The Poalei Agudat Yisrael organization was officially founded here, in Warsaw, on May 24,1922. Its founders looked to bring Orthodox Jewish workers together under the flag of Agudat Yisrael, an Orthodox party founded ten years earlier as an alternative to other Jewish political organizations, especially the Zionist political organization. In fact, opposition to Zionism was one of Agudat Yisrael’s founding principles.

The impetus behind the establishment of the Agudat Yisrael Workers movement was the rigorous enforcement of a Polish blue law that forbid work on Sundays and complicated the lives of observant Jews who were proscribed by Jewish law from working on Saturdays. Employment of Sabbath-observant workers meant that stores or factories owned by Jews needed to lie dormant two days a week. Such inactivity proved economically deleterious to Jewish employers. Owners of factories, workshops, and even small businesses who wanted to religiously observe the Sabbath were forced to open their businesses on the Sabbath by creating sale or rental agreements with non-Jewish partners.

The slogan “The Right to Work for Jews,” deployed in various contexts and places throughout the interwar period, summed up the religious workers’ central demand. It succinctly communicates the idea that, in order to properly observe the Sabbath, Jewish workers needed to work in factories owned by Jews. The phrase emphasizes the responsibility of Sabbath observant business owners to employ Sabbath observant workers. That is, social solidarity to stress Sabbath observance’s importance. The fact that this demand was repeatedly made testifies more than anything else to labor leaders’ failure to achieve their goal, at a time when few opportunities existed for Jews to work for non-Jewish employers.

In addition to the Agudat Yisrael Workers organization’s central effort to gain Jewish workers the right to work for religious Jewish employers, an examination of available sources points to four other important goals that the organization’s Polish branches also consistently pursued on the local level:

1. Recruiting individuals who might have joined the Bund or non-Jewish labor movements to become members of the Agudat Yisrael Workers organization. This was something that movement activists referred to as “Saving the Youth.”
2. Creating frameworks through which workers could be trained in various professions (the needle trades, shoemaking, carpentry, embroidery, weaving, etc.) with every location providing training in fields in which jobs were available nearby.
3. Creating a framework for text-based religious classes that would make it possible for every worker to receive organized instruction tailored to his schedule and needs.
4. Promoting a strong connection between members of the labor movement and constructive efforts being undertaken in the Land of Israel,

Frequently the branches organized extensive cultural activities, including libraries and reading rooms, lectures, orchestras, choirs, and even an amateur theater.

Among the many theoretical and practical discussions of the goals and direction of the workers’ movement, the works of two thinkers stand out. In fact, many consider these thinkers, Yehudah Leib Orlean (1900-1943) and Isaac Breuer (1883-1946), to be the ones who gave the Agudat Yisrael Workers organization its direction.

Besides the educational pamphlets that he wrote in his role as principal of Krakow’s Bais Yaakov Teachers Seminary, Orlean wrote mostly opinion pieces. His most important collection of articles on workers’ questions is *For the Satiated and for the Hungry* [la-seve‘im vela-re‘evim]. It first appeared in Warsaw, under the title *Tzu Zate un tzu Hungerike*, in 1931.

In his articles, Orlean laid out the movement’s goals: halakhic idealism, divine justice and independence. The first goal refers to the strengthening of religious existence and performance of ritual commandments by the workers themselves. The second goal refers to the struggle for justice grounded in Judaism’s values. At the heart of this struggle lies the belief that one law applies to both the poor and the rich; absolute justice can be realized through unity and equality. The third goal, independence, touches upon the need for the Jewish worker to transform himself. Only the distressed Jewish worker found at the bottom of the social ladder could independently pursue his own social redemption . Orlean criticized the Socialist International, because he saw it defined by materialism and class conflict. In his opinion, class conflict had nothing to do with justice . Consequently, he contrasts it with social justice as it finds expression in Jewish law. For example: According to Jewish law, it was forbidden not to pay a worker his wages daily after he completed his work. That is to say, construction of a more just world was a way to reveal God’s presence in the world. “It is clear that justice without faith and socialism without the rule of heaven will not bear fruit and it is clear from the outset that they will lead to degeneration and death.”

Orlean saw the Agudat Yisrael Workers movement as an avant-garde force destined to awaken the forces of justice worldwide. First, it would do so in Agudat Yisrael, then in the Jewish people, and finally throughout the world. Orlean presented the decision to be part of Agudat Yisrael as the choice between the possibility of arousing God-fearing people to the idea of justice and the possibility of awakening the socialist movement to faith in God. Orlean saw the Agudat Yisrael Workers movement as a socialist workers movement possessing a distinct vision, because its socialism was undergirded by justice originating with a higher power. As a result, its vision of justice was absolute. Orlean understood the workers movement’s role as a double one: dissemination of the idea of justice amongst ultraorthodox Jews and spread of the God idea in the socialist movement. As far as he was concerned, small revolutions taking place outside of the spotlight best expressed the practical duties of the movement: daycare centers for workers’ children and trade schools where youths could both study religion and learn a trade. Such steps were beneficial, because they would enable the emergence of a generation of learned workers.

Orlean argued that in practice the rich Jew and the worker had a shared goal and shared horizons. When the labor movement demanded equality, it did not do so to advance the personal status of its members. On the contrary, it looked to bring back the content of Jewish life that had been eroded during the many years of exile. In his view, the Jewish employer wanted equality no less than the worker, because a Jewish religious principle, rather than a social value, was being promote--the religious obligation to maintain a just and egalitarian society.

Isaac Breuer’s approach proves more complex. Breuer belong to the leadership of the Orthodox Jewish community in Germany. He published philosophical and contemplative works on Jewish religion and contemporary Judaism. In addition, he published opinion pieces about the Agudat Yisrael Workers movement’s roles and direction, and practical plans for realization of its objectives.

He always formulated solutions to Jewish social problems in accordance with how he defined halakhic socialism in his ideological writings. The Land of Israel constituted the sole geographic location where socialist change could occur. The workers considered themselves to be the type of people suited to immigration to Palestine, because their training as workers prepared them to settle the land, establish agricultural settlements and work for their livelihood. Isaac Breuer was the one who introduced an ideological dimension to this yoking of the labor movement and ultraorthodox settlement.

In a pamphlet about the Agudat Yisrael Workers movement’s action plan for Palestine, he wrote the following:

The Agudat Yisrael Workers Movement calls out to all the workers […] to join its ranks and to participate in its war: **For God, for his Torah, for his nation, and for his land! For a regime steadfast behind Torah and national unity! For international peace and its establishment between the nations dwelling in the Land of Israel! For Torah socialism and for just relations between employers and employees!**

Here one finds the same three principles that are stressed in Orlean’s writing: Independence, in other words, the workers coming together to make necessary changes on their own; the strengthening of halakhic idealism, that is to say, loyalty to the laws of the Torah with the substantive difference between Breuer and Orlean being the direct connection that Breuer creates between loyalty to the Torah and loyalty to the people, the Land of Israel, and the nation that is completely absent from Orlean’s writings; the third tenet that Orlean refers to as “divine justice” and Breuer refers to as “Torah socialism.”

It might seem like I am splitting hairs, but it is important to note the different terms used to refer to the third tenet. Orlean speaks about thought and about an ideal of divine justice. Rather than ideas, Breuer speaks about religious obligation. When he employs the term Torah socialism, he stresses religious law’s binding aspects. In Judaism, there is a substantive difference between thought, an ideological-intellectual worldview, and Jewish law that possesses an element of practical responsibility. This is not the place to expand on this difference between Polish Jewry and German Jewry’s religious outlooks that finds expression here. Yet in order to better transition to the comparative component with which I would like to conclude my talk, it needs mention.

One finds elements that engage with Karl Marx and his thought in most of the socialist and overtly anti-socialist writings of the interwar period; all the authors that I am aware of who wrote about ideology for the Agudat Yisrael Workers movement were familiar with Marx and his work. Yet, on the surface, Marx appears completely absent from the writings of the Agudat Yisrael Workers Movement. There is not a single reference to Marx or quotes from the Communist Manifesto or any of his other writings in these texts. The authors make a concerted effort to distance themselves from what appears to be socialist and Marxist influence and to depict the workers movement’s ideological platform as reflecting a wholly Jewish outlook.

It is clear that this is not how things actually were. The pressing need to emphasize the existence of a common Jewish fate that had both rich and poor aspiring to express divine justice reflects a clear challenge to Marx’s theory of class warfare. In contrast, the idea of the workers as independent actors portending change, something which appeared in the texts we discussed, runs counter to the idea of a shared Jewish fate. It is based on Marx’s view of the proletariat. These two examples point to Marx’s veiled presence in the ideological writing of the Agudat Yisrael Workers movement. If one wonders why Marx initially seems absent from these texts, the answer relates to the type of legitimacy that the Agudat Yisrael Workers movement aspired to attain.

The Agudat Yisrael Workers movement operated in a conservative Orthodox setting. Its proponents looked to bring about a serious revolution in consciousness among members of an ultraorthodox party, as well as within the Jewish community as a whole, and, as an individual and as a progenitor of a way of thinking, Marx was as distasteful as it came to the Agudat Yisrael Workers movement’s audience. Therefore, in order to bring about a halakhic socialist revolution, they needed to distance themselves from non-Jewish outlooks that were common all around them and to find new avenues through which they could advance efforts that were socialist in orientation and suited to their audience and as distant as possible from socialism in their presentation.

I now arrive at the idea behind my lecture’s title: Marx, Breuer, and Orlean had a shared socialist consciousness, a shared understanding of the proletariat, and a shared recognition of the capitalist system perverse character, but their similarities end here. These ideas are developed differently by Breuer and Orlean than they are by Marx. Their direction accords with the moderate socialism of their time; they create ideological justifications and religious practices so that it will notlook like they are adopting secular outlooks.

It should be said that while Agudat Yisrael is perceived as conservative based on its classification as an Orthodox party, the Jewish socialist discourse just discussed proves tremendously innovative. It constitutes a far-ranging interpretation of Jewish law and Jewish thinking that is built upon a clear hierarchical approach. Therefore, we are talking about a revolutionary movement that demanded that its members undergo a revolutionary alteration in consciousness that proved no less significant than the one that the revolutionary socialist movements demanded of their members and perhaps proved even more significant. Yet from the moment that the revolution is dressed in religious garb, it gains acceptance with the public and turns into a movement, albeit a small one. Thereafter a movement that started here moves to the Land of Israel, and transforms from a labor federation into a political party that participates in Knesset and periodically serves as part of the government.