

## Does the Torah Promote Socialism?

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I know Bernie Sanders. Well, I don't *directly* know him, but I basically know him. He went to the same high school, the famed James Madison High school in Brooklyn, where Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Chuck Schumer, Norm Coleman, Carole King, Judge Judy, Martin Landau, and my 91 year old grandmother, Harriet Raskin, all graduated! Bernie Sanders could be any one of my grandparents, aunts and uncles, or cousins who share a relatively similar biography...many have New York City roots; each has a cultural, though not particularly religious affinity for Judaism; many have eschewed organized religion, but maintain strong attachments to corned beef and knishes, latkes and matzah ball soup. "I think everyone believes in God in their own way," Sanders told the Washington Post,<sup>1</sup> "To me, it means that all of us are connected, all of life is connected and that we're all tied together." My sense is that this theology would not be the least bit objectionable to the Bernie Sanders's in my family. In fact, there are plenty of very well-known Jews who might sum up their Judaism in much the same way: Think Jerry Seinfeld, Barbra Streisand, Philip Roth, Betty Friedan...

These are Jews who probably went to Hebrew School, as Bernie did; probably had a bar mitzvah, as Bernie did; probably went to synagogue once or twice a year, as Bernie did in his youth—though it is reported that he spent more time on the steps outside listening to the World Series than inside listening to Kol Nidrei; and likely hasn't spent much time in a synagogue since...you probably heard that this past Rosh Hashanah, Bernie Sanders was not only not in shul, he was campaigning and speaking at of all places Liberty University, the evangelical Christian college founded by Jerry Falwell. Can you imagine what his Polish immigrant parents would have thought of that? In his speech he quoted the *Golden Rule*, which he pulled from Matthew 7:12, rather than its earlier, original, Jewish source, the great rabbi Hillel! But I suppose it's important to know your audience...

Moreover, Bernie Sander's Jewishness, like the Jewishness of the Bernies in my family, is inextricably linked to social justice, left wing, Democratic politics, and in Sander's case, socialism. Now while you may think that a Jewish socialist is some kind of a *bushah*, an

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<sup>1</sup> "Why Bernie Sanders doesn't participate in organized religion," by Frances Stead Sellers & John Wagner. Washington Post, January 27, 2016

embarrassment, a disgrace because of the association with socialism and communism, the truth is that there is a long line of Jewish socialists...beginning with Leon Trotsky, originally Lev Davidovich Bronstein, and Karl Marx, whose parents were Jews but converted when Karl was a young boy...to other people we actually revere, and proudly claim as our own: like many of the founders of the modern State of Israel. According to Elinor Burkett's biography of Golda Meir, Golda's husband Morris hated life on the kibbutz in part because all they talked about was work, Zionism, and socialism!<sup>2</sup> Shy Agnon, A.D. Gordon, David Ben Gurion, Yitzhak Rabin, Shimon Peres were all socialists, or as they preferred to be called, "Labor Zionists." The question I want to pose to you today is whether in fact the Torah advocates a socialist economic philosophy...particularly in this morning's Torah reading, Behar.

Could there be any greater example of socioeconomic engineering that the Jubilee year? Every fifty years all debts were annulled and people who were saddled with liabilities had a chance to start over, land was returned to its original owners, the poor were protected from the rich, and servants were released from their duties. Crops were left unharvested, and anyone was allowed to gather food from any field. Money cannot be lent with interest, and the prices of land leases were strictly controlled. In so many other places the Torah seems to legislate financial support for the weakest, most vulnerable members of society: the widow, the orphan, the Levite. "*Lo t'ametz et levav'cha, ve'lo tikpotz et yad'cha mei'achicha ha'evyon...* Do not harden your heart or shut your hand against your needy kinsman," the Torah commands.<sup>3</sup> "Rather, you must open your hand and lend him sufficient for whatever he needs."

I'll never forget the very first page of Talmud I ever learned...It was the 10<sup>th</sup> *perek* or chapter of Tractate Pesachim, and at the very beginning of the discussion I encountered the Hebrew term *tamchui*. A *tamchui* was a communal charity plate of sorts that people who didn't have enough money for food could take from...In the context of Passover, this communal charity could support the purchase of enough wine for the four cups at the seder. And Jewish history is replete with examples of funds for the poor and destitute: free loan societies, immigrant aid, care for the elderly, indigent burial funds, subsidies to support poor brides, orphans, new mothers, Jewish

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<sup>2</sup> Burkett, Elinor. *Golda*, page 50

<sup>3</sup> Deut. 15:7-8

education. Our own shul has a “Share Your Blessings” fund so that no one is turned away from synagogue membership regardless of their financial abilities. I can’t imagine an ethnic or religious community with a more developed program of services and support for its own needy members than the Jewish community.

The question is does the Torah’s radical ideas about social and economic justice amount to an endorsement of socialism? First let’s establish a working definition of socialism...According to Oxford, “Socialism is an economic system which features state ownership of the means of production and control over investment in the economy, a more equal distribution of income and wealth, and the democratic election of government officials responsible for economic decisions.”<sup>4</sup> So let’s analyze each of these through a Torah lens:

While socialism promotes active government control and ownership, Judaism has a healthy skepticism when it comes to the involvement of the authorities. Recall the backlash the Jewish people experienced when asking for a king. Not only does the prophet Samuel rail against the idea as an affront to God, but he hails forth about all the excesses such a domineering government would entail. In his rebuke, Samuel seems particularly concerned about state ownership and control: A king will repossess your land, your vineyards, your pastures, he tells the people, he will take your weapons, your chariots; he’ll demand a tenth of your flocks, he will determine the employment of your sons and daughters for his benefit, and the list goes on and on.<sup>5</sup> The Mishnah counsels people to keep a healthy distance from the government, and to be aware that politicians are usually benevolent only when it is to their benefit.<sup>6</sup>

Furthermore, the value of private property is very much a concern of the Torah...Think about the commandments prohibiting the theft of both physical and intellectual property, even coveting is prohibited...just the thought of being preoccupied with someone else’s private property is considered a sin! Whole tractates of the Talmud deal with property rights, damages, returning lost objects to their rightful owners, the responsibilities of being entrusted with someone else’s belongings. It seems to me that the idea of the government being a *better* steward of people’s

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<sup>4</sup> Honderich, Ted. *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, pp. 830-831

<sup>5</sup> I Samuel 8

<sup>6</sup> Avot 2:4

property, or that collective ownership is preferable to private ownership is Jewish rather indefensible.

Listening to socialists today, there is a demonization of the wealthy, the top 1%, anyone who has an office on one of the eight New York City blocks that make up Wall Street. Money, however, is not inherently evil in Judaism...nor is making money or for that matter, being wealthy. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob famously accumulated substantial wealth; some of the greatest sages of the Talmud were known for their affluence: think Rabbi Yehudah Ha’Nasi, Rabbi Tarfon, Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah... The idea of prosperity, achieved honestly, through perseverance, effort and skill is considered praiseworthy. The idea that the world was created incomplete...with grain growing in fields rather than loaves of bread, was so that people would use their God-given talents to join God in the creative process. Now none of that should imply that Judaism doesn’t care for the poor or the less fortunate. *Tzedakah* in Judaism is not just a nice thing to do—*tzedakah* means “justice,” not charity. It is fundamental to how Jews are meant to use their money. We are obligated to share materially with those who have less. But *tzedakah* is not the same as income redistribution, and the rich should not be demonized for their successes. Money is morally neutral...how it is earned and spent is where our values come into play.

I think Jews historically flocked to socialist ideologies because they believed that, once and for all, the playing field would be leveled...that finally they would be able to participate in commerce without the prejudices of religion or ethnicity holding them back. Also, Jews have always identified with the underdog, the oppressed, the marginalized...and with good reason: “*V’ger lo tilchatz*, do not oppress a stranger, *v’atem y’datem et nefesh ha’ger*, because you know the feelings, literally the *nefesh*, the soul of the stranger, *ki geirim hayitem be’eretz Mitzrayim*, because you were strangers in the land of Egypt.”<sup>7</sup> We come by this sensitivity naturally, and based on our own experience. We know firsthand what persecution feels like...we know firsthand what it means to have to move, relocate, re-establish both our lives and our livelihoods. We know what it feels like to be strangers, immigrants, new-comers; to have to learn new languages and adapt to new cultures. We know prejudice, bigotry, and fear. These afflictions

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<sup>7</sup> Exodus 23:9

have bred a unique sensitivity and sympathy for the plight of others. I'm quite sure that this mentality informs both Bernie Sanders and the Bernie Sanders's of my family. That history is certainly deeply ingrained in my value system as well!

But when you think about it, socialism has actually not been a *Jewish* philosophy, nor has it been particularly helpful to the Jewish people. In 1977, a year after he won the Nobel Prize in Economics, another Brooklyn Jew named Milton Friedman-- He didn't go to James Madison, by the way, he graduated from Rahway High School in Union County, New Jersey--described socialist states as the worst environments for Jewish survival in modern history. Jews, he said, certainly did not thrive in the "socialist utopias of Russia or Poland," to say nothing of the National Socialist State of Nazi Germany. He said that in this country Jews excelled in fields where government had the least roll to play, and where the competitive spirit was the highest. Think about how few Jews were involved, for example, in the automobile industry...one of the most regulated, government entangled businesses in America. Compare that to the professions, to retail, to Hollywood even...each of them far from government interference or monopolies...and Jews were the titans in those industries. Even Israel turned from its socialist origins to a more capitalist economy, and Israel has received critical aid not from Jews in socialist societies but Jews who became successful in America, in Great Britain, and in other free market countries. "No people have benefitted more from the capitalist system, a system that allows people to prosper truly on their merits, not their ethnicity, skin color, gender, religion...or any other factor" than the Jews, according to Dr. Friedman.<sup>8</sup>

So does the Torah promote socialism? I think the answer is a resounding no. What the Torah promotes is a society that works hard, that conducts itself with honesty, integrity, and justice, that is takes care of all of its members as a matter of religious principle, and that views the world as a place to partner with God in making it more fruitful and prosperous for all.

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<sup>8</sup> *Is Socialism a Jewish Value?* by Emily Schrader, Times of Israel, August 19, 2012