Poa'le Agudat Yisrael (Agudat Israel Workers) is one of the fascinating yet forgotten groups in the political mix of twentieth-century Jewish politics. A religious group that saw itself as a representative of workers and their rights, Poa'le Agudat Yisrael was situated between many worlds. It was not Zionist since it rejected the strong secular ethos of Zionism. It was also not fully part and parcel of the Agudat Yisrael movement from where it emerged, since that movement was dominated by a bourgeoisie who looked suspiciously on a workers’ group that talked of social justice and sounded all too socialist.

The movement was active in Poland and pre-state Israel. In Poland, Poa'le Agudat Yisrael was fairly intellectual, discussing and creating texts that explored the role of religious social justice. The branch in the emerging Yishuv (Jewish community in the land of Israel) on the other hand was busy advocating for an active role of Orthodoxy in the Yishuv and creating a working relationship with the institutions controlled by the Zionist labor movement. The branches in pre-state Israel and in the Yishuv took different directions than that of their Polish mother organization. The first attempts to establish a presence in the Yishuv took place in 1923 when branches were opened in Jerusalem, Tel-Aviv, and Petach Tikvah. But these are not discussed in the book since they did not bear fruit.

The book begins in the 1930s, with the fourth wave of Jewish immigration to Mandate Palestine mainly from Germany and Poland. Many of these immigrants were Orthodox but their identity differed markedly from that of the Orthodox community in the Old Yishuv (nineteenth-century Jewish community) that controlled Agudat Yisrael. In light of the 1930s immigration, representatives of the Agudat Yisrael established a presence in the growing New Yishuv (Jewish communities of the late Ottoman and British Mandate eras created by the Zionist movement) to ensure a smooth immigration and representation of the interests of these Orthodox immigrants in the Zionist-dominated Yishuv. This representation was necessary in light of the refusal of the Jerusalem Agudat Yisrael to create a working relationship with the Yishuv.

Ada Gebel explores the role of such people as Binyamin Mintz, Kalman Kahana, Ya’akov Landoy, and Ze’ev Fisher-Shine who came from Poland and went on to create an organization that focused on securing jobs for its members, on promoting workers’ rights, and on building settlements. These men collaborated to create an administrative infrastructure that would be able to supply the needs of its constituency in separation
from the infrastructure dominated by secular labor Zionism. Initially, they had not planned to create a workers’ party, and did so only once they realized the need for a distinct brand to represent Orthodox Jews who were interested in taking part in the building of a Jewish national home. This distinct brand differentiated them from the religious Jews of the Old Yishuv who wished to remain separate from the New Yishuv in every way.

The movement set out to create independent institutions to serve its members. Most of the book surveys these enterprises: building projects in cities and towns; attempts to create a healthcare system and a social welfare infrastructure; efforts to initiate the establishment of agricultural settlements; negotiations with the Histadrut, the influential union that controlled access to union jobs; the establishment of schools; and attempts to create a spiritual and intellectual framework for its members outside work hours. The book underlines the practical nature of the movement in pre-state Israel, and by default the scarcity of ideological discussions among its members. If we take as examples Mintz, a leader in the movement since the 1930s and a journalist who wrote extensively on many topics concerning Israel and Judaism, or Kahana, a leading rabbinic figure and a political leader in the movement who was intellectually engaged with many issues at the center of Jewish public life, we will not be able to find ideological discussions about the unique path of their movement. These two prolific writers do not offer any insights concerning the distinct message of the movement vis-à-vis Zionism or Agudah.

There was one exception: Issac Breuer. In 1936, Breuer immigrated to Jerusalem. As a leading ideologue of the Agudah, he published extensively on issues concerning neo-Orthodoxy and workers’ rights. He became the first president of Poa’le Agudat Yisrael, and represented the Agudah before the Peel and Anglo-American Commissions. There is extensive scholarship on his writings. His main claim was that Agudat Yisrael should help Jews to live in Eretz Yisrael according to the Torah while rejecting secular Zionism and cooperating with the Yishuv in practical matters. He was not a socialist. Yet he called for the protection of workers’ rights and supported mediation between employers and employees while also objecting to workers’ right to strike. Together with Mintz and others, he helped form Poa’le Agudat Yisrael in pre-state Israel into an organization that focused on jobs for religious workers, workers’ social rights, and the building of Jewish settlements while the principles of socialism were few and far between. Breuer had many personal conflicts with the other leaders in the movement, such as Mintz, Fisher-Shine, and others, making Breuer less effective when it came to fundraising, for example. In fact, the Agudah’s lack of resources greatly limited the scope of its operations.

_Haredim ve-anshe ma’aseh_ gives many examples of the struggle of a movement that was mired between the Zionist movement and Agudat Yisrael. Poa’le Agudat Yisrael sought to participate in the building of a future Jewish state while advocating for the rights of religious Jews in it. Poa’le Agudat Yisrael was not a member of the Zionist movement, but the group did wish to have a relationship with the Zionist movements and its institutions, including the secular trade unions, and formed a working relationship with secular Zionism that was not without challenges. The leadership in Germany and Poland did not always understand the need to cooperate with the Yishuv on such issues as immigration or job placement. Out of sheer pragmatism, Poa’le Agudat Yisrael maintained working relationships with secular Zionism and the Histadrut, knowing when not to consult the rabbinic or the Agudah establishment for reasons of real politik. Poa’le Agudat Yisrael had a complicated relationship with religious Zionism. On the one hand there was an understanding and even respect for the many accomplishments of religious Zionism with regard to the chief rabbinate and the settlements, but on the other hand, there was also a clear line of demarcation that indicat-
ed that even though the movement had much in common with religious Zionism, there were significant issues in which they differed. The relationship with the other branches of the Agudah was also complex, and Poa’le Agudat Yisrael can be seen as a “step sister” to the mainstream Agudah establishment. The leadership in Europe was not always aware of the complexities in the emerging Yishuv, and there was constant tension with the Jerusalem Agudah, which wished to advance a separatist policy vis-à-vis the organized Yishuv and to attain an independent status when dealing with the British.

Gebel vividly presents the complexities of Orthodox identity: religiosity, modernity, Zionism, particularism, and universalism. *Haredim ve-anshe ma’aseh* is an important addition to the study of Orthodox politics and the analysis of the rich and complex world of Orthodoxy in the interwar period. The book convincingly depicts the struggle to find equilibrium between idealism and real politik, and provides impulses for further research concerning the movement, such as the continued story of the movement after 1933 and especially after the establishment of the State of Israel. A second avenue for continued research is the story of Poa’le Agudat Yisrael in Poland, which had little to do with the branch in Mandate Palestine and created a distinct and complex ideological discourse unlike that of the movement in pre-state Israel.

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