

# JERUSALEM LETTER / VIEWPOINTS

Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs

VP:89 29 Sivan 5749 / 2 July 1989

## ISRAEL'S LABOR MOVEMENT: WHAT WENT WRONG?

Saadia Gelb

**What Went Wrong? / The Dreams of Revolutionaries / An Attempt to Achieve the Impossible / Successful Revolution Turns Conservative**

### What Went Wrong?

In Israel, the Labor movement cluster, which includes the Histadrut Labor organization, Hevrat Ovdim -- the holding company for Histadrut enterprises, the various Labor parties and their supporting public, with the kibbutz movement at its core, was once the object of veneration and universal acclaim by Israelis and world Jewry. Today that Labor movement is the focus of unfolding animosity.

By now there is no doubt that Israel's Labor movement is in crisis. Its Labor Alignment was ousted from political power in 1977 and has failed to return in the three subsequent elections. In 1984 the Labor Alignment split. The tendency of younger voters is either to desert Labor altogether or to move to smaller parties to the left of the mainstream Labor party. The Histadrut is in serious trouble. Many of the stars in the ferment of the Histadrut enterprises have gone bankrupt and disappeared from the scene.

Others are struggling hard to avoid that result. The kibbutz and moshav movements, Labor's pride and joy, have gone through a series of financial and economic reverses and have required special government bailouts. Labor ideology is no longer honored even in the breach by most of the movement's members and leaders who are now seeking some social democratic way to a more market-oriented and freer economy, in contrast to the collectivist socialist dreams of Labor's founding fathers.

How did this state of affairs come about? Was the ideology sound but the implementation bad or at least inadequate. Are people at fault or is the basic concept flawed? Did we veer off course or was the original path one leading toward a dead end goal? Are we victims of the "God that failed"?

Our God did not fail because we had no God. Nachman Syrkin, Ber Borochov, Berl Katznelson, David Ben-Gurion, Meir Yaari, Yitzhak Tabenkin,

Daniel J. Elazar, Editor and Publisher; Zvi R. Marom, Associate Editor; Mark Ami-El, Managing Editor  
21 Arlozorov St. Jerusalem, 92181, Israel; Tel. 02-639281. © Copyright. All rights reserved. ISSN:0334-4096

The opinions expressed by the authors of Viewpoints do not necessarily reflect those of the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs

and the other founding fathers of the Labor movement were not even angels -- certainly not gods. We were far too sophisticated for that kind of devotion.

Secondly, objectively viewed, we did not fail. The kibbutz movement, despite its current ailments, numbers 160,000 people in 280 kibbutzim. The Histadrut encompasses 80 percent of Israel's working community and over 30 percent of its economy. The Labor parties constitute the largest segment of voters in national elections. That cannot be defined as failure, yet there is a mood of dissatisfaction and a gnawing doubt about the future.

Why is this? Essentially it is a failure to live up to the dreams and expectations of the movement's social revolutionary founders.

### **The Dreams of Revolutionaries**

Revolutions are made by young hopefuls. Only youth, to whom failure or death seem distant and unreal, can venture into journeys of utopia. Hubris, naivete, and optimism in both thinking and practice are essential. Revolutionaries, thank God, really believe that they can reshape society.

It is characteristic of youth to bypass limiting factors and to think in absolute terms (not that old age is synonymous with wisdom). Are equality, freedom, and social justice not achievable in the near future or are they just distant goals? But revolutions which smash injustice do not necessarily eliminate the forces that produced the injustice. Desirable goals do not automatically generate desirable behavior.

Anti-revolutionaries constantly raise the issue of the human factor. "You can't change human nature" is their slogan. This is unquestionably true. Revolutionaries who attempt to alter the human species are heading for disaster. No one should play God. The problem is to direct and control human behavior while fully recognizing man's biological and psychological makeup. The most successful example of this, perhaps the only one, is the American Revolution's system of personal responsibility, checks and balances in the functions of government, and overall democratic control by elections. As

Martin Diamond put it, the American Revolution succeeded as it did because it was a revolution of sober expectations.

The Labor Zionist revolution met some of these requirements but failed in others. The enthusiastic pioneers ignored the opposition and assumed the task of building a new society in a hostile environment. For two generations success seemed assured, despite the common knowledge that a revolution is a one-generation event. Now, following the euphoria, a rude awakening looms on the horizon.

One reason for this is the fact that the opposition to the revolution did not collapse and disappear. Victory drives opponents to acquiescence and silence, and frequently drives them underground, but not to dissolution. The opposition remains, whether intellectual, physical or emotional, and behaves like air in a crack of a vacuum. Mistakes by the revolutionaries will evoke grumbling; serious errors will produce a counter-revolution. (Witness the shouts of glee at the current economic woes of kibbutzim, moshavim and Hevrat Ovdim.)

### **An Attempt to Achieve the Impossible**

The kibbutznicks set out to achieve unattainable goals. The battle cries and slogans, when taken literally, reveal their simplistic content. The kibbutz founders wanted to remake man. They wanted a just, humane, cultured, cooperative, self-abnegating, rational, devoted, loving creature. They recognized the baser elements in people but had faith in the potential for changing individuals if human institutions were transformed. The founders of the Histadrut set out to build a society of workers cooperating locally and nationally, helping one another, devoting the profits to social goals, progressing culturally and technologically.

The Labor parties had no doubts about the cooperation of the masses in building the Zionist entity on the basis of "constructivism," democracy, integrity, equality for all inhabitants of all faiths and nationalities -- in short, socialism. They had no doubts that the Arab masses, freed of their exploiting effendis and sheiks, would

join the mutual effort. The devastating result of these unrealistic objectives was an enormous degree of self-deception. Many a rank-and-filer and many a leader confused desire with fact. We are all blessed with the capacity to consider the figments of our imagination as truth.

Only self-deception can explain the genuine shock of surprise when a kibbutz treasurer absconded with money entrusted to him; when the prominent manager of a Western Galilee kibbutz holding company proved to be both tyrannical and inadequate; when the financial offices of a national kibbutz fund were duped by a slick con-man; when the largest Histadrut industrial conglomerate did not exercise normal prudence in its long-range planning. The fact that these failures were only a miniscule part of an overall record of purity and integrity was not taken into account. Perfection was expected of Labor Zionism; that was its promise and its platform.

The objective image of any revolution in the public mind is formed by its successes and failures over time. In our case, how many kibbutzim, moshavim and cooperatives were actually established and with what results in membership, produce and influence, versus how many mishaps, scandals and failures? How well did the Histadrut develop in size, effort, clout? How did the Labor parties fare in politics and in winning public support?

There are statistical measures to make an objective evaluation. Yet it is more difficult to measure the reflected image as seen by the general public. Polls are fickle. They show vacillation and inconsistency. Furthermore, they are contingent on the issues and the personalities at the moment of the survey. "Popularity" is an elusive concept but it is a genuine factor to be reckoned with. Most significantly, the reflected image affects the self-image. Many revolutionary participants are bandwagon followers. They come and go according to the prevailing trend.

Worst of all are the internal contradictions that are inherent in any revolution that succeeds. Once a goal or a segment thereof is attained the original fervor abates. Striving is much more exciting

than maintenance. The challenge wanes and the flaws surface.

### **Successful Revolution Turns Conservative**

Furthermore, implementation of the revolution, with the consequent need for protecting it, requires an apparatus of people and resources -- in other words, a bureaucratic structure that soon develops vested interests. Pioneering revolutionaries must conserve their achievements. "Permanent revolution" is a semantic aberration. Thus, no matter how revolutionary a revolution might be at the outset, it must of necessity turn conservative, thereby setting the stage for its successor or for the lurking opposition.

An example of the functioning of the revolutionary apparatus is a Russian story of recent vintage. A bridge required two guards. The planners added two additional guards for a replacement shift and a third to cover illness and vacations. A unit of five people called for a supervisor, accountant and proper reports to the regional and national departments. The entire unit naturally evolved into a staff of twenty. It functioned well until the central authority decided on a 10 percent across-the-board cut. The two guards were promptly dismissed.

The normalcy which inevitably follows a period of revolution brings with it the desire for increasing rewards among both leaders and followers. "After all we've done for the revolution," it is only fair to expect a better life: better housing, food, clothes; greater freedom; more influence on events; a greater esteem for one's achievements. Since these benefits are due to each one for his noble efforts, the selfish motive is well hidden and the rationalization involved is noticed by the enemies exclusively. "It is coming to me," becomes the national slogan, whether verbalized or not.

With such expectations so amply deserved, the chase for "goodies" begins at once and all the aggressive strivings escalate. "Out of the noble ideals and motives evolve the known human frailties -- pushing, pulling, jealousies, pressures for honors and power, suspicion, cynicism, under-

handed methods, favoritism, syncophants, liars, cheats, crooks, evil manipulations -- and all under the guise of idealism and in the original language and revolutionary slogans" [George Orwell].

The transformation of the traits of the followers of the revolution from noble to selfish, as described, may be understandable. Why should people not want a better life? Yet it is incalculably worse when identical developments occur among the leaders. The leaders, who are able to curb their followers, themselves live on a plane in which controls are mild or non-existent. It is at this point that Lord Acton's principle takes effect. All leaders, without exception, as they gain power succumb to the forces of corruption. The process is inevitable. In order to implement the goals of the revolution, power is essential. The moment that power is achieved, moral erosion commences. Our human capacity for self-deception is unbridled, so we justify the grab for power by such concepts as "realistic," "pragmatic," "investment for the future," "self-defense," "welfare of society," etc.

There are some leaders who are genuine charlatans. Most are not. They merely express their own inner conflicts, quirks and frustrations which normally characterize all of us. Yet when the concentration of power magnifies a person's egomaniacal trends, paranoid, manic-depressive phases and prophetic complexes, havoc results. These traits are not all bad; at a given stage they are positive and fruitful. Who can be a revolutionary without a prophetic vision? At a certain point, however, positive turns negative and the leader involved will never be aware of the change.

What is amazing is the length of time it takes for the followers to discover their leaders' flaws. Frequently it is a result of their own fears or self-interest, but more often it is a blind spot. While we all know from history about idiot kings, cruel tyrants and demented leaders, blind followers rarely apply critical judgment to their own heroes -- in state, church, society, and even in the revolutionary labor movement. They cling to their day-dream im-

ages. Yet Lord Acton tells us that the correlation between power and corruption applies to small cases as well as to the big ones.

The Labor Zionist founders knew of the pitfalls involved in concentrating power and created two safeguards -- the principle of rotation and the establishment of control committees (vaadot bikoret, literally "critique committees"). They failed, however, to provide these noble institutions with teeth. The result was that principled personalities were at the mercy of executives who paid lip service to the ideals but sidetracked corrective measures. The checks were there but the power to balance was absent.

Rotation was observed, but not vertically. Functionaries rotated horizontally among themselves. Very few workers rose from the workbench to the executive chair, and when they did they practically never returned. The slogans of experience and efficiency were invariably used for holding onto power and influence. The original laudible traits of modesty and restraint yielded to deceptive public relations techniques, and the public turned cynical and apathetic.

Where is the Labor Zionist revolution heading today? Are we located in a dip on the time curve or have we reached bottom? Two factors will determine the future. Have we, both membership and leadership, learned the lessons and understood the process? Do we possess the internal vitality to effect the necessary changes? Can we motivate enough personal responsibility to assume the new burdens? Can we face reality without recoiling? "A crisis is not a disaster, it is an opportunity," wrote Zvi Kesseh, a middle level Labor Zionist ideologue. My conclusion is that it is also a challenge. I would not write off our revolution yet.

\* \* \*

Saadia Gelb is a member of Kibbutz Kfar Blum and co-author of The Kibbutz Experience (Schocken, 1974). He is a frequent contributor to the Jerusalem Letter.