

Isaac Breuer's Utopia: An Excerpt from "Falk Neft's Homecoming" (1923)

By: ELLIOT RESNICK

Many Jews think of Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch's *Torah im Derech Eretz* weltanschauung as a pragmatic modus vivendi for living in the modern world—something akin to rendering “unto Caesar the things which are Caesar’s and unto God the things which are God’s.” This understanding is false. According to Rav Hirsch, “The Word of God knows no division of life into two compartments, the so-called religious, directed to God, and the other, the profane, which has nothing to do with divine matters.” Rather, “God takes the whole of life for His service.”¹ *Torah im Derech Eretz* demands that Torah animate one’s entire life. Every thought, every word, and every deed must be informed by G-d’s will—wherever one is, whatever one does. Indeed, for this reason, Rav Hirsch (whom many falsely regard as a Germanophile) advocated that all Jews teach their young children to speak Hebrew—since “a man’s whole way of thinking takes its stamp and coloring from the language in which he speaks and thinks.”²

German Orthodoxy in the decades following Rav Hirsch’s passing is often regarded as having embodied the *Torah im Derech Eretz* ideal. Considering its all-encompassing nature, however, it perhaps is no wonder that Isaac Breuer (1883–1946), a grandson of Rav Hirsch—and a writer, philosopher, and Agudath Israel leader—didn’t think so. He criticized

¹ Commentary to Genesis 1:28, trans. Isaac Levy (Gateshead: Judaica Press, 1989), 35. See also Rav Hirsch’s comment, quoted in Mordechai Breuer, “The ‘Torah-Im-Derech-Eretz’ of Samson Raphael Hirsch” (New York: Feldheim, 1970), 22: “[I]n the Jewish vocabulary there is no place left vacant for secular life.”

² Samson Raphael Hirsch, *Horeb: A Philosophy of Jewish Laws and Observances*, trans. Dayan Dr. I. Grunfeld (London: Soncino, 1962), 409. To support this position, Rav Hirsch quotes the following fascinating comment from the *Sifre (Ekei)*: “When a child begins speaking, his father should speak to him in Hebrew and teach him Torah. If he doesn’t... it’s as if he buried him.”

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German Orthodoxy for being “superficial,”³ “bourgeois,”⁴ and narrow in scope,⁵ arguing that the Torah of German Jews influenced only a small portion of their lives. Their God was “an occasion-tied God. A God of particular times.”⁶ He wasn’t a “God of states and peoples,” a “God of politics and economics.”⁷

For Breuer, *Torah im Derech Eretz* was not a mere slogan. It was the animating principle of his life. It determined his position in communal politics in Frankfurt,⁸ it lay behind his vision for Agudath Israel,⁹ it shaped his attitude toward Zionism,¹⁰ and it served as a central theme in the several works of fiction he wrote.

³ Michael Brenner, *The Renaissance of Jewish Culture in Weimar Germany* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1996), 147.

⁴ Mordechai Breuer, *Modernity Within Tradition: The Social History of Orthodox Jewry in Imperial Germany*, trans. Elizabeth Petuchowski (New York: Columbia, 1992), 380. See also Matthias Morgenstern, *From Frankfurt to Jerusalem: Isaac Breuer and the History of the Secession Dispute in Modern Jewish Orthodoxy* (Leiden: Boston, 2002), 288–292, and Breuer, “Torah-Im-Derech-Eretz,” 39–45.

⁵ See the section titled “The ‘Claim to Totality’” in Breuer, *Modernity Within Tradition*, 23–33.

⁶ Isaac Breuer, *Falk Nefts Heimkehr* (Frankfurt: J. Kaufmann Verlag, 1923), 122.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 124. Breuer sought the “full and uncompromising rulership of the Torah.” Isaac Breuer, “Samson Raphael Hirsch as a Guide to Jewish History,” trans. Jacob Breuer, quoted in “Introduction” to Samson Raphael Hirsch, *The Nineteen Letters of Judaism* (New York: Feldheim, 1960), 14.

⁸ See the statement of Rabbi Dr. Joseph Breuer, a brother of Isaac Breuer, quoted in “Introduction” to Samson Raphael Hirsch, *The Collected Writings: Volume VI* (New York: Feldheim, 1990), xiii: “He who understands *Torah im Derech Eretz* understands ‘Austritt;’ the principles are the same.” See also Alan L. Mittleman, *The Politics of Torah: The Jewish Political Tradition and the Founding of Agudat Israel* (Albany: State of New York Press, 1996), 11.

⁹ Mittleman, 11, 135, 143.

¹⁰ Breuer possessed something of a love-hate relationship with Zionism. He strongly objected to placing “the nation”—rather than the Torah—at the center of Jewish life. Yet, he couldn’t help but see in the modern return to Zion, not only the hand of God, but also the potential for the complete triumph of Torah over all human activity—not just on an individual scale, but on a national scale as well: *Torah im Derech Eretz* par excellence. Thus, as a leader of Agudath Israel, Breuer was “tireless in his efforts to induce contemporary Torah scholars to summarize in systematic form the application of the Divine law to the economic conditions and the technical foundations of a modern state, and thus to create an Agudist program for the constitutional and economic law systems of the country.” Salomon Ehrmann, “Isaac Breuer” in Leo Jung, ed., *Guardians of Our Heritage* (New York: Bloch, 1958), 641. The Agudah’s policy of essentially sitting on the sideline as the Jewish state slowly came to fruition frustrated Breuer, and

In Breuer's second novel, *Falk Neft's Homecoming* (1923), a young man, Falk Neft, returns home from serving in World War I disillusioned with life and Judaism as he knows it.¹¹ His father, Adolf, wants him to enter the family business, but Falk cannot bear to live a smug bourgeois existence after witnessing the horrors of war. The following excerpt—featuring a confrontation between father and son—can be found on pages 167–190 of this 286-page novel. It occurs shortly after Falk comes to a true appreciation of Judaism (following his mother's death), and provides insight into Breuer's understanding of *Torah im Derech Eretz*.

The publication of this excerpt upon the occasion of Breuer's 70th *yahrtzeit* (13 Av) marks the first time a portion of any of Breuer's novels has been made available to the English-reading public.¹²

* * *

“What would you say, Father, if I declared today: ‘Father, I’m old enough, I want to get married?’”

“What would I say? ‘Come into the business,’ I would say, ‘learn something, become something, be something, and then you can marry.’”

“Must a person become something in order to marry?”

“Are you suggesting otherwise? A person can’t live on air, can he?”

“And when I become something, Father, what... am I then?”

“What are you then? A capable human being who takes up his calling and is of value to the world.”

“What is a calling?”

“For heaven’s sake, Falk, don’t ask such foolish questions! A human being must be something in the world.”

“And why am I here?”

“Naturally you’re entering the firm. That’s clear.”

“So I’m here for the firm?”

“If you enter the service of the firm, yes.”

“And why is the firm here?”

at the end of his life he found himself moving closer to Mizrahi. See Morgenstern, 314–335.

¹¹ See Breuer, *Modernity Within Tradition*, 392, concerning the attitude of his father (Isaac Breuer) toward WWI: “[H]e was soon disillusioned because of the horrors of the war: he called it a ‘gruesome disaster,’ ‘humanity’s shipwreck,’ and he wrote indignantly about the militarism of the nations whose power politics considered no infraction of justice too great.”

¹² The translator would like to acknowledge the valuable help of Gideon Feigenbaum in preparing this translation.

“.....”¹³

“Tell me, Father.”

“Are you making fun of me?”

“Forgive me, Father, for me it’s deadly serious.”

“But this is plain... plain mad. What should I tell you? Have you any idea what kind of economic boom we’re experiencing today? Now is exactly the right time. Unlimited possibilities! You apparently don’t appreciate the significance of Adolf Neft’s firm. I’d like to show you our last balance sheet...”

“Oh, let it be, Father.”

“Let it be—you act as if the firm of Adolf Neft is mere peanuts.”

“I know that you’re very... rich.”

“And you think, therefore, that you don’t have to do anything? Is that it?”

“No.”

“What then?”

“You yourself already said it: I want to become a capable human being who takes up his calling—didn’t you say that?—and is of value to the world.”

“Well... and...”

“The calling matters.”

“And what does my son understand by that?”

“A calling comes from a call.”

“Yes, well... and...”

“Only One calls.”

“Who?”

“God.”

“Who? But Falk, we’re talking business now!”

“I know.”

“Don’t you think it’s better to leave the dear Lord out of this?”

“No.”

“What are you trying to say?”

“God has called me.”

“How so?”

[...]¹⁴

¹³ These ellipses (three dashes in the original) are Breuer’s way of indicating silence on the part of the respondent.

¹⁴ Twenty-three lines of the original text, which are largely tangential and somewhat confusing (since they make reference to earlier events in the novel), are omitted from this translation.

"Well, then speak... hmm... speak to the point. What do you really want?"

"To listen to God's call. That's my calling."

"Falk, you forget that the firm of Adolf Neft is one of the very few first-rate firms which are closed on Saturday and all holidays—kept strictly closed. Is that perhaps nothing? Just recently, the rabbi called it a true sanctification of God's name. Have I not combined them one with the other: do the firm and religion lie in opposition with me? Has the firm ever prevented me from meticulously fulfilling my duties toward religion? Tell me!"

"Father, why speak about yourself?"

"Why not? You think I don't realize what you're getting at? I'm just curious what fault you find in me. Well then?"

"... .."

"Take someone else if you'd like. What do you think of Katzenstein?"

"A capable businessman."

"Hmm. And as a Jew?"

"He's *frum*."

"What else?"

"Nothing else."

"Has he—how did you put it?—listened to God's call?"

"No."

"Why not? How so?"

"His business is his calling."

"Is that wrong?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Being a Jew is his calling."

"It's *also* his calling."

"Not also. Only."

"Doesn't he keep everything?"

"He keeps everything. But he lives nothing."

"I don't understand that."

"As a Jew he is—at most—an apprentice. As a businessman he is—a boss. He is—Katzenstein."

"What's missing?"

"To him, Judaism is a religion: *he* calls God. To him Judaism is not a calling, it's not his life's purpose, it's not his destiny...: it isn't *God's* call to him. Life called him to business. That call he followed. Which is why he is an expert in business. But God called him to Judaism. That call he didn't follow. Which is why he is an amateur in Judaism. He lives business. But he doesn't live Judaism."

“That’s all well and good, but—don’t take this badly—here at the office that comes off as a bit... odd. That belongs on the... pulpit. There I listen to it quite readily, if it’s not said too often. From time to time I like to be reminded of the vanity of all earthly affairs. But in life, business is indeed regarded as something. A person must just find a reasonable compromise. Everything in life, at the end, boils down to compromise. A person can’t run his head against a brick wall.”

“I don’t want to compromise. It suffocates me. I want to get serious. I don’t want to squander my life away.”

“What big words. You’re young. That’s all. In 10 years—perhaps even five—you yourself will laugh at them.”

“Perhaps. But most certainly if... I go into business now.”

“Do you think I didn’t have big ideas when I was your age or a bit younger? But believe me: In life they’re worthless.”

“Then life is worthless.”

“As a young man, I was in the literature society and I often talked warmly of Goethe, Hebbel, and Ibsen deep into the night. I even cared for socialism and wanted, along with others, to reform the world. What came of it? Nothing. Absolutely nothing. It was fortunate that I broke with it in time. One of us who stayed really made nothing of himself and is still a poor devil today to whom I occasionally send money in secret without him knowing whom it’s coming from. Who was the wiser one? The starry-eyed idealist or me?”

“You, Father. You made something of yourself.”

“I have found my way in life, thank God. A person can’t swim against the tide. If he doesn’t get on the bandwagon, he will be crushed underneath. That’s just the way it is. Life doesn’t ask about us. It’s stronger than we are.”

“I don’t want to.”

“You must.”

“We’ll see about that.”

“Be ruined or compromise.”

“In that case, better to be ruined.”

“Falk!”

“... ..”

“Is compromise really that bad?”

“Compromise is a mortal sin. It’s polytheism. ‘You shall have no other gods besides Me.’ Doesn’t the Bible say that?”

“Falk!”

“Compromise brought us the war. Compromise destroyed Zion and Yerushalayim.”

“What is this about Zion?”

“.....”

“What are you talking about? Again something new!”

“The wagon you’re sitting on—the course of its wheels is headed toward—war. It is a war wagon. On it you have packed everything: your business, your marriage, your family, your knowledge, your art, your virtue, your justice, your love, your hate, your yearning...: I don’t want to. I don’t want to. I’m not going on that wagon. Better to be under the wheels. I don’t want to squander my life away. I almost did it once already. I’m not doing it anymore.”

“What is this about Zion?”

“Is what I think really so outrageous? Should matters go on after the war just like they did before the war? After my mother’s passing just like they did before? Is the thought not sufficiently outrageous, not sufficiently appalling, that we’re all locked in a necessity that we can’t escape no matter where the road leads? Father, had you experienced at my age what I experienced, who knows if you also wouldn’t... Can’t we understand each other, Father?”

“Eh... eh... what is this about Zion?”

“.....”

“Hallo! I’m becoming convinced you’re a Zionist! What? Come on, out with it! Is that it?”

“Father...”

“Yes or no!”

“Father... stop! Why talk about it?”

“Why not?”

“Why lay bare the foundations? Why touch the mystery?”

“Which mystery?... Why are you looking at me so strangely?”

“Father... what is Zion and Yerushalayim to you?”

“Are you trying to interrogate me? What does that mean? Do I perhaps not fast on the ninth of Av—and on the seventeenth of Tammuz and the tenth of Teves too? The doctor has long advised me against observing so many fast days.”

“Father, what are the ruins of Zion and Yerushalayim to you?”

“What should they be to me? I feel terribly sorry for them. But in the meantime there’s nothing I can do about it. ... And neither can you, believe me.”

“Father, do you live the ruins of Zion and Yerushalayim?”

“What’s that? How does one do that?”

“Oh, Father... the God of Zion and Yerushalayim, the God of their ruins has called me. What stands between me and you, between my life and your life, is the ruins of Yerushalayim.”

“What does that mean? I’m beginning to think you’re nuts.”

“Don’t you recognize it? You hear it every Shabbos: ‘Have mercy on Zion because it is the house of our life!’ Father, I’m serious. The words you pronounce become deed. The house of my life is a heap of ruins. My God is a God of ruins. My life is a life of ruins. In the ruins of Zion and Yerushalayim I nest myself and help the God of ruins build.”

“Hollow phrases. Nothing but hollow phrases.”

“Then Zion and Yerushalayim are also nothing to you but... hollow phrases. Then Judaism too is nothing to you but ... a hollow phrase.

“Are you almost done? I’m beginning to lose my patience. Do I not bring enough sacrifices for these ‘hollow phrases,’ you silly boy? My firm could...”

“Money, again money! Again business! I hate your money and hate your business! Me, me—not my money alone—does Judaism want. Me with my money and with my business. ‘Have mercy on Zion because it is the house of our life!’ Hurrah, how cozily all of you are set up in alien houses, in the houses of an alien life. How merrily you swim in the stream of this life, devoted to business which you idolatrously call your calling; devoted to the firm as if it were a thing in itself; deeply sunk in the roots of a hellish present whose base is dripping from the blood of men who were permitted to be mindlessly and carelessly slaughtered as a result of yesterday’s fancied necessity. This present, which already occurred yesterday, brought about the destruction of Zion and Yerushalayim. How can, how should, God have mercy on Zion when you yourselves know no mercy for Zion?”

“You really are crazy.”

“Do you not see how this alien life, your economic life, your political life, is nothing but a thousand-year-old delusion? The individual lost in the economy, the economy in the state, the state staggering in senseless arrogance between omnipotence and helplessness? Do you not see how this life which you are calling me to has become utterly entangled with the historical lives of the nations which, like diabolical beasts of prey, face one another with raised paws and repeatedly pounce on one another whenever the desire to murder strikes? And I should enter this life? I should take part in this life and see the purpose of my existence in it? Never! Never!”

“So.”

“Father, are you blind? For the last 3,000 years the world has been going off the rails, tossing the nations in a seething cauldron because God is not present to bring order to the nations of the earth. The life of the nations is a life not worth living. Should I take part in such a life?”

“Am I asking that of you?”

“Yes, you are. You’d like me to make Judaism a religion after the manner of the nations. A better, a truer religion—why not?—a more precious, even dearer religion. No? But always religion! A decorative accessory for life, the source of edification and the power for innovation in life, a serene asylum in this life and an insurance for the life after—is that what Judaism should be? Where is the place for Zion and Yerushalayim? Devoted to the life of the nations, entangled in their historical delusion, enmeshed in the so-called inalterability of today and tomorrow: where is the place for the yearning for Zion and Yerushalayim, for the yearning for the God of Zion and Yerushalayim? The God of Zion and Yerushalayim is not a God of the synagogue or a God of the Sabbath or the holidays or the fast days. The God of Zion and Yerushalayim is a God of the order of life, a God of the economic order, a God of the political order, a God of the international order. He’s God-King, a king of the nations. And the synagogue and the Sabbath and the holidays and the fast days and everything we have today are fragments of God’s system of law which comprises life and the economy, governments and states—the precious rubble of a great once and the precious cornerstone of a great tomorrow. That’s all they are. Nothing else. Because Zion and Yerushalayim lie in ruins, Judaism too is nothing other than ruins, and the synagogue and the Sabbath and the holidays and the fast days and, even more, the life which flows around us only arouses ever anew, every day and every hour, the immeasurable yearning for atonement for Zion and Yerushalayim’s ruins, for God’s return to Zion and Yerushalayim, for the construction of the house of our life. Our *life*, Father! Do you hear? Our *life!*”

“So you *are* a Zionist!”

“No, on the contrary: A Jew!”

“On the contrary?”

“Zionism means the affirmation of the historical life of the nations. Judaism means the rejection of the historical life of the nations. Zionism means the rejection of God-King from Zion and Yerushalayim. Judaism means the affirmation of God-King from Zion and Yerushalayim. There is no crossover here. No mediation. Here there is only ‘yes’ and ‘no.’”

“I say ‘no’ to you and to Zionism. What does Judaism have to do with politics? Eh?”

“What is politics?”

“Oh, you fool!”

“Father, don’t be angry with me. I *cannot* do otherwise. I must. I don’t want anything other than to live my life properly and not to squander it. It is acquired dearly enough. Tolerate me.”

“... ..”

“May I say it? If politics means the classification of the historical life of the nations as it has unfolded in the last 3,000 years, then Judaism has nothing in common with politics. But if politics means the order of a community of people, their economic structure and governmental and international organization, then doesn’t Judaism, Father, teach God’s politics, God’s order for the community of people, God’s economic structure, God’s organization of governments and humanity? Isn’t Zion God-King’s perch which one day will be the capital of the world when God-King comes to bring order to the men on earth and achieve victory for His politics over the states predatory self-glorification?”

“Where did you get all that?”

“O Father, and if no one would have told me: I feel it, I know: the new... the great... the unspeakable great... it’s coming... it’s coming. The houses of alien life are shaking... shaking under the burden of blood... and over Zion and Yerushalayim’s pure... ever-so-pure ruins... flits a trembling dawn.... Father, O Father... I feel it, I know: a sigh is passing over the earth... and a ringing yearning... threads are stretching across the sky... mystery-laden threads... starting from the heart of my people... and ending on Zion’s summit. Father, let me live the life of my people, let me live the life of tomorrow. I have no part in the life of yesterday. Since Zion and Yerushalayim have lain in ruins, to be a Jew means: to live a life of the future.”

“Live however you want, but enter the business. Then everything will sort itself out.”

“I can’t.”

“But all of this is nothing but theory, nothing but feelings or, if you’d like, even poetry. Very touching. But at the end of the day, a person doesn’t live poetry, for heaven’s sake. I know a very poetic-minded businessman who writes poetry when he comes home in the evening. But his bottom line works out. Do what he does.”

“I can’t.”

“Why?”

“I already explained.”

“You’re mad.”

“... ..”

“To have such a son is a punishment. How did I get such a... *schlemiel?* Such a specimen.”

“... ..”

“So I have nothing more to say to you then? I’d like to tell you what it means to be a Jew. To be a Jew means that one should obey one’s father. At least that’s what I learned. Does that no longer apply nowadays?”

“In whose name are you demanding obedience?”

“That a person has to put up with this! It’s absolutely... Well, as a Jew I’m demanding obedience from you. As a respectable son, if you know what that is.”

“As a Jew I obey God.”

“And God called you, right? You and your silly talk! Go ahead, start all over again. ... So, you’re not going to enter the business?”

“I can’t.”

“Wonderful. That means... no, it’s okay. And what do you intend to do?”

“I want to become a Jew.”

“Are you a Christian? Or perhaps a heathen? A Mohammadean? Do you know what you are? You’re a fool. Now you know it.”

“... ..”

“Will you finally now kindly tell me what you’re aiming at?”

“I want to search for my people. I want to live the life of my people. I want to learn from my people how one lives the life of the future.”

“Announce it in the newspaper. Offer a finder’s reward. If it’s high enough, the whole synagogue will answer.”

“I only see satiated Jews in the synagogue. I’m searching for hungry Jews, for my hungry people—hungering for redemption, for the redemption of Zion and Yerushalayim as if they were starving for their daily bread. I really don’t know anything. I want to become an apprentice in what it means to be a Jew. I want to at least get to the ‘army.’ To be a leader, I’m probably already too old.”

“And from what are you going to live?”

“We’ll see. What did my people always do over the long centuries? I’ll do exactly the same. My people will tell me what to do.”

“I think you’re relying on my money! You may have miscalculated. For loafers I don’t have a single Pfennig.”


“I’m not relying on your money. God’s nomads struggle through. Do you remember the Rechavites?”¹⁵

“Rechavites?”

“Yes.”

“Something else! It’s not worth asking about it... I’ve had enough. It’s cost me enough time. I have work to do, after all. Go home. Time will tell.”

“Father, don’t be mad at me...”

“Go! Go! I’ve had enough of you. You’re a failure of your own making. I wish you were with the competition.” 

¹⁵ See Jeremiah 35:6-10, 18-19 and *Falk Nefts Heimkehr* 148-152, 270, and 270 and 283 (translator’s note).