel Hatzair 1936). Also available online: "Peretz Smolenskin, Bar Derurah, Yitshak Salkinsohn," chapter 7, accessed March 28, 2015, http://benyehuda.org/silberbusch/ishim_umeoraot.html#_ftn1.

⁵ The general literature written on Lieberman is beyond the scope of a footnote. On Lieberman and Marx see most recently Moshe Mishkinsky, "Le'inyan hamarksizm vedimmuyo shel Marx," in *Iyunim basotzyalism ha-yehudi* (Kiryat Sedeh Boker: Machon Ben Gurion, 2004), 162; Jonathan Frankel, *Prophecy and Politics: Socialism, Nationalism and Russian Jews 1862–1917* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 32–33; and Bernard Weinryb, *Bereshit hasotzyalism ha-yehudi* (Jerusalem: Reuven Mas, 1940), 92–94, esp. 104. For an overview of the secondary literature written on Lieberman and his circle see Kalman Marmor's handwritten bibliography located in his archive in YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, RG 205 Box 35.

⁶ This translation is taken from Frankel, *Prophecy and Politics*, 33.

⁷ See most recently Yuri Slezkine, *The Jewish Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univer-

vast overwhelming majority of Jews who resided in Russia and focused instead on a minority of Jews living in Western Europe and the United States. For Marx, the case of assimilated Jews highlighted the limitations of political emancipation and the need for a broader form of human emancipation. The very idea of the politically emancipated Jew laid bare the contradictions of the bourgeoisie as both citizens of the State and private economic actors. While political emancipation did free the State from particular religious interests, it still left intact various forms of social and economic discrimination and antagonism in the private sphere. The question surrounding the status of Jews, Marx explained, should not involve their capacities to be citizens, but rather the way that their economic activity prevented the emancipation of humanity from capitalism. Marx was not concerned with what he called the “Sabbath Jew”—those who upheld the religious ideals and rituals associated with Judaism—but rather the “everyday Jew,” the way Jews behaved economically in European civil society. The everyday emancipated Jew exemplified the way the private sphere was based on the accumulation of property. Though Marx supported Jews’ political emancipation, his essay was laced with anti-Semitic stereotypes that conjured up the medieval image of Shylock. Jews were a placeholder for those who hoarded goods and promoted economic competition.

Marx’s emphasis on the “everyday Jew” reflected a more general bias toward the concerns and historical development of Western European countries over the political and economic organization of the Russian Empire. Prior to his private endorsement of the Russian commune (*obshchina*) in the late 1870s and public endorsement of it in the preface to the 1882 Russian translation of the *Communist Manifesto*, Marx largely ignored the internal socioeconomic dynamics of the Russian Empire. Not surprisingly, most Jews living in Russian lands were either unaware of Marx’s writings or unable to read German or French (the languages in which Marx’s works were published). Yiddish was Eastern European Jews’ primary language, and only the elite wrote in Hebrew.

Even among the small number of Jewish intelligentsia familiar with Marx’s works, it’s doubtful that more than a handful had even heard of his piece “On the Jewish Question.” Prussian authorities seized roughly one-third of the one thousand copies of the journal in which it appeared,

sity Press, 2004), 98, 123–27. On Jews in the 1870s ignoring Marx’s “On the Jewish Question,” see Julius Carlebach, *Karl Marx and the Radical Critique of Judaism* (London: Routledge, 1978), 187–88. On the reception of “On the Jewish Question” among acculturated Jews residing on German lands, see Shlomo Na’aman, *Marxism and Zionism* (Gerlingen: Bleicher-Verlag, 1997), 68, 77–97 and Jack Jacobs, *On Socialists and The Jewish Question After Marx* (New York: NYU Press, 1992), 44–71.

Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher,⁸ making it a rare and dangerous piece of literature to own. It is uncommon to find “On the Jewish Question” mentioned in Jewish literature prior to the 1890s. After all, it entirely ignored the overwhelming majority of world Jewry that resided in Eastern Europe, specifically in the Russian Empire.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, Jews living in Russia experienced a large-scale economic crisis that affirmed many of Marx’s own economic theories but also contradicted others.⁹ Residential restrictions placed upon the four million Jews residing in the Pale of Settlement (areas including territories in present day Lithuania, Ukraine, Belarus, and Poland) coupled with the emancipation of Russia’s serf population in 1861 led to the flooding of labor markets and to fierce economic competition between various ethnic groups and classes. Still, the majority of Jews were positively inclined toward the Empire and supported Alexander II’s regime. Only a handful were active in Russian revolutionary politics and familiar with the name Karl Marx.

Marx’s first Jewish readers generally were first exposed to his co-authored work, the *Communist Manifesto* and his magnum opus, *Capital*. Published in German in 1867, Marx’s *Capital* described the development of capitalism through an analysis of the way value-form changed over the course of history. In short, Marx maintained that capitalism came on the heels of the dissolution of medieval feudal regimes. Medieval society had been built around the primary feudal economic relationship between indentured serf or peasant and the lord or nobleman. People were born into specific economic positions and were forced to farm or produce goods and to pay rent to those whose lands they were tied to from birth. Lords and noblemen, Marx claimed, controlled the means of production and invested accrued capital from labor surpluses in reproducing the very conditions of their domination. They spent their resources on political projects, wars, and payments to kings—ensuring their continued position as lords. They invested less of their surpluses in labor and the means of production and more in ensuring their capacity to rule over lands and control society.

According to Marx, the collapse of the feudal economy was a function of new forms of industrialization and communication. The establishment of manufacturing industries and technological advances in communication

⁸ See Gareth Stedman Jones, *Karl Marx: Greatness and Illusion* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 155.

⁹ On the economic crisis in the Pale of Settlement, see Ilya Orshanskii, “Ocherki ekonomicheskogo polozheniia evreev v rossii,” *Den’*, August 15, 1869 and Ezra Mendelsohn, *Class Struggle in the Pale* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 19–21.

gave rise to new kinds of economic classes and labor relations. “The prelude of the revolution that laid the foundation of the capitalist mode of production,” Marx wrote, “was played in the last third of the 15th, and the first decade of the 16th century.” It was then that “a mass of free proletarians was hurled on the labour market by the breaking-up of the bands of feudal retainers.”¹⁰ Whereas feudal relations were organized around serfdom and the selling of commodities by their producers, capitalism emancipated the laborer from lords and princes but turned labor itself into a commodity. Hired day labor replaced closed guild systems. Steam and machinery transformed the size and scope of commodity production and the surplus value that could be extracted from labor costs.

Marx argued that technological developments led to the end of serfdom and to the emergence of new forms of economic exploitation in factories and manufacturing industries. Under capitalism, every individual became free to sell his or her own labor, thereby allowing industries to be organized around the acquisition of capital achieved through the accumulation of the surplus of labor time. “Instead of being in the position to sell commodities in which his labour is incorporated,” Marx continued, the laborer under capitalism “must be obliged to offer for sale as a commodity that very labour-power, which exists only in his living self” (*Capital*, 2:6:4). The capitalist continued to maximize surplus value by paying his or her laborers only the means of subsistence. Marx speculated that this process would reach its point of crisis when a worker’s labor no longer belonged to him or herself: when his or her own products were owned by someone else and products no longer had any relation to the individuals that produced them. Eventually, according to Marx, labor wages would decrease to such a degree that workers would no longer be able to afford the very products they produced. When laborers realized that this had occurred, Marx claimed, capitalism would reach a point of crisis.

Jewish readers of *Capital* would not have found the kind of anti-Semitic invective that exists in “On the Jewish Question.” In *Capital*, Marx no longer used “Jews” as a stand-in for capitalism or the bourgeoisie. Instead, he employed class categories to define different economic groups and actors and only tangentially touched on the status of Jews. In book 1, chapter 1 of *Capital*, he cryptically asserted that the self-valorization of capital was best expressed in the Hebrew language. “We may here remark,”

¹⁰ Karl Marx, *Das Kapital*, trans. Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling as *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy* (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr, 1909), 8:27:2 (hereafter cited in text as *Capital*).

Marx wrote, “that the language of commodities has, besides Hebrew, many other more or less correct dialects. The German ‘werthsein,’ to be worth,” Marx continued, “expresses in a less striking manner than the Romance verbs ‘valere,’ ‘valer,’ ‘valoir,’ that the equating of commodity B to commodity A, is commodity A’s own mode of expressing its value” (*Capital*, 1:1:54). Marx was focusing on the way the term “value” was equivalent to the German “Wertsein” (or in old writing form “Werthsein”). It is unclear what exactly Marx meant by “Hebrew.” Sander L. Gilman speculates that Marx may have heard a Yiddish accented German from his mother. His father, the son of a rabbi, certainly knew Hebrew. But it is doubtful that Marx, who was converted at age six, knew Hebrew. In hindsight, one might interpret his invocation of “Hebrew” as a stand-in for “Jewish haggling.”¹¹ But he may have also been referring to the biblical word, “’erekh,” which signified “importance,” “worth,” and “value.” Either way, it is unclear whether Jews who read this statement in the 1870s identified it as expressing anti-Jewish sentiments.

More specifically, in *Capital*, Marx described Jews as a “trading nation” that lived in “the pores of Polish society.” This nation, he claimed, was “founded either on the immature development of man individually, who has not yet severed the umbilical cord that unites him with his fellowmen in a primitive tribal community, or upon direct relations of subjection.” Marx did not blame these groups for their professional activities or religious beliefs. He believed that Jews’ religious profile reflected certain historical material conditions and lower forms of economic production that could eventually be overcome. “The religious reflex of the real world can, in any case, only then finally vanish, when the practical relations of everyday life offer to man none but perfectly intelligible and reasonable relations with regard to his fellowmen and to Nature” (*Capital*, 1:1:134).

Marx’s Russian Jewish readers may have taken issue with his unsympathetic description of them as “a trading nation,” but they were in full agreement with his general point. The problems facing minorities, like Jews, could not be solved by tolerant states or by religious reform. They were systemic problems and part of a larger history of economic subjugation. The capacity to change one’s economic situation was not determined by the cultivation of liberal religious elites who could authorize the study of scientific and secular knowledge or governmental officials that could rectify anti-Semitic legislation. Marx did not cast blame on Judaism for Jews’ immiseration or even on anti-Semitic policies of specific states or national cultures.

¹¹ See Sander L. Gilman, “Karl Marx and the Secret Language of Jews,” *Modern Judaism* 4, no. 3 (1984): 280.

Rather, Marx pointed to larger social and economic forces as the cause of poverty and social discrimination.

Marx's *Capital* emphasized that the most daunting problem facing Jews was the socioeconomic structures mediating their relationship to the physical world. In contrast to seeing Marx's view of Jews through the "materialistic" Jew described in "On the Jewish Question," Russian Jews in the 1870s focused on what would later be termed Marx's "historical materialism," as laid out in *Capital*. Historical economic forces had driven Jews into professional positions that alienated them from their neighbors and the products that they needed for even the most basic means of subsistence. Jews' outsized involvement in mercantile activities and money loaning reflected these historical forces. Marx's critique of capitalism and its forerunner mercantilism appealed to those Jews that were negatively affected by the limitations placed on their labor options.

Marx's ideas trickled into Russian Jewish life in the early 1870s through revolutionary reading cells that trafficked contraband literature. Most notably in Vilna and Mohilev, there emerged reading groups composed of roughly twenty individuals, all of whom were raised by observant Jewish families.¹² Some had attended the Russian governmental rabbinical schools opened in 1847 and could therefore read German or French. Among the most prominent members were the future Menshevik leader, Pavel Axelrod; the gunrunner for the terrorist organization *Narodnaia Volia*, Aron Zundelevitch; and the revolutionaries Khasia Shur, Eliezer Tsukerman, and Aaron Lieberman. The reading cells served different purposes for different individuals. For Axelrod and Zundelevitch, they were but one point on a path toward the revolutionary politics that would ultimately find expression in the Communist Revolution of 1917. For Lieberman, they were a launching pad for theorizing and propagandizing a specifically Jewish socialism that manifested itself in the establishment of the organized Jewish Labor movement and in communist and socialist wings of the Zionist movement.

Members of these reading cells were introduced to socialist and anarchistic literature, newspapers, and pamphlets through the efforts of the "Chaikovskii circle," the leading non-violent Russian socialist propaganda organization.¹³ Most notably, they smuggled the writings of the Russian

¹² Numerous studies have been written about the Jewish revolutionaries of the 1870s in multiple languages. See Haberer, *Jews and Revolution*, 22–51; Elias Tcherikover, "Der onhoib fun der Yidisher sotsyalistisher bavenung," in *Historishe Shriftn* (Warsaw: Farlag "Kultur-Lige," 1929), 1, 532–69; Boris Frumkin, "Iz istorii revoliutsionnogo dvizheniia sredi evreev v 1870-kh godakh," *Evreiskaia Starina* 2 (1911): 221–48.

¹³ On the books distributed by the Chaikovskii circle, see Peter Kropotkin, *Memoirs of a*

philosopher, Peter Lavrov, and other prominent socialists living in exile back into Russia. Through these channels, Russian Jews first encountered the ideas of Karl Marx. But most Jewish revolutionaries would not see an actual copy of Marx's original works until they left Mohilev and Vilna and arrived in the metropolises of Kiev and Berlin.

Pavel Axelrod, for example, first read Marx's works in Kiev sometime around 1873. "*Capital* drew me out of the twilight into an open place saturated with sunlight," he later recalled. Like many university students in Kiev, Axelrod at first had difficulty understanding Marx. "Under the influence of other socialist and utopian thinkers," Axelrod later explained, "I thought *Capital* expressed a religious-sectarian character."¹⁴

As a response to the Jewish students in Kiev who were unable to understand Marx, the poet and journalist Judah Leib Levin produced a partial Hebrew translation of *Capital*.¹⁵ Levin focused on the first chapters of book 1, "where [Marx] described the metamorphosis of commodity."¹⁶ Levin boldly maintained that his "Hebrew translation allowed [Jewish] students in Kiev to deeply understand Marx's words."¹⁷

By the late 1870s, the nerve center for Jewish revolutionary activities in Russian lands was Aaron Lieberman. The Vilna revolutionary first came across Marx's works in the mid-1870s. By 1875, he was citing *Capital* in articles published in Peter Lavrov's broadsheet, *Vpered!* By 1876, he was telling his Jewish comrades that it was required reading.¹⁸ In a letter written to his friend Eliezer Tsukerman, Lieberman referred to Marx's magnum opus as "Hakeren," signifying the ways in which "capital" functioned not only as a form of monetary value but also as both a "fund" and the "foundation" of society. In other letters, Lieberman indicated that he and his circle of Jewish revolutionaries were immersed in studying Marx's writings.

Revolutionary (New York: Black Rose Books, 1989), 287–306 and Haberer, *Jews and Revolution*, 74–94.

¹⁴ See Pavel Axelrod, *Perezhitoe i peredumannoe* (1923; repr. Cambridge: Oriental Research Partners, 1975), 88. To be sure, Axelrod also mentioned that he might have seen *Capital* in the home of another individual.

¹⁵ See Levin's letter written to an unidentified individual dated June 1910 housed in Levin's archive at the Pinhas Lavon Institute for Labor Movement Research (hereafter cited as PL), IV A104 71. See also Yehudah Leib Levin, "Zikaron basefer" in *Yehuda Leib Levin: Zikhronot vehegyonot*, ed. Yehudah Slutsky (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1968), 53n1.

¹⁶ See PL, IV A104 71.

¹⁷ See Yehudah Leib Levin, *Zikaron basefer* (Jerusalem, 1868), 53. See also Moshe Kamensky, "Nihilistim 'ivriyim bishnot hashiv'im," *Hashiloah* 17 (1907): 259.

¹⁸ See Lieberman to E. Tsukerman, February 17, 1876, in *Arn Liebermans brieu*, ed. Marmor (New York: YIVO, 1951), 53.

Marx deeply impacted Lieberman. Whereas, in the late 1860s, he was writing Hebrew letters to Jewish newspapers endorsing the liberal policies of Alexander II, by 1876, he was at the forefront of challenging the Russian government and was writing articles in Russian that called for a social revolution.

LIEBERMAN'S MARXIST HISTORY OF JUDAISM

Lieberman harnessed Marx's theory of the value-form of feudalism and capitalism for his own project: a critique of medieval and modern value-forms of Judaism. Originally written in what his friends described as "a tome on the messianic and biblical ideals of Communism," Lieberman's work would be divided and published piecemeal in various media. Some sections he distributed across Hebrew newspapers *Hashahar* (*The Dawn*) and *Hamabit* (*The Observer*). Others he placed on the pages of his own socialist broadsheet, *Ha'emet* (*The Truth*). The bulk of Lieberman's writings, however, was discovered only posthumously in his archive in Vienna and subsequently published in various articles in Hebrew, Russian and Yiddish media. His most developed work appeared in 1928 under the title of *Toward the Genealogy of Utopias*. Taken together, these pieces provide a clear picture for the way Lieberman used Judaic traditions to further develop Marx's theories.

Following Marx, Lieberman assumed that "nature" was not a given but rather "something that we conquer and appropriate." Even knowledge existed in relation to the development of the material world. "Our knowledge increases as our senses develop," he explained, "and our knowledge widens our hearts and permeates our senses. All of human history and civilization," he continued, "is only a history of the development of our senses and capacities."¹⁹ Echoing Marx, Lieberman saw history as being propelled by human beings attempting to act upon the physical world and upon the various economic forces that limited their capacities to do so.

Specifically, Lieberman employed Marx's theory of feudal relations to reveal the medieval Jewish "value-form." In an essay entitled "The Development of Medieval Society,"²⁰ published in 1876 in *The Truth*, Lieberman described the symbiotic relationship between feudalism and scholasticism.

¹⁹ Aaron Shemuel Lieberman, "Gevul koḥot ha'adam," *Hamabit*, May 15, 1879.

²⁰ See "Hitpathut ḥayyei haḥevra bishnot habeinayim," *Ha'emet* 2, 1876, republished by Tsvi Krol, *Ha-Emet* (Tel Aviv: Arkhivon umuzei'on shel tenu'at ha'avoda, 1938), 25–31.

He explained how scholasticism divided life between the holy and the profane, good and evil, and the elite and the masses. For scholastics, nature reflected the will of heaven; it was something fixed that expressed objective truths. Human beings were meant to conform to the laws established by a deity. “Scholastics maintained that humans could not change nature,” Lieberman argued. “For scholastics,” Lieberman explained, “social relations were something connected to nature itself.” The laws of nature and those established by kings were based either on “fate” or on powers beyond people’s control. Nature was held up as a frozen entity—its hard and immutable laws reflected the will of God.

Lieberman’s critique of feudalism-scholasticism focused on the Christian theology of Thomas Aquinas, the Jewish philosophy of Moses Maimonides, and the preponderance of *musar* (ethical) literature in the medieval period—all of which, he claimed, expressed an “ascetic” worldview, equated form with the divine spirit, and relegated matter to a secondary role in the story of creation. Lieberman explained how scholasticism dispossessed human beings of acting on their will or their desires by identifying these traits as the source of evil. Medieval scholastics, he continued, assumed that human will and desire stood in opposition to God’s will and thus needed to be suppressed. Since God ordained the order of the world and the division of its resources in society, human desire for material things signaled human weakness and a lack of belief in God.

Lieberman relegated Maimonides’s philosophy to the margins of Jewish history by identifying him with Christianity and feudalism. He prefaced his description of the great medieval Jewish philosopher by noting “that the Christian religion consumed the Ancient World and greatly influenced Judaism as well.” Maimonides’ scholasticism reflected foreign streams of thought. The medieval ban placed on the study of his works, Lieberman believed, was well deserved. “Though this is not the place to discuss such matters,” Lieberman noted, “wise kabbalists” proffered a very different theory from the one advanced by Maimonides.²¹ Lieberman asserted that kabbalah, the medieval esoteric Jewish theory of the Godhead that drew from earlier mystical sources, offered a uniquely Jewish worldview, one that fundamentally differed from medieval Jewish and Christian philosophers.

Scholasticism was the superstructure of a feudal economic base composed of set professional profiles. People’s material conditions were beyond their control. Their station in life was fated, and any attempt to alter or

²¹ See “Hitpatḥut ḥayyei haḥevra bishnot habeinayim,” *Ha’emet* 2, 1876.

contest social and economic institutions was perceived as an act of sedition and as a form rebellion against the sovereign. Just as scholastics believed that desire produced sin, feudal lords argued that human will produced rebellion. Feudalism and scholasticism made human beings believe that their material situation was fixed and eternally binding. Nature was set, law was predetermined, and one's profession was passed down from generation to generation. To act against this order was to rebel against both God and man. Human desire and will were the sources of sin and insurrection. Elites were either those born into positions of authority and wealth (lords) or those that disciplined their bodies to control their desire (priests). Scholasticism affirmed and strengthened the economic regime of feudalism.

Following Marx, Lieberman described the breakdown of feudalism through the rise of the burger class, what he called in Hebrew "ironim." The worker would be transformed from a producer of commodities into a commodity itself, enslaved to machines and new masters, the bourgeoisie. The latter slowly and sometimes violently ensured their economic predominance by removing noblemen and kings from their seats of power and establishing new forms of political organization that allowed for more efficient and large-scale commerce. Capitalism was a movement based on the Talmudic principle of "kol d'alim gavar" (might makes right). Lieberman's articles published in *Ha'emet* never explicitly mention the name of Karl Marx or *Capital* because he feared governmental confiscation and the anti-Communist leanings of his publisher, Peretz Smolenskin.

In *Toward the Genealogy of Utopias*, Lieberman explicitly made known his debt to Marx's theory of feudalism and critique of the economic forces that held humanity in captivity. Written sometime in the late 1870s, the book described the worldview of Thomas More and outlined the ways that early modern utopian thought could be aligned with Marx's Communism. In this work, Lieberman cited and translated into Hebrew sections of *Capital* (which he once again referred to in the Hebrew form of "Hakeren") and addressed the expropriation of the serfs and peasant population from manors and estates in England and Scotland. Specifically, Lieberman quoted at length chapter 27 of the French translation of *Capital*, which detailed the clearing of Scottish estates and the actions taken by the Duchess of Sutherland. From 1814 to 1820, the Duchess removed 15,000 inhabitants from her land and replaced them with tenant farmers that could operate sheep farms. The clan that had at one time lived on the 794,000 acres was now relegated to 6,000 acres on the seashore. "This land that had until this time lain waste, and brought in no income to their owners" was now rented "at an average rent of 2s. 6d. per acre to the clansmen, who for

centuries had shed their blood for her family. The whole of the stolen clannish land she divided into 29 great sheep farms, each inhabited by a single family, for the most part imported English farm-servants” (8:27:15). Lieberman’s goal was not to explain the clearing of the estates per se, but rather to document the demise of scholasticism’s value-form alongside its feudal economic base structure.

Lieberman argued that feudalism and scholasticism were replaced by capitalism, Protestantism, and its Jewish offshoot, the Jewish reform movement. Just as capitalism was born on the ruins of feudalism, Lieberman maintained that Protestantism and the modern Jewish reform movement were produced out of the remnants of medieval scholasticism. Scholasticism’s ascetic qualities could also be found in Protestantism, which gave a religious imprimatur to ruling political elites. Lieberman identified the Jewish reform movement, or what he called “protestants of the Mosaic Faith,” as reflecting the foreign influences of capitalism and Christianity. Protestantism and the Jewish reform movement were not, however, progressive forces. Rather, just like capitalism, they only further confused the masses and strengthened the claims of ruling elites. Lieberman explained:

In truth, the religious reforms have damaged the intellectual development of human beings far more than the old and weak institution of Catholicism as we see witness today among the nations of the world and our Jewish brethren. . . . Among the reformers no one more than Calvin sought to bring back the crown of scholasticism. He sought to hang all human affairs on faith and he subsumed all human affairs under an entirely novel principle that was unknown to the Roman priests. God designed from the beginning the development of every person. God willed it that the world would be a place of suffering and pain and man should not complain about his fate . . . those who rule are the servants of God. He gave to them his honor and they take his place in the world. . . . And in the same way Christian Protestants follow in this path so too our [[Jewish] Protestants. And all those who try to reform religion according to these principles are only hurting the success and development of the nation. So too we beseech those who are enlightened in our nation: do not listen to these reformers.²²

Long before Max Weber explicitly tied capitalism to Protestantism through the work of John Calvin, Lieberman identified the way Calvin’s worldview

²² See Lieberman, *Kitvei A. S. Lieberman*, “*Letoldot ha’utopyot*,” ed. Michal Birkowitz (Tel Aviv: Davar, 1928), 2n1.

had brought together these regimes. Protestantism affirmed the nation-state, promoted political quietism, and supported capitalistic enterprise.

Lieberman's critique of "Jewish protestants" was mirrored in his critique of Jewish capitalists. "The Jewish aristocracy is responsible for Jews being pursued until today, especially in eastern Europe," he explained.²³ On the pages of *Vpered!*, he denounced the Jewish industrialists such as the "Gintsburgs, Poliakovs and Warshavskys, whose interests," he believed, "were in opposition to those of the Jewish people."²⁴ Lieberman described the exploitation of factory workers and the strikes sprouting up at tobacco factories across Lithuania.²⁵ He linked Jewish industrialists with Jewish reformers. "Social change," Lieberman believed, "could never come about through enlighteners who had attended the government schools, benefited from the philanthropy of the rich and at every opportunity tried to distance themselves from their own people."²⁶ He saw both Jewish reformers and industrialists as being complicit in the regime of capitalism.

But Lieberman's goal was not to simply ascribe the Protestant superstructure to capitalism but to also distance Judaism and Jews from these ideologies and economic structures. Just as Lieberman marginalized the medieval Jewish philosophy of Moses Maimonides by identifying it with medieval Christianity and feudalism, he identified the modern Jewish reform movement as an outgrowth of Protestantism and capitalism. He believed that Jews, as a collective, were not implicated in feudalism and capitalism, and that Judaism, as represented by a body of ideas, had been deformed by these economic regimes and their Christian superstructures, Catholicism and Protestantism. Judaism, as he understood it, stood in opposition both to Christianity and to capitalism.

Lieberman's own program and theory of Judaism followed the basic outline set in the *Communist Manifesto*. At one point, he even attempted to compose a Hebrew translation of the text.²⁷ In various articles and tracts written over the course of the 1870s, Lieberman echoed the platform laid

²³ See *Pinkas agudat hasotyalistim ha'ivriyim belondon* (Jerusalem: Hebrew University, 1968), 41.

²⁴ See "Iz Vil'no," *Vpered!*, September 1, 1875, 504.

²⁵ On the factories and strikes in the 1870s, see Lieberman, "Iz Belostoka," *Vpered!*, December 15, 1875, 723 and Abraham Menes, "Di Yidishe arbeter-bavegung in Rusland fun onheyb 70er bizn sof 90er yorn," in *Historishe shriftn*, ed. Elias Tcherikower, 3 vols. (Vilna: YIVO, 1939), 3:10–17.

²⁶ See "Iz Belostoka," *Vpered!*, February 15, 1876.

²⁷ On Lieberman's attempt to translate the *Communist Manifesto* see the letters between Rosalya Idelsohn and Valerian Smirnov in Boris Sapir, "Lieberman et le Socialisme Russe," *International Review of Social History* 3 (1938): 35–37.

out in Marx's brochure, calling for the abolition of "kinyan hameyuḥad" (private property), the cessation of child labor, the equal treatment of women, the unification of the proletariat of all nations, and the downfall of governments and capitalist institutions. Moreover, Lieberman identified Marx's program in biblical and kabbalistic terms. He believed that Marx's theory of the intelligentsia reflected the kabbalistic concept of the thirty-six righteous people and equated Communism with a "messianic" age.

Lieberman's assumption that the *Communist Manifesto* expressed Judaic ideals may have had some historical basis. Marx's "turn to socialism" in the 1840s has been described by some as a rejection of "Christian personalism."²⁸ His embrace of Communism in 1843 came on the heels of intense conversations with the Jewish socialist Moses Hess, whom Marx referred to as his "Communist rabbi." Some have asserted that "Hess's influence was important in leading Marx towards revolutionary communism."²⁹ More than one scholar has considered Hess to be "Marx's precursor and, so to speak, his 'John the Baptist.'"³⁰ Most recently, Gareth Stedman Jones has highlighted the way that Marx and Engels in the 1840s viewed Hess's communism as expressing Judaic ideals.³¹ Though Marx would have vehemently denied any links between his own theory of labor and certain strands of biblical and kabbalistic traditions that critiqued historical institutions, Lieberman thought otherwise and immediately identified what he believed to be latent affinities between Jewish-messianic and Marxist discourses.

Still, Lieberman fundamentally differed from Marx in two very critical respects. First, in contrast to Marx who identified Jews as a strictly religious group, Lieberman assumed that Jews were also a historical national collective and as such would follow the internal program of all nations as described by Marx in the *Communist Manifesto*. Seeing Jews as a national entity allowed Lieberman to promote the cultivation of a specifically Jewish cadre of propagandists. Jews would first develop revolutionary cells within a Jewish social sphere and then later join a larger federated Communist International that would overcome social and political distinctions. This

²⁸ See Warren Breckman, *Marx, The Young Hegelians, and the Origins of Radical Social Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 19, 292–97.

²⁹ See Carlebach, "The Problem of Moses Hess's Influence on the Young Karl Marx," *Leo Baeck Institute Year Book* 18 (1973): 28. On Hess's own political radicalism and messianism, see most recently Adam Sutcliffe, "Ludwig Börne, Jewish Messianism, and the Politics of Money," *Leo Baeck Institute Year Book* 57 (2012): 233–36.

³⁰ See Carlebach, "The Problem of Moses Hess' Influence," 39.

³¹ See Jones, *Karl Marx: Greatness and Illusion*, 227.

reading of Marx's theory of propaganda would have radical political implications that would be further developed by Zionists, Bundists, and Jewish Socialists in the late nineteenth century.

Second, Lieberman cryptically and somewhat homiletically deepened Marx's theory of consciousness by defining the agent connecting and motivating human beings toward action. Whereas Marx argued that consciousness began with labor, Lieberman went a step further and asked about the agency behind praxis. For Lieberman, human beings' impetus to move forward and attempt to attain "wholeness" was based on them hearing "the voice of God that travels within the sphere of the universe (*bekerev tevel*) and calls out to our minds: speak to humanity and move forward!" Citing a biblical passage (Exodus 14:15), Lieberman removed the term "the Jewish people" (Bnei Yisrael) and instead inserted the word "humanity" (*adam*). This reflected Lieberman's own attempt to see Marx's universal goals as flowing from biblical principles. Lieberman reinterpreted these biblical verses to argue that God was the force that connected human beings to nature and allowed for action. God was not consciousness but rather the condition that made consciousness possible and allowed humans to change nature and develop new capacities.³² "We have the capacity to appropriate nature and make it work for us," Lieberman explained. God provided human beings with the mechanism to conceive and alter the seemingly natural order of things.

Lieberman's theory of the Divine differed from the anthropomorphic theories of God promulgated by Feuerbach. Whereas Feuerbach identified God as the projection of an ideal human being, Lieberman identified God as a force that connected nature to human beings and "unified" subject and object. God was not an ethical ideal or the sum total of various predicates attached to its name. Rather, God was the connective tissue that allowed humans to act upon the world.

Lieberman's depiction of God as being rooted in human beings' capacities to constantly transform nature ran back to kabbalistic ideas put into circulation by the sixteenth-century Safed scholar Isaac Luria and further developed by the eighteenth-century Italian messianist, Moses Hayyim Luzzatto (1707–1746). Lieberman, as we will see, adopted Luria's basic temporal scheme that identified the imbalances and injustices of history as a function of Creation. Luria described these imbalances and injustices through a sephirotic system that reflected God's relationship to the universe. In kabbalistic thought the *sefirot* (plural of *sefira*) are the emanations

³² Lieberman, "Gevul koḥot ha'adam," *Hamabit*, May 15, 1878.

through which the infinite Godhead expresses itself in this world. While the exact genesis and configuration of the *sefirot* is a matter of great debate, for Luria the *sefirot* comprised ten distinct and connected spheres (such as Knowledge, Kingdom, Strength, Mercy) that reflected the divine light that came into this world through the process of Creation. Taken together these spheres account for the deep structure of the universe, explain the antinomies of human history, and provide an eschatological blueprint.

Central to Luria's system was the principle that evil and injustice were built into the very nature of the *sefirot* and were further revealed in the creation of the universe. Evil was not something produced by man or something that indirectly emanated from God but in fact was part and parcel of God and was thus ontologically conjoined with that which is good.³³ Creation was a "cathartic" process on the part of God attempting to rid itself of evil and inviting human beings to help in the process of eradicating evil. Thus, instead of an elite trying to distance itself from an evil material world in order to draw closer to a pure heavenly intellectual sphere (scholasticism), all of nature, for Luria, was connected to and composed of both good and evil elements. The task of human beings was to engage and act upon the physical world and to continue the process begun by Creation by fully cleansing the universe of evil.³⁴

Lieberman teased out the political implications of Luria's kabbalistic theory by rereading the works of Luzzatto, whose *138 Gates of Wisdom* he explicitly quoted on multiple occasions. Lieberman's citations of Luzzatto's work were not merely a matter of scholarly integrity. The latter built on Luria's theory of the Divine by pointing to human labor as a precondition for the process of cleansing the world of evil. Many have seen in Luzzatto's work a revolutionary political reading of the kabbalah.³⁵ What Luria spoke about in cosmic and theoretical terms, Luzzatto described in historical and political terms. Privately, Luzzatto claimed to be a messiah. This led to various public disputes with rabbinical authorities and eventually forced him to curb his messianic teachings and adopt the persona of a law-abiding pious Jew and scholar. However, buried in Luzzatto's writings, one can see a rigorous messianic theory that emphasized the unique role of the Jewish people in bringing about a universal social and political revolution. The Jewish people, Luzzatto argued, would be at the forefront of overcoming

³³ See Isaiah Tishby, *Torat hara' vehakelippah bekabbalat ha'Ari* (Jerusalem: Schocken 1965), 48–49.

³⁴ Tishby, 45.

³⁵ See Jonathan Garb, "The Circle of Moshe Hayyim Luzzatto in Its Eighteenth-Century Context," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 44, no. 2 (2011): 189–202.

the antinomies and contradictions of the Godhead made present in Creation: Jew-gentile, male-female, and rich-poor. Jews would lead humanity in fixing the Godhead and ushering in a new mode of existence.

Lieberman adopted, with modifications, Luria and Luzzatto's theories of evil, which claimed that evil was inherent within God's nature and the creation of the universe. He used it to redefine the relationship between elites and the masses. According to Lieberman, "good and evil"

are both connected together in the upper spheres and emanate from the source of Infinity and the will of that which stands above [God]. . . . However, the evil side is not distinguished from the Godhead as it is with the Persian God, Ahriman. . . . The secret of the evil side in [the kabbalah] is that it allows people to have freedom to choose good or bad and be rewarded for every deed (*mitzvah*). [By good and bad being part of the upper spheres and nature itself] that which is good is not kept hidden for holymen (*tzadikim*) alone.³⁶

By locating evil within the Godhead and the physical world, Lieberman empowered human beings with the capacity to critique social institutions and reject ascetic tendencies. If form and matter were presented as one, and good and evil were part of the Godhead, and desire and will were part of nature, then asceticism was no longer a virtue or an elite status. Lieberman claimed that humans, at each and every moment, were being given the opportunity to confront, reject, or attempt to resist institutions and laws that promoted social hierarchies, economic inequalities, and social antagonisms. These forms of evil were part of history and were established in order to give human beings the opportunity to critique them and to create a new world order that promoted freedom and the development of human beings' full capacities. This did not require humans to distance themselves from these structures (asceticism), but rather to change them. Labor was virtuous and held out the possibility of the full rectification of social and economic imbalances and inequities.

For Lieberman, these inequities were theorized within the kabbalistic discourse of the Godhead (as revealed in history) and most acutely witnessed in the "immiseration" and "poverty" of the lower classes that had been robbed of the fruits of their labor. According to Luzzatto, the history of human affairs was based on a misalignment between the theological and

³⁶ Lieberman, "Hitpathut hayyei hahevra bishnot habeinayim," *Ha'emet*, 27–28n2.

political spheres. He described this misalignment as the imbalanced relationship between the kabbalistic category of the feminine sphere of *Malkhut* (politics) and the divine masculine sphere of *Yesod* (divinity). Through the political, human beings had incorrectly usurped the mantle of godliness in history.

The inequities generated from politics misappropriating divinity were difficult to see because of the way feudal lords and capitalists employed the concept of “mercy,” known in the kabbalistic tradition as “*raḥamim*.”³⁷ Lieberman explained that while merciful policies and practices, such as various governmental laws and philanthropic projects, appeared to be altruistic expressions directed at overcoming economic imbalances and ensuring that politics were guided by divine principles, they in fact permitted someone or something to exist in a state of deficiency or deprivation. Explicitly citing Luzzatto, Lieberman maintained that “mercy” reflected a misalignment of the political and the divine forces. “Mercy” upheld the regimes of feudalism and capitalism. In Luzzatto’s kabbalistic theory of society, the injustices, antagonisms, and inequalities in history are allowed to stand when the political sphere deceptively claims the mantle of the divine sphere.

Mercy appears as a gesture to a higher authority (the Divine, *Yesod*) while also allowing the existing structure of authority (the Sovereign, *Malkhut*) to remain standing. The key to bringing about a revolution was recognizing the deceptive nature of “merciful” elites and institutions—ripping off the Band-Aid of mercy was the first step to healing humanity.

Lieberman’s theory of mercy was a coded attack on late nineteenth-century European governmental liberal policies that supposedly were improving the economic conditions of the lower classes. In the name of God-given rights, governments across Europe were providing greater protections to oppressed groups while also conspiring to promote capitalistic industries that only further handicapped these groups. Liberalism was the way in which capitalism cloaked its injustice in the garb of divine ethics. Russian Jews, Lieberman maintained, should not be fooled by the liberal policies promoted by European states and reform rabbis.

Lieberman used the kabbalistic concept of mercy not only to attack liberal governmental policies, but also to criticize capitalists’ promotion of philanthropy. He equated the liberal merciful governmental policies with charity given by the industrialist-philanthropist. While the “philanthropist” donates his own resources to those in need, upon closer examination, Lieberman maintained, “those who establish hospitals, synagogues, and housing for the poor, are the same as those who covet their money.” Society

³⁷ See “Ma’aseh Satan,” *Ha’emet* 3, 1876, republished by Krol, *Ha’emet*, 52.

naively thinks charity is “directed for the purposes of the good.” Lieberman scoffed at such pretensions. “For the same individual who provides small sums of his money to the poor does so while decorating his home with beautiful things produced through their labor.”³⁸ Those who were “merciful” were those who upheld the law.

Lieberman’s kabbalistic concept of “mercy” deepened Marx’s comrade Friedrich Engels’s critique of bourgeois “charity.” Engels identified “charity” as degrading man and “giv[ing] more than he who takes; charity which tread[ing] the downtrodden still deeper in the dust, demand[ing] that the degraded, the pariah cast out of society, shall first surrender the last that remains to him, his very claim to manhood, shall first beg for mercy before your mercy deigns to press, in the shape of alms, the brand of degradation upon his brow.”³⁹ Lieberman asked Jews to entertain the possibility that “if there were no rich people there would also be no rebellious poor people and no need for charity. For each person would enjoy the fruit of their labor.”⁴⁰

Lieberman’s critique of mercy was directed at specific Jewish groups living within the Pale of Settlement. Philanthropists represented the emerging sector of economically elite Russian Jews that benefited from Alexander II’s liberalization program. Among other projects, the philanthropists funded the translations of scientific works into Hebrew and the establishment of crafts schools.⁴¹ In the long term, Jewish Marxists, like Lieberman, argued that philanthropy would never alleviate Jews’ economic problems; in fact, it sustained them. Philanthropists were complicit in the Russian government’s oppression of Jewish and serf populations.

Lieberman saw the destruction of Russian imperialism as presaging the end of capitalism. He described the year 1876 and Russia’s involvement in the Balkan War as heralding the End of Days. Marx himself had privately asserted that the outbreak of the Russian-Turkish War was “a new turning point in European history.”⁴² For Lieberman, it was only a matter of time

³⁸ See “Ma’aseh Satan,” *Ha’emet* 3, 1876.

³⁹ See Friedrich Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class of England in 1844*, translated by Florence Kelley Wischniewetzky (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1943), 278.

⁴⁰ See “Ma’aseh Satan,” *Ha’emet* 3, 1876.

⁴¹ On the support given by Jewish philanthropists to Jewish students in Kiev see M. Margolis, “Khesbn fun dem gelt,” *Kol mevasser*, February 11, 1865 and Brian Horowitz, *Jewish Philanthropy and Enlightenment in Late Tsarist Russia* (Seattle: Washington University Press, 2011), 7–10.

⁴² See Karl Marx to F. A. Sorge, September 27, 1877, in *Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels Collected Works*, vol. 45 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2010), 278, http://www.hekmatist.com/Marx%20Engels/Marx%20&%20Engels%20Collected%20Works%20Volume%2045_%20Ka%20-%20Karl%20Marx.pdf.

until “a prophet” would reveal himself to be God’s messenger responsible for punishing the wicked, fixing the sephirot (the elements that comprise the Godhead), and transforming the social order of the world. State law would be eliminated and merciful acts of charity would no longer be necessary. A new society based on the principle of “hakol lakol” (everything for the whole), would replace private property and the principle of “sheli sheli veshelkha shelkha” (what is mine is mine and what is yours is yours).⁴³

According to Lieberman, if class and gender differences were removed, there would be a realignment of social and economic relations. The religious sphere (*Yesod*), identified in kabbalistic literature as expressing masculine traits, would become one with the feminine political sphere (*Malkhut*). In a communist society, Lieberman maintained that there would be no need for “charity” or “mercy” to mediate between them because a new kind of absolute justice and social harmony would rule over all. The full unification of the political-feminine (*Malkhut*) with the divine-masculine (*Yesod*) would give birth to a new social and political body. Lieberman cites Luzzatto as follows:

It is written in all the works of hidden knowledge, that honesty [yosher] and justice [din] are two opposites. Honesty [yosher] comes from the *Sefira* of *Hesed*, the source of that which is good and justice [din] comes from the *Sefira* of *Malkhut* [Kingdom], which is the source for that which is evil. And as it appears today justice is the source of deficiency and misery. As the wise one Ramhal [Moses Hayyim Luzzatto] explained [the correct ordering of] the beauty and delight [*hayofi vehahemda*] of *Malkhut* [Kingdom] does not emerge unless the *Sefira* of *Yesod* [Foundation] is present. For with the [masculine] *Sefira* of *Yesod*, the [feminine] *Sefira* of *Malkhut* [Kingdom] is made whole. But without *Yesod*, [the power to connect Godliness to the world], there is only deficiency and misery [*Kelah Pithei Hokhma*, Siman 58].⁴⁴

Lieberman’s theory of kabbalistic communism was a signature feature in his writings and was meant to appeal to the overwhelming majority of observant Jews in Russia and specifically to those whom he identified as the intelligentsia of Jewish life, those attending Talmudic seminaries, yeshivot.

⁴³ See A. Lieberman to Abraham Isaac Lieberman, August 1875, in *Arn Liebermans briv*, 41

⁴⁴ In the only footnote in the “Ma’aseh satan” *Ha’emet* 3, 1876, 52.

The yeshiva was a long-standing Jewish learning institution in which Jewish males spent their days poring over rabbinic texts. In the 1870s, there were still many more Jews attending yeshivot than Jews attending Russian universities. The learned rabbinic elite still enjoyed the admiration of large sectors of Russian Jewry.⁴⁵ Most of them, however, could not read Russian or, for that matter, any European language in which Marx's work appeared.

Lieberman took it upon himself to act as the channel between the yeshiva students and Marx. In a brochure published on May 20, 1876, Lieberman pitted the yeshiva student against the enlightened reform-minded, university-educated Russian Jews. These "so-called enlighteners," Lieberman claimed "worshiped money and the State." Lieberman identified Jewish enlighteners as reflecting the economic program of acculturated Western European bourgeois Jews. Lieberman beseeched the yeshiva student "to draw closer to all those who work the land. For the proletariat," he exclaimed, "will come together and remove kings from their seats of power." The reconciliation of these different groups through a shared class identity "would lead to a social revolution and the lifting of the red flag."⁴⁶

At the very moment that Marx began reconsidering the Western biases implicit in his theory of Communism,⁴⁷ Lieberman was developing a theory of Marxist thought built around the traditional character of Eastern European Jewish life. By the mid-1870s, Marx had ceased criticizing traditional social institutions and "primitive" communities on Russian lands. Marx had begun studying the Russian *obshchina*. No longer did he encourage their destruction in the hopes of developing the conditions for capitalism. Marx specifically emended the 1875 French translation of *Capital* (employed by Lieberman) to emphasize that the "English form of expropriation of the peasants is applicable only to Western Europe, or to put it differently, Eastern Europe and Russia may follow a completely different path of evolution."⁴⁸ By 1876, Lieberman had already assumed that Communism would

⁴⁵ See Ben Halpern and Jehuda Reinharz, "Nationalism and Jewish Socialism: The Early Years," *Modern Judaism* 8, no. 3 (1988): 225.

⁴⁶ "Shelumei Bahurei Yisrael" was reprinted in *Davar*, April 30, 1936. On yeshiva students influenced by Russian revolutionary literature see Leo Deutsch, "Der ershter Yeshiva bokhur in der russisher revolutzion," *Di tsukunft* 20, no. 8 (1915): 713–18.

⁴⁷ On the development of Marx's thought in light of his knowledge of Russian history see Haruki Wada, "Marx and Revolutionary Russia," in *Late Marx and the Russian Road: Marx and the Peripheries of Capitalism*, ed. Theodor Shanin (London: Routledge, 1983), 40–75.

⁴⁸ Wada, 49.

not come through the surpluses of capitalism but rather through the revolutions of oppressed collectives and more primitive forms of social organization. Lieberman's privileging of the yeshiva and rejection of Western European reformist rabbis, philanthropists, and capitalists provides crucial missing information about how Marxist thought was redefined in light of contemporary Russian social and economic divisions.

CONCLUSION

In discussing the rise of post-liberal Jewish politics, the historian Jonathan Frankel remarked that the positions advanced by later Jewish Socialists and Zionists were "essentially similar to, and even influenced by, the so-called Hebrew socialism developed by Aron Lieberman in the 1870s."⁴⁹ Lieberman's reconceptualization of Jewish history through the lens of historical materialism reveals the way that Marxist theories of labor first entered Jewish circles at the end of the nineteenth century. More generally, it highlights the way in which Marx's critique of capitalism and theory of Communism were reconceived in light of the various collectivities on Russian lands in the 1870s.

In contrast to those who have focused primarily on the reception of Marx's "On the Jewish Question" and his Jewish followers' rejection of Judaism, Lieberman highlights the way Marx transformed the nature of Jewish politics as well as what would come to constitute Judaism. Marx's theory of Communism and critique of history would become an organizing framework for twentieth-century Jewish thinkers, inspiring new versions of Judaism and Jewish collectivity revolving around land, labor, and bodies. It also allows us to understand how Russia's unique socioeconomic makeup called into question Marx's earlier theory of the historical inevitability of capitalism.

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⁴⁹ Frankel, "The Roots of Jewish Socialism (1881–1892)," in *Essential Papers on Jews and the Left*, ed. Mendelsohn (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 61.