

A. LIEBERMAN: FATHER OF JEWISH SOCIALISM¹

FORTY YEARS have elapsed since the Jewish socialist press made its first appearance. The Hebrew journal, *Haemet* ("Truth"), the first Jewish socialist publication, made its debut in Vienna in May, 1877. The journal and its publisher and editor, Aaron Lieberman, are among the most interesting and extraordinary phenomena of modern Jewish history. To understand the first Jewish socialist publication and the period in which it originated, we must first make a study of the man Lieberman, who truly deserves the title of "Father of Jewish Socialism".

Aaron Shmuel Lieberman (later known as Arthur Freeman, his pen-names being *Bar Drora* and *Daniel Ish Chamudot*) was born about 1848 in the town of Luna in the province of Grodno, Russia. He received his education in the larger cities of Sowlke and Vilna. Independently, both he and his father (a Hebrew teacher tutoring in the homes of the well-to-do) fell under the influence of the *Haskala*.² Thus the young Lieberman was spared the conflict which the freethinking youth of that period had with their pious parents. In his father's home, Lieberman obtained a knowledge of the Hebrew language and literature. Throughout his life he was a fanatical devotee of Hebrew, the language of his socialist propaganda.

In accordance with the Jewish custom of those days, the future nihilist married at an early age and was already a father when he entered the Rabbinical school in Vilna. In the 70's the Rabbinical school in Vilna was a center of enlightened, liberal, and even revolutionary thought. Several pupils were aware of the socialist movement among the Russian intelligentsia; and two, Aaron Lieberman and his younger friend, Zundelovitch (born in 1854), were active socialist propagandists.

1873-78 were important years in the Russian revolutionary movement. That period marked the commencement of the interesting movement of "mingling with the people". The social-revolutionary intelligentsia learned manual trades, dressed as peasants and workers, and mingled with the masses, thereby spreading revolutionary ideas. The spiritual leader of this movement was P. Lavrov who published a fortnightly journal, *V'Period*, which was printed in London and illegally circulated in Russia. Jewish youth was not unaffected by this propaganda which gave birth to the *Chorni Peredial*³ and the terrorist activities of the *Narodnaya Volya*.³ Among the more prominent Jewish names actively identified with the underground movement of the 70's were the Levinthal brothers, Axelrod, Aronson, Lazare Goldenberg, Goldstein, L. Zuckerman, Jessie Helfman, and Gotz. Jewish socialist writers such as M. Vintchevsky, L. Cantor,

¹ Written in 1917.

² See footnote 8, p. 90.

³ Non-Marxian mass movements embracing peasants and workers which merged with other groups to form the Socialist-Revolutionary Party.

Yahalal, and M. Lilienblum appeared on the scene. The pogroms disillusioned the last three in the revolutionary ideals, and they joined the *Chibat Zion*⁴ movement.

Zundelovitch and Lieberman were original. Whereas other Jewish socialists agitated among the Gentile workers or were contented merely with writing Hebrew poetry on social problems, the two young students of the Rabbinical school attempted to win the Jewish masses over to Socialism. This was a unique approach, for at that time not only Gentile, but also Jewish intellectuals negated the economic role of the Jewish masses. Jews are not fit for productive work, they claimed; they are by nature brokers, merchants, money-lenders and "parasites"—in short, an element that is not susceptible to socialist propaganda. Zundelovitch and Lieberman were more intimately acquainted with the Jewish masses. Being themselves proletarians and raised among the Jewish proletariat, they knew that the Jewish masses lived by their own toil—that the Jewish people was not a people of exploiters and parasites, but a people of exploited and oppressed workers.

They therefore devoted themselves to the dissemination of socialist propaganda among the Jewish masses. With this aim in view, Zundelovitch organized a group of young Jewish intellectuals in Vilna. But he was soon drawn into the Russian political movement and left for St. Petersburg. There he established an illegal press, fell into the clutches of the Czarist police, and was sentenced to Siberia. He was not freed until three years later, during the Revolution of 1905.

Lieberman made a timely escape from the Czarist police by fleeing abroad where he devoted the rest of his short life to spreading socialist propaganda among Jews.

Immediately after his escape Lieberman organized in Berlin the "Jewish Group of the Internationale", consisting of Jewish socialist emigres from Russia. He then left for London where he worked on Lavrov's *V'Period*. He also organized a Jewish socialist society—the first in Jewish history. The membership was a comparatively large one for that period, totalling thirty-seven, mostly workers. Lieberman was also a worker, earning his living as a lithographer.

The records of this society are to be found in the archives of the Foreign Committee of the *Bund* at Geneva. Lieberman was the secretary of the branch. The title page reads:

RECORD OF THE SOCIETY OF THE HEBREW SOCIALISTS OF LONDON

Founded Iyar 26, in the Year 5636, May 20, 1876

The record contains the program of the society, written in Hebrew as well as in Yiddish (although the minutes of sessions were in Yiddish). The first Jewish socialist program states in part:

We are convinced that the present order, which holds sway everywhere, is ruthless and unjust. The capitalists, rulers, and clergy have taken unto themselves all human rights and property and have enslaved the working masses through the power of their money.

As long as private ownership continues, economic misery shall not cease; as long as humanity is divided into nations and classes, hatred will not cease; as long as the clergy continues to sway the emotions of the people, religious hatred will continue.

The liberation of humanity can be achieved only through a basic change in the political, economic, and social relations—by uprooting

⁴ See footnote 9, p. 97.

the existing order and constructing in its place a new society based on socialism which will abolish the injustice and domination of capital, which will eradicate the parasites and the system of "mine" and "thine".

We Jews are an integral part of humanity and cannot be liberated except through the liberation of all humanity.

The liberation of humanity from misery and slavery can be achieved by the workers only if they unite in a struggle against their despoilers, destroy the existing order, and replace it by the reign of labor, justice, freedom, and the fraternity of mankind.

The workers of Europe and America have united in various societies to achieve their aim and are preparing for a revolution, for the establishment of the reign of labor socialism (*Socializmus Laavoda* in the Hebrew text). Therefore, we, the children of Israel, have decided to affiliate ourselves with this noble Alliance of Labor.

This program was written by Lieberman and was unanimously accepted by the society.

The society existed seven months, disbanding with Lieberman's departure from London.

During his stay in London, Lieberman published the first socialist proclamation in Hebrew. Commencing with *el shlomei bachurei yisrael* ("To the intelligent youth of Israel"), he appealed to the youth to devote their energy to the public welfare and participate in the struggle for the emancipation of the working masses of all peoples. In a biblical style he portrays the awakening of the Jewish masses and their struggle against their Jewish exploiters. The Jewish people will soon recognize their enemies and will exclaim:

Thus have your sins been visited upon us; your crimes have caused us sorrow. You have brought upon us the anger of the sword and the crash of thunder and lightning. Your sin has inflamed against us the hatred of the people; your treacherous hand has carried a blaze of religious hatred against us. Sharpened swords have been cast at us and have pierced through the bodies of thousands of our brethren. You have humiliated our people. Your deceit in trade has branded the Jewish people, the very same people whom your plundering has suppressed and tortured, to a much greater extent than all other evildoers on earth.

This proclamation was signed by the "Loyal Volunteers of the People of the House of Israel". The proclamation showed a deep love for the Jewish people and for humanity. The opening of the proclamation was: "We, the friends of the Jewish people and of all the suffering masses . . ."

After his departure from London, Lieberman settled in Vienna where he became acquainted with the conservative and nationalist publicist, Peretz Smolenskin, and for a short time was a contributor to the latter's periodical, *Hashachar* ("Dawn"). But he soon went his own way; and in May, 1876, he founded *Haemet*, the first Jewish socialist organ. Although Lieberman cloaked his writings in metaphors to escape Czarist censors, *Haemet* did not have a long life; the Vienna authorities shut it down after the third issue and arrested its editor. He was extradited by the Prussian police and was tried in Berlin with two other Russo-Jewish socialists (Hurwich and Aaronson, a brother-in-law of Eduard Bernstein).

Lieberman was sentenced to prison (according to some, for fifteen months; according to others, for nine months) and was not freed until January, 1880. All in all, Lieberman spent two years in the prison of Vienna, in continuous danger of being handed over to the Russian authorities.

Prison life affected Lieberman's mental balance. A tragic love affair in London and America, where he went after his liberation, did not help restore it. On November 18, 1880, the father of Jewish socialism committed suicide in Syracuse, New York. His last written words were: "Long live the world! He who finds only misery and pain is doomed to die. Do not accuse me ere you have put yourself in my position."

Only three small issues of *Haemet* appeared. It contained insufficient material from which to glean the *weltanschauung* of that period in general and of Aaron Lieberman in particular. We have not even a clear idea as to which articles were written by Lieberman and which by his colleagues, for Lieberman refused to publish the names of the authors with the articles. Without doubt the prospectus as well as the leading articles and notices were Lieberman's own products.

It seems that Lieberman was far from scientific socialism and Marx and Engels. Marxian literature forty years ago was little known and even less recognized. The socialism of *Haemet* has an idealistic and scholarly character. Lieberman's prospectus in *Haemet* stated:

The darkness which to this day governs the minds of the majority is the father of all evil. It has penetrated to the base of society and has shattered its foundation. Darkness has paved the road for deceit. With its aid brutal rulers have enslaved the people . . . The people knows endless pain . . . and is degenerating through ignorance. The people cannot choose between evil and good. Only truth can bring enlightenment to the human mind and distinguish good from evil.

Champions for justice are to be found among all peoples. Only our Jewish literature has lacked *emet* (truth); for since prophecy ceased among the Jewish people, our writers have ceased to take an interest in the miserable life and needs of the people.

Characteristic of Lieberman was his uncritical assumption that the Jews understood Hebrew.

The outstanding theoretical work in *Haemet* was Lieberman's "The Struggle for Existence and Its Relation to the Life of Society" (the leading article of the second number). He concluded that the struggle for existence was forcing humanity to unite into one society and that "solidarity is the best weapon in the struggle of life".

The sketches and poetry of *Haemet* are replete with socialist thoughts and sentiments. A few articles, such as the leading article in the first number, dealt with the Jews, including those of Hungary and London.

Immediately after Lieberman's death, J. A. Trivaush in his novel, *Dor Tahapuchot* ("The Confused Generation"), pictured his hero Aaron Lieberman in the role of "Frank". He knew him intimately and portrayed him as a man of inner contradictions. On one hand he was a nihilist, discrediting the past and denying the right of existence of all nations, including the Jewish; on the other hand, he was a fanatical Hebraist and lover of the Jewish people. Morris Vintchevsky, his personal friend, in his excellent "Memoirs", pictured Lieberman as stormy, paradoxical, and artistic.

The documents of the founder of Jewish socialism reveal in him a deep conflict. He denied the existence of a Jewish people, while elsewhere he expressed almost Zionist thoughts. S. L. Zitron (in *Hed Hazman*) and M. K. (in *Hashiloach*) relate that in his long discussions with Peretz Smolenskin, Lieberman "negated the historic past and dismissed the national problem". Lieberman's leading article in the first number of *Haemet*, devoted to the Jewish problem, categorically denied the existence of a Jewish people, as may be seen from the following: "We Jews do not possess a culture of our own which differentiates and isolates us from the nations among whom we live . . . Any bond which may ever have existed between us has long been torn asunder."

Thus wrote an author *who spoke to Jews in the name of Jews in the ancient Hebrew tongue* which for centuries served as the cultural tie of our scattered people!

The previously mentioned records of the London society illuminate a different characteristic of Lieberman. The minutes of the tenth meeting, held on the second of Ab, 1876, contain a motion of Lieberman that the next meeting, which would have been held on the ninth of Ab, be postponed.

This move was opposed by George Saper, who said, "We socialists are not interested in *Tisha B'Ab*. We have renounced ancient tradition . . . We are interested in the equality of humanity."

To this Lieberman replied, "At the present time *Tisha B'Ab* has the same significance for us Jewish socialists as it has for all Jews; for as long as the social revolution has not taken place, political freedom is of prime importance to every people. To the Jewish people it is of the utmost importance. On this day we lost our independence for which our people has mourned for the past 1,800 years." The society agreed to Lieberman's proposal and postponed the meeting.

Lieberman's cosmopolitanism came from the prevailing belief of the socialists of all nations that they were on the eve of the social revolution. Lieberman refused to publish advertisements in his *Haemet*. Expecting the social revolution at any moment, Lieberman avoided anything that might identify socialism with the present order. He considered both nationalism and advertising to be capitalistic phenomena which might carry a bourgeois spirit into the labor movement.

The father of Jewish socialism did not succeed in creating harmony between his deep Jewish national instinct and his carefully construed socialist philosophy.

Lieberman's picture of the Russian martyrs published by M. Vintchevsky in the *Zukunft* (1909, p. 88) was an artistic achievement. Artistic tendencies were noticeable also in Lieberman's handwriting, preserved in the archive of the *Bund* in Geneva and in the New York Public Library. These writings reveal a soul full of beauty and artistry.

Lieberman's friend, Hurwich, relates a most unique incident in *Bilola*. He tells us that Lieberman presented a most extraordinary gift to his deified teacher, Lavrov. The gift was Lieberman's own hat, with the following note: "As it is impossible for me to send you my head, I send you my hat."

Lieberman's tragic inner struggles drove him to suicide. The father of Jewish socialism died before the advent of the Russian pogroms—they might have clarified his attitude to the Jewish problem.