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 forbade 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 damaging 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 in the name of Sabbath observance. 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 life and the performance of ritual commandments by the workers themselves. The second goal refers to the struggle for justice grounded in Jewish 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 on the need for the Jewish worker to transform himself. Only the distressed Jewish worker, stuck at the bottom of the social ladder, could independently pursue his own social redemption through the inner cultivation of divinely inspired justice and idealism. 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 the class struggle with social justice, as it finds expression in Jewish law; for example, Jewish law forbids not to pay a worker his wages daily after he completes his work. In other words, building more just world was a way to reveal God’s presence. “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 among 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 rousing 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 emanating from a higher power. As a result, its vision of justice was absolute. Orlean understood the workers’ movement to have a dual role: disseminating the idea of justice amongst ultraorthodox Jews, on the one hand, and spreading the idea of God in the socialist movement, on the other. As far as he was concerned, the practical duties of the movement were best expressed in small revolutions, taking place outside of the spotlight: 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 promoted: 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 realizing 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. Workers considered themselves to be the type of people suited to immigrate to Palestine, because their training 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 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 throughout Orlean’s writing: independence, in other words, 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, which is completely absent from Orlean’s writings); and the third tenet, which Orlean refers to as “divine justice” and Breuer as “Torah socialism.”

It might seem like I am splitting hairs, but it is important to note the different terms used to refer to this 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 the religious law’s binding aspects. In Judaism, there is a substantive difference between thought, an ideological-intellectual worldview, and Jewish law, which possesses an element of practical responsibility. This is not the place to expand on this difference between Polish 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 deserves mention.

One finds elements that engage with Karl Marx and his thought in most of the socialist and even adamantly 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 was not the actual situation. The pressing need to emphasize the existence of a common Jewish fate, with 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, which appeared in the texts we have discussed, runs counter to the idea of a shared Jewish fate, and 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 of consciousness among members of an ultraorthodox party, as well as within the Jewish community as a whole. As an individual and as a concept, Marx was as distasteful as it came to the Agudat Yisrael Workers movement’s audience. In their minds, Marx represented secularization, the breakdown of the family, and more. This proved to be the fundamental outlook of Orthodoxy. Therefore, in order to bring about a halakhic socialist revolution, they needed to distance themselves from the widespread non-Jewish outlooks around them and to find new avenues through which they could advance efforts that were socialist in orientation, suited to their audience, and as distant as possible from socialism in their presentation.

I now arrive at the idea behind the title of my lecture: Marx, Breuer, and Orlean had a shared socialist consciousness, a shared understanding of the proletariat, and a shared recognition of the perverse character of the capitalist system, 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 on the basis of 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 no less significant than the one that the revolutionary socialist movements demanded of their members, and perhaps even more so. Yet from the moment that the revolution is clothed 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, transforming from a labor federation into a political party that participates in the Knesset and periodically serves as part of the government.