

Changing Faiths

From the Prologue of *Heaven On Earth*

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Socialism was the faith in which I was raised. It was my father's faith and his father's before him.

My grandfather, Avraham Chaim Muravchik, grew up in a small *shtetl* outside Kiev in what was then the Russian Empire. Born in 1878, he received the orthodox religious training of every boy of his time and place. But like many others of that generation he turned away from formal Judaism by the time he entered high school, or *gymnasium*, as it was called.

It was in the radical student circle at *gymnasium* that he met my grandmother, Rachel. She was several years his junior since he had not been able to afford the school until he had worked for a time as a lumberman, while her family, which manufactured paper bags and lived in Kiev proper, was better off. Together they joined the most radical of the newly formed Russian leftist parties, the Socialist Revolutionaries. It was distinguished from the more Marxist-oriented Social Democrats by its endorsement of terror tactics and by its theory that the leading role in the revolution would be played by Russia's peasantry rather than its proletariat.

Avraham Chaim and Rachel left for America in 1905, part of a wave of Jewish emigration touched off by an orgy of anti-Semitic violence that followed Russia's defeat by Japan and the abortive attempt to overthrow the tsar. The peasants, it turned out, were more easily mobilized for pogroms than for revolution.

In America, the couple found work with the Yiddish-language *Jewish Daily Forward*, whose masthead was emblazoned with the famous injunction of the *Communist Manifesto*: “Workers of the world unite!” They settled in a Harlem tenement, in which my father, Emanuel, was born in 1916.

Emanuel’s boyhood was filled with the comings and goings of the exile branches of the Russian Students Organization and the Left Socialist Revolutionaries. (The party had split in 1917, and my grandparents stuck with the more radical half.) In 1929, Norman Thomas ran for mayor of New York on the Socialist Party ticket, and the campaign crystallized my father’s budding interest in socialism. He chose it as the topic of an eighth-grade paper, and after four intense days in the library pronounced himself a convert. A few months later, just after his thirteenth birthday, he joined the Socialist Party. It was a coming of age that substituted for a *bar mitzvah*.

My mother, Miriam, shared my father’s views albeit with softer ideological definition. Being of liberal spirit, however, they decided to refrain from systematically indoctrinating me and my brother as they raised us. Systematic indoctrination was scarcely necessary, at any rate, for the political cause was the center of their lives. It was discussed at the family dinner table and with their friends, who were mostly “comrades.” On car excursions, we whiled away the time by singing “We Shall Not Be Moved” and other old labor songs. I first visited our nation’s capital in 1958 at the age of eleven when my parents took us on the Youth March for Integrated Schools, one of the earliest civil rights demonstrations. By my teens, I was a seasoned protestor.

By then I, too, had joined the Socialist Party, eventually becoming the leader of its youth wing, the Young People’s Socialist League. It was a small organization because

socialism never caught on in this country, despite my father's efforts and my own. (His have persisted for more than seventy years, while I became an apostate in my thirties and began to grope my way back to Judaism.)

If we were out of step with America, we took heart from knowing that America was out of step with the world. My comrade Michael Harrington—the famous writer who became chairman of the party in 1968, at the same moment that I became chairman of the youth wing—boasted: “Most of the people in the world today call the name of their dream ‘socialism.’ ” I could not vouch for his math, but socialism undoubtedly was the most popular political idea ever invented.

Arguably, it was the most popular idea of any kind, surpassing even the great religions. Like them, socialism spread both by evangelization and by the sword, but no religion ever spread so far or so fast. Islam conquered an empire that at its height embraced 20 percent of mankind. It took 300 years before Christianity could speak for 10 percent of the world's people, and after two millennia it can claim the adherence of about one-third of the human race. By comparison, within 150 years after the term “socialism” was coined by the followers of Robert Owen in the late 1820s, roughly 60 percent of the earth's population found itself living under socialist rule of one kind or another. Of course, not all who lived under socialism believed in it, but not all who were counted as Christians or Muslims were believers either.

Once empowered, socialism refused to yield its promised rewards. The more dogged the effort to achieve it, the more the outcome mocked the humane ideals it proclaimed. Yet for a century and a half, no amount of failure dampened socialism's appeal. Then suddenly, like a rocket crashing back to earth, it all collapsed. Within a

couple of decades, socialism was officially repealed in half the places where it had triumphed. In the other half, it continued in name only. Today, in but a few flyspecks on the map is there still an earnest effort to practice socialism, defended in the manner of those marooned Japanese soldiers who held out for decades after 1945, never having learned that their emperor had surrendered.

In this book I trace socialism's phenomenal trajectory. It is the story of man's most ambitious attempt to supplant religion with a doctrine about how life ought to be lived that claimed grounding in science rather than revelation. Although its provenance was European, it was taken up with ardor in China and Africa, India and Latin America and even in that most tradition-bound of regions, the Middle East. No other faith ever appealed as widely. It was not confined to salons and libraries but exerted itself as well in statehouses and on picket lines, barricades and battlefields. It did more than anything else to shape the history of the twentieth century.

Ironically, the power of this faith was to some degree obscured by the popularity of Marxist theory, which held that ideas were merely the surface froth thrown up by underlying currents of technological progress and material interests. This, too, was a seductive notion because it answered that most puzzling question: why do people think what they do? But this "materialist" interpretation of ideology has not stood the test of time, least of all in explaining socialism's own history. What material interests or technology caused the triumph of socialism, or its defeat, in Russia? Its transmission to China, Cuba and North Korea? Its appearance in other forms in Sweden, Israel, Tanzania, Syria?

The idea of socialism did not march through history of its own accord. It was

invented, developed, popularized, revised, exploited and then abandoned by a chain of thinkers and activists. It was modified again and again, sometimes for ulterior motives but also because, for all its unmatched allure, it proved maddeningly difficult to implement. I have chosen to tell the story of socialism through sketches of key individuals each of whom exemplifies a critical stage or form in its evolution. Some of these were seminal figures, responsible more or less single-handedly for a major turning point. Who can imagine communism without Lenin, fascism without Mussolini, or the peaceful self-nullification of the Soviet Union without Gorbachev? Other important episodes, such as the rise of utopianism or social democracy or the embrace of socialism by “Third World” states, cannot be traced to a single individual, so I have selected for portraiture the one whom I believe best represents each of these chapters in the drama.

The manger in which socialism was born was the French Revolution, with its emphasis on equality, its profound anticlericalism and its promise that all things could be made new. Amidst the chiliastic confusion of serial upheavals, one impassioned visionary, “Gracchus” Babeuf, proposed that the way to give substance to the slogan “liberty, equality, fraternity” was to collectivize all property. Thus did his Conspiracy of Equals, as it called itself, serve as midwife to the new idea, which grew and developed over the next 120 years. In the early 1800s, with most of Europe still recoiling from the Napoleonic bloodbath, socialism turned away from revolution to experimentation, in the form of small communities in which people could practice the life of collective ownership. The most important of these—in America and England—were led or inspired by Robert Owen.

These experiments in socialism did not turn out well, and the idea itself might

have wasted away in infancy had it not been taken up by a symbiotic team of unique prophetic power: Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. They shifted the basis of socialist hopes from individual experiments to broader historic trends, which fortified it against empirical failure. Although Owen's movement had adopted the physical trappings of religion, erecting church-like "halls of science" where sermons were delivered at Sunday services, Marx and Engels achieved the far more profound breakthrough of imbuing socialism with something of the intellectual and spiritual force of the great religious texts. Their doctrine provided an account of man's history, an explanation of current sorrows and a vision of a redemptive future.

But half a century after the publication of *The Communist Manifesto*, the socialist idea hit another crisis as Marx and Engels' leading heir, Eduard Bernstein, observed that economic development was contradicting the prophecy. The theory was rescued by Lenin, who kept it alive by performing heart transplant surgery, replacing the proletariat by the vanguard. Still, although socialism had stirred millions by the early twentieth century, it remained a dream.

Then, World War I gave Lenin the opportunity to put his idea into practice, and in 1917 socialism achieved its first momentous triumph. Even those socialists who decried Lenin's methods, or who viewed his state as little more than a caricature of their goals, nonetheless felt strengthened in the conviction that history was flowing from capitalism to socialism. Yet the debate over the Russian model, along with the war's demonstration of the power of nationalism, shattered the movement. Of the fragments, the most outré was fascism, which seemed to turn socialism on its head. Still, the leap from Lenin to Mussolini was no bigger than that from Marx to Lenin; each man distilled theory from the

exigencies of revolutionary action.

The fascist chapter was explosive and brief, and socialism emerged strengthened from the defeat of this heresy in World War II. Not only did many more communist regimes emerge, but social democracy found a new lease on life, spearheaded by Clement Attlee's stunning electoral triumph over Churchill in Britain at the end of the war. The aftermath also saw the appearance of dozens of new postcolonial states and with them the birth of "Third World socialism." This was a hybrid of communism and social democracy, exemplified by Julius Nyerere's Tanzania, and modeled partly after Chinese Maoism, partly after British Fabianism.

At some point in the late 1970s, socialism reached its apogee, with communist, social-democratic or Third World socialist regimes governing most of the world. There were, however, two chinks in the socialist armor. One was its dismal economic performance: much of socialism's appeal sprang from the wish to ameliorate want and deprivation, yet in practice it often made things worse. The other was its utter failure to gain a foothold in America, the world's most influential nation, where—to add insult to injury—the leading antisocialist force seemed to be none other than the working class, personified by labor leaders like Samuel Gompers and George Meany. As America's continued economic success mocked socialism's failures, various Third World nations began to rethink their economic direction. Astoundingly, so did the two communist giants, China and the USSR, which, under the stewardship of restless reformers Deng Xiaoping and Mikhail Gorbachev, embarked on uncharted courses away from socialism. It remained only for the social-democratic branch of the socialist family to beat a retreat in order for the reversal to be complete. And in 1997, Tony Blair resuscitated Attlee's

moribund party by campaigning with the slogan “Labour is the party of business.” Thus, 201 years from the date of Babeuf’s failed coup, the story was brought full circle.

I complete my telling with a digression from history to laboratory science, as it were, by training a microscope on an Israeli kibbutz. Like most such settlements, kibbutz Ginosar was secular, built by Jews who, like my father and grandfather, preferred the teachings of Marx to those of Moses. And like most, they succeeded where people in other lands had failed, creating a pure socialism, faithful to the blueprint—only to see their progeny turn its back on this way of life.

After so much hope and struggle, and so many lives sacrificed around the world, socialism’s epitaph turned out to be: If you build it, they will leave.