

PALESTINE

The Zionist Movement and Land Tenure

In an informing article in the *Jewish Guardian* of 14th October, Mr Elias M. Epstein (Jerusalem), reporting an address he delivered recently at the North London Liberal Synagogue, writes:—

“I wish to speak here of the agricultural settlement which constitutes the basis of Zionist colonization activity. There no man can say of his land, ‘I own it. I shall do with it as I please; leave it untilled, rent it to another, or parcel and sublet it.’ Ownership of the ground is vested in the *Keren Kayemeth*, the land organ of the Zionist Movement. The land is placed at the disposal of qualified settlers on terms of hereditary lease, on conditions having as their object the elimination or mitigation of the social evils attached to private property in land. In so far as it is available, land is granted to all fit for an agricultural life, whether they possess means or not; irrespective of their class or country of origin, or opinions.

“The size of a farm is determined by a family’s normal needs. It will not be larger than it can work itself, so that there is neither temptation nor possibility to lease surplus ground to another and profit from the rent. Neither will it be smaller than a family needs to maintain itself, to exclude the necessity of hiring oneself out to other farmers.

“As science demonstrates how soil can be improved and its yield intensified, the unit of acres per farm can be reduced and room made for fresh settlers. On the other hand, harmful growth of large estates by combination of farms through gift or inheritance is checked. This experiment is still young—the oldest of these villages is barely twenty years old—but provision is made for the passing of a holding to the heirs or legatees of the lessee, in the absence of whom it would be relet to another family. Thus the normal advantages of land ownership—those which redound to the benefit of the community—are retained, while its abuses are obviated.

“The tenant farmer of national land . . . is not restricted in the use of his land. He builds up his home and tills his fields as his personal instincts and capability may dictate. There is no cramping of individuality, which finds expression in one case by a luxuriant flower-garden; in another by specialization in prize poultry; in a third, by high-grade dairy products; and a fourth, special fruit trees.

“As long as he reconciles his interest in it with the general interest, a farmer is master of his own holding; he would find himself restricted only when contemplating its abuse. If he wishes to surrender his farm at any time, he is to be compensated for all he has invested in it.

“Moreover, in so far as there accrues an increased value of the land (as a result not of the expenditure of the settler, but of public development works), that increase accrues to the community. The low rental for the ground charged by the National Fund is on a 2 per cent basis of the value of the land, and this is to be ascertained at regular intervals, so that when the value increases, the rent paid to the public authority rises in proportion.

“In these settlements there can be no harmful exploitation of the land; no speculation; no forcing up of rents; no battenning on the toil of others by those with astute brains; there can be no harmful exploitation of the individual. If a disaster occurs to one family, the loss is shared by all, as some time ago occurred, when a fire destroyed the harvest of six neighbouring farmers in Nahalal. It is not surprising that mutual help is developed into a system—each volunteers a day’s labour

for a sick member of the village, or each lends a horse for so many days if another’s animal is hurt. And this willingness to share each other’s burdens—not, be it noted, in a spirit of charity from the wealthy to the needy, but, as fellow-men, in a spirit of real comradeship—is not affected by the inevitable differences that arise between them because one ploughs better, another one has the help of his children, or the parents of another burden his domestic budget.

“Centuries ago, the Jewish prophets (who were also peasants) thundered against social unrighteousness, against ‘the laying of field to field,’ against the strong oppressing the weak by holding in his hands the means whereby his fellow lived.

“We have ceased to bring burnt offerings to the Lord; we have abandoned—each of us in less or greater degree—the old forms of our religion. But have we substituted for them the ‘good heart’ and humbleness that Micah cried for? In that country, where prophecy attained sublime heights, men and women have rooted out of their hearts the arrogance of selfishness, have cheerfully accepted, nay, insisted upon, a life of fair opportunity to all, equal enjoyment of nature’s blessings, and a common share of life’s mishaps. Upon the soil of the Land of Israel, Jews have again set up the banner of social justice.”