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Anarchy in Yiddish

Famous Jewish Anarchists from Emma Goldman to
Noam Chomsky

Jesse Cohn

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“We can’t defect to a future which has no relation to
its past
— a past which consists of pain and evil.”

It’s a bright May day in Paris in 1926, a quarter after two in the afternoon. A middle-aged watchmaker named Samuel Schwartzbard, a veteran of the French Foreign Legion and, as it happens, of the Red Army, is waiting outside the Chartier restaurant in the Rue Racine. A man with a cane, a former foreign dignitary now living in exile, steps out of the restaurant. Schwartzbard approaches him, and calls out in Ukrainian: “Are you Mr. Petliura?” The man turns. “Defend yourself, you bandit,” shouts the watchmaker, drawing his pistol, and as Petliura raises the cane in his right hand, Schwartzbard shoots him three times, shouting, “*This* for the pogroms; *this* for the massacres; *this* for the victims.” And thus Samuel Schwartzbard – Shalom, as he was also called – assassinated General Simon Petliura, the former leader of the independent nation of Ukraine, who between 1919 and 1921

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had ordered a wave of pogroms that had consumed the lives of sixty thousand Jews. Schwartzbard, who was also a Ukrainian, had survived a pogrom at the age of nineteen, fleeing to Romania; much of his family did not escape or survive.

Schwartzbard, acquitted after his trial, rejoices with his family

Since then, Schwartzbard had traveled, fought, written poetry, studied. He had made friends with several other expatriates in Paris, notably Alexander Berkman, Mollie Steimer, Senya Fleshin, and Nestor Makhno. Berkman, Steimer, and Fleshin were Jews from America, all of immigrant parentage, all now living in exile, having been deported. Makhno was a Ukrainian, the exiled leader of a failed peasant insurrection that, for a while, had battled both Trotsky's Red Army *and* the White armies of Petliura and Denikin. All of them were anarchists.

Anarchism was, for a time, one of the primary contenders for the loyalties of working men and women the world over – including the hundreds of thousands of Jews fleeing poverty and oppression in Russia in the late 1800s, many of whom fled to England and America to become part of the most heavily exploited strata of the working classes there. Socialist ideas like justice, solidarity, and freedom caught on quick in the oppressive atmosphere of the sweatshops; so did anarchism. Here is how Rudolf Rocker, a German anarchist, first met his Jewish comrades – this is from William Fishman's wonderful book on the *East End Jewish Radicals*, which we have in the Temple library:

His first personal experience of Jews and Jewish radicals came in spring 1893, while strolling round the Parisian boulevards with a friend, Liederle, who asked him if he would like to attend a Jewish Anarchist meeting. *Jewish Anarchists!* Identification in religious terms seemed, to Rocker, a travesty of the meaning of Anarchism. He had scarcely known Jews [back home] in Mainz ...

That Sunday, in a hired room on the first floor of a coffee house in the Boulevard Barbès, Rocker met, for

a friend – and she never submitted to the will of the powers that be in this world. She lived and died as an anarchist. I think she also lived and died as a Jew. For Goldman, for Berkman, for Landauer and Lazare, for Pesotta and Goodman and the others, the coming of the Messiah was not something to pray for but to embody; the day of redemption was not something to await but to bring. In their own heretical way, they kept faith with Israel.

the first time a group of Jewish Anarchists. Scattered around tables, in small groups, he saw about fifty or sixty comrades of both sexes in lively discussion. A few were absorbed in reading journals printed in Hebrew, which he later recalled as the *Arbeiter Frain*t and the *Freie Arbeiter Stimme* ... All spoke a German patois, which he followed with difficulty. What struck him forcibly was the active participation of women in large numbers, who, in accordance with Libertarian principles, operated as equals within the circle.

It was this spirit of egalitarianism, as well as “the warmth and hospitality” and “the high-powered thrust in debate,” that drew Rocker to this community (Fishman 231–232). Although he himself was a Gentile, Rocker would come to play a major role in the life of the Jewish community of London’s East End; he learned Yiddish, fell in love with a young Jewish labor militant (Milly Witkop), became a key activist in the Jewish Anarchist Federation, and took over as editor of the Yiddish-language anarchist newspaper *Di Arbeter Frain*t. In the years to come, some would call him “the anarchist rabbi.” Indeed, shortly after Rocker led Jewish sweatshop workers to victory in a 1912 strike, as Rocker later recalled,

One day as I was walking along a narrow Whitechapel street, an old Jew with a long white beard stopped me outside his house, and said: “May God bless you! You helped my children in their need. You are not a Jew, but you are a man!” This old man lived in a world completely different from mine. But the memory of the gratitude that shone in those eyes has remained with me all these years.¹

¹ Rocker qtd. in Woodcock 422

This powerful experience of community was defining for Rudolf Rocker, and it defined the meaning of anarchism for the men and women who made the movement.

Anarchism itself was part of the broader currents of socialism – it was the left wing of the socialist movement. My own great-grandfather William Edlin, who became an editor of the Yiddish-language newspaper *The Day*, when he was young, used to quote from both the communist Karl Marx *and* the anarchist Peter Kropotkin in his pamphlets on the coming of the great social revolution. For some time, anarchism was a real contender for the future of the international labor movement. It was after 1917, really, that the tide definitively turned against the anarchists: the world finally had an example of a “successful” revolution, and that was the so-called Soviet Union. The anarchists were condemned to sit out the rest of history as the “losers” – and to have their own achievements forgotten. Even in 1932, the aging Alexander Berkman complained in a letter to a friend that American workers had entirely forgotten that *anarchists* had led the fight for the eight hour day in the benighted days of the 19th century. His beloved Emma Goldman, famous as “Red Emma,” is widely remembered as a feisty feminist firebrand, but rarely as one of the most prominent anarchists in American history.

So what is this largely-forgotten anarchist movement, and what role did Jews play in it?

I’ve given you some quotes from Jewish anarchists who explain “anarchism” in their own words, but to put it in even more of a nutshell: rather than meaning chaos, violence, or the absence of any order or organization, anarchism – as defined by its philosophers and practitioners from the 19th century to the present – is a movement which seeks to abolish all forms of hierarchy and domination, particularly to abolish both the government and the wage system.

Anarchists put these beliefs into practice in different ways: it’s true that many anarchists resorted to terroristic means, assassinating heads of state and wealthy capitalists. As a hot-blooded young

from you; yea, when ye make many prayers, I will not hear; [for] your hands are full of blood.

Wash you, make you clean; put away the evil of your doings from before mine eyes; cease to do evil;

Learn to do well; seek judgment, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow. (1:11–17)

Isaiah is saying that the official ritual of Judaism has become an empty show, a hollow repetition of formal gestures, empty of spirit. It is not the letter of the Law but the spirit that matters. What is this spirit that is missing? It is the spirit of justice and compassion – the ideals and values that bound the people together in the desert. This is what a Jewish anarchist like Saul Yanofsky was reminding his cousins when he wrote angrily in the *Arbeter Fraind* of the gross spectacle of Yom Kippur services attended by “rich [Jews] overdressed and overfed in seats set aside for the sheine leit,” and by poor Jews “pressed together by the door, hungry and ill-clad with no prospects of a sumptuous fast-breaking meal to return to” (211). I can hear an echo of Isaiah in Yanofsky’s voice. And it is Emma Goldman who wrote that

at the age of eight I used to dream of becoming a Judith and visioned myself in the act cutting off Holofernes’ head to avenge the wrongs of my people. But since I had become aware that social injustice is not confined to my own race, I had decided that there were too many heads for one Judith to cut off. (Goldman, LML 370)

From the age of sixteen on, she spent her entire long life fighting for civil liberties, for womens’ rights, for the rights of working men and women, for peace and freedom; she endured terror and jail and separation from her loved ones and exile and hardships beyond measure for the cause. She took care of people – as a leader, a nurse,

man brought anarchist thinking into the mostly liberal peace movement, and advanced the cause of gay rights; Murray Bookchin tied anarchist philosophy to environmentalism, creating a new “green” anarchism. All of these men and women, whether or not they declared themselves atheists, embraced anarchism with a kind of fervor that is religious, even though most of them were also extreme rationalists; they rejected the established religion of their fathers and mothers for the same reason that they rejected the established institutions of power and money – because they felt it was irrational. They believed that rational persuasion and education could overcome the irrational reign of force, that right could overcome might. At the same time, as rationalists, they yearned for a great ideal to embrace, for what even Noam Chomsky (a rationalist’s rationalist) has called a “spiritual transformation.” They were moralists, deeply motivated by ethical questions, incensed by injustices. They carried a very Jewish sense of righteousness, the spirit of the Book of Exodus; they rejected the idea of a life organized in pyramids of power and status, with a few Pharaohs on the top and masses of slaves underneath.

I would say that the anarchist Jews were not only “true Jews” in a cultural sense, but were really also deeply religious Jews in the old sense of the prophets. When the Jewish anarchists of Brooklyn defied the call to atonement, calling themselves “the new rabbis of liberty,” they were behaving like the prophets, who themselves were a kind of “new rabbis of liberty”: they were being iconoclasts, rejecting the established religious cult as a hollow ritual, just like the prophets did. It’s Isaiah who says,

To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices unto me? saith the Lord ... Bring no more vain oblations; incense is an abomination unto me ... Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hateth ... when ye spread forth your hands, I will hide mine eyes

anarchist militant, Alexander Berkman made an attempt on the life of steel magnate Henry Clay Frick on behalf of the striking workers murdered at Homestead, Pennsylvania . It didn’t work: Frick lived, and Berkman went to prison. Other anarchists practicing “propaganda by the deed” were more successful than Berkman – Samuel Schwartzbard would be one example – but this period of bombings and stabbings largely exhausted itself by 1894, when anarchists woke up and realized that all these sporadic, individual acts of violence weren’t accomplishing anything and only made the State stronger in the ensuing waves of judicial crackdowns and police reprisals. Even Berkman, in his later years, declared that he was no longer generally “in favor of terroristic tactics, except under very exceptional circumstances” – Nazi Germany being one of those “exceptional circumstances” (*LML* 721). The German-Jewish anarchist Gustav Landauer spoke for many when he wrote in 1907 :

One can throw away a chair and destroy a pane of glass; but ... [only] idle talkers ... regard the state as such a thing or as a fetish that one can smash in order to destroy it. The state is a condition, a certain *relationship* among human beings, a mode of behavior *between* men; we destroy it by contracting *other* relationships, by behaving differently toward one another ... We *are* the state, and we shall *continue* to be the state until we have *created* the institutions that form a real community and society of men.²

From 1894 on, anarchists emphasized positive, constructive activism, particularly in terms of *organizing*. Anarchists created workers’ cooperatives, experimental schools, collective farms, “mutual aid” societies, and anarcho-syndicalist labor unions like the I.W.W. (the famous Industrial Workers of the World, or the

² qtd. in Lunn 226, my emphasis

“Wobblies” as they were known in America). Far from being anti-organization, anarchists advocated a kind of “organization from below.” They sought to replace coercive institutions with cooperative ones, to find ways of doing what needs to be done in a democratic, egalitarian, and decentralized fashion, using frequent face-to-face meetings of small groups to make decisions rather than voting every few years for “representatives.”

Most anarchists saw anarchism as embracing the struggle of all oppressed people against oppression, including the struggle of Jews against anti-semitism – with a few notable exceptions. Pierre-Joseph Proudhon and Mikhail Bakunin, two of the pioneers of the anarchist movement in the mid-to-late nineteenth century, were themselves anti-semites who identified Jews with money and capitalism. Their prejudices would only be seriously repudiated later in the nineteenth century, as anarchists reacted against the growing anti-semitic movements in France and elsewhere. In fact, it was at that point that both Jewish and non-Jewish anarchists developed theories about the origins and nature of anti-semitism, and organized against it politically.

Anti-semitism, argued anarchists such as Voline, had evolved as a sort of safety valve that the wealthy and powerful could use to control working class anger – people who were conscious of being cheated and misused could be persuaded to attack the Jews rather than their rulers or their employers. As everyone from the Czars to Hitler discovered, Jews make excellent scapegoats. To really permanently destroy anti-semitism, anarchists argued, we have to attack the root of the problem: the conditions of exploitation and injustice that Jew-hating serves as a distraction from. Thus, Voline wrote that

the complete destruction of present-day society and its reorganization on a completely different social basis which will lead to the definitive disappearance of the nationalist plague, and with it, of antisemitism. It

founders and early thinkers of the kibbutz movement were influenced by and acknowledged their debt to anarchism.” Manor distinguishes between what most people think of as “anarchy” – i.e., “the total absence of laws and regulations” – and “anarchism,” which is “not a lawless society but a society based on voluntary acceptance of the decisions and laws of the society by each individual member, by consent, without coercion and statutory sanctions.” Any kibbutz has its rules for living, but these rules are arrived at collectively and voluntarily accepted by each member: thus, while “there is no anarchy” in the kibbutz, “anarchism” is “exactly what takes place in kibbutz life.” Professor Yaacov Oved, a member of Kibbutz Pal-machim, gets more specific: via the influence of the Russian anarchist Peter Kropotkin, whose pamphlet on “Anarchist Communism,” translated into Hebrew in 1921, was widely read by the recent immigrants to Palestine, and via the influence of Gustav Landauer, whose voice had been widely heard in Zionist circles, and whose close personal friend Martin Buber memorialized his ideas among the pioneers even after Landauer’s death, through the 1920s and beyond, particularly among the young members of the Hashomer Hatzair movement. “Up to 1925,” says Oved, during “the initial, experimental stage” of kibbutz life, “anarchistic influences were prevalent” (my emphasis). It was only between the late 20s and the mid 60s, during the phase of “movement and party institutionalization,” that the anarchist influences were buried or lost. Since then, there has been some rediscovery and reclamation of the anarchist character of the kibbutzim.

The most famous and notable Jewish anarchists, though, were always outside of Palestine/Israel; most of the ones on the list on page three of your handout were either born in Russia or Eastern Europe or were the children of immigrants from those countries. Very frequently, they not only adopted existing anarchist theories, but innovated them: women like Etta Federn and Emma Goldman applied the anarchist critique of power and authority to the home and the family, bringing feminist concerns into the movement; Paul Good-

ward” (189), therefore the Jews always “sought justice, and never finding it, ever dissatisfied, they were restless to get it.” Beyond this, though, the very Jewish

conception of divinity ... led them to conceive the equality of men, it led them even to anarchy ... [For] all Jews are Yahweh’s subjects; He has said it Himself: “For unto me the children of Israel are servants.” What [earthly] authority can, then, prevail by the side of the divine authority? All government, whatever it be, is evil since it tends to take the place of the government of God; it must be fought against, because Yahweh is the only head of the Jewish commonwealth, the only one to whom the Israelite owes obedience. (ch. ??)

No wonder all the kings and princes of the world have found Jews to be such troublemakers.

It was people like Gustav Landauer and Bernard Lazare who gave early Zionism its radical edge. In 1897, Lazare declared, “We must live once again as a nation, or more closely like a free collectivity, but only on the condition that the collectivity not be modeled after the capitalistic and oppressor states in which we live” (qtd. in Lowy 194). In his correspondence with Theodor Herzl, the father of the modern Zionist movement, Lazare upbraided Herzl for his inconsistencies: “You are bourgeois, because your thoughts are bourgeois, your feelings are bourgeois, your ideas are bourgeois and your social views are bourgeois. And yet you want to lead a nation, our nation, the nation of the poor, the oppressed, the proletarians” (qtd. in Lowy 195). Instead of recreating the modern liberal capitalist State in Palestine, Lazare and Landauer advocated that Jews should reach into the well of their most ancient traditions create something new – a functioning anarchist society.

According to Giora Manor, a journalist who happens to be a member of Kibbutz Mishmar Ha-Emek, “Historically speaking, the

will disappear when the vast human masses, at the end of their sufferings and misfortunes, and at the price of atrocious experiences, comprehend, finally, that humanity must, on pain of death, organize its life on the sane and natural basis of cooperation, material and moral, fraternal and just, that is to say, on a truly human basis. (“Antisemitisme,” Encyc. Anarchiste)

Jewish anarchists took this a step further by beginning the battle against anti-semitism in the present. Samuel Schwartzbard didn’t stop at his personal revenge for the pogroms; he founded an organization called the International League Against Racism and Anti-Semitism. In exile from the U.S., Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman investigated and reported back on the condition of the Russian Jews in the early years of the Soviet Union. Leah Feldman rode with Nestor Makhno’s army against the pogromchiks. One way or another, Jewish anarchists fought back – as Jews, as anarchists, as human beings rising against their oppressors.

At the same time, they didn’t always have an easy time getting along with other Jews. Religion was a particular sticking point. Proudhon and Bakunin had defined anarchism as the revolt against all forms of human enslavement, physical and mental – and religion they counted as a form of mental slavery, noting that the Church had always bolstered the State, and that poor people were always told to wait for their reward in heaven rather than seeking justice on earth. Jewish anarchists frequently took up this wholesale attack on religion; in her famous manifesto, Emma Goldman wrote of “religion” as “the dominion of the human mind” (AOE 53):

The primitive man, unable to understand his being ... felt himself absolutely dependent on blind, hidden forces ever ready to mock and taunt him. Out of that attitude grew the religious concepts of man as a mere speck of dust dependent on superior powers on high,

who can only be appeased by complete surrender. All the ... biblical tales dealing with the relation of man to God, to the State, to society ... [express] the same motif, man is nothing, the powers are everything. Thus Jehovah would only endure man on condition of complete surrender. Man can have all the glories of the earth, but he must not become conscious of himself ...

Religion! How it dominates man's mind, how it humiliates and degrades his soul. God is everything, man is nothing, says religion. But out of that nothing God has created a kingdom so despotic, so tyrannical, so cruel, so terribly exacting that naught but gloom and tears and blood have ruled the world since gods began. Anarchism rouses man to rebellion against this black monster. Break your mental fetters, says Anarchism to man, for not until you think and judge for yourself will you get rid of the dominion of darkness, the greatest obstacle to all progress. (51, 53)

Now, in light of this kind of pronounced atheism emanating from the anarchist quarters, it's no wonder rabbis in New York and London saw the Jewish anarchists as a threat to their traditions, their communities – and their own rabbinical authority. In 1888, the “clerical and lay leaders” of London's Jewish community “set out to destroy” the Yiddish-language anarchist newspaper, the *Arbeter Fraind*. According to Fishman, “The back page of every issue carried the appeal in heavy type: ‘Workers, do your duty. Spread the *Arbeter Fraind!*’” The typesetter was bribed, and issue number 26 appeared with the wording of the ad slightly changed: “Workers, do your duty. Destroy the *Arbeter Fraind!*” The typesetter promptly disappeared, fleeing the wrath of the editors; then, after that, they bribed the printer (155). By 1904, they were hiring “gangs of thugs

Landauer did not observe the Jewish religion in any formal sense; he was an atheist. However, his passionate interest in Hassidic mysticism and his close personal friendship with the great theologian Martin Buber leads Michael Lowy to call Landauer a “religious atheist” – a contradiction in terms, but maybe the only way to express it. Although he “refused to believe in a God ‘beyond the earth and above the world,’” he also defined anarchism as a “religion” (Lowy 135), as a kind of spiritual mission, an earthly messianism. What Landauer calls “spirit” is not a supernatural force, but as the shared feelings, ideals, values, language, and beliefs that unify individuals into a community. The State only exists because the spirit that creates community has weakened: the community has fractured and turned against itself (what is “crime” and “war” after all? human beings fighting among themselves). The State is what emerges when the warmth of the binding “spirit” withdraws. Thus, Landauer speaks of revolution in spiritual terms, calling it redemption, using Jewish religious language to describe the need for social and political transformation.

Bernard Lazare, too, came to identify Judaism with the spirit of radicalism, even with anarchism. When he began writing his book on anti-semitism in 1891, he did so as a Jew alienated from Jewishness and Judaism alike, but as Michael Lowy points out, over the next two years Lazare changed direction. The first part of *Antisemitism: Its History and Its Causes* “holds Jews responsible, ‘in part, at least’ for their ills, because of their ‘unsociable’ character, their political and religious exclusiveness, their tendency to form a State within the State, their obstinacy in rejecting the message of Christ, and so on”; but “the second part ... written in 1893,” reflects Lazare's growing admiration for the Jewish tradition, particularly for “the great prophetic texts in the Bible” (188). Thus Lazare writes that Judaism itself contains a “revolutionary spirit” which is implicit in the this-worldly character of the tradition. Since, Lazare argues, “the Jew does not believe in the Beyond and cannot accept unhappiness and injustice in earthly life in the name of a future re-

their voluntary renunciation of Judaism and Jewishness, as well as Gentiles' voluntary renunciation of Christianity. For Marx and the marxists, progress means the abolition of everything that is traditional and backward-looking, the abolition of particularity and diversity in favor of universality and sameness. It is the anarchist Mikhail Bakunin, Marx's ideological enemy, who objects to Marx's notions of historical progress, who objects to the obliteration of diversity and the establishment of universal uniformity.

Thus it is that we find the German-Jewish anarchist Gustav Landauer writing in a passionate essay of 1912: "Humanity does not mean identity; humanity is the union of the manifold." In other words, for Landauer, there is no such thing as universality without diversity. In 1915, Landauer wrote: "Why should one ... preach the ending of ... all differences in the world? ... I am happy about every imponderable and ineffable thing that brings about exclusive bonds, unities, and also differentiations within humanity. If I want to transform patriotism then I do not proceed in the slightest against the fine fact of the nation ... but against the mixing up of the nation and the state, against the confusion of differentiation and opposition" (qtd. in Lunn 263). "Differentiation" doesn't mean "opposition" or conflict, so diversity and togetherness are not opposites either. Landauer considered himself to have three unique communal identities – as a German, as a Jew, and as a southern German (??) – as well as a universally shared human identity. These are not incompatible options for Landauer: to be a real Jew (or a real German, or a real Swabian) is to be a real mensch – a real human being. Landauer would fully have understood what the old Jewish man said to Rudolf Rocker in Whitechapel: "You are not a Jew, but you are a mensch!" In other words: you do not observe our faith, but by involving yourself in our community in the name of what is common to all humanity, you make yourself a real human being, and as such, you are blessed by God, whether you recognize it or not.

(schlogers) ... to break up Anarchist and Social Democrat meetings" (259).

Anarchists didn't take all this lying down, needless to say – nor did they fail to provoke it. When the *Arbeter Fraint* started up again, it featured a full-bore attack on orthodox Judaism, including parodies of the Passover seder and the Lamentations (155). In the late 1880s, a group of Jewish anarchists on the Lower East Side organized as a club called "The Pioneers of Freedom," which "distributed Yiddish parodies of penitential prayers, mocking the traditions of Yom Kippur," and organized "Yom Kippur Balls held on Kol Nidre night" (Kolel) In 1889, they leafleted to "[invite] Jewish workers to spend Kol Nidre evening at the Clarendon Hall on Thirtieth Street" – causing a "near-riot" when the proprietor, "under political pressure," tried to call it off. In 1890, in Brooklyn, they threw a "Grand Yom Kippur Ball with theater" on the Day of Atonement ("A Life Apart: The Treyfe Medina"), advertising their celebration as "Arranged with the consent of all new rabbis of Liberty ... Kol Nidre, music, dancing, buffet; Marseillaise and other hymns." This spectacle, which more than once provoked actual street fracas between believers and non-believers, was duplicated in London and in Philadelphia (Kolel) – although on at least one occasion, in 1890, the Russian-Jewish anarchists of Philadelphia actually called off their Yom Kippur Ball – which was to feature "pork-eating" – out of respect for the role played by the city's orthodox rabbi, Sabato Morais, in mediating a crucial strike of cloak-makers that year ("Morais"). In London in the 1890s, Rudolf Rocker was asked to comment on the habit of some Jewish anarchists of demonstrating "provocative

behaviour” in front of the Brick Lane synagogue on Shabbat. He answered that “the place for believers was the house of worship, and the place for non-believers was the radical meeting” (Ward). Which, if you think about it, is a peculiarly rabbinical sort of exchange – it’s just the sort of question young men used to ask rabbis to answer: Rabbi, are the comrades right to demonstrate in front of the synagogue on the Sabbath? No wonder Sam Dreen said “Rocker was our rabbi!” (qtd. in Fishman 254).

Still, this tension about Judaism and anarchism raises the question: can you really be an anarchist and a Jew? Is there such a thing as a Jewish anarchist, or are there only Jewish-born anarchists? Let me add some tension to the question: if you search the Internet for the name of Bernard Lazare, an anarchist born to a Jewish family in southern France in 1865, you will find his 1896 book, titled *Antisemitism: Its History and Its Causes*, quoted on the websites of several anti-semitic organizations. It’s no wonder when you read the opening paragraph of the book, in which Lazare writes:

... the general causes of antisemitism have always resided in Israel itself, and not in those who antagonized it ... the Jews were themselves, in part, at least, the cause of their own ills ... Which virtues or which vices have earned for the Jew this universal enmity? Why was he ill-treated and hated alike and in turn by the Alexandrians and the Romans, by the Persians and the Arabs, by the Turks and the Christian nations? Because, everywhere up to our own days the Jew was an unsociable being. Why was he unsociable? Because he was exclusive, and his exclusiveness was both political and religious, or rather he held fast to his political and religious cult, to his law. (ch. 1)

You read this, and you say to yourself: this is a Jew? This apology for pogroms, this Jew-hating historiography? And the truth is, Lazare was in some sense anti-semitic at the time that he began writing his book on anti-semitism. He really was a kind of self-hating Jew, having embraced anarchism and divorced himself from his people and its traditions. In the opening chapter of his book, Lazare defines Jewish identity in terms of unsociability and exclusivity: to be Jewish, according to Lazare, is to define yourself as apart from the rest of humanity. Better, then, to be a human being and not a Jew. He defines humanity as what is universal, and Jewishness as what is merely particular. Is this an anarchist attitude towards Judaism and Jewish being?

Would you be surprised, at this point, if I told you that Bernard Lazare, without ever renouncing anarchism, was the first to come to the defense of the falsely-accused Jewish officer Alfred Dreyfus in 1898? That Lazare, that same year, founded a Zionist journal called *Le Flambeau* (The Torch), the first of its kind in France? That this same Bernard Lazare, in this same book on anti-semitism, repudiates the false racial “science” of Jew-haters like Edouard Drumont (ch. 10), denouncing anti-semitism as “one of the last, though most long lived, manifestations of that old spirit of reaction and narrow conservatism, which is vainly attempting to arrest the onward movement of the Revolution” (ch. 15)?

Well, clearly things are a little complicated.

Consider this: a number of the prime representatives of the great enemies and antagonists of anarchism – for instance, Karl Marx and Leon Trotsky – were born Jewish, but disavowed their Jewish identities; for them, though, this disavowal was not merely a personal choice, but a deeply philosophical one. If you read Marx’s essay “On the Jewish Question,” you’ll find that Marx really embraces this notion that to be Jewish is to be particularistic and exclusive, to refuse to join the wider human community. He declares that the solution to the “Jewish Question” is the abolition of Jews as Jews – not their extermination (Hitler’s “final solution”), but