Aaron Liebermann: the father of Jewish socialism
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Radical political change has been a formative factor in modern Jewish history, Jews often having been at the forefront of movements aimed at improving the living standards of ordinary people. Leon Trotsky (né Bronstein) was not the first Jew to want to change the state of society, and Jews played a significant role in left-wing revolutionary politics from the middle of the nineteenth century. One such was Aaron Samuel Liebermann, generally viewed as a relatively minor figure in the history of the movement. In the 1870s, however, he played a notable role in left-wing politics. He was to some extent influenced by Moses Hess, the forerunner of modern Zionism and an early Jewish advocate of reform. Hess’s tombstone in Cologne (later moved to near the Sea of Galilee) was inscribed with the words ‘Father of German Social Democracy’.1 But Ber Borochov, the socialist Zionist leader and one of the most influential figures in the Jewish labour movement, gave Liebermann the title of the ‘Father of Jewish Socialism’.2 Rudolf Rocker also described Liebermann as ‘rightly the father of Jewish socialism’, and said that he was one of the most remarkable men in the socialist movement of his time.3 Rocker, a Yiddish-speaking non-Jew of German birth, spent much of his time in the East End of London largely among Jews, where he was a leading figure in the Jewish anarchist movement. A twentieth-century authority on Jewish socialist history, Boris Sapir, also considers that Liebermann deserves to be regarded as the founder of Jewish socialism.4 Liebermann, the first Jewish socialist to try persistently to organize Jewish workers,5 merits more than a footnote in the history books.

Liebermann was born in Luna, a town in the province of Grodno in Russia, in about 1849. His early education was traditional and it is said that

1 J. Frankel, Prophecy and Politics (Cambridge 1981) 47.
2 Ber Borochov, Nationalism and the Class Struggle (Westport, CT 1972) 169.
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his grandfather introduced him to the Talmud when he was only six years old. At sixteen he went to the Vilna Rabbinical Seminary, in reality a teachers’ seminary, from which he graduated as ‘teacher of the first rank in a Government school’. Some time spent in St Petersburg exposed him to revolutionary ideas and by the age of twenty-four, when he returned to Vilna, he was a secularist and a maskil (modernist). Isaakovich Zundelovitch had established an organization called the Vilna Circle in 1873, and Liebermann joined this group, which consisted primarily of pupils of a yeshiva and a teachers’ college, becoming its leading figure. In contrast to other Jewish activists, who did not really understand what motivated working-class Jews, Liebermann and Zundelovitch endeavoured to gain support from the Jewish masses. The Circle existed for only two years, with a maximum membership of twenty-six, but, unlike many of his comrades, Liebermann remained Jewish in outlook and thought. He called himself a ‘Hebrew socialist’ and was anxious to educate the Jewish proletariat to fight for better living conditions. Vladimir Jochelson, a close comrade of Liebermann’s in Vilna, provided a good description of Liebermann at this time. ‘He had obtained a European education. He had a command of several European languages and he was an orator. He was thoroughly conversant with the Talmud and he had a great love of the Hebrew literature. He was a talented Yiddish publicist. He was a free-thinker, but he was no less occupied in our circle with questions of nationalist conscience with regard to the Jewish people. He worked in our group to get socialist literature published in the Yiddish language.’ Although he appreciated that the masses spoke Yiddish, Liebermann wanted Hebrew to be the language of propaganda because it was the written language of the Jewish intelligentsia, whom he believed should be preaching the message of socialism to the Jewish masses in their own language. Furthermore, Hebrew was less suspect in the eyes of Tsarist censorship. He naively believed that Hebrew was the best literary vehicle for training revolutionaries among talmudic students, but the fact is that Hebrew was an unknown language to the Jewish working class and was never going to be accepted as the language of the revolutionary movement. Liebermann was enthusiastic about the potential of talmudic students, whom he believed possessed the qualities to help his cause. ‘They represent the pillars of Jewry. They comprise the elite of our Jewish youth. They are men of an acute mind, they love truth and justice with their very

7 Borochov (see n. 2) 170.
8 Rocker (see n. 3) 114–15.
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heart. They are the only ones among our youth without a sense of egotism...
they continue to dwell among the Jewish masses whilst the so-called “educated” youth deserted the bond of Israel and under the excuse of enlightenment sought honours, money and power.11

In 1874 in Vilna, Liebermann formulated his own maskil ideas in a fictional satire entitled ‘The Crux of the Matter’ published in Peretz Smolenskin’s Hebrew journal *Ha-shahar* (The Dawn) and in it he fantasized about the future world. He was scathing about traditional Jewish (*heder*) teaching and his reputation following the publication of this work grew among haskalah (enlightenment) circles, where he was seen as the most talented Hebrew stylist among the younger writers.12

Before its demise the Vilna group had formed a secret association with similar groups in St Petersburg and Moscow, and it liaised with secret organizations in these two cities as well as with supporters in Western Europe.13 In 1875 the Vilna police successfully traced and arrested many of the ringleaders including Zundelovitch, but Liebermann evaded arrest and managed to flee, initially to Berlin where he tried unsuccessfully to establish a ‘Jewish Socialist Section of the International’. After this he moved to London. Liebermann was strongly attracted to the writings of Peter Lavrovich Lavrov (1823–1900), a philosopher who influenced the development of Russian revolutionary movements, and he became involved with Lavrov’s revolutionary journal called *Vperyod* (Forward).14 Lavrov was a leading figure in the early period of the Russian revolutionary and socialist movement and one of the most important influences in moulding the thoughts of Jewish intellectuals in Russia at that time.15 He had similar ideas to those of the Russian revolutionary and anarchist Mikhail Bakunin, and was also in favour of political decentralization and the exclusion of the state from the life of society.16 Karl Marx was known to be a reader of the journal.17 *Vperyod* had begun life in Zurich, but later transferred to London, and there that Liebermann reiterated his vision of a Jewish socialist movement and argued that socialism was not alien to the Jewish people. In one article he wrote that socialism was not a strange phenomenon for Jews: ‘revolution is our tradition, solidarity is the basis of our Torah.

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15 Rocker (see n. 3) 114.
16 E. Silberer, ‘Was Marx an Anti-Semite?’, in Mendelsohn (see n. 10) 391.
we Jews who proclaimed the principle that the land cannot be alienated for ever, it is we who proclaimed such a social institution as the seventh and the Jubilee year, and bequeathed to humanity the ideals of equality and brotherhood. Our ancient social order was anarchy, our human relationships were based on the principles of the International. The great prophets of our modern times, the Jews Marx, Lassalle etc. were brought up in the spirit of our people. May we, therefore, follow them.\textsuperscript{218} Despite these stirring words, Liebermann was not a supporter of Marx’s communist ideals. Marx’s materialism was to him incompatible with his traditional Jewish idealistic and messianic conceptions.\textsuperscript{19}

Liebermann worked as a compositor and was active in editing for \textit{Vperyod}. It has been claimed that he was promised a position on the London \textit{Daily Telegraph}, but that this was later withdrawn.\textsuperscript{20} Within a year he formed with nine others a short-lived socialist society entitled \textit{Aguard haSozialistim halVrit} (Hebrew Socialist Union), the first Jewish workers’ organization with the objective of propagating socialism among the Jewish masses. Its membership never exceeded forty. Liebermann wrote its manifesto, composed in a scholarly Hebrew and translated into Yiddish, which was the first Jewish proletarian manifesto;\textsuperscript{21} it referred to the need to spread the doctrine of socialism to non-Jews as well as Jews, and argued that workers should seek to unite with those in other countries and fight against their oppressors.\textsuperscript{22} His programme emphasized that Jews are an integral part of humankind and they must join with their fellow workers in Europe and America to destroy the capitalist system and establish socialism. The \textit{status quo} was said to be ruthless and unjust, since the ‘capitalists, rulers and clergy’ had enslaved the working masses ‘through the power of their money’. The continuation of private ownership and clerical influence would sustain economic misery and religious hatred. Change would come only if the existing order was uprooted and replaced by a new socialist society. This could be achieved only by the workers uniting to destroy the existing order. The manifesto concluded with the statement that ‘we, the Children of Israel, have decided to affiliate ourselves with this noble Alliance of Labour’.\textsuperscript{23} While in London, Liebermann issued the first socialist manifesto in Hebrew, in which he appealed to Jewish youth to take part in the political struggle to emancipate all workers, but especially to fight

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\bibitem{18} Patkin (see n. 11) 96.
\bibitem{19} Ibid. 95.
\bibitem{21} Tcherikower (see n. 6) 182.
\bibitem{22} Fishman (see n. 20) 103–5.
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their Jewish exploiters. This appeal commenced with the words *el shlomei bacharei yisrael* (to the finest youth of Israel and was signed by the ‘Loyal Volunteers of the People of the House of Israel’.

The Jewish establishment in Britain began to be concerned, and the unwanted radical activity prompted the *Jewish Chronicle* to warn its readers of what it regarded as dangerous agitators. It described the Socialist Union as a ‘body which possesses no existence whatsoever except in the imagination of the insane originator’, and said that the tract that had been issued emanated ‘from the enemies of the Jews and [is] put into circulation in order to injure them’. There were, inevitably, conflicts between the foremost members of the Union, but Liebermann took the lead. Strikingly, he forced through the decision to respect the Fast of Av (*Tisha b’Av*). A meeting had been planned for that date, but he convinced his comrades that because Jews had lost their independence on that day some 1800 years previously, it was appropriate to mark the occasion. Liebermann’s activities in London were directed particularly towards Jews who had lived in pre-1881 Britain, before the great immigration. Many of those to whom he addressed his remarks were, by the 1870s, comfortably off and would have had no truck with socialism. It is not surprising that the leaders of British Jewry were aghast at these revolutionary ideas. Yet Jews had come into the United Kingdom, mainly to London’s East End, in significant numbers even before 1881, and were working in tailoring, hat-making and tobacco sweatshops, as well as being watchmakers and carpenters. Well-established British Jews must have been concerned at what seemed to be extreme activities. A leading article in the *Jewish Chronicle* in July 1876 referred to communism among Russian Jews, and advised the Russian Tsar to follow the precedent set by his brother in Austria with regard to dealings with the Jews there, because this would surely result in ‘not a communist [to be] found amongst the Jews of Russia’. Immigrant clergy such as the Russian Magid Rabbi Zvi Hersch Dainow were encouraged to speak against the Socialist Union. The *Jewish Chronicle* denied that Jews coming to London from Russia were socialist agitators, and the Magid accused Liebermann of ‘vagabondage, dishonesty and avowed transgression of the laws of God and man, especially the laws given on Sinai’.

Liebermann and his associates gave public lectures to explain the need to work towards a socialist society. They were anxious that Jewish values and Jewish character should be retained. Liebermann’s insistence on the use of Hebrew, not commonly understood by the masses, helped ensure that his

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24 Borochov (see n. 2) 171.
25 *Jewish Chronicle* 23 June 1876, p. 181.
26 Ibid. 7 July 1876, p. 211.
27 Ibid. 11 Aug. 1876, p. 293.
mission quickly became unsuccessful. He was conscious of hardship among impoverished Jewry because he attacked the communal authorities for charging £3 for Jewish marriage. No notice seems to have been taken, but some time later several synagogues in the East End of London reduced the fee to half a guinea. At a meeting held on 26 August 1876, which was packed both with supporters and opponents of the Socialist Union, Liebermann attacked the local Jewish leaders, especially the Chief Rabbi, and there were loud disputes. The meeting ended when it was decided to form a tailors’ union. Yet soon the Jewish establishment managed to destroy their activities, leaving Liebermann demoralized. The tailors’ union deserted him and he eventually returned disconsolate to Vienna where, under the new name of Arthur Freeman (Liebermann had several noms-de-plume), he met Peretz Smolenskin. But the two men could not agree on how to move forward. Liebermann then set up another Hebrew journal entitled Ha-Emet (The Truth), hoping it would help organize a Jewish socialist movement in Central and Eastern Europe. Its prospectus stated: ‘The darkness which to this day governs the minds of the majority is the father of all evil. It has penetrated to the base of society and has shattered its foundation. Darkness has paved the road for deceit. With its aid brutal leaders have enslaved the people … The people knows endless pain … and is degenerating through ignorance. The people cannot choose between evil and good. Only truth can bring enlightenment to the human mind and distinguish good from evil. Champions for justice are to be found among all peoples. Only our Jewish literature has lacked emet; for since prophecy ceased among the Jewish people, our writers have ceased to take an interest in the miserable life and needs of the people.’ Liebermann vigorously attacked capitalism in Ha-Emet. In one article he graphically contrasted London’s West End with conditions suffered by the poor in the East End. ‘These are not people standing for sale in the London market but machines of flesh and blood called “hands” and happy are those “hands” which find a buyer … because, as bad luck would have it, these machines have stomachs which demand food. … Private wealth and communal wealth are two contradictory phenomena and the one can only grow at the expense of the other.’

There is disagreement among historians about Ha-Emet’s value. To Abramsky the journal was largely ineffective and isolated among Jewish workers through Liebermann’s insistence on using Hebrew, but Frankel

29 Elman (see n. 23) 58–9.
30 Borochov (see n. 2) 172.
31 Frankel (see n. 1) 41–2.
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believes it was a notable achievement and helped Liebermann disseminate socialist doctrines within the Pale of Settlement in Russia.\(^\text{33}\) Morris Winchevsky, who was responsible for promoting socialism in the Yiddish press in London and later edited a different Hebrew socialist journal, worked with Liebermann both in Vilna and in London and wrote that it was ‘a fine and honest literary undertaking’, and that its standards were unaf- fected by personal ambition. Winchevsky added that Liebermann, despite his acceptance of secular culture, remained a ‘learned, sharp-witted Talmudist who enjoyed making his readers wrinkle their foreheads trying to understand him’.\(^\text{34}\) But Liebermann inconsistently denied in *Ha-emet’s* first issue that Jews had their own culture. ‘We Jews do not possess a culture of our own which differentiates and isolates us from the nations among whom we live … Any bond which may ever have existed between us has long been torn asunder.\(^\text{35}\) But he also claimed that assimilation would not solve the Jewish problem.\(^\text{36}\) Only three issues of the journal appeared, and *Ha-Emet* collapsed when the third was banned. In February 1878 Liebermann was arrested and sent to prison for twelve months. He was expelled from Austria and went to Berlin. There he was soon arrested again, accused of setting up an illegal and subversive organization. In a trial referred to as the ‘Trial of the Russian Nihilists’, he and other socialists were imprisoned for another six months before being deported.\(^\text{37}\) Liebermann returned briefly to London, probably in January 1880, before moving on to the United States. In London he met Winchevsky, who had been deported to England a short time previously. Winchevsky became a disciple of Liebermann’s, but he portrayed him as stormy, paradoxical and artistic.\(^\text{38}\) Liebermann developed a relationship with Winchevsky’s sister-in-law, Rachel Sarasohn. She thought she was an *agunah* (a married woman whose husband refused to grant her a divorce or had disappeared), but then heard from her husband who asked her to join him in Syracuse, New York. Liebermann followed her in the hope that she would receive a *get* (divorce) and marry him, but this did not happen and, in that city, he took his own life on 18 November 1880.\(^\text{39}\) His final written words were: ‘Long live the world! He who finds only misery and pain is doomed to die. Do not accuse me ere you have put yourself in my position.’\(^\text{40}\)


\(^{34}\) L. Greenberg, *The Jews in Russia* (New Haven, CT 1965) 157.

\(^{35}\) Borochov (see n. 2) 173.

\(^{36}\) Levin (see n. 5) 45.

\(^{37}\) Greenberg (see n. 34) 157.

\(^{38}\) Borochov (see n. 2) 172.

\(^{39}\) Levin (see n. 5) 45.

\(^{40}\) Borochov (see n. 2) 172.
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Liebermann never attracted real support and was often attacked for his somewhat naïve approach to the problems of working-class Jews. He was also criticized for his unswerving support of Lavrov and for his inconsistencies. But in his short life of thirty years or so he played a not insignificant role in the class struggle of impoverished Jews in Britain and Europe. Despite being to some extent influenced by Moses Hess, Liebermann was not a Zionist and seems never to have made pronouncements about Jews returning in numbers to Erets Yisrael. Nevertheless, Chaim Zhitlovsky, a Russian populist and socialist who some years later played a central role in the development of Jewish politics, believed Liebermann’s only serious mistake was his insistence on using Hebrew instead of Yiddish. He argued that his successors of the 1890s were successful because they reversed this policy on language. Yet Liebermann did not possess a coherent policy for action and lacked the vision to see a way forward. As Levin has commented, his ideas were ‘a fuzzy composite of Russian popularism, Jewish messianism, Western European non-Marxian socialism and anarchism’. Nevertheless, his activities led the discerning Ber Borochov to comment that his work qualified him to be called the founding father of Jewish socialism. One cannot take away from him his niche in Jewish history.

41 Frankel (see n. 1) 273.
42 Levin (see n. 5) 45.
43 Borochov (see n. 2) 169.