
The Mishnah and Jewish dirigisme

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It is a commonplace that Jews are for the most part to be found on the left side of the political economic spectrum. According to the old saw, "Jews have income of Episcopalians, but vote like Puerto Ricans".

This group of people, comprising only some 2 per cent of the US population, and far less than that over the entire globe, nevertheless has given us Freud and Marx, and a host of other denizens of coercive socialism[1]. True, some of the most able advocates of free enterprise also spring from this sector of the population[2], but compared to the sheer numbers on the other side, the latter must be considered relatively few and far between.

The facts

The evidence for this contention is overwhelming. Merely on an anecdotal level for example, to call a person living on the upper west side of New York City a Jewish liberal is widely acknowledged as a logical redundancy. Then, too, Jews are disproportionately active in all sort of institutions reflective of the left: unions, the NAACP[3], the southern black voter registration drive, Hollywood, mass media such as *The New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, the feminist movement, the US Communist Party, the New York State Liberal Party, the list goes on and on.

The example of Israel is another case in point. There may be more Jews in other countries, but when it comes to relative numbers, Israel has the highest concentration. Were it not for the massive amounts of foreign aid from the USA and elsewhere, the economy of that nation would be even more of a basket case than at present. True, it is militarily beleaguered, but this does not even begin to account for its economic failures. These are due, almost entirely, to an unprecedented level of government ownership, management and control over the economy. Moreover, international comparative ratings of economic freedom (Gwartney *et al.*, 1996), give Israel a rating of "F".

The question for social scientists is how to account for this phenomenon. It is a perplexing one, given that the Jews owe more to capitalism than to any other system, and that their obligation in this regard is an enormous one. Milton Friedman has thought long, hard and carefully about this issue, and I shall use his work as a jumping off point. In Friedman (1985a, p. 405) he includes in this debt the fact that:

Jews have flourished most in those countries in which competitive capitalism had the greatest scope: Holland in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and Britain and the US in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries they have flourished in the sectors (of the economy) that have the freest entry and are in that sense most competitive,

for example in retail trade and the professions *vis-à-vis* banking and large heavy industry.

The affinity of Jewish people for dirigisme is a puzzle, too, on the ground that they are very intelligent, and morally concerned, while even a modicum of intellectual awareness indicates that free enterprise is far more just and productive than any other economic system.

Nor is there any lack of evidence for any of the premisses of this syllogistic assertion. As for the major one, state Murray and Herrnstein (1994, p. 275):

Jews – specifically, Ashkenazi Jews of European origins – test higher than any other ethnic group. A fair estimate seems to be that Jews in America and Britain have an overall IQ mean somewhere between a half and a full standard deviation above the mean...In the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, 98 whites...identified themselves as Jews...their mean IQ was 0.97 standard deviation above the mean of the rest of the population and 0.84 standard deviation above the mean of whites who identified themselves as Christian[4].

It is easy to show that economic systems based on free markets and private property are more productive than those which are not. Consider only the laboratory experiment that was East and West Germany[5], before the reunification. These were one people, with one blood, with one culture, with one economy; apart from the accidents of war which separated them, there were no relevant differences between the two. And yet because of these martial misfortunes one of these entities fell under the sway of Communism, while the other was (imperfectly) organized under capitalist principles. Which one prospered, and which one had trouble feeding and clothing itself? Which one felt it necessary to erect a Berlin Wall to keep its citizens imprisoned? No one with this example before them – and desirous of maintaining modern standards of living and even expanding them – would choose government control over markets. And yet somehow otherwise very intelligent Jews have done just this.

This is neither the time nor the place for a demonstration that capitalism is the most just and moral of all economic systems[6]. Suffice it to say that this system does not start out by stealing money from those who have honestly earned it, even large amounts of it. Neither does the libertarian code[7] force people to interact with one another on any but a completely voluntary basis: it does not interfere with the rights of people to engage in freedom of association, as is compelled by affirmative action, for example. Nor does it engage in large scale takings (Epstein, 1985), nor regulations and controls, which amount to much the same thing. Add to that the *reductio ad absurdum* of the basic philosophy of welfarism: it cannot be generalized, even by its own advocates. For it would imply that, had we but the means, we would be justified not only in redistributing money, wealth, and income, but also beauty, IQ, musical talent, sense of humour, personality, etc. That way lies The Brave New World, which no leftist, not even Rawls (1971), has so far consciously embraced.

So there we have it. The Jews are very smart. They are smart enough to know better. Yet, it is patently obvious that they do not “know” better. How, under these conditions, could the overwhelming majority of the Jewish people still cleave to interventionism, regulationism, redistributivism, and all the other dimensions of dirigisme?

The explanations

There have been various theories put forward in an attempt to explain this phenomenon.

Historical accident

Friedman (1985a), for example, accounts for it on two grounds. The first, in his view only a partial account, is based on a historical accident: in nineteenth century Europe, the only people to invite, or even allow, the Jewish to participate in the political process were the left. It was the secular party which would welcome them; the right at the time was under the control of the religious, for example, Christian faction, which would not.

There is no doubt that there is some truth to this explication. But, as Friedman (1985a) correctly maintains, it can hardly be the entire story. The secularism (and hence openness to the Jews) of the left in post-Napoleonic times can only go so far. For this pattern to have continued to the present day, and to hold true on continents other than Europe, there must be other reasons as well.

Reaction to stereotypes

Friedman's (1985a) second explanation is as the result of a Jewish reaction to the anti-Semitic charge that they are cold-hearted, crass and cruel, concerned with financial exploitation, money lending, usury, and other supposedly unsavoury practices. In order to show themselves and their critics that this description is incorrect, they in effect bent over backwards to show their "true" natures: caring, considerate, charitable; and, hence, leftish.

No doubt there is some explanatory power in this story. But much the same criticism holds true in this case: it, even combined with Friedman's (1985a) first explanation, cannot be the whole story. It is far too puny to stand alone, or even as a major factor. Why did the Jews not just ignore the anti-Semites? At least in the modern-day USA, the neo-Nazis, skinheads, Ku-Klux-Klan and others of their ilk hardly constitute a potent force; why go through the ordeal of changing one's basic characteristics, if such they really be, merely because an impotent corporal's guard makes some anti-capitalist charges?

Alternatively why not "grasp the bull by the horns" and, in Friedman's (1985a, p. 413) words, "accept the description but reject the values that regarded these traits as blameworthy...". That is, brazen it out. Admit that Jews engage in usury, moneylending, profiteering, speculating, slumlording, ghetto merchandising, inside trading, and all the rest, but instead of apologizing for them, maintain that these practices are actually in the public interest[8].

Friedman (1985a, pp. 413-14) rejects this possibility:

But this reaction was hardly to be expected. None of us can escape the intellectual air we breathe, can fail to be influenced by the values of the community in which we live. As Jews left their closed ghettos and shtetls and came into contact with the rest of the world, they inevitably came to accept and share the values of that world, the values that looked down on the "merely" commercial, that regarded moneylenders with contempt. They were led to say to themselves: if Jews are like that, the anti-Semites are right.

There are problems with the interpretation, however. First of all, it is not so much that the Jews *learned* these anti-market, commerce-is-evil sentiments from the larger world, as Friedman (1985a) maintains, so much as they *taught* others such views. Remember: Jews were in the forefront of socialism. They were to a wildly disproportionate degree the *leaders* of movements which sought to suppress capitalist acts between consenting adults, to use Nozick's felicitous phraseology.

As further evidence for his "reaction to anti-semitism" explanation, Friedman (1985a) points to evidence from Israel. There, unlike Diaspora Jews, the local inhabitants extol the virtues of sports, the military and agriculture, while denigrating the yiddish language, intellectual pursuits, cooking and urban dwelling. "Can this record not be interpreted as an attempt, no doubt wholly subconscious, to demonstrate to the world that the commonly accepted stereotype of the Jew is false?", asks Friedman (1985a, pp. 414-15).

But he cannot have it both ways. If the Israeli Jews are trying to show the anti-Semites they are different than commonly supposed, then how can Diaspora Jews, who according to Friedman (1985a) do *not* act this way, also reject the stereotype? In other words, at best, Friedman can show that only one group fits his hypothesis, not both.

Further, it is not true, at least for US Jews, that they look down on athletics. Several decades ago, they were active in basketball (e.g. Red Auerbach, Red Holtzman) and boxing. More recently, they dominated handball (champions included Fred Lewis, Vic Hershkowitz, Jimmy Jacobs[9], Paul Haber, Sam Haber, Gus Lewis, Ken Schneider, Steve Sandler, Howard Eisenberg, Stewart Kirzner, Morris Levitsky) and won a national championship in squash rackets (Victor Neiderhoffer). Part of the reason for not engaging in athletics on a more intensive level in the present day may be political-psychological, as Friedman implies; but a more likely explanation may be economic: there are now higher alternative costs for Jews in terms of careers in finance and computers, as lawyers and doctors, as businessmen, artists and writers.

Second, if anyone can "escape the intellectual air we breathe", it is the Jewish people. Their intelligence alone, to say nothing of their penchant for inventiveness, courage, willingness to take up unpopular causes, etc. would otherwise make this very likely. Friedman himself, and certainly all of the people mentioned in [2], are cases in point. That Jews nevertheless have not done so is evidence that Friedman's explanations are incomplete; that there is some other reason why large numbers of Jews naturally gravitate towards analytic modes, and patterns of thinking, beloved of the left.

Intellectualism

Another theory maintains that intellectuals are disproportionately seduced by the siren song of socialism, that Jews are disproportionately represented in the ranks of intellectuals, and are therefore heavily inclined against *laissez-faire*.

We have already defended the second proposition. The first, too, is easy to maintain. Consider the formative experience of those who later become intellectuals. In academia, they are given the highest marks, and the honours and awards on which these are based. In later life, however, their earnings are

not at all proportionate to these early accomplishments. Rather, they are often eclipsed by retailers, merchants, salesmen who were much their inferiors in school. Ray Kroc, the founder of McDonald's restaurants, for example, was no valedictorian. It is easy to account for bitterness and resentment towards a market system which makes this possible[10].

Friedman (1985a, p. 410) rejects this explanation, if not in its entirety, at least as a significant part of the story. He does so for two reasons:

First, my impression is that a far larger percentage of Jewish intellectuals than of non-Jewish have been collectivist. Second, and more important, this explanation does not account for the different attitudes of the great mass of Jews...who are not intellectual.

With regard to the first reason, I am in complete accord with Friedman. Hence, I agree, there is more to the tale than this. But there are several difficulties with his second reason, which indicates that there is perhaps more to this explanation than he credits it with.

For one thing, to some extent a very high proportion of Jews, at least in the modern era, are intellectuals, or at least would be considered so on the basis of their accomplishments and habits, if not their occupations. I refer here not to the many who are accountants, dentists, engineers, etc. Such people need advanced degrees, and can be counted as intellectuals on that score alone. I refer to those with more pedestrian jobs – plumber, meat cutter, waiter. Even these people, disproportionately under-represented among Jews, engage in intellectual pursuits: they play chess or bridge, or are rabbis, or have a masters degree in something or other they are not now using professionally, or have reading habits markedly dissimilar to their non-Jewish occupational counterparts.

Now let us suppose, if only for the sake of argument, that Friedman is correct on this, and that there is indeed a “great mass of Jews...who are not intellectual”. His analysis can then be taken in two different ways. According to one interpretation, the Jewish masses disagree with their intellectual leaders. (Therefore, the explanation based on the intellectual's fascination with leftish causes can tell only a small part of the story, their own. In contrast, the masses are right wingers.) However, there is little evidence for this contention; on the contrary, virtually *all* significant sectors of the Jewish community[11] can usually be counted on by the left wing of the democratic party.

According to another possible interpretation, the explanation of Jews as intellectuals and intellectuals as leftists cannot account for the leftish masses, because they are not intellectuals. However, there is an obvious reply to this: the masses are persuaded, in their beliefs, by the large numbers of Jewish intellectuals. There is a two-step process at work here. First, the Jewish intellectuals become socialistic because of the pressures which impinge on all intellectuals. Second, they convert the Jewish masses to this vision.

To sum up this section. I agree with Friedman that the argument from intellectualism cannot be the entire explanation for Jewish socialism, but I give it more weight than he.

The Mishnah

I now wish to offer yet another hypothesis to account for a preponderantly socialistic Jewry. This, too, in my opinion, tells part, but not all of the story.

As several of the contributions to this present volume make clear, many in different ways, the Mishnah is hardly a document inspired by the Adam Smithian tradition. If anything, the very opposite is true: it is a document biased against the system of *laissez-faire* capitalism. In this view, Levine may have overemphasized the Mishnah's interventionistic qualities (as claimed by Hill, in this volume), but the latter may also be guilty of a misemphasis: exaggerating the Mishnah's compatibility with markets and private property. As I read the Mishnah, the parts of it that are relevant to markets, profits, interest charges, etc. are invariably opposed to economic freedom. The right to engage in any and all mutually agreeable commercial interactions is clearly proscribed, and heavily so. Ona'ah, the doctrine that one may earn only "reasonable" profits, is a case in point. According to some interpretations, this is merely the prohibition of fraud. However, I do not think this interpretation can be sustained. Vast profits can be earned without swindling. In my perspective, Levine does yeoman work in pointing out the deficiencies in the Mishnah, at least from the vantage of the free enterprise philosophy.

Let us now consider some criticisms of this view. The Jews who are avowed socialists are mainly irreligious. It is unlikely that secular Jewish collectivists would be influenced, let alone bound, by a religious tractate such as the Mishnah. States Friedman (1985b, p. 449): "... the opposition to capitalism has arisen primarily among Jews who were emancipated from religion, not among those who retained the orthodox persuasion". Siegel (1985, p. 451) puts this point more forcefully: "... no religious Jew that I know of, [who] is loyal to his or her religious community, was ever a socialist".

I freely concede that such persons^[12] would never adopt their coercively collectivist positions *because* they felt compelled to do so by the Mishnah. Indeed, some of them would even be tempted to renounce socialism, however much they loved it, were they to become acquainted with the Mishnah, so bitterly opposed to religion are they. However, the route of causation might be far more indirect. From the Mishnah, to the *Weltanschauung* of the Jewish people, and then, suitably disguised, to themselves.

Second, while it is unlikely in the extreme that the Mishnah would influence irreligious, even less so anti-religious Jews to adopt its philosophy, this certainly does not apply to the orthodox. If no one else, they, at least, are heavily influenced by this creed. My critics would scarcely deny this. However, these people, within the Jewish community, have power and influence far in excess of their numbers, which are growing in any case. This can be seen most clearly in Israel, where the orthodox, although comprising only some 20 per cent of the population, have garnered enough political power to control the conduct of Sabbaths and other holidays, circumcisions, weddings, burials, and even to determine the very definition of a Jew for immigration purposes (born of a

Jewish mother). And this phenomenon applies to the Diaspora as well, if not with the same strength.

Another criticism arises out of Friedman's rejection of a thesis put forth by Fuchs (1956). In the view of the latter, the leftism of Jewry arises out of its concern for social justice. This can be taken in two very different and incompatible ways. The first in effect claims that Jewish liberalism is virtuous because the actions it espouses – greater regulation of the economy, more income redistribution – actually succeed in promoting fairness and increasing overall wealth. This claim is extremely difficult to defend, as was made clear above.

The second is akin to the Mishnaic interpretation offered by the present author. Here, we ignore claims to the effect that economic, utilitarian and moral gains can be made through left liberalism, and ask instead whether and to what extent these leftist beliefs (erroneous though they be) can be traced to Mishnaic sources.

Friedman (1985a, p. 408) dismisses this “out of hand. Jewish religion and culture date back over two millennia; the Jewish opposition to capitalism and attachment to socialism, at the most, less than two centuries”. This is of course true if we limit our definition of socialism to that which is commonly labelled as such. But if we look at the Mishnah with an open mind, and ask whether (the relevant parts of) it is socialist, even though it may not have been widely seen in this way before, we can only agree that it is. Contrary to Friedman, the Jews have been socialists merely for the last 200 years, only in a superficial sense. In actual point of fact, they have been acting in a manner compatible with this failed doctrine ever since the advent of the Mishnah, many thousands of years ago. The laws of gleaning, *ona'ah*, etc. are coercive socialist precepts. If so, then we cannot at all dismiss this second interpretation of the Fuchs thesis “out of hand”.

Although Friedman is totally dismissive of Fuchs in the present context, he curiously makes too much of a concession to him in another. He states (1985a, p. 416): “No doubt...the view of the Jews [was] altered in detail by their historical and cultural heritage, which made them specially sensitive to injustice and specially committed to charity”. Here, Friedman seems to be allying himself with the first (erroneous, in my view) interpretation of Fuchs' hypothesis. Forced redistribution of wealth – as called for in Jewish law – is not at all the same thing as charity, which must be done on a voluntary basis. Nor should we acquiesce in the view that the Jews have any particular “sensitivity” to issues of justice. On the contrary, as I have argued above, to the extent that these deviate from the correct libertarian insights into these matters, they are in error.

Friedman takes the position that Sombart's (1913) analysis, the exact opposite of Fuchs', was much more nearly correct[13]. In Sombart's view, which Friedman shares, Judaism inclines one not against capitalism, but in its favour.

There is no doubt a very limited sense in which this is true. Certainly, both Judaism and capitalism emphasize characteristics such as resourcefulness, intelligence, hard work, steadfastness, endurance in the face of adversity, etc. But one may be forgiven for wondering whether the Sombart (1913, p. 153) who

stated that “the individual was not to be hampered by regulations of any sort” really understands what capitalism is all about, or has even read the Mishnah. Capitalism, Sombart notwithstanding, has only one “regulation”: the libertarian notion prohibiting the initiation of violence against another person or his property. Judaism, in contrast, has no fewer than 613 different rules and regulations, covering virtually all conceivable aspects of life. No two systems could be further apart in terms of intrusiveness into the life of the individual.

If widely off the mark on this, Sombart (1913, pp. 205, 209) is however correct on another matter. He writes:

The whole religious system is in reality nothing but a contract between Jehovah and his chosen people...God promises something and gives something, and the righteous must give Him something in return.

However, what the righteous Jew must give God in return is not adherence to *laissez-faire* capitalism, but rather obedience to the 613 rules, many of which are socialistic.

Conclusion

Jews, for the most part, are liberals and leftists. This applies even to the orthodox, with but some exceptions. Why? This is a complex issue, and no one answer appears completely to suffice. Friedman (1985a, p. 416) is satisfied, in the main, with but two explanations: accidental circumstances of nineteenth century Europe and “subconscious attempts by Jews to demonstrate to themselves and the world the fallacy of the anti-Semitic stereotype”. I accept both of these explanations, but place lesser weight on the second than he. In addition, I adopt two others he rejects: special forces that seem to operate on intellectuals, and the bias of Judaic law towards coercive socialism.

Notes

1. A few tip of the iceberg examples include Mitchell Ginsberg, Jacob Javits, Noam Chomsky, Leon Trotsky, Herbert Marcuse, Stephen Jay Gould, Barbra Streisand, Alan Dershowitz, Paul Samuelson, James Tobin, Kenneth Arrow, Paul Ehrlich, Norman Lear and Saul Alinsky.
2. Milton Friedman, Murray N. Rothbard, Ayn Rand, Alan Greenspan (at least the one who was an associate of Ayn Rand, not the later one who became chairman of the federation), Ludwig von Mises, Robert Nozick (at least the one who wrote his 1974 book, not the later one), Richard Epstein, Alvin Rabushka, Bernard Siegan, David Friedman, David Frum, Henry Manne, Hillel Steiner, Gabriel Roth, Ellen Frankel Paul, Seymour Martin Lipset.
3. At least during its inception and early years.
4. See also Seligman (1994).
5. The same point could be made by comparing the Chinese in Hong Kong with those in the “People’s Republic”; or Jews in New York City with those in Israel; or Indians and Pakistanis in the USA and in Pakistan and India. See also Bauer (1981, 1984), Murray (1984), Sowell (1975, 1981, 1983, 1994).
6. For the libertarian case in this regard, see Rothbard (1973, 1982), Nozick (1974), Hoppe (1989, 1993), Novak (1978, 1979a, 1979b, 1981, 1985, 1986), and Friedman (1989).

7. It is possible that some of the disagreement I have with Friedman over the relationship between Jews and capitalism stems from our differing interpretations of the latter concept. As a libertarian, I hold that government, at most, should protect persons and property, for which the only justified roles are courts, police and armies. Friedman, in sharp contrast, is a classical liberal, who adds to these three many additional functions. For example, he advocates the welfare state (albeit limited to a negative income tax), as opposed to private charity only; he favours public education (financed by a voucher system) instead of totally private schooling; eschewing a free market in money, he advocates fiat currency and central banking (although constrained by a "3 per cent" rule); he sees a limited role for anti-trust, and does not argue for total elimination. On this see Friedman (1960, 1962, 1965) and Friedman and Friedman (1980, 1983).
8. For an exegesis along these lines written by someone who happens to be Jewish, see Block (1976). See also Hazlitt (1979).
9. He gained more fame as the manager of boxer Mike Tyson than as a champion handball player.
10. See also Schoeck (1966), Block (1992).
11. Exceptions are the Orthodox, and the Chassidic.
12. This applies particularly to the Ashkenazi Jews from Europe who were most active in founding Israel.
13. Frankel (1985) is sharply critical of Friedman (1985a), but on grounds very different than, and irrelevant to, my own. One peruses Frankel (1985) in vain for criticisms of Sombart other than the fact he was a National Socialist. Friedman (1985c) replies to Frankel (1985), and very successfully in my view.

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