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THE ABRIDGEMENT OF THE RIGHTS OF
SOVIET JEWS IN THE FIELDS OF
NATIONALITY, CULTURE, AND RELIGION*

by Zvi Gitelman

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The status of Jewish nationality, culture, and religion is determined by the interplay of Soviet policy and the reaction to it of the Jewish population. Soviet policy has two components, strategic and tactical, and on reflection I was very impressed by the continuity of the strategic aspect, stretching back to before the Revolution.

The judgment expressed by Lenin that the Jews are not a nation but some sort of caste and it is best for them to assimilate into other peoples, remains the basic assumption of Soviet policy. It should be emphasized that Lenin's judgment was not antisemitic but was then shared, and still is, by many Jews who describe themselves as progressive, even as Lenin regarded his own ideology as progressive.

That long-term prescription for the Jewish people as a solution to their problem, or the problem of the world, remains valid to this day. But Lenin himself, while retaining this assumption from a strategic point of view, was able to make tactical shifts, again setting a precedent which is followed to this day.

From 1918, it was recognized on purely pragmatic grounds, that the Bolshevik message could be addressed to this "non-nation" only in its own "jargon," and the decision was taken to give the Jews a status at least of a nationality (nationalnost) so that certain cultural rights could be conferred on them.

However, except for Birobidzhan, the Jews had no territory, such as the other republic nations or nationalities in the Soviet Union possessed. This was not simply a legalistic matter for it had practical consequences for the nature of Soviet Jewish life. It means that there is no constitutional reason for providing the Jews with such facilities as their own schools, journals, newspapers, and the entire governmental apparatus available to peoples in their own territories. However, again on a tactical level, these things were in fact made available to the Jews at certain times. In the 1920s, in small ethnically compact units in the Ukraine, in Byelorussia, the Crimea, and later on in Birobidzhan, a facsimile of the republican structure which the other peoples enjoyed was provided also for the Jews. There were Jewish soviets operating in Yiddish, groups in trade unions, Party cells, and so on.

So far as Judaism as a religion is concerned, its legal status is not different from that accorded to other religions, but it is different in practice. Just as the Catholics have no central body coordinating their activities, so the Jews have none. There are other parallel discriminations, such as the lack of places of worship, the lack of seminaries, and so on. In degree, if not in kind, the situation for Judaism is more severe than for others. For instance, there are facilities for the training of Christian clergy, but not for Jewish clergy, or they exist to a very limited extent abroad, which in itself is a comment on the situation.

The actual, as distinct from the legal, status of Jewish nationality, culture, and religion has been conditioned by certain specific characteristics of the Jewish people, peculiar to them. These operate in different directions. On the one hand, Jews more than any other large nationality in the Soviet Union have ties abroad. Unfortunately, these ties are with people in the United States and in Israel, two countries which obviously do not rank high on the list of favorite states.

Since they have such ties, the Jewish people are necessarily regarded as a potentially disloyal element. Just as in the United States questions were asked as to whether a Catholic president would owe his first loyalty to the Vatican or to American interests, similar questions are raised in the Soviet Union about the Jews.

In contrast, the second peculiarity of Jewish nationality is a highly commendable one from the Soviet point of view, and that is its "progressive" nature, in that it is progressively denationalized. As such it is in the vanguard of those marching confidently from sblizhenie to sliyanie, in the forefront of the ineluctable march of history, from the "drawing together of peoples" into a complete fusion.
There are some other nationalities in the Soviet Union which exhibit the same characteristics, such as Bashkirs who have culturally become Tatars, Abkhazians who have become Georgians in their culture, Byelorussians who have become Russianized, etc. But perhaps no other nationality has adopted to the same extent the culture of another people, that of the Russians. And to that extent they are indeed "progressive."

One of the objections to Zionism is that it seeks to reverse this progressive nature of the Jews. It tries artificially to take the Jews back to their own culture, and even physically out of the Soviet Union to a land which purports to be theirs. So Zionism, from the Soviet point of view, is a profoundly reactionary doctrine, and not just because of its association with the State of Israel. After all, that was the Zionist aim long before the modern State of Israel was established and was strongly condemned by Lenin and other Bolsheviks.

Let me compare and contrast official and unofficial Jewish culture in the Soviet Union today. Official culture is a very narrowly restricted concept, an artificial creation of the 1920s, and essentially dead by 1938—not 1948 but 1938. It is limited to one language, Yiddish, whereas Jewish culture has always been expressed in a multiplicity of languages, not even restricted to Hebrew.

In the 1979 census 14 percent of the Jews gave Yiddish as their mother tongue. If you add those who gave it as their second language, you get 350,000 people, which is significant but a rapidly declining number. In 1959 it was 21 percent of the population, in 1970, 17 percent, and in 1979 down to 14 percent.

Hebrew has been a suspect language since the 1920s because of its links with Zionism, and because some Jewish communists succeeded in persuading non-Jewish communists that there is a class element in the multiplicity of languages among Jews: namely that Yiddish is the language of the working masses and Hebrew that of the clergy and their bourgeois supporters. Therefore Hebrew is a class enemy language and Yiddish is the language which should be promoted in the socialist society.

The third linguistic possibility would be for Jewish culture to be expressed in the Russian language, just as in Anglo-Saxon countries Jewish culture is expressed in English. This is an un-Leninist concept. According to Lenin's doctrine, nationality and culture are tightly fastened to the particular native language of the people. Once the language is abandoned, then in that sense the national culture ceases also to exist.

There have been some pitiful attempts to drag out the demise of official culture. From time to time, one can see this, as for instance in Sovetish Heymland, the Yiddish monthly journal: about three
or four years ago there was a notice of the introduction of elective courses in Yiddish language and literature in the schools of Birobidzhan. But, the announcement noted, these courses could not be held because there were no textbooks available for the students. This is quite ironic in the light of the fact that as late as the early 1930s hundreds of Yiddish books were being published annually in the Soviet Union, among them textbooks for both primary and high schools, and even for higher institutions of education. At that time, in the 1930s, there were over one thousand Yiddish schools in existence.

In October 1981, Sovietish Heymland reported that, recognizing that the future of Yiddish was in danger, courses in Yiddish literature were to be introduced at the Gorky Institute which trains writers. I do not know of any culture that has been created, or maintained, by sending students to institutes for writers. It seems to me a very strange way of trying to create a culture and the question immediately arises: if indeed the writers are created, who would be the readers?

A compact Jewish population which was Yiddish-speaking existed in certain cities in the Soviet Union as late as the 1970s, and allowed a claim to be made for Yiddish-language schools in those areas. But emigration has reduced that possibility, which was anyway theoretical. In cities such as Vilnius, Chernovtsy, and Riga, the 1959 and 1970 censuses show half the Jewish population claimed Yiddish as their mother tongue. I think that some part of that population would have been willing—even eager—to send their children to Yiddish schools had they existed. Economically, it might well have been feasible to establish such schools in those compact areas of Jewish population, but just these cities have lost more than half of their Jewish inhabitants largely through emigration. So the Yiddish-speaking element of Soviet Jewry, most of which is made up of those Jews who came to the Soviet Union in 1939-40, by the 1970s was largely gone. Therefore the constituency for Yiddish culture is further and drastically diminished.

Finally, there are intrinsic historical peculiarities of Jewish culture which affect the policy of the Soviet authorities towards it and which make the creation of a specifically Soviet Yiddish culture an exercise in futility. Those peculiarities are the inextricable links between the Jewish religion and Jewish culture. This is something which even the State of Israel has come to recognize in the past thirty years and ironically there, too, the authorities have struggled with the problem of how to introduce Jewish consciousness into the school curriculum without introducing religion.

The second element which is indigestible is the concept of the "Return to Zion" which again is not easily or naturally divorced from Jewish culture as it has historically existed. Both of these elements
are contrary to Soviet ideology and therefore historical Jewish culture, even in secularized form, is highly unpalatable to the Soviet regime.

In a word, then, I think official Jewish culture is a closed chapter in Soviet Jewish history. Remarkably, however, simultaneously with this closure, there has begun a new chapter, and that is unofficial Jewish culture. This takes the basic form of a study of Hebrew and Jewish history and a kind of quest for religion.

The study of Hebrew has now gone on unofficially and at best semi-legally since the rise of the emigration (or aliya) movement. While it is limited to the large cities, and to the intelligentsia in those cities, it has made quite a significant impact even on those who do not participate in it. Those who are engaged in it, whether as students or teachers, seem to have developed a remarkably efficient teaching method. I have been greatly impressed by the amount Hebrew people have been able to learn in these conditions, and perhaps the way they have done so may be a model for others.

Along with this has come a very limited religious revival which has occurred also in other contexts. There are four dominant, what I would call value systems—not ideologies—in the Soviet Union today. They are:

1. Marxism-Leninism, and the adherents to that appear to be decreasing in numbers;
2. Materialism, which I think is the largest value system, and is almost the Western kind of "pursuit of the almighty rouble";
3. Nationalistic value systems;
4. Religious value systems.

The last two sometimes coincide as, say, in the case of the Lithuanian Catholics, to some extent for Jews, and for certain peoples of Muslim backgrounds.

Perhaps revival is too strong a word to use, and it would be more correct to say that this religious interest is the effect of three causes. One is simply the search for an alternative both to the Marxism-Leninism as well as to the growing Soviet materialism. I think there is considerable disenchantment with both of these dominant value systems.

Secondly, there is a recognition by those who began in the Zionist movement or who came to it after leaving the Democratic movement, that the further one looks into the history of the Jewish people and their culture, the greater looms the role of their religion. For those who are able to make a personal commitment to religion, this is a logical next step. Clearly, not everyone can or wants to do that. But there is a logical connection between national consciousness and religious observance if one has theological conviction.
Thirdly, and the most recent phenomenon, perhaps only of the last few years, is, in the absence of external emigration, an increase in internal emigration. It is obvious to Soviet citizens today that the immediate possibilities for leaving the country are very small. The number of applications for exit visas has declined. People have come to the conclusion that there is no sense in making an application which will only bring them trouble with no prospects of getting out of the country.

What then should one do if interested in Jewish commitment? Without being cynical, I suggest that one alternative is to turn to religion. We have seen that many individuals who began as secular Zionists have become increasingly personally religious. This is a phenomenon which may be growing and cannot be dismissed out of hand.

Added to this is curiosity about Jewish history, which has been aroused by the fact that the authorities have made it unavailable to most Soviet citizens. It is a subject which is suppressed and therefore people are intrigued by it.

There appears to be very little contact between official and unofficial cultural activities. The former make a strong point in denigrating Zionism but I doubt whether that has any effect whatever on stemming the tide of would-be emigration. Unofficial culture directly and indirectly supports the idea of emigration and that is one of the reasons why it is unacceptable to the authorities. Even those people who quite sincerely pursue Jewish culture with an avowed disinterest in emigration are indirectly promoting it, because there is a kind of logic which leads from Jewish culture to emigration. The realization that there is no freedom to live a full Jewish life in the USSR means that you can only do so by leaving the country. The Soviet authorities have themselves created potential emigrants by denying people access to Jewish culture.

Without going too deeply into the religious situation, which has already been dealt with by others, I want to point out one thing. I have been quite astonished by the ineffectiveness of Soviet anti-religious propaganda. When one considers the lack of religious education over the past fifty years, coupled with the tremendous investment in anti-religious propaganda and agitation, it is quite amazing to find such apathy among those who have left the Soviet Union towards religion. Over the years I have interviewed about 1,400 emigrants of various kinds in various countries. In every interview one of my questions was attitude towards religion in a standard formulation: do you consider yourself very religious, religious, traditional, not religious, or anti-religious? Overall only 5 to 6 percent designate themselves as being anti-religious, 40 to 50 percent choose to define themselves as non-religious, and about a third call themselves
traditional. Similar results have been obtained in other surveys also.

"Traditional" turns out to be observance of certain customs, not necessarily and not primarily for religious reasons, but more often for sentimental, historical, or family reasons. But that after so many years of extensive and intensive anti-religious agitation there are so few militant atheists, consciously committed to being anti-religious, tells us a great deal about the effectiveness of Soviet attempts in this matter.

People are today so far removed from religion that they are not "turned off" by any thought of it; they are not frightened by it, not appalled by it, and not disgusted by it, so they are not hostile to it and not motivated to combat it. It is not, as a result, even something to discuss, in contrast to some of the Muslim peoples' attitudes.

Far more effective than the propaganda has been the general socio-economic trends within the Soviet Union as in other developed countries. As people moved out of the shtetlakh—the small tightly-knit Jewish communities—into large industrial centers, where they, perhaps for the first time, came into contact with people of other nationalities, religions, languages, and culture, the same thing happened to Soviet Jews as to their brethren who went to Canada, the United States, or Britain. Once removed from the structure of Jewish traditional life, Jewish traditional practice and commitment also changed.

Finally, as regards religion, the synagogue remains the only physical central address of the Jewish people in the Soviet Union and it has therefore acquired a kind of symbolic and social importance, no less than its religious importance. There are no other places in the country where large numbers of Jews can meet together. It is the last remaining symbol of Jewish historical and religious culture on a communal basis. It therefore serves as a magnet for many who are not particularly religious but who do wish to identify themselves as Jews and to meet other like-minded people.

If, therefore, official Jewish culture is being eliminated, and unofficial culture must remain semi-legal and harassed, does it mean that Jewish culture in the Soviet Union will disappear? In the narrow sense, yes; in the broader sense, no. If one thinks of culture in terms of language and creativity, perhaps that will disappear, or will be even more restricted than it is even today. However, culture in the sense of a lifestyle, that will remain distinctively Jewish if diminishing, will remain. People spend their leisure in a certain way and pursue certain interests. They have certain values which distinguish one group from another, sometimes even if they speak the same language.
These differences are immediately recognizable to Soviet citizens as well as perhaps to people in other countries. The different ways in which different ethnic groups spend their leisure times are visible to all. And this difference is one way which sets Jews apart; it may be diminishing in the Soviet Union but it still exists.

Culture and subjective identity do not necessarily go together. Jewish identity, Jewish consciousness are not entirely dependent on adherence to, and involvement in, Jewish culture. In the long term they are, but for the lifetime of an individual, and even perhaps for two generations, they may not be. Identification survives the loss of culture; just as in the West, so too, in the Soviet Union, there are millions of Jews who know no Jewish language, practice no Jewish rituals or anything like that, but nevertheless consider themselves and are considered as Jews.

In the Soviet Union there is an additional element to antisemitism—and perhaps not only in the Soviet Union—which forces Jews to accept their Jewish identity, who might otherwise have been happy to discard it, and that is that they are prevented from doing so. And therefore the situation of Soviet Jews is acculturation without assimilation, namely the loss of any form of Jewish culture, except in the broad sense of lifestyle and for certain practices, without the ability to shake off the burden of Jewish identity which is preserved legally (by the internal passport) and by society at large which insists on regarding these people as Jews no matter how they would regard themselves.

The guiding principles of Soviet policy remain progressive Jewish acculturation as a strategy, although total assimilation has been postponed until overall sliyanie (fusion) will be achieved, and that apparently is something for the indefinite future.

On the tactical level, however, there have been practical shifts, mainly in response to foreign policy considerations rather than for domestic reasons, in recent years.

The Israel-Arab situation is relatively unimportant in the formation of Soviet policy towards Soviet Jews. What has been crucial for this purpose has been the super-power relationship. The exaggerated view of Jewish power and influence in the United States plays a role here, as does also the perception that favorable action towards Jews goes down well in the United States Congress and among the American attentive public.

Something which has not been emphasized sufficiently till now is the link between emigration and domestic policy towards Jews, especially in the sphere of higher education. Those who advocate the emigration of Jews from the Soviet Union, and I am among them, should be aware of the fact that emigration of some Jews has very deleterious
consequences for those Jews left in the Soviet Union. We may still have to make the unfortunate choice to continue to press for the emigration of the minority who wish to leave, but we should be aware of what that means to the others.

Parallel with emigration has come a severe decline in the higher education open to Soviet Jews. That is extremely important because higher education is the last channel for social mobility. At this point, it affects the Soviet Jewish population more than anything else because it determines the value of the Jews in society.

The Soviet authorities have adopted a superficially rational policy in this respect, for which one can criticize them but hardly blame them. They argue: why should we train cadres for the West? Why should we admit a physicist to the university when tomorrow he will be in Chicago or Tel Aviv, helping countries in which we are profoundly uninterested? Therefore the logical thing to do is to close off higher education to Jews.

We have to recognize this consequence of emigration and think what it means to those remaining. In fact, emigration has confirmed an image of the Jews which some Soviet authorities have long held and others have now come to adopt: the Jews are no longer, if they ever were, really Soviet citizens—they are resident aliens. They are people whose sojourn may be temporary, whose loyalty is doubtful, whose commitment is suspect, and whose future may not be Soviet.

The suspicion of disloyalty—that the Jews will turn against the Soviet Union if they can—has been confirmed by emigration. Even those Jews who are quite sincerely loyal, who have no wish to emigrate, who would like nothing better than to be completely assimilated into the Soviet system and become totally Russified, even they come under suspicion. For that reason I believe no Jews have any future in the Soviet Union. This is the irony: even the Jews who do not wish to emigrate, either themselves or their children, may be forced to do so, if allowed, because of the blanket suspicion cast over the entire Jewish population by the state, that at best they are considered only resident aliens.

As to the future, I would have thought that one of the earliest and least costly signals which a new Soviet administration could send to the United States, would be to turn up the emigration volume. That, I think, would have required some immediate response from the United States. I think I can discern some signals coming out of Moscow, but I do not see any returning from the other side, and therefore I do not expect to see any gesture from the Soviet leadership, in the short term at least, regarding emigration.

The anti-corruption campaign which is being launched in the
Soviet Union may harm the Jews, as it did in the 1960s, not only because they are made into scapegoats.

I don't believe that this Soviet administration, or any future one, is likely to change its basic cultural policy. There is no pay-off for doing so. It would make no sense to the authorities to reintroduce some form of Soviet Jewish culture. It would be costly and would not satisfy any domestic need since there does not appear to be any great interest in returning to the conditions which existed in the 1920s. It certainly would not placate the West.

There does not seem to be any reason to suppose that there will be any revival of any kind of Soviet Yiddish culture, because of its intrinsic lack of appeal and because extrinsically it would not do very much good.

At one point, Soviet Jewish culture was seen as a competitor to Zionism and to Judaism. A Soviet Yiddish paper of the 1920s carried a story which purported to tell about a Jewish peasant woman in Byelorussia who, hearing of the plan to settle large numbers of Jews on the land in Birobidzhan or in the Crimea, shouted out excitedly at a public meeting: "Eretz Yisroel in unzer land!" (The land of Israel right here in our own country!), namely, that Zionism would be fulfilled right there in the Soviet Union.

That, of course, was one of the motives for settling Jews on the land, to create a Soviet alternative to Zionism. There are very few people, if any, who now believe in that possibility.

Tactical shifts which bring improvements in the Jewish situation are but palliatives. The strategic aim remains unchanged and, I believe, will remain so. Therefore we are left with the following circumstances. For those Jews in the Soviet Union who have made a personal commitment to Jewish nationality, whether secular, Zionist, or religious, the only viable option is emigration. For those who are not nationally conscious as Jews, but consider themselves something else, whether cosmopolitans, or Russians, or Georgians, there are theoretically two possible options.

One is assimilation, but that is not very realistic because of the rejection of it by society and because of legal barriers. The other is forced emigration. That is to say, people who have become Jews honoris causa. They themselves have chosen not to be Jews but are so defined by the Soviet regime. They will eventually be pressured into emigrating as Jews, turning their adverse status into an advantage. "All right, if you insist on considering me as a Jew despite my ardent desire to be a Russian, and I am going to suffer all the negative consequences of being a Jew, at least I will try to exercise the one advantage of being a Jew, namely to vote with my feet against the Soviet system."