Rabbi Dr. Yitzhak Breuer, Rabbi Yehuda Leib Orlean, and Karl Marx:

Did All Three Follow the Same Path?

In 1922 in Warsaw, a group of workers belonging to the non-Zionist Orthodox Jewish political party Agudat Yisrael founded a labor union. The union, named Poalei Agudat Yisrael, became one of the most intriguing subsidiary movements of Agudat Yisrael.

My lecture aims to address the ideological foundations of this movement. The two leading thinkers who charted the course of the movement were Yehuda Leib Orlean and Yitzhak Breuer, the former from Poland and the latter from Germany. The former drew his socialist worldview from the spirit of the prophets and the latter from the power of divine law, the Jewish Halacha. Both of them, in their writings, debate Karl Marx and the socialist ideologies prevalent at the time, without ever mentioning Marx.

One of the salient principles in Marx’s writings – and subsequently within Poland’s largest Jewish labor movement, the Bund – was an anti-religious outlook. As such, a religious labor movement that emerged from the most conservative branch of Orthodox Judaism in Poland and engaged in debate with the Marxist worldview of that time and place raises fascinating questions, considering that this movement necessarily sought to adapt Marxist principles to the Jewish, Halachic approach, even though the two approaches were not always in accord.

In this lecture I compare worldviews that were salient among European labor movements in the early twentieth century, foremost among which was the Communist Manifesto, with the ideological writings of the founders of Poalei Agudat Yisrael, examining the manner in which this ideology linked Jewish sources with socialist ideologies.

Only a decade after its founding, Poalei Agudat Yisrael became a global movement, and its most significant branch was the one that gradually established itself in Eretz Israel, where it served as a link between the ideologies of the labor camp and those of the non-Zionist Orthodox Jewish camp. I will supplement my lecture with an attempt to profile Poalei Agudat Yisrael, given its ideological and ideational character, as an agent of mediation between different ideological poles – in view of its ability to adapt socialist ideologies to those of the Jewish tradition.