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RABBINIC RESPONSES TO COMMUNISM

Historians may soon look back at modern communism as a historical relic—as a movement that erupted onto the world stage, left a major impact on world history and some one hundred and fifty years later came to an end. However, the fact that a particular ideology appears destined for extinction does not mean that the study of that ideology becomes worthless. Aspects of deceased ideologies often return in different forms. Questions, such as what aspects of a given ideology proved harmful and what made that ideology attractive for decent people remain instructive beyond the life span of the ideology proper. Indeed, an analysis of rabbinic critiques of communist thought helps illuminate a number of important contemporary issues. Confronting the challenges of communism led these rabbis not only to reject it, but to creative and fruitful engagements with many important Torah themes that bear on the topic.

It should be clear at the outset that rejecting communism does not entail endorsing the modern western state or accepting strict capitalism. A number of the rabbinic voices we shall investigate express dismay about aspects of both the eastern communist and the western capitalist systems, albeit with greater disdain for the former. Many see each system as a response to the problems generated by the other. Biblical episodes in Genesis are read in terms of the pendulum swinging back and forth between the political rivals. Some of the rabbis even saw the capitalist system as prone to similar problems as communism with regard to particular issues.

The rabbinic views we shall discuss were not, for the most part, expressed in the context of comprehensive studies of halakha's approach to economic or political theory.¹ In other words, these authorities did not, for instance, explicitly analyze the entirety of *Seder Nezikin* to bolster their points. Rather, they employed these ideas to explain particular traditional texts such as biblical passages or sections of the *haggada*. Nonetheless, this does not detract from the significance of these writings. The texts illustrate what several giants of the rabbinic world thought Judaism says about a host of important issues, and that bears significance in and of itself. Fur-

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thermore, it is safe to assume that these rabbinic writers drew upon their extensive knowledge of Torah when arriving at their conclusions.

Our focus here is on the writings of influential early and mid-twentieth century rabbinic voices of stature who had something significant to say about communism. Almost all of the figures treated here satisfy this description. The exceptions to my criterion include Yitshak Breuer who, while not a practicing Rabbi, was an important modern Jewish thinker, and R. Avraham Hen, a rabbinic figure less well known than others we shall consider, whose works include many incisive insights on our topic. Although these rabbinic voices will frame our analysis, we shall also utilize the many helpful insights provided by the broader world of literature and philosophy to illuminate the arguments.

This article will not spend time at the outset defining and differentiating between terms such as communism, socialism, Bolshevism, Marxism, dialectical materialism, and totalitarianism. Suffice it to say that these rabbis critiqued aspects of the communist state that existed in twentieth century politics. Most of them witnessed the evils of such a state and one of the rabbis we shall discuss anticipated some of the problems before the communist state was born. We have avoided definitions because each criticism stands on its own; subtle terminological analysis may confuse more than it clarifies. After a review of the critiques, we shall suggest some contemporary applications in non-communist contexts.

MARXIST MATERIALISM

Marxists often teach that the only true motivating factors in life are economic. Such seemingly independent values such as art and religion are truly only weapons employed in the economic battlefield. For example, the wealthy utilize religion to keep the poorer masses quiet and prevent revolt. Alasdair MacIntyre offers the following summary of Karl Marx's view on religion.

It [religion] buttresses the established order by sanctifying it and by suggesting that the political order is somehow ordained by divine authority, and it consoles the oppressed and exploited by offering them in heaven what they are denied upon earth."²

Working with this materialist assumption, a Marxist historian reads all historical movements as reflections of the economic clash between various classes. In the modern world, the medieval clash between landowners and serfs has been replaced by the struggle between owners of capital and laborers. Yet the underlying motive for human action remains the same.³

It should be clear that the religious individual, and perhaps any moralist, must not accept such a reductionist account of human motivation. Economic factors certainly play a strong motivating role but humans also act out of more idealistic motivations. To ignore the ethical and religious principles that drive humanity is to reduce humans to the level of the beasts, if not lower. In a sermon for *Shabbat ha-gadol*, R. Moshe Avigdor Amiel argues that the “*rasha*” among the four children mentioned at the *Pesah* seder expresses the materialistic standpoint.⁴ This answers the well-known question about the lack of parallelism between the first two of the four children—the *haggada* contrasts an intellectually virtuous child, the *hakham*, with a religiously problematic child, the *rasha*. R. Amiel explains that the opposing son is called a *hakham* and not a *tsaddik* because the challenge here involves battling a corrupt ideology and does not concern only the realm of righteous and wicked action. It takes the wisdom of the *hakham* to meet the intellectual challenge. We tell the *rasha* that had he been in Egypt, he would not have been redeemed, because according to the materialist conception of history, the Jewish people should simply have become absorbed into Egyptian society and not maintained their national identity. In order to understand R. Amiel’s point, I would add that although Marxists read the exodus story as a class struggle, Tanakh depicts a story of national liberation. According to R. Amiel, the significance of *shabbat ha-gadol* is that it instructs us that a spiritual vision (*shabbat*) must precede the physical exodus.⁵

Yitshak Breuer also objected vociferously to Marxist materialism.⁶ He writes that our Torah teaches that humanity was created in the image of God and therefore, remains apart from and superior to the rest of the natural order. The Marxist view of man as dedicated solely to fulfilling his material needs undermines this distinction. The Torah’s view of humanity includes visions of goodness, beauty, sanctity and righteousness that are all denied by the Marxist. Breuer suggests that the biblical citation, “man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God does man live” (Deut. 8:3), comes specifically to rebut the Marxist view of man, a view that ignores humanity’s nobler motivations.

Moreover, there are other ignoble motivations that should not be ignored due to an exclusive focus on the economic. R. Yehiel Yaakov Weinberg points out that Cain murdered Abel despite the fact that the two of them shared an entire world.⁷ Pride, hatred, jealousy and anger represent a partial list of some other possible motivations for problematic behavior. R. Yosef Eliyahu Henkin echoes this idea when he writes that money catalyzes only a minority of the jealousy in this world. Jealousy of physical prowess, beauty and wisdom all powerfully influence humanity

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more than monetary discrepancy.⁸ As Aristotle said long ago, in response to Plato advocating the sharing of property as a means of ending conflict, “Vulgar men object to inequality of goods; superior men to inequality of honor.”⁹ In this context, it may be pertinent to note that Marxist politicians during the first half of the twentieth century often miscalculated due to their underestimating the power of nationalistic sentiments. If so, the communist vision of perfecting society through eradicating private property ignores the spiritual improvement of each individual needed for combating the other threats to a just society.¹⁰

This critique of Marxism has much broader implications. In general, moderns tend to think of solving societal ills exclusively through political means, as if the right governmental structure could alleviate our difficulties. They ignore the more significant question of what type of people our societies produce.¹¹ Andre Gide writes that,

Man can not be reformed from the outside—a change of heart is necessary – and I feel anxious when I observe all the bourgeois instincts flattered and encouraged in the Soviet Union, and all the old layers of society forming again—if not precisely social classes, at least a new kind of aristocracy, and not an aristocracy of intellect or ability, but an aristocracy of right thinkers and conformists.¹²

Gide correctly observes that a shift in economic or political policy can never significantly aid humanity without a focus on improving the moral character of the people. He also notes that taking monetary distinctions out of the equation does not prevent class divisions. Even worse, the divisions become based not on wealth but on the ability to conform to questionable ideals.

The early socialists did not all share the Marxist tendency to focus all one’s energies on the political and economic spheres. In a fascinating article on Moses Hess, Isaiah Berlin contrasts Hess’s thought with that of Marx and Engels. Whereas Marx and Engels wrote of the class struggle, Hess wrote of a struggle in every individual between self-assertive egoism and the opposing principles of altruism, love and social justice. Hess understood that human flourishing depended on producing benevolent human beings “endowed with a character and an outlook which no amount of social and political reform could of itself secure.”¹³ While Marx criticized moralizing socialists as “utopian,” it seems that they showed far greater insight into helping humanity than he did.

At the same time, the need to address humanity’s moral development should not cloud over the need for political reforms. Indeed, George Orwell describes the call for a change of heart as “the alibi of

people who do not wish to endanger the status quo.”¹⁴ A response to Orwell’s point might contend that when addressed in a genuine manner, the two types of reform should not be mutually exclusive. Furthermore, it does seem reasonable to devote more energy to reforming individuals, because such reform will invariably affect institutional life as well, and less energy to the institutional change because any structure can be corrupted by immoral people. Emil Brunner offers an extreme version of this argument when he says “motive is more important than structure. Right systems will always result from the right motive, which means from love; but the right motive, the right disposition, never results from the right system.”¹⁵ On the one hand, we should reject Brunner’s categorical use of “always”—good intentions alone are insufficient—and realize that some systems do help cultivate development of the refined personality. On the other hand, we should accept Brunner’s basic point that the quality of the people ultimately proves more decisive than the nature of the system.

PRIVATE PROPERTY

Western political thought has devoted considerable efforts towards establishing the legal and moral basis for private property. Hugo Grotius thought it the product of a social contract, while, John Locke taught that a person acquires ownership by producing something with his or her labor and others thought that the monarch owns and distributes property by Divine right. Aristotle, on the other hand, did not articulate any legal basis for private property but rather argued that private property has manifold positive impact on society.¹⁶ To the best of my knowledge, rabbinic writings address the question of private property more from the Aristotelian perspective. This approach may rest on the assumption that God could distribute property as He sees fit, but the important question that remains is why the Torah favors private ownership and what positives emerge from such an institution.

Indeed, the communist abolition of private property raises the question of what value private property has. R. Amiel argues that private property encourages human initiative. Human beings are naturally inclined to expend more effort for personal gain, and removing the chance for personal gain will radically decrease society’s production. R. Amiel refers not only to the quest for wealth but also to jealousy and the competitive spirit. He compares the need for such motivations to the talmudic story (*Yoma* 69b) about how canceling the sexual urge caused a situation in which no eggs would be produced. In the same way, humanity needs the competitive urge in order to develop.¹⁷

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There is a certain irony to R. Amiel's argument, because as we have already seen, he critiques materialism for only seeing humanity's baser motivations while ignoring their more noble motivations, but here he himself emphasizes some of the less exalted motivations of man. Despite the irony, there is no inconsistency. As we mentioned, one problem with the Marxists is that they forget about other ignoble motivations, and R. Amiel refers to motivations such as jealousy that exist outside of economic contexts. Additionally, one can affirm the possibility of true idealism while still maintaining that humanity also needs the help generated by less idealistic forces. The talmudic story in *Yoma* can endorse the need for the sexual urge while affirming that spouses also act out of love for each other or for their children.

In another context, R. Amiel offers a different argument for private property. He claims that a feeling of ownership and independence clarifies humanity's unique status among the animals. Only the human being, created in the image of God, controls the material world.¹⁸ To clarify, R. Amiel certainly does not hold that the only essential difference between humans and animals is that the former enjoy the ability to own property. He does hold that private ownership helps to highlight the distinctiveness of mankind.

Others argue that the institution of private property actually protects individuals from stronger forces. R. Henkin writes that "would it not be for the sanctity of individual ownership, the land would fall totally in to the hands of the strong ones."¹⁹ A society that recognizes private property allows a certain degree of independence to each individual owner. The owner has greater control of his or her own destiny. Albert Camus expresses this sharply when he critiques Marxism for teaching that the worker will happily receive his bread even as personal freedom and control of individual destiny diminish. "If someone takes away your freedom, you may be sure that your bread is threatened, for it depends no longer on you and your struggle but on the whim of a master."²⁰

R. Shalom Mordekhai Schwadron raises a different argument for the significance of private property. When everything becomes communal, no one feels personally responsible to help out those in distress. Not only that, but anyone who wants to help has no right to take money from what has become public funds. R. Schwadron depicts Sodom as a socialist society and sees that as the source of their refusal to give charity. He writes that "all share in the *kupa* and therefore it is impossible for a pauper to come from elsewhere, because if that pauper takes a penny, he has taken from communal funds and everyone loses, and it was as in Russia when everything belonged to all and therefore, no one was allowed to give charity."²¹

I believe that two separate points can be extracted from R. Schwadron's analysis. Thinking in communal terms can often justify selfish behavior, as the selfish action can be perceived as altruism toward the community. For this reason, Reinhold Niebuhr argues that it is easier for the individual person to act morally than for nations to do so.²² In the same way, communists can justify hard heartedness as defending the public good or as a movement toward the inevitable direction of history. Secondly, when all beneficence becomes funneled through bureaucratic channels, it loses all personal quality and destroys the connection between giver and recipient. Society might set aside a good deal of money for the poor but individual people do not learn to act generously.²³ It is no accident that communist society tends to diminish compassion in its residents.

Some writers claim that communist economics actually represents the highest form of charity as envisioned by Rambam.²⁴ According to Rambam's scale of charity, the highest of the eight levels includes bringing a poor person into a partnership so that that person becomes independent and no longer needs to beg for funds.²⁵ Perhaps communism represents just such a partnership on a grand scale. While the argument has some merit, I contend that it has two serious flaws. As R. Schwadron mentioned, this type of charity applies only to those within the system and not to outsiders. In a shared economy, all the charity would be funneled to the communist unit and the outside world becomes entirely excluded. Secondly and more fundamentally, when the system mandates shared ownership, the crucial moment of individual choice to give evaporates. Rambam refers to a scenario in which a person freely chooses to include a pauper as a business partner. This is not identical to a system that forces everyone into a big conglomerate. The character development that stems from thousands of moments of choice would be lacking. Note that Rambam prefers one thousand charitable gifts of a dollar to one gift of a thousand dollars, because it is the constant choosing to give that moulds the benevolent personality.²⁶ All the more so, Rambam would prefer many moments of choice to a system of charity that, after the first generation decides to adopt a shared economy, lacks even a single moment of decision.

Of course, affirming the need for private property and rejecting the communist program does not necessitate endorsing a radical capitalist viewpoint. One can criticize communism without endorsing cutthroat individualism. R. Amiel argues that the Torah supports private property but also places safeguards to insure that the gap between rich and poor not widen into a chasm. The equal distribution of land in Israel upon the Jewish people's entry and the subsequent return of sold land at *Yovel* insure that land not become concentrated in a wealthy minority. The

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prohibition on lending money with interest protects the poor from escalating debt. Finally, the mandatory tithes set aside for the poor help put food on everyone's table. According to R. Amiel, the Torah attempts to capture the personal initiative of capitalism while avoiding the capitalist indifference to the plight of the paupers.²⁷

Employing a historical model used by others as well, R. Amiel sees the early parts of Genesis as a fluctuation between communism and capitalism. The generation of the flood's sin is "*hama's*." As the Talmud defines it, "*hama's*" involves a form of theft in which the thief does actually pay the victim. Capitalist bosses who underpay their workers engage in "*hama's*" as do store owners who overcharge for food items of basic necessity. If so, *dor ha-mabul* represents capitalist excess. In response, the builders of *migdal Bavel* attempted to form a communist society. When this too failed, the people of Sodom reverted to a stingy capitalism. Interestingly, whereas R. Schwadron traces the absence of charity in Sodom to the communist ethos, R. Amiel sees it as ruthless capitalism.

R. Yitshak Isaac Halevi Herzog also arrives at a nuanced position regarding *halakha's* view on private property.²⁸ His son, Israeli ambassador Yaakov Herzog, asked him in 1950 whether Jewish representatives should agree if the pope asks them to sign a joint inter-religious document against communism. Among other issues, R. Herzog discusses the ownerless quality of fruits during the sabbatical year as a possible analogue to joint ownership but then argues that the two are not truly comparable. Relinquishing of ownership during the sabbatical year does not apply to all property, and even for fruit, it only applies one seventh of the time.²⁹ Thus, without the agreement of all the property owners, R. Herzog does not find any basis for setting up a socialist economy. At the same time, he expresses concern for the situation of the workers in capitalist countries and mentions growing improvements in this regard. Rather than a revolution that spills blood, he calls for an evolution towards a more just society.

Two rabbis of significant stature argue that *halakha* lacks full enthusiasm for private property and that this idea helps explain a morally troubling law. According to the *halakha*, the *mitsva* to return lost items does not apply to items lost by gentiles.³⁰ A Jew who returns such an item can fulfill the *mitsva* of sanctifying the Divine name but the *mitsva* of returning a lost item per se does not apply. Even when a Jew loses an object, if the finder finds it after the owner has despaired of retrieving the item, the finder can keep it. In both circumstances, many question why *halakha* does not obligate returning the item. Both R. Avraham Yitshak Hakohen Kook³¹ and R. Yehiel Yaakov Weinberg³² explain that *halakha* places limits on private ownership. This weak view of private

ownership contends that even a small loss of control, such as losing the item or losing and despairing about the item, serve to break the tenuous hold that the owner had.³³ For Rabbis Weinberg and Kook, the Torah endorses private ownership in a weakened form.

R. Elimelekh Bar Shaul, former Chief Rabbi of Rehovot, finds two earlier rabbinic voices that express some admiration for abolishing private property.³⁴ R. Yaakov Emden, in his commentary on the *ma'amadot*, negatively evaluates philosophy's contribution to society. He criticizes Plato for advocating shared wives but he does praise him for being in favor of shared property. R. Emden cites the *mishna* in *Avot* (5:13) in which *Hazal* refer to the attitude of "what's mine is mine and what's yours is yours" as *middat sedom*.³⁵ In his commentary on that very passage in *Avot*, R. Emden states that shared property would prevent jealousy and hatred among people and he cites the example of the Essenes described by Josephus. At the same time, he notes that *halakha* clearly assumes the existence of private property and therefore argues that the *mishnah's* praise for the attitude of "what's mine is yours" refers not to ownership but to charity.³⁶ From this perspective, the *mishna* advocates a readiness to share but not a negation of ownership.

R. Bar Shaul's other source also does not truly endorse communal ownership. R. Yaakov Kranz, the famed Dubno *maggid*, asserts that logic would dictate doing away with private property. He does not rely on the argument that this would minimize strife but argues that God is the true owner of all things. *Halakha* fails to follow this logic because it would terminate charity and *hessed*.³⁷ The Dubno *maggid* echoes R. Schwadron's argument that communist economic policy prevents mankind from developing personalities full of benevolence and charity. Thus, even the authorities who see the appeal of communal ownership admit that the laws of the Torah having to do with damages, theft, tithes and charity all clearly assume the existence of private property.

TOTALITARIAN SOCIETY

The identification of the builders of the tower of *Bavel* with communist society comes through most powerfully in the *Ha-Emek Davar* of R. Naf-tali Tsevi Yehuda Berlin.³⁸ Although the commentary was published before the advent of communist society in particular and of totalitarian society in general, R. Berlin shows remarkable precision in his vision of such a society. In his view, the builders want to construct a huge tower to watch over distant lands and prevent dissidents from setting up independent communities. In other words, "Big brother is watching you." The

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Torah emphasizes the “*devarim abadim*” of the tower’s builders because it is precisely the desire for a singular mode of thought that God finds objectionable. Unlike other commentators who explain that the tower was religiously objectionable because its builders planned to use the tower to worship idols or attack God, R. Berlin identifies the problem as stemming more from the concentration of power and the enforced unanimity than from the violation of a specifically religious norm.³⁹

It is noteworthy that R. Ovadiah Seforno also views *migdal Bavel* in terms of the concentration of power but sees the tower as part of a plan to solidify Nimrod’s control over the ancient world. The tower is set up to promote idolatry but only as a means of bringing the masses under the rule of the king associated with that idol worship. Thus, Seforno sees the episode as being not about communist rule but rather about the individual dictator who plans the totalitarian takeover of society. As did other dictators, Nimrod makes cynical usage of religion, in this case idolatry, to further his dreams of power.⁴⁰

Monolithic thinking in communist society continued even when the Soviet leadership changed positions. During the 1930’s, communists around the world were expected to have the identical position on issues such as being pro or anti-war, or regarding their attitude to Nazi Germany, despite the shifts in Russia’s position on these issues. Communists spoke out against Germany up until the 1939 Molotov-Ribbentrop pact and immediately sounded a different note. According to MacIntyre, group thinking was demanded even when no practical ramifications hinged on a particular position. “Creedal uniformity” was valued for its own sake.⁴¹

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE INDIVIDUAL

Communism tends to think only of the good of the collective and never of the individual’s needs. The economic shift from individual to collective gets played out over all aspects of the human condition. This leads to a diminishing of the individual’s ability to make life choices and to indifference to an individual’s plight. R. Amiel⁴² and R. Avraham Hen, one time Rav of Beit Hakerem,⁴³ both of whom emphasize the significance of each individual as a cornerstone of their worldviews, harshly criticize this aspect of communism. Strikingly, R. Amiel also criticizes capitalism on the same grounds because “the tyranny of the majority” also means that individuals will remain unprotected.⁴⁴ Additionally, a demagogue might inspire the masses to support methods that sacrifice the protection of individuals. Only the Torah provides a legal system that protects the individual.

It is interesting to note in this context a striking midrash that appears in *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer* (chapter 44). This source expounds upon the attitude of the builders of the Tower of Babel. “If a person fell and died, they paid no attention. If a brick fell, they sat and cried, saying ‘Woe is us. Who will bring us another in its place?’” This source strengthens the remarkable parallels drawn between this episode and communist society. For communists, the grand project of socialism mattered and the fate of particular individuals did not. It is no accident that many *aharonim* utilized this biblical story to discuss communist governments.⁴⁵

R. Amiel and R. Hen marshal a similar list of proofs illustrating the importance of the individual in *halakha*. In an optional war, the Torah allows war exemptions to those who just started to build a family or settle a house. Surely, these war exemptions hurt the common cause, but the individual must not be trampled upon.⁴⁶ The Talmud (*Yerushalmi*, *Terumot* 8:4) forbids giving up an individual to a besieging army in order to save the collective. Again, we will not wrong one fellow for the sake of the collective.⁴⁷ Restrictions on the king’s power and the ability of prophets to chastise the monarchy may hurt the structure of authority but they protect the individual.

In all fairness, it should be noted that we do sometimes sacrifice the individual for the good of the community. The Mishna (*Gittin* 45a) teaches that we do not overpay to redeem captives so as not to give the captors motivation to seize others as well. According to Rambam, Torah laws were formulated to bring benefit to the overwhelming majority of people even though, in isolated circumstances, a particular law might cause harm to a given individual.⁴⁸ Even given these counter examples, R. Amiel and R. Hen do succeed in pointing out a number of striking cases in which we may be surprised to find that *halakha* favors the individual over communal concerns. At the very least, this should generate a strong sense of reluctance to sacrifice an individual on the communal altar.

R. Amiel also relates this point to the communist hatred for religion.⁴⁹ At first glance, it is not obvious why the economic and political position of communism should necessitate rejecting religion. Lenin and Marx taught that the problem with religion is that it keeps the masses content with their poverty. According to R. Amiel, that explanation only masks the true reason for their antipathy to religion. The Torah rejects total servitude to a human individual or group, because “they are My servants but not servant of servants.” The communist demand of complete loyalty to the collective cannot coexist with the Jewish ideals that deny such subservience. As Emil Brunner writes, “The totalitarian state is intrinsically atheistic and anti-theistic since, by definition, it claims the total allegiance of man.”⁵⁰

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THE IMPERSONAL NATURE OF COMMUNIST SOCIETY

Asserting the significance of the individual does more than protect individuals from the abuses of the collective. In addition, the loss of individuality means a government of conformists, an absence of individual creativity, a breakdown of personal relationships and a loss of the sense of the uniqueness of each human being. Rabbi Joseph B. Solo-veitchik emphasizes these elements.⁵¹ Commenting on the line from the *Haggadah*, “We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt,” he differentiates between a slave owned by another individual and a slave owned by the state. Where in the former case, some personal relationship can develop between master and slave; in the latter scenario, “no personal relationship is imaginable.” Jews in ancient Egypt, as well as and all people living under communist Russia suffered from this impersonal servitude. The system also robs the leaders of their individuality as Pharaoh represents the generic name of all Egyptian rulers. Thus, all Kremlin leaders delivered the same speeches.⁵²

Characteristically, R. Soloveitchik also argues that human creativity stems from lonely individualism and not from collective existence.⁵³ Having destroyed the singularity needed for creativity, Communist Russia was unable to produce great literature. The same people who a century before had produced Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Chekov, Gogol, and Pushkin, suddenly found their inspiring muses silenced. “A corporate state, such as modern day Russia, cannot produce sensitive souls.”^{iv} Needless to say, R. Soloveitchik’s focus on the individual is not a call for selfish egocentricity. Rather, the moral individual asserts the depth and significance of interpersonal ties and obligations while understanding that human growth depends on singularity.

EVIL MEANS FOR A NOBLE END

As mentioned, thinking only in terms of the collective leads to a situation in which what happens to the individual becomes irrelevant. Thus, communists tend to adopt a utilitarian perspective in which the ends justify the means. In addition, seeing all moral codes as tainted by economic motivations adds to a weakening of moral constraints. Lenin, Stalin and others were content to murder hundreds of thousands of people as long as it advanced the communist program. R. Avraham Hen, a personal witness to the horrors of communism, forcefully articulated this point: “To these people, there is nothing in the world other than the tittle on the *yod* of their program and the holy dogma on their tablets. Let the

nation be destroyed, thousands of people be murdered and not let a tittle on the *yod* be lost.”⁵⁵ In this passage, R. Hen cleverly inverts a well-known criticism leveled against the rabbis. In his famous poem entitled “*kotso shel yod*,” Y. L. Gordon savagely criticized the rabbis for their fealty to halakhic detail even when it leads to personal ruin (the invalidating of a bill of divorce that prevents a wife from remarrying). Rav Hen utilizes the same term to show that the true inhumanity due to excessive loyalty to a program is shown by the communists rather than by religious Jews.

R. Elhanan Wasserman also spoke of the evil means utilized by the Bolsheviks. When the “*avoda ivrit*” controversy was raging in pre-state Israel, some Jews wanted to resort to violent means to insure that only Jewish laborers were hired. R. Elhanan forcefully argues that violent tactics are forbidden according to the Torah and it is not a legitimate response to say that such tactics help the Jewish settlements. He writes that “The Bolsheviks also say that their tactics are for the good of the world, and what is the result of their ideology, the building of the world or its destruction?”⁵⁶

Along similar lines, R. Amiel argues that Judaism wages war with capitalism, but fights that war with spirit more than with force. “If capitalism is built on might and force [of an economic nature], it can’t be negated through the usage of those means, one can not negate the strong hand of the rich through the strong hand of the poor, one can not fight the terror of one side with the terror of another.”⁵⁷ Without advocating pacifism, R. Amiel reveals concern regarding the means employed in attempting to achieve a more just society. In his view, the ultimate battle must be fought on the educational and spiritual fronts in producing the kind of person who would not extort others.

The problems with ends-justifying-means types of arguments are threefold. Most obviously, some acts seem wrong irrespective of what results they produce. As H. J. McCloskey points out in his critique of utilitarianism, we do not allow a sheriff to hang an innocent man even when that act will prevent riots in which many more people will be killed.⁵⁸ Many moral individuals would refrain from stealing even when sure that nobody would know about the theft or be hurt by it. This refraining would not be due to utilitarian considerations such as what would happen if everyone tried to follow that model but due to a conviction that some things are simply wrong.

Secondly, forecasting the future in politics is notoriously tough and the evil means may turn out to not find justification in the end they produce. In *Darkness At Noon*, Arthur Koestler puts the following into Rubashov’s diary:

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We were the first to replace the nineteenth century's liberal ethics of 'fair play' by the revolutionary ethic of the twentieth century. In that also we were right: a revolution conducted according to the rules of cricket is an absurdity. Politics can be relatively far in the breathing spaces of history; at its critical turning points there is no other rule possible than the old one, that the end justifies the means. . . . Yet for the moment we are thinking and acting on credit. As we have thrown overboard all conventions and rules of cricket-morality, our sole guiding principle is that of consequent logic. . . . But how can the present decide what will be judged truth in the future? We are doing the work of the prophets without their gift.⁵⁹

Koestler captures communism's conscious shift in moral thinking and its consequentialist justifications. Such an approach cannot escape the question of what happens when years of credit create an unpayable debt and when those attempting to predict the future turn out to be false prophets.

Finally, even if we ignore the inherent wrongness of certain actions and can achieve some certainty that good political results will be produced, we might ask what type of people such a society will create. After people have killed, blackmailed and tortured to bring about the ideal political structures, will they remain people worthy of emulation? Louis Fisher writes that "immoral means produce immoral ends—and immoral people—under Bolshevism and under capitalism."⁶⁰ Fisher also notes that as most of life consists of means, "any way of life which reduces the pleasure and purity in means for the sake of a supernatural or natural future transforms life into a cold, unclean, unhappy corridor."⁶¹

THE ABSENCE OF COMPASSION

As Communists taught that all resources should be directed towards their political goals, they failed to see value in simple acts of compassion. Whitaker Chambers, the former communist who exposed the spying of Alger Hiss, tells the following story about his walking with a fellow communist in New York.⁶² "A shivering derelict came up to us and asked for a hand-out. Harry glanced past him, which was the proper communist attitude. Communists hold that to give alms is to dull the revolutionary spirit of the masses." After Chambers gives the pauper some money, Harry is moved but he explains that "You must not think about them. . . . We can't save them. They are lost. We can only save our generation perhaps, and the children." R. Hen refers to this outlook as "ethical castration."⁶³

Hannah Arendt argues that thinking exclusively in terms of the collective prevents feelings of compassion. Arendt makes this point in the

context of an analysis of the encounter between Jesus and the Grand Inquisitor in Dostoevsky's "The Brothers Karamazov." The Inquisitor chooses to torture innocents and even murder Jesus himself for the sake of conglomerate humanity. According to Arendt, the Grand Inquisitor "depersonalized the sufferers, lumped them together into an aggregate—the people *toujours malheureux*, the suffering masses." Jesus, in contrast, has the "ability to have compassion with all men in their singularity, that is, without lumping them together into some entity as one suffering mankind."¹⁶⁴

THE APPEAL OF COMMUNISM

If indeed, communism leads to such a variety of evils, what prompted many intelligent and moral people to be attracted to it? How did some of those people retain their allegiances to the Soviet Union even after the pact with Nazi Germany, Stalin's purges and the betrayal of their own allies in the Spanish Civil War? This question merits discussion even though I did not find analysis of this point among rabbinic writers. As with most historical questions of this sort, a host of factors played contributing roles. Both World War I and the economic hardships of the first third of the twentieth century left people down and looking for grand solutions. The rise of fascism motivated many to think that Communism was the only hope to stopping fascist world domination. In addition to the above, one other point of attraction merits particular attention. Whittaker Chambers explains this point of attraction well. "Their power, whose nature baffles the rest of the world, because in a large measure the rest of the world has lost that power, is the power to hold convictions and act on them."⁶⁵ His initial excitement about the American communist party came from a contrast between those he met at party functions and his college friends. "They are not as intelligent as my college friends, but they do not think that ideas are ping pong balls. They believe that ideas are important as a guide to coherent action. They have purpose and they have courage. They are grown men and women, and these are children."⁶⁶ Chambers' analysis should give pause to those who claim that pluralistic relativism prevents the rise of dangerous ideologies. On the contrary, the absence of a distinct view of the good life encourages those looking for such a view to find haven in fascist ideologies. In Orwell's words, by getting rid of patriotism and religion, "You have not necessarily got rid of the need for something to believe in."⁶⁷

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CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE

Just as understanding the attraction of communism proves instructive today, so too does the previous analysis of the problems of communism have ongoing significance. The temptation to utilize ends justify the means types of arguments to allow immoral behavior remain true in any political structure. We would do well to keep in mind the three-fold concern about consequentialist thinking voiced above. If *halakha* endorses private property but not in a robust fashion, this should impact on how we think about our money. If communal funds for the needy sometimes remove the needed personal moral training forged in giving of one's own, we need to address that issue. It may be that the high taxes and socialistic tendencies of modern Israel deserve both our praise and concern. On the one hand, everyone receives medical care. On the other hand, the system fails to foster a culture of giving and financial donating among individuals.

R. Amiel's analysis of Halakhic economics could justify the graduated income tax.⁶⁸ As we no longer practice the laws of tithing, the sabbatical year, or the jubilee year in ways that help minimize the gap between rich and poor, tax brackets might be justified as a means of maintaining the balance between the independence and initiative generated by private property with the need to limit the chasm between those who have and those who do not. The ideal economy must struggle to both help the poor in a communal context and yet not discourage the individual giving of charity and the development of benevolent individuals that comes in its wake.

Materialism rears its head in certain academic contexts. Some historians still write as if all human decision-making reflect only socio-economic factors, and all nobler human motivations, such as religion, ethics and friendship, are mere pretense. While this approach is especially troubling when applied to rabbinic luminaries, we should resist thinking of any human being in these terms. A whole host of both noble and less noble motivations influence human actions, and any reductionist approach reveals a lack of understanding. R. Amiel, R. Weinberg and Yitshak Breuer's concerns about materialism remain just as cogent today.

While no Jewish group can be accused of totalitarianism, a good deal of uncalled for group thinking does exist. The ideology of "*da'at Torah*" often leads its adherents to deny legitimate differences of opinion in rabbinic thought. A high school rebbe of mine told me that *da'at Torah* rejects secular studies despite the numerous *rishonim* and *ahronim* who endorsed such studies. The recent rejection of the books of R. Nossou Slifkin, despite their being rooted in a well-represented

stance within our tradition, reveals the narrowing of Judaism produced by the current version of *da'at Torah*. Dishonest portrayals of the thought of R. Hirsch, R. Soloveitchik and others also reflect this desire to present rabbinic thought as a unified sameness. However, communism reminds us that group thinking exists on the left side of the political and religious map as well. When rabbis supportive of women's growing role in the community receive a hostile reaction for failing to assent to women receiving *aliyot*, that reveals that not tolerating legitimate dissent remains a problem on both right and left. Needless to say, this does not entail the position that all opinions deserve legitimacy.

Balancing between communal concerns and individual needs also remains a ubiquitous challenge. The modern Western world probably errs too much on the side of individualism. Due to its socialist beginnings and the influence of the army, Israeli society may have frequently focused too much on the collective. The recent criticism of existing educational and religious structures by Israeli youth may reflect an attempt to assert individuality. We need to put serious thought into how to avoid the twin pitfalls of selfish individuality and conforming, impersonal collectivism.

My research failed to turn up a single Rabbi of recognized stature who endorsed the communist program. While R. Yitshak Nissenbaum does approvingly cite a socialist writer who saw socialism as rooted in Judaism, the continuation of his discussion emphasizes manual labor and nationalistic sentiment more than the broader socialist program.⁶⁹ R. Yeshaya Shapira, the Hassidic Labor Zionist leader, did write more enthusiastically about socialism.⁷⁰ However, the major contributions he made towards settling the land do not qualify him as an outstanding rabbinic voice. Rabbi Samuel Alexandrov, a correspondent of Rav Kook, did write very positively about Marxism but he is not a recognized rabbinic authority and his views are too anarchistic to reflect the Jewish tradition.⁷¹ To a great degree, this lack of rabbinic endorsement stems from the live historical example of cruelty and atheism displayed by twentieth century communist governments. At the same time, it also stems from rabbinic insight into the large array of problems examined in this article. I would argue that it is precisely the enduring and eternal values of *Yahadut* that helped these Rabbis avoid being caught up in the blind enthusiasm for communism exhibited by so many Western intellectuals. In this context, it is interesting to note how Jewish values helped influence the socialist movement of religious kibbutzim. Yosef Shalmon⁷² and Dov Schwartz⁷³ have shown how religious socialists rejected many elements of the Marxist program. They could not accept the devaluation of the individual, the overemphasis on the class struggle

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and the endorsement of violent revolutionary means. Shalmon suggests that *Ha-Poel Ha-Mizrabi* adopted the “utopian Socialism” of Moses Hess. It seems that the Jewish tradition prevented them from accepting some of the more problematic aspects of Marxism. Thus, our topic also reveals how the tradition serves as a break stopping the easy approval of the intellectual fashion of the age.

Long after the last communist has preached *Das Kapital* as his or her Bible, the issues raised by communism will remain very much alive. The insights of Rabbis Amiel, Hen, Henkin, Herzog, Kook, Schwadron, Soloveitchik, Wasserman and Weinberg help us both identify the issues and deal with them.

NOTES

I thank Yehuda Bendor, R. Shalom Carmy, R. Asher Meir, Dr. David Shatz and Avi Shmidman for their helpful comments.

1. One exception is R. Hayyim Hirschenson’s study of the relationship in *halakha* between employers and workers. See his *Malki ba-Kodesh Vol. 4* (St. Louis: Moinester Printing, 5683), pp. 12-47. More recent treatments of the relationship between Judaism and the free market can be found in the works of Aaron Levine and Meir Tamari. See also the articles that appeared in *Dinei Yisrael* 12 (1986)
2. Alasdair MacIntyre, *Marxism and Christianity* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), p. 103.
3. Bertrand Russell explains the Marxist viewpoint in his *Roads to Freedom* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1977), p. 28. “It would be unfair to represent him as maintaining that the conscious economic motive is the only one of importance; it is rather that economics mold character and opinion, and are thus the prime sources of much that appears in consciousness to have no connection with them.”
4. R. Moshe Avigdor Amiel, *Derashot El Ami Vol. 3* (Tel Aviv: Vaad le’Hozaat Sifrei Rav Amiel, 5724), pp. 253-254. For a general survey of R. Amiel’s political thought, see Moshe Helinger, “Rav Moshe Avigdor Amiel’s Religious-Political Thought” [in Hebrew], *Bar Ilan Annual* 2001.
5. *Derashot El Ami, Vol. 2* (Tel Aviv: Vaad le’Hozaat Sifrei Rav Amiel, 5724), p. 174.
6. Yizhak Breuer, *Moriah and Tsiyonei Derekh* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1982), pp. 10-17.
7. R. Y. Y. Weinberg, *li-Frakim* (Jerusalem, 2002), pp. 239-240.
8. R. Y. E. Henkin, *Kitvei ha-Gaon R. Yosef Eliyahu Henkin Vol. 1* (New York: Ezras Torah, 1980), p. 5.
9. The quote appears in Neil McInnes’ entry on “Communism” in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Volume 1*, ed. Paul Edwards (New York: Collier Macmillan, 1967), p. 161.
10. Note *Bereshit Rabba* 22:16, in which the midrash suggests three possible causes of the quarrel between Cain and Abel. The brothers were fighting over property, a woman or where the temple would be built. Nehama

- Lebowitz explains that this midrash outlines the varied sources of human strife. See her *Studies in Bereshit*, translated and adapted by Aryeh Newman (Jerusalem: World Zionist Organization, 1974), pp. 38-39.
11. This is a prominent theme of the writings of R. Jonathan Sacks. For an example, see *The Politics of Hope* (London: Vintage, 2000), pp. 14-16. R. Sacks emphasizes the role smaller units such as the family, social clubs and religious groups can play in creating a more moral society.
 12. Andre Gide, *The God That Failed*, ed. Richard Crossman (New York: Bantam Books, 1952), p. 185.
 13. Isaiah Berlin, "The Life and Opinions of Moses Hess" in *Against The Current: Essays in the History of Ideas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 220-223.
 14. George Orwell, "Charles Dickens" in *George Orwell: Essays* (London: Penguin Books, 2000), p. 47.
 15. Emil Brunner, *Communism, Capitalism and Christianity* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1949), p. 43.
 16. For a fine survey of the above theories, see Richard Schlatter, *Private Property: The History of an Idea* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1951).
 17. *Derashot El Ami* Vol. 3, pp. 97-104.
 18. R. M. A. Amiel, *Hegyonot El Ami*, Vol. 2 (Jerusalem, 5696), p. 23.
 19. *Kol Kitvei ha-Gaon R. Yosef Eliyahu Henkin*, p. 5
 20. Albert Camus, *Resistance, Rebellion and Death* (New York, 1988), p. 94.
 21. R. Shalom Mordehai Schwadron, *Lev Shalom al ha-Torah, Bereshit* (Jerusalem, 5759), p. 170.
 22. See his *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1960).
 23. Of course, the same criticism can apply to the welfare state.
 24. See the articles by Shelomoh Aviner, Yedidiah Cohen and Moshe Una in *ha-Kibbutz be-halakha* (Shaalvim: Kvutsat Shaalvim, 1988).
 25. *Hilkhot Mattenot Aniyyim* 10:7.
 26. See *Rambam's* commentary on *Avot* 3:18.
 27. *Derashot El Ami*, Vol. 3, p. 99.
 28. *Pesakim u-Ketavim: She'elot ve-Teshuvot ha-Gaon Rav Yitshak Isaac Herzog Orav Hayyim* Volume 2 (Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kook, 1989) pp. 551-555.
 29. Yehuda Bendor pointed out that the impact of *shemita* and *yovel* would certainly be much stronger on an agrarian society. Nonetheless, R. Herzog remains correct that *halakha* remains quite distant from abolishing private property.
 30. It should be noted that Meiri, *Tiferet Yisrael*, *Torah Temimah* and others think that one is obligated to return lost items to contemporary gentiles.
 31. R. A. Y. ha-Kohen Kook, *Iggeret ha-Ra'ayah* Vol. 1 (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1985), p. 99.
 32. R. Y. Y. Weinberg, *li-Frakim* (Jerusalem, 2000), pp. 594-595. The same idea appears earlier in Maharal's *Be'er Hagolah*, *Be'er* 2.
 33. Needless to say, this argument does not explain the discrepancy between property of a Jew and that of a gentile. That issue lies beyond the cope of this paper.
 34. R. Elimelekh Bar Shaul, *Ma'arkhei Lev* (Jerusalem: Ohr Etsiyon, 1992), pp. 179-187.
 35. R. Y. Emden, *Siddur Beit Yaakov* (Lemberg, 5664), pp. 453-454.
 36. R. Y. Emden, *Lehem Shamayim* (Tel Aviv, 5726), pp. 42-43.
 37. R. Y. Kranz, *Kol Yaakov on Megilat Esther* (Warsaw, 5630), p. 54. Note the

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- similar claim advanced by R. Samson Raphael Hirsch in his commentary on *Avot*. R. Hirsch writes that “If I were to give of my fellow man only that which he would be entitled to take by himself even without my consent, there will certainly be no love between us.” See his *Chapters of the Fathers*, tr. Gertrude Hirschler (Jerusalem: Feldheim Publishers 1989), p. 85.
38. R. N. Z. Y. Berlin, *Ha-Emek Davar*, Genesis 11: 1,4, 6.
 39. For a discussion of this commentary of R. Berlin, see Shalom Carmy, “The Manufacture of Sulphurous Acid: On Wisdom As A Catalyst in Torah Study,” in Jeffrey Saks and Susan Handelman ed. *Wisdom From All My Teachers* (Jerusalem: Urim Publications, 2003), p. 82.
 40. Seforno’s commentary on Genesis 11: 4
 41. *Marxism and Christianity*, pp, 113-114.
 42. *Derashot El Ami*, Vol. 2, pp. 189-203
 43. R. Avraham Hen, *be-Malkhut ha-Yahadut* (Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kook, 5719), pp. 31-42. For a portrait of R. Hen, see Herbert Weiner, *Nine and a Half Mystics: The Kabbala Today* (New York: Collier Books, 1992), pp. 261-290.
 44. *Derashot El Ami Vol. 2*, p. 190. The idea of “the tyranny of the majority” was made famous in the writings of John Stuart Mill and Alexis de Toqueville.
 45. Beyond the examples cited in this article, see R. Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, “*ha-Yehudi Mashul ke-Sefer Torah*,” in *Beit Yosef Shaul 4* (New York: Moriah, 1994), especially pp. 94-95.
 46. It bears noting that some commentators do understand these exemptions as sending home those who might hinder the war effort. R. Dovid Zvi Hoffman argues persuasively against that interpretation, thereby supporting R. Amiel and R. Hen. See his commentary on Deuteronomy (Tel Aviv: Netzach, 1961), pp. 397-400. I thank David Shatz for this reference.
 47. David Shatz pointed out that if we assume the reality of the threats, the chosen individual will be killed anyway and we are not protecting his interests by refusing to give him over. A better formulation for this example might be that deontological constraints prevent our doing certain things to individuals even when those things would help the community.
 48. R. Moshe ben Maimon, *Moreh Nevukim*, 3:34. I am indebted to Yehuda Bendor for these two examples.
 49. *Hegyonot El Ami Vol.2*, p. 22.
 50. See Emil Brunner’s “An Open Letter to Karl Barth,” in *Religion from Tolstoy to Camus*, ed. Walter Kaufman (New York: Harper and Row, 1964), p. 360. In this letter, Brunner questions why Barth, who spoke out forcefully against the Nazis, does not also speak out against Soviet Russia.
 51. Unfortunately, R. Soloveitchik did not personally write much about communism. I am employing published transcriptions of his lectures. See *Noraot ha-Rav* Vol. 4, ed. Aharon Schreiber (New York, 1997), pp. 166-169.
 52. There were individual exceptions such as Kruschev’s speech admitting some of the horrors of Stalin. R. Soloveitchik’s general point remains true all the same.
 53. R. Soloveitchik could still view the existence of *havrutot* as aiding the creative process. He was not calling for a secluded existence but rather for a robust sense of individuality that sometimes engenders loneliness even within a supportive community.

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54. *Noraot ha-Rav* Vol. 7, pp. 18-20. The quote is from p. 20.
55. *be-Malkhut ha-Yahadut*, p. 57.
56. His letter on the subject appears in Aharon Sursky's biography of R. Elhanan. See A. Sursky, *Ohr Elhanan Vol. 2* (Jerusalem: Yeshivat Ohr Elhanan, 5758), pp. 90-91.
57. *Derashot El Ami* Vol. 3, p. 100. The same point appears in R. H. Hirschenson, *Malki ba-Kodesh* 4, p. 46.
58. H. J. McCloskey, "An Examination of Restricted Utilitarianism," in *Contemporary Utilitarianism*, ed. Michael D. Bayles (Garden City: Doubleday, 1968), p. 121. For an excellent discussion of these types of cases, see Bernard Williams, "A Critique of Utilitarianism," in *Utilitarianism: For and Against* by J. J. C. Smart and Bernard Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1973), pp. 93-107.
59. Arthur Koestler, *Darkness At Noon* (Middlesex: Penguin Books,), pp. 81-83. I am indebted to R. Reuven Ziegler for introducing me to Koestler and for directing me to the sources in *Noraot ha-Rav*.
60. Louis Fisher in *The God That Failed*, p. 228.
61. *Ibid.*
62. Whittaker Chambers, *Witness* (New York: Random House, 1952), p. 218.
63. *be-Malkhut ha-Yahadut*, p. 57.
64. Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Viking Press, 1965), pp. 80-81.
65. W. Chambers, *Witness*, p. 9.
66. *Ibid.*, p. 208.
67. "Inside the Whale," in *George Orwell: Essays*, p. 121.
68. Avi Shmidman pointed this out to me.
69. R. Yitzhak Nissenbaum, *Ketavim Nivharim: Maamarai Yesod be-Ziyonut u-be-Yahadut*, ed. Eliyahu Genohovsky (Jerusalem: Levin Epstein, 5708), pp. 206-210.
70. R. Y. Shapira, "Thou Shalt Do What is Right and Good," in *Religious Zionism: An Anthology*, ed. Yosef Tirosh (Jerusalem: World Zionist Organization, 1985) pp. 120-127
71. On R. Alexandrov and other rabbinic voices in Russia that endorse Marxist economics, see the Hebrew work *Glowing Embers: Torah and Tradition in Soviet Russia* (New York: Hasefarim Haeretsyisraelit, 1962). While it must be admitted that living in Soviet Russia minimized the chances of these Rabbis achieving general recognition, the fact remains that none of them belong to the pantheon of rabbinic greats. Louis Jacobs briefly surveys this literature in *Judaism*, 16:3 (Summer 1967) pp. 351-352. I am indebted to R. Uri Cohen for pointing out this reference to me. On the antinomian impulse in Rabbi Alexandrov's work, see Ehud Luz, "Spirituality and Religious Anarchism in the Thought of Shmuel Alexandrov" [in Hebrew], *Daat* 7 (Summer 1981), pp. 121-137.
72. Yosef Shalmon, *Religion and Zionism: First Encounters* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2002) pp. 368-381.
73. Dov Schwartz, *Erets ha-Mamashut ve-ha'Dimayon: Maamadah shel Erez Yisrael be-Hagut ha-Tsiyyonut ha-Datit* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1997), pp. 145-148.