

# Great Controversies



**The Challenge of  
Modernity – 1800's to  
the present**

**Socialism,  
Communism  
and the Bund**

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## Great Jewish Controversies

### Marxism (Socialism, Communism) and the Judaism

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- A. Why is this in our course?
  - a. "the characteristic genius of the Jew has been especially his moral genius...Nobody but a Jew (Marx) could have fought so uncompromisingly and obstinately for the victory of the dispossessed classes" (Edmond Wilson, in his history of socialism, *To the Finland Station*)
  - b. These utopian movements, created under tremendous Jewish influence (but without Jewish means), swept hundreds of thousands of Jews into their fervor during the 1800s and early 1900s
  - c. Critical to understand the early development of the modern State of Israel and what is taking place today
- B. Historical Context Background
  - a. Two great revolutions shook the World: in France and the US
    - i. Spreading the idea of liberty and freedom
      - 1. Napoleonic Wars (1803-1815) spread the ideas throughout Europe but he was defeated and monarchies reestablished themselves in England, Austro-Hungarian, and Prussian empires
      - 2. US was exception, most revolutions when they win are just as tyrannical as the one they overthrew
- C. Jews still trying to deal with the "Jewish problem" throughout 19th century
  - a. Waves of pogroms, led by czarist Russia where it was sanctioned and encouraged by the government
    - i. Jews conscripted into Russian army for 25 year death sentences, quota system administered terribly unfair. Great dissatisfaction with rabbinate
    - ii. Confined to the Pale of Settlement, Unemployment near 40%
  - b. Enlightened movement changed the world and its way of thinking
  - c. Three approaches
    - i. Chassidim, Mussar movements
      - 1. Create a better Jew: More pious, inspired, moral, insular
    - ii. Haskalah and Reform movements
      - 1. Create a new Jew: shed the outdated culture and world view and become aristocratic and cultured to be accepted by society.
      - 2. It was purely Jewish in approach, just not traditional
    - iii. Marxism
      - 1. Create a new society: fix the world's problems and the Jewish problem disappears. (All boats rise in high tide). Rid world of

aristocracy, exploitation, class struggle, nationalism, bigotry and persecution

2. Universal, not at all Jewish, anti-religious, but immensely popular amongst Jews

#### D. Marxism

- a. Karl Marx (1818-1883), a German philosopher, economist, sociologist, historian, journalist, and revolutionary socialist. One of the most influential figures of the modern era
- b. Grandparents were observant Jews, but his parents converted to Christianity and he never saw himself as anything but, though he could never shake his identity as a Jew

*Marx's theories about society, economics and politics – collectively known as Marxism – hold that human societies progress through class struggle: a conflict between an ownership class that controls production and a dispossessed laboring class that provides the labor for production. He called capitalism the "dictatorship of the bourgeoisie," believing it to be run by the wealthy classes for their own benefit; and he predicted that, like previous socioeconomic systems, capitalism produced internal tensions which would lead to its self-destruction and replacement by a new system: socialism.*

*He argued that class antagonisms under capitalism between the bourgeoisie and proletariat would eventuate in the working class' conquest of political power in the form of a dictatorship of the proletariat and eventually establish a classless society, socialism or communism, a society governed by a free association of producers.*

*Along with believing in the inevitability of socialism and communism, Marx actively fought for their implementation, arguing that social theorists and underprivileged people alike should carry out organized revolutionary action to topple capitalism and bring about socio-economic change.*

*(Wikipedia)*

#### E. Marxism vs. Judaism

- a. Motivating Aims
  - i. Similar in that motivated by desire to ultimately perfect the world and create a utopian society
    1. Very appealing to the masses of 19<sup>th</sup> Century Jews
  - ii. Principles of Fairness, Equity, Rights of the Working Man, Money is not source of Power, Exploitation is evil, universal brotherhood and peace...all are deeply rooted Jewish Concepts
- b. The Highest Being
  - i. The most obvious and all-encompassing difference
    1. For Jews, "Hashem is our G-d Hashem is One"
    2. For Marx, "the highest being for man is man himself" and "human self-consciousness is the supreme divinity - by the side of which none other shall be held."

- ii. Marx was viciously anti-Semitic and anti-religious. He wrote "A World without the Jews" detailing all of the world's problems as the fault of the Jews
  - 1. "religion is the opiate of the masses"
- c. Morality
  - i. Without any divine dictum *all revolutionary behavior is morally justified*

*We therefore reject every attempt to impose on us any moral dogma whatsoever as an eternal, ultimate and forever immutable moral law on the pretext that the moral world too has its permanent principles which transcend history and the differences between nations. We maintain on the contrary that all former moral theories are the product, in the last analysis, of the economic stage which society had reached at that particular epoch.*

- ii. Early anarchists: assassinations were their favorite method, bombing carriages; 1870-1900 wave of terror against hundreds of authorities
- iii. Personal moral behavior is the essence of Judaism
  - 1. "You shall not commit a perversion of justice; you shall not favor the poor [the worker] and you shall not honor the great [the capitalist], with righteousness shall you judge your fellow (Vayikra, 19:15)
- d. Determinant of Man's behavior
  - i. Herein lies one of the greatest errors of Marxist philosophy: the intrinsic goodness of mankind
    - 1. Marx: economics. Evil acts are consequences of their position in the class structure of society; socio-economic conditions are responsible for human behavior.
  - ii. Torah: "the imagery of man's heart is evil from his youth" (Bereishis 8:21)
    - 1. The individual, not society, is responsible for his actions. It is men who create society, and if it is an evil one, then it is man who is expected and required to rise above it
    - 2. Cain and Able
    - 3. Noach
- e. Ways to achieve perfection
  - i. Marx: Revolution against existing socio-economic order. Everything done towards that means brings the world closer to perfection
  - ii. Judaism: rejects revolution because the roots of evil and injustice lie not in economics but in man himself. It's a system of moral revolution within each individual before the world as a whole can be changed
    - 1. External freedom from bondage only allowed context for spiritual and moral freedom to develop

## F. Jewish Socialists

- a. Enlisted in the hundreds of thousands
  - i. The rabbis were powerless to change society, Russian government, poverty...etc, but Marxists and socialists were going to do something
    1. The Bund: Jewish labor union in Russia, Poland and Lithuania to organize the Jews into a united socialist movement
      - a. Was anti-Semitic and anti-religious but had many many orthodox Jewish members
    2. American Labor Unions in early 1900s were organized and controlled by socialist Jews
      - a. Sydney Hillman (Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America); David Dubinsky (International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union)
  - b. Two major developments:
    - i. Continued anti-Semitism
      1. What was supposed to be international brotherhood without bigotry didn't turn out that way
    - ii. Zionism
      1. Was not tolerated in Socialist circles
      2. Jews married the two together and created a socialist utopian (non-religious) dream to end the exile
        - a. Kibbutz, atheism, hatred of religion, negative attitude towards capital and money, power of the worker, centrally controlled economy run by government, hard work in agriculture, build a new Jew, permissibility of violence against Britain