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177

Box
65

Folder
359

Labor's great role in Palestine, 1934.

Labor's Great Role in Palestine

By Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver, of Cleveland, Ohio.

During my Sabbatical year I spent a good deal of time in and about Palestine. This was my third visit to the country. My first visit was in 1919, shortly after the World War. Palestine then was still under military occupation. It was then a very empty and desolate country. Here and there you could see a Jewish settlement or colony, but it was no more than some of those flowers which you see growing up among the debris of ruins. The country showed very little promise of great things.

My second visit to Palestine was in 1927. The country had developed a great deal during those eight years. New settlements and colonies had been established. Tel Aviv had become a city of respectable size and importance. Industries were springing up and expanding. Nevertheless I felt then that all about Palestine there was still the air of something experimental and tentative. One did not have the feeling of permanence about the whole project. To be sure there was something definitely in the making, but one did not know whether the process would not sooner or later break down.

This year that feeling of uncertainty left me the minute I got into the country. The country had made such marvelous strides in these five or six years. Its development was both intensive and extensive. One had the feeling that the plant had finally sent its roots deep down into the soil and that it had become a sturdy plant which would be able to withstand almost any storm which might sweep over it. Jewish settlements had multiplied to a remarkable degree. Trade, industry and commerce had expanded. Home building had increased. All the community and social agencies which go to make up a permanent and stable community had developed to a remarkable degree. Between 1919 and 1933 close on to 125,000 Jews had come and settled in the country.

What particularly impressed me was the spirit of confidence that one encountered everywhere. This confidence was traceable to many causes. First of all, and most evident, of course, was the fact that the country was prosperous. This fact has already been dwelt upon so often that I need not elaborate on it now. The rest of the world was passing through terrific economic tribulations. The most powerful and prosperous countries had

gone down into a disastrous economic decline. Little Palestine was holding its own. There were no bankruptcies, bank failures or unemployment. Government finances were sound. It was fortunate for Palestine that it had never been over-capitalized or over-industrialized.

Palestine was beginning to enjoy the consequences of five major developments which had taken place in the country in the last ten years. The first of these was the completion of the Ruthenberg Project for the hydro-electricification of the Jordan. That project, which seemed to be more or less of a fable for nearly a decade in Zionist and Jewish circles, had finally become a reality of steel and concrete. It was finished, actually built, and it is now giving electric power at low rates to practically two-thirds of Palestine.

The second development which contributed to this spirit of confidence in the country was the highly successful development of the citrus industry, particularly the orange industry, in the country. Palestine was becoming an exporter of no mean proportions of oranges. This was bringing capital into the country. Heretofore the capital which had come into the country was largely either by way of contributions or by way of investments of private individuals. Here was capital coming into the country on the basis of what the country was producing. The citrus industry is developing so rapidly that it is expected that in 1936 Palestine will be able to export some eight or ten million crates of oranges to the various markets in Europe and elsewhere.

The third major development was the development of the chemical resources of the Dead Sea. A small town has grown up around the Dead Sea. Hundreds of workmen are now employed in extracting some of the almost limitless rich potash from the Dead Sea. That potash is now being sold in the markets of the world. It is possible that this may prove to be one of the richest sources of income for Palestine in the future.

The fourth project, which was being employed while I was there, and is now completed, was the Haifa harbor. The Haifa harbor is now one of the two or three finest harbors on the Mediterranean. It is fast becoming the point of export and import not merely for Palestine and for parts of Syria, but for the entire hinterland, for Mesopotamia, for the Iraq. Haifa promises to become the great industrial center of Palestine.

The last of the five major developments which contributed to this upbuilding of the morale of the people and to stimulating the hopefulness that one senses everywhere in the country, is the completion of the pipe-line which is to carry oil from Mosul to the shores of the Mediterranean. Twelve hundred miles of pipes have been laid right across the desert, and one of the two terminal points of that pipe-line is Haifa. Already one sees huge tanks on the outskirts of Haifa where this oil is to be stored for ultimate exportation.

For a small country like Palestine five of such major enterprises, completed within the space of less than a decade, are enough to send a current of hope, and with it renewed initiative and enterprise through the whole economic life of the country.

Another reason for this spirit of confidence to my mind is this—and this brings me to the subject upon which I want to dwell—a realization that the economic foundations which have been laid in Palestine are true and sound foundations, that the economic superstructure of the country is grounded in real things built not upon those facts of economic life which are durable.

The labor group in Palestine to my mind is largely responsible for this fact. I had occasion to observe quite closely the numerous factions and groupings in Palestinian Jewry, the old settlers and the new, the young and the old. I was persuaded from my close observation of men

and movements in Palestine that the labor group represents today the most sound, the most thoughtful, the most constructive, and if I dare say it, the most conservative element in the Palestinian population. They have real leaders among them both in the political and in the economic fields. They know what they are about. They are facing their problems pragmatically, intelligently and courageously.

Let me illustrate what I mean. You are all acquainted with the Arab problem in Palestine. Recently we had some very serious riots in Palestine. They were not the first riots. They are probably not the last. Now, the Arab problem as you well know is a very serious one in the country. It cannot be lightly brushed aside. There is a large Arab population, at present the dominant majority in the country, which for one reason or another has been agitated, instigated and aroused, and which is being manipulated by the small group of very clever, politically-minded Arab leaders who are trained in all the tricks of European propaganda methods and who also know what they are about.

The Jewish labor group in Palestine is facing the Arab problem forthrightly and squarely. It is not blinking the issue. It is not ignoring it. It refuses to meet the situation by any theatrical grandstand attitude by any bellicose gestures, by any effort to shout down the opposition or to outplay them in the game of propaganda, knowing full well that these tactics cannot succeed. They have adopted a long-range program of rapprochement, a program of cooperation with the Arabs, fully aware that for the time being that program is very difficult of realization. They are determined to work with the Arab, and not against him. They are reconciled to the fact that the Arab is going to remain in Palestine and will for years and generations to come be an important element in the Palestinian population.

As a means of closely approaching the Arab and establishing a basis of cooperation with him on the plane of common labor interests, they are endeavoring to raise the standard of the Arab workman. They are encouraging the unionization of the Arabs, because they believe that as the Arab rises in the economic scale, as he becomes more literate and more intelligent in an economic sense, he will realize that the interest of Jewish labor and the interest of Arab labor are not antithetical, but that both national labor groups can co-operate in the common task for mutual benefit and for the upbuilding of the country.

Now, if there is any other solution for the Arab problem, I for one, frankly do not know of it. There is no way of driving them into the desert. There is certainly no way today of reducing that population to the level of feudal serfs to serve the interest of a dominant Jewish group. Not only, can we not ourselves permit any such immoral exploitation of a people but it simply cannot be done.

There is another subject on which the labor group in Palestine has been sound level-headed, and that is the subject of the Jewish State in Palestine. The working group in Palestine, like all classic Zionists, are maximum nationalists. They have not surrendered the ideal of a Jewish State in Palestine. But they realize as all people who are engaged in the business of practical statecraft realize, that no state is built in a day. They are not blatant about their ultimate objectives, they are not irritant about them, they do not fling them in the face of the Arabs. At present they are not so much concerned with ultimate objectives as they are with their present detailed rights in the country under the terms of the mandate. They first want to sink the roots of Jewish life deeper and deeper in the country. They know that they must have a preponderantly large Jewish majority in the country before the question of the Jewish State can be satisfactorily settled.

They have been criticized for it. The extreme Revisionist group has taunted them with the charge that they are time-servers and opportunists. It is so comfortable, and it gives one such a warm glow of inner exaltation when one feels that he is more "patriotic" than the

other fellow, that his program is more extreme and "courageous" than that of the other fellow. But the labor leaders of Palestine who are responsible for the upbuilding work of the country cannot afford this self-indulgence. They are confronted with the day-by-day perplexing and difficult problems of construction and building, and they are determined not to be deviated from their task of upbuilding by any dramatic maneuvers which are fruitless and which may prove dangerous.

These two facts alone, their attitude towards the Arabs and their attitude towards the problem of the National State in Palestine, have given to the whole upbuilding work in Palestine a certain practical certitude which it would not have if the politics of the country were in the hands of irresponsible and beligerent politicians.

Another factor which the Labor Party has stressed in Palestine, and which particularly at this hour is of utmost importance, has been the idea of self-work. Palestine must be built up by Jewish labor, not merely by Jewish capital. Classical Zionism aimed at this. If you recall the history of the Zionist movement, you will remember that it was as much aimed at reconstructing the economic life of the Jew as it was at establishing a Jewish homeland in Palestine. Classic Zionism was an effort to restore an economic balance in Jewish life, to rectify the frightful maladjustment which the Galuth had forced upon the economic life of the Jewish people—the overcrowding in the middle class, in business and in the professions, the sad conditions which are responsible for so much of the present tragedy of German Jewry.

You will recall that one of the most damaging and infuriating arguments which the Nazis used in the last fourteen years of their propaganda against the Jew was just this: that the Jew is an exploiter, the Jew lives off the labor of other people. How many Jewish farmers have we in Germany? How many Jewish artisans? How many skilled and unskilled Jewish laborers have we in Germany. But see how many Jewish bankers, merchants and professional people! Of course we know that there are historical reasons for it. But a historical reason is an explanation, not a solution.

The classic thinkers of the Zionist Movement conceived as one of the great objectives of Zionism the normalizing of the economic life of the Jew once he is settled in his own homeland. Many Jews that go into Palestine forget this. They bring a little capital with them and start a business, and they are not particularly careful whether they employ Jews or Arabs. Many would prefer to employ the Arab because he represents cheaper labor. There is thus the danger that in the course of time we would have in Palestine an immigrant Jewish group, largely belonging to the bourgeois class, living off and exploiting a working peasant and proletarian Arab group. That would besmirch our whole noble enterprise in Palestine. That would make us an object of just criticism and contempt throughout the world. Palestine would become the classic example in the sight of the whole world of the fatal exploiting proclivities of the Jewish people.

The labor group in Palestine has been keenly aware of this danger and, therefore, fundamental to its philosophy is that Palestine, Jewish Palestine, shall be built up by Jewish labor from the ground up.

Please remember that if there is any lesson which has come out of the last ten or fifteen years of economic unrest in the world, it is that the ultimate and final verdict in the life of a nation lies with the people who live on the soil and who work with their hands. The future belongs to them. If in Palestine we are not strongly entrenched as tillers of the soil and as workers in industry, we will share the fate of all exploiting capitalistic groups in the world.

Self-work, then is a great principle of the Jewish labor group in Palestine. I have seen the Jewish worker in Palestine and there is something very fine and uplifting about him. I do not mean to wax romantic. All work is noble and all workers are ennobled by it. But there is a distinctiveness about the Jewish workingman in Palestine.

His social level is high. His cultural level is high. He is literate, he is well read, many of them are well educated. Some of them have had university training. Their minds are open to everything that is going on in the world. You sit around with them in some circle after the day's work and talk with them. I have been to very few circles in Cleveland that were as interesting and as stimulating. They have read the finest in the world's literature. They are at home in economics and sociology. Many of them have thought out for themselves a clear philosophy of life. It is challenging to come up with a group like that. In a way, it is humbling.

Out of this principle of self-work which Jewish labor is stressing in Palestine has come the other—I ought not to call it a principle. I should rather call it a necessity—namely, the insistence on the employment of Jewish labor by Jews. The Jewish employer is asked to employ Jewish labor and not Arab labor, not because of any hostility to the Arabs, but because in Palestine and around Palestine there is a very great reservoir of cheap Arab labor. Their standard of living is very low. The Jewish workingman cannot compete with them on that level. He and his family cannot live on three or four piasters a day. The Jewish employer—and the Jewish employer is no different from all other employers—will buy his labor in the cheapest market. If he is permitted to choose as between Arab and Jewish labor, he will, with a few outstanding exceptions, employ as a matter of course Arab labor. Jewish labor will progressively be starved out. There will be no Jewish labor in Palestine. There will be no self-work in the upbuilding of the country.

Lastly, Jewish labor has tried to emphasize the importance of co-operative enterprise in the country, of social enterprise. That ought not to be regarded today as very startling and radical. The whole world is moving in that direction. The day of unrestricted competitive individualism is drawing fast to a close. Even in such a staid and conservative land as ours we are beginning to experiment with the idea of controlled industry, which inevitably leads to some form of socialized industry.

In Palestine Jewish labor has maintained that rather than first build up a capitalist society with all its inherent weakness and evils, and then be compelled, in suffering and struggle, to revamp or destroy it and to build upon its ruins a socialized state, it is wiser to start now, in a new country where one does not have to destroy before one can build, from the foundations and build up some kind of satisfying co-operative social and economic life.

On a small scale, they have already done it. They have done it, not as it was done in Russia, through the expropriation of the properties of other people and through blood and terror. They have done it through their own efforts and with capital which they themselves or friends and sympathizers the world over have provided. There are now some very fine model Jewish colonies in Palestine where the old prophetic ideal of a human society has been incorporated. Co-operative groups of one type or another exist where labor and resources and enthusiasms have been pooled without sacrificing individuality or personal freedom.

I don't know where else in the world today this type of bloodless and voluntary experiment in socialized community life is going on. In this sense Palestine is becoming a sort of proving ground for mankind a laboratory for the peaceful co-operative commonwealth of tomorrow.

For these reasons, I believe the labor group in Palestine represents the soundest, the most constructive, the most conservative and the most promising element in Palestine.

I met some of their leaders, among them the unforgettable and much lamented Arlosoroff. Truly a remarkable man. I was with him the night before he left for Berlin. The next I heard of him was that he had been assassinated. Arlosoroff represented the high type of Western European Jew—he had been educated in Western European ways of thought—and at the same time he represented the finest traditions and the highest ideals of Israel. He was a man of keen mentality. He understood not only movements and abstract ideas, but what is infinitely more important, he understood people. That is why he was chosen to be the head of the Political Department of the Zionist Executive in Palestine. He made friends for the movement among the British officials. He made friends among the important sections of the Palestinian population. He was struck down in the midst of his youth and his career. It is a tragic loss to the movement to Palestine and to Israel.

I met many other of the leaders of the labor group and they increased still more my confidence in this group, in whose hands, the fortunes of Palestine today rest.

Let me close with another side of the picture. For one reason or another the labor group has not been able to capture the imagination of large sections of the youth of Palestine. The youth of Palestine, at least the most vocal section of it, tends very decidedly to the extreme right, just as the youth of many of the countries of Europe. These young people like their Zionism in uniforms. They like the martial ways of party life. They are captivated by demands for an immediate maximum program even if it can achieve less than the minimum.

I suppose the reason for this is that the Socialism of today is no longer a movement of daring and danger that it was a generation ago. A generation ago Socialism represented the ultimate extreme to the imagination of young people. The danger which is involved in being identified with an extreme movement enkindled their ardor and fascinated them.

There are today extremes beyond Socialism. On the one hand, Communism and, on the other hand, Fascism. Socialism has become more or less a conservative movement like democracy and liberalism. Unfortunately, today democracy and liberalism cannot capture the imagination of young people. That is one reason for the defeat of democracy and liberalism in many parts of the world.

How to get around this in Palestine, I don't know, any more than I know how we can get the youth in this country aroused to a high pitch of devotion and enthusiasm for those democratic and liberal ideals, which a generation or two ago were able to set fire to a nation and raise it to a high pitch of sacrifice. That is one of the great problems in Palestine. The excessive ardor of sections of Palestinian youth has led to serious riots. I suppose directly and indirectly it was responsible for the assassination of Arlosoroff.

Perhaps as the mood of the age changes, as life becomes a little more quiet and settled, these extreme movements will disappear of themselves, and the solid constructive tendencies will again gain ascendancy in human life; and Palestine's youth too will again rally to them.

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