

A RABBINICAL REVOLUTION? RELIGION, POWER AND POLITICS IN THE CONTEMPORARY UKRAINIAN JEWISH MOVEMENT

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The role of the "religious element" in the contemporary Ukrainian Jewish movement is examined in the wider context of Jewish politics in that country. Analyses focus on the reasons for and objectives of the political advancement of Ukrainian rabbinic leaders in the second half of the 1990s and the growth of their influence on Jewish community-building in post-Soviet Ukraine. Also discussed is the political nature of the rabbinic leadership and the place of Jewish spiritual leaders as a ruling group within the disposition of political forces in the local Jewish community.

Introduction

The modern Ukrainian Jewish population is a substantial part of European Ashkenazi as well as world Jewry, which played an important role in the genesis and establishment of the Jewish communities of Israel, the U.S.A., Canada, Argentina, and other countries. Today, in spite of the huge stream of contemporary Jewish emigration from Ukraine to Israel and to the countries of America and Europe, Jews are still the third (after Ukrainians and Russians)

Jewish Political Studies Review 10:1-2 (Spring 1998)

largest ethnic group in Ukraine. Currently the Jewish population, according to *halakhic* criteria, is estimated at between 250,000 and 360,000. According to the Israeli Law of Return, however, an estimated 520,000 to 685,000 persons have the right to immigrate to Israel.¹

The Jewish community of Ukraine, as well as other Jewish entities in post-communist countries, is both the object and subject of multi-dimensional social, cultural, and political trends. These trends include mass emigration,² as well as attempts to reestablish a full Jewish life in Ukraine. Although there is evidence of Jewish integration into an independent Ukrainian state, at the same time many descendants of mixed marriages, as well as those who preferred to hide their Jewishness, are seeking out their Jewish identity.

It is important to note the modern day situation of the Jews in Ukraine as an integral part of the local society, one almost deprived of their own cultural features (i.e., language, culture, tradition), and at the same time with a stable Jewish self-identification. In addition, there is the dual loyalty issue — allegiance to a new democratic Ukraine together with feelings of Israeli and Jewish patriotism. Finally, within the modern Ukrainian Jewish movement there are elements of religious redemption and new attempts to rethink Jewishness in secular-ethnic terms.

All of these factors are peculiar external features of the national self-consciousness of this part of East European Jewry, and which reflect a sophisticated and controversial process of recreation of Jewish identification in post-Soviet Ukraine.³

The revival of Jewish communal institutions is becoming a factor attracting the social energy of Ukrainian Jewry. The sphere of social and political activities of these institutions, which is usually referred to as “Jewish politics,” has become directly involved in the mechanism of ethnic-national identification of Ukrainian Jewry. In this context, it is also evident that the role of the religious element has been increasing.

All of these factors reflect a comparatively new phenomenon in the modern history of Ukrainian Jewry. What is the reason for the evident increase of the religious factor in Jewish politics during the second half of the 1990s? What is the nature of rabbinical leadership as a political phenomenon, and what is the mechanism of the spiritual leaders’ influence on Jewish community-building in post-Soviet Ukraine? Finally, what is the role of Jewish religious institutions in the realization of political interests and resolution of political conflicts in the contemporary Jewish movement of Ukraine? This article is devoted to answering these questions.

The Jewish Movement in Ukraine: The Post-Soviet Experience

As was mentioned above, the establishment of the Jewish movement as well as Jewish communal life in contemporary independent Ukraine is quite a sophisticated and controversial phenomenon. Most Jewish social, cultural, educational and political structures, including religious communities and a strong Zionist movement, were destroyed by the end of the 1920s. Ukrainian Jewry never really recovered from the Nazi Holocaust and Stalinist terror.

As a result, most of Ukrainian as well as Soviet Jews in general had to adapt to the external (non-Jewish) environment, which meant reconciling themselves to the negative effects of the environment, including administrative, political and societal anti-Semitism. Consequently, Jewish life developed beyond the traditional forms of Jewish self-organization. There were small underground groups for *aliya* as well as national and human rights activists. Legalization of these groups and the institutionalization of their activities occurred only after *perestroika* together with mass emigration. However, many of the problems and controversies of the previous period still plague the Jewish organizations.

In addition, conditions do not exist for the creation of Jewish political parties in contemporary Ukraine. The same is true for the recreation of those parties which were active in Ukraine at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries, including their ideology and political culture. The fact is that those parties were organized around a strong Zionist political tradition which was a basic factor of political inter-party cleavages in the Jewish movement of that time.

It is clear that although the trends for redemption of this tradition do exist, their practical realization is directed more towards emigration than to local Jewish structure.⁴ Since the 1920s the concept of "dual end" (i.e., preparation for repatriation to Palestine and struggle for Jewish rights in a hostile country)⁵ was the basis of the Zionist influence in the country. However, such a political niche almost does not exist in contemporary Ukraine.

Public opinion reflects this situation clearly enough. In the summer of 1993, our sample of the Jewish population of eastern Ukraine showed that only 21 percent of the respondents supported the idea of creating Jewish political organizations in Ukraine. Consequently, "might-be" Jewish political parties capture only last place among the suggested list of organizations that would be "very helpful and necessary to create." At the same time, Jewish political parties

headed the list of organizations whose creation, in the respondents' opinion, might be "of harm for Ukrainian Jews."⁶

The current domestic economic and political instability in Ukraine is the third factor that makes the reestablishment of the Ukrainian Jewish movement so controversial. This is also seen in the lack of clearly articulated and adequately exercised "Jewish policy" by the authorities.⁷

Finally, there are the strong contradictions within the Jewish community itself, which include:

1. An ideological conflict dealing with ways of developing the Jewish community in that republic and understanding its status in an independent Ukraine. The opposing factions in this question are, on the one hand, a "post-Soviet" trend, represented by the Jewish Council of Ukraine (JCU), and on the other, partisans of the concept of "Jewish civil society" in Ukraine, guided by the Association of Jewish Organizations and Communities of Ukraine (AJOCU). While the former quite clearly proclaims its pro-government and "integrationist" orientation, the latter would like to create a strong independent Jewish community — that is to say, a community loyal to independent democratic Ukraine, and at the same time having a strong and independent infrastructure as well as developing Jewish national identity.

2. Contradictions between partisans of the "Yiddish" (or *shtetl*) model of cultural rebirth, which is oriented to local cultural tradition, and those who are oriented towards "Hebrew," or the "blue and white" model.

3. A conflict between the interests of Ukrainian branches of foreign and international Jewish organizations (Joint, Jewish Agency, religious organizations, Israeli, American and European government and public institutions, etc.) and local Jewish institutions, movements, organizations, and interest groups.

Many different aspects of Jewish life in contemporary Ukraine are the subject of these external and internal controversies and conflicts. These include ways and patterns of construction of Jewish communal institutions; infrastructure, character and content of Jewish education; problems of charity and welfare activities; forms, priorities, and tenacity of Jewish national and cultural redemption in Ukraine; approach to *aliya* and Israel as well as to the Jewish diaspora communities; lobbying and representation of Jewish interests; rights for restitution of Jewish properties confiscated by the communist regime, as well as distribution of aid from world Jewry; and relations with other national movements.

The examples of conflicts and contradictions dealing with these points are numerous. Many experts consider these conflicts to be the

result of the struggle for leadership in the Jewish movement, as well as for influence on local and international public opinion.⁸ Another important angle of this phenomenon are the attempts of leading actors in Jewish politics to capture certain functions of communal management.

The true picture of Jewish politics in Ukraine is complicated and still in the process of formation. It is already evident, however, that the struggle between the different factions of the Jewish political elite is leading to a crisis in the national movement. Attempts to reach reconciliation and coordination of activities in Ukraine (as was done by Edgar Bronfman, chairman of the WJC) had very limited effect.

A Religious Solution?

A relatively new phenomenon in Ukrainian Jewish politics is the growth in political importance of Jewish religious leaders (rabbis) and their advancement in the local Jewish movement. In many cities such as Odessa, Kiev, Dnepropetrovsk, Kharkov, Kherson and others, rabbis have taken communal leadership roles, pushing aside representatives of both the post-Soviet authorities and the new Jewish elite. The growing political influence of these Jewish spiritual leaders is a result of a number of circumstances. First of all, there is growing interest by Ukrainian Jews in Judaism, who see it as an extremely important component of Jewish national identity. For example, sociological samples of the east Ukrainian Jewish population done by the author in 1991, 1992, 1993, and 1994 showed a constant growth among respondents (4, 22, 30, and 35 percent respectively) in the religious factor as being an important reason for their decision to make aliya.

It is the author's opinion that this positive reference to Judaism is more a cultural factor — that is, an expression of ethnic-national consciousness — rather than reflecting their religious identity as such. The above samples proved this, showing that respondents presented the same approach both to "religious" and "cultural" factors, and consequently saw no difference between them. It is not by chance that only 12 percent of respondents in 1994 considered themselves to be religious; 37 percent claimed to be non-religious; and 51 percent were unable to answer definitely whether they were religious or not.⁹ Judaism as a "symbolic ethnicity" is not a specifically Ukrainian phenomenon. The Russian example shows that it is

a characteristic feature of identity of Ashkenazi Jewry of post-communist eastern Europe as a whole.¹⁰

The preservation of Jewish national identity under the communist regime, together with almost total suppression of the means of Jewish identification in Ukraine as well as in the USSR in general, resulted in Judaism enjoying a positive image in the ethnic-national consciousness of Ukrainian Jewry while never being realized in day-to-day Jewish life. In addition, the ethnic-national status of the Jewish religion was strengthened by the fact that the few existing synagogues at that time were almost the sole place for expressing Jewish patriotism and pro-Israeli inclinations, especially during the 1960s and 1970s.¹¹ These peculiarities of local Jewish identity resulted in the fact that until the mid-1990s, religious-secular relations were practically excluded from the political conflicts in the Ukrainian Jewish movement.

A good example of this is the experience of reconstruction of the infrastructure of the Jewish community of Kherson. The initiative was taken by a group of Jewish activists who were typical representatives of local secular Jewish intellectuals. At the same time they were aware of the fact that at the beginning of this century Kherson had a strong Habad community, which also owned the synagogue building where this group conducted their meetings. Following this tradition, the group called themselves the Habad Organization even though they had no religious leanings. Thus, the secular Habad Organization became an important center of political influence in Jewish Kherson. When a dynamic and active Rabbi Avrum Wolf arrived from Israel, the situation he found in the city made it much easier for him to unify the major branches of the community — religious, cultural, educational, and welfare — under rabbinical leadership.¹² Accordingly, many Ukrainian Jews see rabbis as an independent and authoritative force above the “dirty politics” of local Jewish community chiefs with their different ideological orientations and conflicts.

The fact that many of the rabbis come from abroad is also seen in a positive light. To illustrate this let us look at a conflict which arose around the activities of a commercial company in Odessa which was supported by the then Jewish community administration. The company was dealing with the transportation by sea of immigrants to Israel and the transferring of their finances to Israeli banks. There was a great scandal around the financial and political malpractices of the company, creating a political crisis which resulted in the “retirement” of communal executives and the shift of their power to religious leaders.¹³

The institutional factor is, of course, no less important. In 1992 there were only 12 active synagogues in Ukraine. Their public and communal role at that time was not considered to be very significant.¹⁴ In 1995 there were 50 synagogues active in all regions of Ukraine¹⁵ and their role, in spite of earlier pessimistic opinions, is constantly growing. To some extent one can see a kind of resumption of the traditional East European Jewish approach to a synagogue as a *Beit Knesset* and not only as a *Beit Tefila*.

In other words, the synagogue is seen as a legitimate center and important pillar of Jewish life in a city or region. At the moment synagogues in the Ukraine have become an important center for information, social aid, and personal contacts. In addition, a considerable network of yeshivas, as well as Jewish day and Sunday schools, kindergartens, and other educational establishments belong to or are supported by religious organizations, both local and foreign. For example, 13 out of 16 full-time Jewish day schools in Ukraine have religious affiliations.

Necessary public infrastructure for rabbinical activities is also provided by Jewish religious communities, which are quickly growing in size and importance. In March 1996 there were more than 70 such communities officially registered with the Ukrainian authorities. Most of them are Orthodox communities and affiliated with Habad and other streams of Hasidism. Others are represented by the Conservative and Reform movements, whose influence in Ukraine is limited.

It is interesting to note that the increasing political role of rabbis and religious institutions in the late *perestroika* and post-*perestroika* periods was unconsciously sponsored by the Ukrainian establishment. The latter was confused by policies inherited from the previous regime as well as new policies toward Jews and other minorities.¹⁶ On the one hand, leaders of the post-communist majority of the ruling elite were undoubtedly interested in demonstrating a "democratic image" of the Ukrainian regime. From this viewpoint, a positive attitude toward the local Jewish community is considered to be vitally important for the establishment of good relations with the West, including access to American funds and European technologies. The reform wing of the communist party and the Soviet bureaucracy, which came to power at the peak of *perestroika*, considered these and other pragmatic reasons when giving a green light to the Jewish movement.¹⁷

The new concept of nation-building, adopted by Ukraine since its independence, treats ethnic-national entities first of all as culture groups. Consequently, there are Jewish ethnic-culture organizations which are officially considered to be legitimate representatives of

national and ethnic interests. On the other hand, the new regime inherited the complex question of Jewish properties (i.e., synagogues, school buildings, and land) confiscated by communist authorities during the 1920s and 1930s. Contemporary authorities prefer to see religious communities as the exclusive inheritors of this property. It is obvious that the Ukrainian government is trying to avoid any national or political connotation to the problem.

However, the result of such a policy proved to be different from what was expected due to the proximity between “ethnicity” and “religiosity” in the identity and consciousness of East European Jews. The Ukrainian authorities, in fact, stimulated a huge wave of founding and registration of Jewish national organizations in the form of “religious” communities. The latter immediately demanded their rights to remaining synagogue buildings and other Jewish properties, while at the same time creating an important infrastructure for the advancement of Jewish religious leaders.

The new regime’s intention to fill the moral and ideological vacuum left after the breakdown of communist ideology with a religious consciousness became an additional factor in the growth of rabbinical influence. The fact is that following this new “ideology,” Ukrainian leaders, both on the national and local levels, prefer to deal with “non-politicized” rabbis rather than with leaders of numerous Jewish “secular” organizations.

Direct access to the resources and experiences of the Jewish diaspora is also of great importance for the growth of the political strength of the new rabbinic elite. An effective use of these resources is of great advantage to this group. For example, in many cases rabbis are more “politically correct” than their local secular counterparts. The former often take into consideration the character of the local Jewish entity and the peculiarities of local Jewish consciousness. Most of the rabbis usually stress the national, and only afterwards the religious, character of their activities and institutions. As a rule, the rabbinic leaders also take into account the traditional pro-Israeli inclinations of local Jewry, and thus rabbis, although the majority are representative of Hasidic movements, either openly display their Zionist values or demonstrate their acceptance of them in the context of Jewish national and religious redemption.

Finally, one should also take into account the personal factor. The advancement of rabbis in the Jewish movement is a result of the activities and personality of the Chief Rabbi of Ukraine, Yaakov Dov Bleich — a rabbi-politician. Rabbi Bleich, a New York-born representative of the Karlin-Stolin Hasidic movement, who came to Ukraine in 1991 at the age of 26, has been a political success because of his personal qualities. Being fluent in English, Hebrew, and Yiddish,

Bleich also learned Ukrainian and Russian. Among his strongest features is his ability to identify and recruit qualified and reliable assistants as administrative directors and various people in charge of programs. Rabbi Bleich demonstrated an important ability to estimate and adequately adapt to a changing political situation.

As Johanan Petrovsky writes about him:

Rabbi Bleich knows that he is in Rome and tries to do as the Romans do. Not in the sense of religious practice but in the sense of treating people...and he would do all he can in order to fulfill this task. He is canny enough to understand how much the attitude towards Jews depends on personal contacts of the rabbi with the authorities....And he will speak to Kravchuk and nowadays advise Kuchma in good Ukrainian....People eagerly come to visit him; he is invited to give talks on TV....Rabbi Bleich, because of his sociability and tolerance, has become an attractive figure for a large group of religious people in Kiev.¹⁸

As a result, shortly after his arrival in Kiev, Rabbi Bleich became Chief Rabbi of Kiev and Ukraine, and in 1994 he was also elected as the chairman of the Jewish community of the city of Kiev. Besides the founding of two religious schools, with 600 students all together, Rabbi Bleich helped establish many communal institutions — a bakery, butcher shop, canteen for poor people, and yeshiva. In addition, he organizes summer camps and participates in various inter-organizational bodies. Rabbi Bleich's greatest political success was in his ability to influence the thinking of Kiev and Ukrainian Jews.

The rabbi's political strength is also a result of his chairmanship of the Association of Jewish Religious Communities of Ukraine as well as his key position in the management of such organizations as the Coordination Committee of Jewish Education in Ukraine, the All-Ukrainian Jewish Charity Foundation, and others. People see Bleich as a natural mediator between different Jewish organizations: secular and religious, foreign and local, and pro-government and independent. Rabbi Shmuel Kamenensky in Dnyepropetrovsk, Rabbi Moskovich in Kharkov, Rabbi Avrum Wolf in Kherson, and Rabbi Shalom Gotlieb in Nikolayev play similar charismatic roles outside of Kiev.

In Zaporozhye, a young Israeli rabbi and graduate of a hesder yeshiva, Noam Shlessinger, became that city's first rabbi in 65 years. In 1995, one year after his arrival, the first synagogue was inaugurated. This author was witness to an impressive ceremony of *hakhnasat*

Sefer Torah at the reopening of the old synagogue in Zaporozhye in eastern Ukraine which had been closed by the authorities at the end of the 1920s. The synagogue building, constructed with public donations in 1909 and one of the biggest in eastern Ukraine, was unable to house everybody who wanted to participate. There was a crowd outside equal in size to that within. A conservative estimate was that there were no less than 2,000 Jews and members of their families (about 25 percent of the Jewish population of the city) who came to the synagogue that day. These people made the event an impressive manifestation of national consciousness.

All of these ideological, political, cultural, and personal factors promoted the influence of spiritual leaders as a new Jewish political elite. This influence was at the expense of other ruling groups in the Jewish community of the country. As Betsy Gidwitz correctly put it:

Community rabbis serve as representatives of the local Jewish population to local and regional power sources, defenders of the Jewish people and the State of Israel, congregational leaders, day school presidents, welfare service supervisors, fund-raisers, coordinators with international organizations...host to foreign visitors, and mediators in various disputes among the Jewish people.¹⁹

The Rabbis and a New Dimension of Jewish Politics

Since the mid-1990s, the composition of political forces in the Ukrainian Jewish movement has changed due to the political advancement of spiritual leaders. However, within this group — the rabbinic elite — there were conflicts. Many of these clashes had a personalized character stemming from the diversified ways of implementing organizational and ideological approaches in organizations, factions, and interest groups, as well as which politician each leader supported. For example, in Kiev there was a controversy between Rabbi Bleich and Rabbi Berl Karasik. The latter, official head of the local Habad community, wanted to take over the Jewish leadership in Ukraine. While being a famous Habad scholar and a brilliant teacher, Rabbi Karasik appeared to be a weak administrator. Some of his closest assistants were involved in corruption cases. According to Johanan Petrovsky, "Rabbi Karasik's directors robbed him and caused a scandal around the Habad program sending schoolchildren to Israel camps. For example, it was enough to bribe a person responsible for this program in order to send a non-Jewish child to Israel."²⁰ Habad's image was also weakened due to an

unsuccessful attempt to reclaim the building which had housed the Brodsky synagogue.²¹

Although formally still head of the Kiev Habad community, Rabbi Karasik's position has been weakened. At the same time Rabbi Bleich's influence has increased. The conflict here is not due to ideological differences, which are not understood by most local Jews in any case, but rather is one of a political nature. Rabbi Karasik was unable to compete with the successful combination of spiritual-ideological and administrative methods of Rabbi Bleich. As a result, by the end of 1993, most religious communities, regardless of their affiliation with this or that stream of Judaism, supported Bleich who, as mentioned, was elected chairman of the Association of Jewish Religious Communities of Ukraine.

In Odessa, too, there was conflict between two religious leaders, Rabbi Shlomo Baksht and Shaya Gisser, both vying to be Chief Rabbi of Odessa.²² Both Shlomo Baksht, an Israeli who arrived in Odessa in 1993, and former Odessa citizen Shaya Gisser, who came back to the city in 1990 after learning at one of Israel's yeshivas, are officially recognized by Odessa authorities. Neither one of these religious leaders, however, has been able to attain ideological and political dominance in the Odessa community.

In principle, definite ideological and political differences between the two leaders do exist. Rabbi Baksht, for example, is positively related to Zionism, while Rabbi Gisser is anti-Zionist as well as being a partisan of the Yiddish model of cultural rebirth and an opponent of foreign influence. However, between the two there does exist a kind of division of fields of influence: Baksht is more active in Jewish education while Gisser deals more with charity and welfare projects. Nevertheless, in the eyes of the majority of the Jewish population of Odessa, each is struggling for power in spite of their attempts to demonstrate correct relations. None of this "advances the cause of the Jewish community or Judaism."²³

In addition to personal power struggles, there is also conflict between the various streams of Judaism. Among the more than 70 religious communities and associations that exist in Ukraine, the majority belong to the Orthodox wing (mainly represented by Habad and other Hasidic movements). In some places, mainly in western Ukraine, Conservative Judaism has some influence. The Reform movement, though getting bigger, is still not very strong and is represented by 17 small congregations in Kiev and other cities of central Ukraine.

The ideological and philosophical conflicts of Orthodox groups (Hasidic or Religious Zionist) with each other or with the Conservative and Reform movements are of little practical importance for

local Jews. More often the dissension is understood as an integral part of local "Jewish politics," and which is, according to the Chief Rabbi of Ukraine, Yaakov Bleich, a struggle "for power and money."²⁴

In Cherkassy, the struggle between the local branch of Ezra (an Orthodox Zionist youth movement) and Progressive Judaism was over control of the Jewish Sunday school. In the course of the conflict, both sides had no doubt that, as one of the heads of the Ezra World Union, I. Hildesaimer, put it, "a victory will be gained by those who will raise more money."²⁵

In the actual practice of Jewish politics, the participants are motivated by a sophisticated combination of pragmatic and idealistic motivations. In addition to "material" interests and personal ambitions there is also the struggle for spiritual, social, and political rights of the Jewish community or interest groups inside it. Such "non-materialistic" factors as self-respect, historical memory, and retention of local Jewish tradition and cultural heritage are often no less important for Jewish politicians in Ukraine. This can be seen in the fact that the influence of Reform leaders does not extend beyond a few cities of central and southern Ukraine, in spite of the investment of substantial resources and their access to American Jewish money. Attempts by Ariel Stone, a Reform rabbi in Ukraine from 1992 to 1996, to extend their sphere at the expense of the Hasidic domains in eastern and southern Ukraine were almost totally unsuccessful.²⁶

Finally, regarding the religious dimension of Jewish politics in Ukraine, one should also point out the struggle between the rabbinic elite and other ruling groups in the Ukrainian Jewish community. For example, in Kherson, Rabbi Avrum Wolf gained victory over his secular rivals in that city. However, Rabbi Wolf succeeded in uniting both secular and religious activities under the rabbinate.²⁷

This was in contrast to the results of the same sort of conflict in the Jewish community of Kharkov. The conflict between representatives of Habad headed by Rabbi Moskovich and leaders of the secular Jewish community organized around the Jewish Culture Society (JCS) of Kharkov is at the center of local Jewish politics. JCS chairman M. Khodos blamed "foreign Hasidic centers" for taking control of the structures of Jewish education in the city. In addition, both groups are fighting over control of one of the old synagogue buildings to gain more political influence.²⁸

Very often a conflict between secular and religious Jewish leaders becomes a personal, ideological, and political struggle, as in Zaporozhye, for example, as a result of a two-year fight between a foreign Zionist rabbi and leaders of the local Jewish Council (affiliated with the pro-government Jewish Council of Ukraine). The

dynamic and popular Rabbi Shlessinger had to resign from his position and return to Israel. Soon it turned out that Habad politicians effectively took advantage of this situation — their representative, affiliated with the Habad center in nearby Dnepropetrovsk, took the vacant position.²⁹

These and other events of recent years are part of a trend of strengthening the political positions of Habad leaders through the establishment of their own institutional infrastructure. This infrastructure develops either in parallel with local community structures or, as is happening more often, “adopts” the latter. Habad leaders such as Rabbi Kamenetsky in Dnepropetrovsk have created “empires” in some of the larger communities. They usually include an impressive system of communal services, such as subsidies and food assistance, public dining rooms for poor people and kosher restaurants, social and medical care centers, places for socializing and cultural events, offices for information and legal aid, as well as schools, training centers, kindergartens, and child care services.

Habad leaders have taken constructive steps towards their political institutionalization in Ukraine, resulting in the marginalization of other factions of the Jewish political elite. The chairman of the Ukrainian Jewish Va’ad, Joseph Zissels, has on many occasions strongly criticized Habad as well as other foreign organizations for creating their own infrastructures in Ukraine.³⁰ According to many Jewish leaders, these are among the “strong external factors...which in the present conditions of a destroyed and reappearing [Jewish] community are obstacles to its consolidation.”³¹

It should be mentioned that some factions of the Habad political elite are making visible attempts to extend their influence in the whole of Ukraine. The Kiev representation of Ts’irei Habad is considered top priority. This organization is headed by Rabbi Asman, who has replaced Rabbi Karasik as the Habad head in Kiev. Among the group’s activities was the formation of the “All-Ukrainian Jewish Congress,” which was inaugurated on 24 April 1997. Just as in the case of the Russian Jewish Congress, whose “moving force became [Jewish] bankers...while initiative and ideological birth...came from the side of rabbis,”³² Jewish businessmen and rabbis of Ukraine were united by mutual political interests. Jewish businessmen, integrated into the upper level of the Ukrainian ruling strata,³³ are trying to use the infrastructure of the Jewish communities in order to strengthen their “formal” influence and authority, as well as to access international contacts. Such big entrepreneurs as V. Rabinovich, N. Feldman, V. Pinchuk, M. Gravets, A. Maiberg, and A. Tabachnic became members of the AUJC executive board for reasons of political security. At the same time, Habad leaders in Ukraine are undoubtedly

among those factions of the rabbinic elite which are interested in using the connections of their new partners with the Ukrainian political establishment to access centers of political and financial influence.

It is interesting to note that the creation of the AUJC was rather coolly accepted by the leadership of the Jewish Religious Communities of Ukraine. Rabbi Bleich responded negatively to AUJC Chairman O. Rabinovich's leadership ambitions as well as to his pretensions for participation in the restitution of Jewish properties. However, the situation changed considerably after the first AUJC convention. Rabbi Asman and his associates, unlike their counterparts in Russia, were unable to preserve their monopoly upon the AUJC management. On the one hand, Congress President Vadim Rabinovich did substantially help the Kiev Habad (in part, his role was crucial in implementing the decision to give the Brodsky synagogue to Habad). On the other hand, the impact of the representatives of other groups of Jewish politicians, especially Zissels, on Rabinovich and his colleagues — businessmen on the AUJC executive council — became greater. Zissels and his colleagues were evidently dominant in the second AUJC Convention, while the role of Rabbi Asman and Hasidic politicians of his camp was much less important. Consequently, the charismatic Rabbi Bleich, Chief Rabbi of Ukraine and Kiev, began to play a much larger role. Rabbi Bleich joined the Congress a week before the second convention and is considered to be the most probable candidate for chairman of the Rabbinical Council — one of the key elements in the All-Ukrainian Jewish Congress.

Thus, the "spiritual leaders'" activities have become an important factor in Jewish political life in Ukraine, including the resolution of a number of conflicts within the Jewish communities of that country. For the most part, these conflicts are political in nature and are not a result of the religious-secular divide in the Jewish movement.

Conclusion

The picture of Jewish politics in Ukraine is complex and a reflection of features particular to Ukraine (i.e., the role of rabbinical politics) and of those aspects which are similar to those in other countries of the diaspora. Ukrainian Jewish politics has features which are general to the Jewish political tradition as a whole,³⁵ including the traditional types of Jewish political leadership. For

example, the concept of *ketarim* (domains), including prophetic, civil (bureaucratic), and spiritual (priesthood)³⁶ is also present in the Ukrainian as well as the East European Jewish movement.

This movement in pre- and early *perestroika* days had a definite prophetic character. National leaders of that time who were “prisoners of Zion” and aliya and human rights activists (i.e., Natan Sharansky of the USSR and Vladimir Kislik of Ukraine) demonstrated an ideological or prophetic model of public leadership. The group of Jewish politicians which was dominant in the next phase of the Jewish movement in the USSR and successor states (1987/mid-1990s) was recruited from different sources and was represented mainly by communal bureaucracy (i.e., leaders and activists of different local and foreign Jewish organizations). Their authority as a group was based on models of public administration more than anything else.³⁷

Beginning in the mid-1990s, a modern priesthood (rabbinical leaders) took on an increasing political role. This group of Jewish political elite is successfully trying to exercise a spiritual-political form of power, based on the combination of public leadership and public administration models. From this point of view, the advancement of rabbis to dominant roles in the Ukrainian Jewish community seems to be a purely political phenomenon and has very little, if anything, to do with the religious redemption of Ukrainian Jewry.

In general, elements of Ukrainian Jewish politics, based on the relations of contradictions and cooperation of its leading subjects, are now in the process of being formed. There are three basic political forces affecting the Ukrainian Jewish national movement: local Jewish structures of different forms, types and orientations, with religious groups playing an increasing role; Israeli and international Jewish institutions; and the local social and political environment that includes a not yet properly established policy of ruling the Jewish community in contemporary Ukraine.

Each of these is trying to gain the upper hand, obtaining control over the process of political and social institutionalization of the Jewish community of Ukraine. The Ukrainian Jewish movement could develop in one of the following ways:

1. An American-style community — strong, independent and influential.

2. A “paternalistic” trend, meaning the creation of Jewish institutions and groups of Jewish leaders, which will be relatively independent from local authorities (especially if the present economic situation in Ukraine does not improve) but totally dependent on Israeli and/or Western Jewish organizations.

3. The creation of a Jewish movement with weak national institutions, independent of the international Jewish structures but controlled by Ukrainian authorities.

None of these trends is predominant at the moment, but it is evident that the results of the struggle in the Jewish movement will be crucial for the Ukrainian Jewish community, both in the near and distant future.

Notes

1. According to the 1989 census, 487,000 Jews live in Ukraine. The present data is estimated taking into account both the politico-demographic factors and the pace of migration. See Mark Kupovetsky, *Ethnic Demography of Ukrainian Jews in the 1990s and Evaluation of the Number of School-age Children (7-16 years old) in 1997 and 2002*. Report presented to the Rabbi Dr. J. Lookstein Center for Jewish Education in the Diaspora, Bar-Ilan University, October 1996, p. 15.
2. According to official data, more than 313,000 Jews and members of their families emigrated from Ukraine between 1989 and 1995. Out of these, approximately 180,000 left for Israel and more than 133,000 went to other Western countries. *Ethnic Demography of Ukrainian Jews*, pp. 7-8.
3. Vladimir Khanin, "Ukrainian Jewish Identity in the Crossroads of Cultures: Historical Factors and Contemporary Experience," paper presented at the international conference "Jewries at the Frontier," Cape Town, South Africa, August 1996.
4. This point can be proved by the fact of the creation of the Israel B'Aliya party in Israel. This trend was also captured by Zvi Gittelman in his paper presented at the international conference, "Judaism in the Post-Communist World," St. Petersburg, August 1996. Reprinted in *American Jewish Committee Papers*, 1997, no. 37.
5. The concept of the "dual goal" was that of the Poalei Zion party in the 1920s-1930s. A slogan of economic and social improvement of Jews in Ukraine was declared by the party alongside emigration to Palestine as a major goal. See documents in *Tsentrallyi Derzhavnyi Arkhiv Gromads'kykh Ob'yednan' Ukra'iny* (TsDAGOU) (Central State Archive of Public Associations of Ukraine), *Fond* (Fund) 41, *Opis* (Inventory) 1, *Dela* (Files) 225-234, 236. See also Shimon Dubnov, *History of the Jews in Russia and Poland* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1920), pp. 144-145.
6. For more details see Vladimir Khanin, "Social Consciousness and the Problem of Jewish Identity of Ukrainian Jewry," *Shvut — Journal of East European Jewish History and Culture*, no. 4 (Tel Aviv 1996).

7. Vladimir Khanin, *The Ukrainian Establishment and Jewish Community of Independent Ukraine* (Kiev: IJS Publishers, forthcoming).
8. This was, in part, the position of M. Frenkel, one of the leaders of the Kiev community and editor-in-chief of the leading Ukrainian Jewish newspaper — *Hadashot*. The author conducted a personal interview with M. Frenkel in Kiev, September 1994.
9. See Vladimir Khanin, "Social Consciousness and the Problem of Jewish Identity of Ukrainian Jewry."
10. V. Chervyakov, Zvi Gitelman, V. Shapiro, "Religion and Ethnicity: Judaism in Ethnic Consciousness of Contemporary Russian Jews," *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, vol. 20, no. 2 (April 1997).
11. Recently declassified archival documents of that period show that synagogues were a place of open pro-Israeli inclinations even in the years of repressive anti-Semitic policies. For example, in 1948 there were a number of successful as well as unsuccessful attempts to undertake special synagogue services on the occasion of the establishment of the State of Israel. Such events drew thousands of Jews in Chernovtsy, Lvov, Odessa, Uzhgorod, and other cities. The services usually included prayers and kaddish "in memory of Jews who died in Palestine in the course of establishment of the State of Israel." Many of the synagogue meetings (such as the one in Uzhgorod) issued resolutions requesting that "the Soviet Union permit the formation of military units" in order to help Israel and made attempts to collect money for the Jewish state. All of this activity was quickly repressed by the authorities. Government officials considered these services as "specific [political] meetings, organized by nationalistic elements with the aim of propaganda for the State of Israel." TsDAGOU, F. 1, Op. 23, d. 5667, pp. 142-147.
12. Betsy Gidwitz, "Travel to Jewish Population Centers in Ukraine, March and April 1997," Independent report (unpublished), p. 47.
13. Information was gained in the course of a confidential interview, Kiev, January 1997.
14. This was an opinion of many of the activists in Jewish organizations interviewed by the author in the course of the conference "Jewish Civilization and Jewish Thought in Ukraine," Kiev, August 1993.
15. The present data is provided by the chief rabbinate of Ukraine.
16. See *Politika Ukrainy v haluzi zabespechenya prav natsional'nykh menshin* (Policy of Ukraine in the field of insurance of the rights of national minorities). Information material for the International Seminar on Ethnic Minorities' Rights, organized by the European Conference for Cooperation and Security (Kiev: Ukrainian Ministry of Nationalities and Migration, 1993) (in Ukrainian, unpublished), pp. 3, 5-7, 9-12. See also Vladimir Khanin, *The Ukrainian Establishment and Jewish Community of Independent Ukraine*, p. 4.
17. In fact the process started even before V.V. Shcherbitsky, not long before his dismissal as first secretary of the Central Committee of the

- Communist Party of Ukraine, during the meeting held in Kiev "Ukraine" Palace, reported to Michael Gorbachov an "excellent success" in the creation of Jewish and other national and cultural associations, *Pravda Ukrainy* (6 August 1989).
18. Johanan Petrovsky, "Hope Dies Last: Ukrainian Jews and Ukrainian Independents, 1991-1995" (unpublished paper).
 19. "Travel to Jewish Population Centers in Ukraine," p. 60.
 20. "Hope Dies Last: Ukrainian Jews and Ukrainian Independents," p. 4.
 21. The synagogue, built in 1903 with a donation from the Brodsky family, Kiev businessmen and philanthropists, is one of the biggest and most beautiful synagogue buildings in Ukraine. The synagogue was closed and confiscated by the authorities at the end of the 1920s. After the war the building housed the city's puppet theater. The question of giving back this building, together with other Jewish properties, to the Jewish community arose after Ukrainian independence. Leonid Saliy, the mayor of Kiev at that time, was against restitution of former Jewish properties in Kiev (using the politically inflexible and aggressive position of Habad administrative director Moshe Dubinsky to undermine the case). As a compromise it was suggested at the time that Habad co-rent the building together with the theater. (The author owes this information to M. Frenkel who took part in these meetings with Saliy.)
 22. The factual material for this passage is a result of the author's personal observations in Odessa in 1994, 1995, and 1996.
 23. "Travel to Jewish Population Centers in Ukraine," p. 55.
 24. Personal interview, Zaporozhye-Kiev, September 1995.
 25. Personal interview, Sha'alvim, March 1993.
 26. "Hope Dies Last: Ukrainian Jews and Ukrainian Independents," p. 5.
 27. "Travel to Jewish Population Centers in Ukraine," p. 47.
 28. *Panorama* no. 1 (Kharkov, 1994), p. 3.
 29. Personal observations of author during 1994-1997.
 30. Joseph Zissels, *Jews of Ukraine and the Jewish Community in the West*. A report to the annual conference of the American Jewish Committee [n.d.], p. 2.
 31. Report by the Va'ad of activities in Ukraine from 1991-1995, p. 6.
 32. *Mezhdunarodnaya evreiskaya gazeta* (International Jewish Newspaper), Moscow no. 2 (161) (January 1996), p. 2.
 33. For example, Vadim Rabinovich, founder and president of the All-Ukrainian Jewish Congress, is known as a person very close to Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma. Rabinovich, a multimillionaire, is believed to be one of the major donors to Kuchma's presidential reelection campaign. Information was gained during interviews with people who are close to the Ukrainian presidential office and the AJCU Coordination Committee (Kiev, January and May 1997).

34. Such was the observation of a number of the convention delegates, interviewed by the author of this article (Jerusalem-Kiev, December 1997).
35. See Daniel J. Elazar and Stuart Cohen, *The Jewish Polity* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), esp. pp. 7-20; Zvi Gitelman, "Comparative Politics and the Jewish Political Experience," in *The Quest for Utopia: Jewish Politics, Ideas and Institutions Through the Ages*, ed. Zvi Gitelman (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 1992), pp. 3-15.
36. Stuart Cohen, *The Three Crowns: Structures of Communal Politics in Early Rabbinic Jewry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 7-28.
37. According to Ukrainian Jewish Va'ad chairman Joseph Zissels, "the majority of leaders of [Jewish] communities and organizations are working, in one way or another, and getting paid by foreign Jewish organizations." The latter contribute about 95 percent to the \$22-25 million budget of the Jewish community of the country. Joseph Zissels, *Yevreiskaya obshchina Ukrainy: SSostoyaniye i perspectiv'y* [Jewish Community of Ukraine: The Present Situation and Prospects]. Paper presented at the 5th International Conference of Jewish Studies (Kiev, September 1997), pp. 9-11.