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IDEOLOGY AND RAISON D'ETAT IN ISRAEL'S RELATIONS WITH THE USSR

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Israel and the Soviet Union, both states based on an ideology, have shared the same difficult dilemma: how to accommodate ideological commitments to the imperatives of raison d'etat. Should the USSR support a local Communist rebellion or abandon it and strengthen intergovernmental links with that country? Should Israel stage an air raid on the PLO at Tunis or abstain from it so as not to endanger the local Jewish community? Should it exploit the naive Zionist Pollard or refuse his services in order not to compromise American Jews? More recently, Israel has come to weigh its concern about Soviet Jewry against its interest in renewing diplomatic relations with the USSR. What is the link between the two elements of this dilemma? Moreover, for how long will eventual Soviet-Israeli relations be limited to these two issues? Israel and world Jewry should be ready for imaginative steps likely to be made by the new Soviet leaders who have shown impressive sophistication and eagerness to innovate.

An Opening

Since Gorbachev assumed leadership in Moscow, Soviet performers and filmmakers have appeared in Israel before enthusiastic crowds, Soviet shortwave radio hams have been allowed to communicate with their Israeli counterparts, and hundreds of Soviet visitors have come to see how their kin have adjusted in their new country. Gorbachev made last Yom Kippur a trifle more joyful for the Jews (do his advisors on Jewish affairs read the acronym for

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this year as tismah, "go merry"?) when, on the 9th of Tishri, he authorized Ida Nudel's emigration.

Her release was a continuation of the traditional practice of detente. Ever since Nixon's visit to Moscow in 1972, most high-level U.S.-Soviet links have been accompanied by measured concessions on the emigration question. The liberation of refuseniks and of world-renowned prisoners of Zion has been used as an hors-d'oevre for the sumptuous diplomatic repast awaiting world leaders. This time, it was in obvious reference to the then-forthcoming visit of U.S. Secretary of State Schultz to Moscow. But the choice of the eve of Yom Kippur was also meant to score points among Jews in the U.S., in the USSR and, possibly, in Israel. It was yet another sign of a growing professionalism of the Soviet authorities in charge.

In the context of the well-publicized restructuring of Soviet society (the so-called perestroika, as distinguished from glasnost, i.e., public debate), the Soviets may depart from the old pattern established by Brezhnev of alternating brutal repression meted out to Soviet Jewish activists with reprieve meant largely to earn credit with Western public opinion. That method has worked so far, but failed to address the Soviet Jewish question in a long-term manner. Even though glasnost has yet to shape Soviet government decision-making relating to Soviet Jews, articles in the reinvigorated Soviet press and conversations with Soviet emigres and officials provide some insight into the new Soviet thinking on the subject.

Jews continue to be disproportionately well-represented among Soviet intellectuals -- the social group most supportive of Gorbachev. It is therefore natural that the new atmosphere of glasnost has reinforced the hitherto weakened identification of Soviet (and formerly Soviet) Jews with their native land. Albeit in a limited way, a comparison with Argentina may be in order. Thousands of Argentinian Jews, politically and ethnically estranged from the military regime, returned to the country when the democratic government of Alfonsin came to power a few years ago.

Attempts at Dedramatization

Just as Gorbachev ponders normalization of Soviet-Israeli relations (he pointedly chose receptions for the president of Syria and, later, for the chairman of the PLO to voice his concern about this), he is obviously looking for long-term measures to defuse the issue of Soviet Jewish emigration. Over a year ago he succeeded in showing that emigration is a two-way street. Hundreds of Soviet Jewish emigres were allowed to return to live in the USSR, thousands more were allowed to visit their former country, meet with friends and relatives and, presumably, to appreciate first-hand the changes brought about by the new leadership.

The new Soviet leaders have finally come to realize that emigration is attractive largely because it is forbidden. They made this point by arranging for the return of a few hundred Soviet Jews to their native land and then abstaining from old-style political propaganda. Rather than trumpet the alleged advantages of Soviet society and the corresponding ills of the West, the Soviets emphasized the more believable human trauma of emigration. The fact that a joint Soviet-Israeli film about Georgian Jewish emigration to Israel -- an idea taboo only a few months ago -- is about to be produced is another indication of the change of emphasis sought by the Soviets. As their self-confidence grows, Soviet decision-makers may seek not to ban emigration, but rather to normalize aliya in the hope of bringing it down to the manageable proportions typical of aliya from Western countries. They must realize that emigration to Israel, a marginal phenomenon for the USSR in any case, can be further reduced if Jews can feel comfortable where they are and have a modicum of confidence in the future of their children. Herzl's belief that antisemitism is the motive force of Zionism can be found in every Soviet publication on the subject.

The new air of unofficial tolerance of Hebrew and Judaic classes may give way to a more structured approach to Jewish culture in the USSR. One should not be surprised if a state-subsidized (and

therefore mildly state-controlled) network of Jewish clubs makes an appearance in the Soviet Union. Some of them may have a more pronounced cultural content (including studies of Jewish history, Jewish law, Hebrew, afternoon or Sunday schools for children). Others, following the pattern of most Jewish community centers in North and South America, may acquire a purely social character. They will provide a safe avenue for nominal Jewish identification which should satisfy most of the Soviet Jews who care about their Jewishness at all.*

At the same time, the growing minority of observant Jews can continue to develop. There have been reports of a limited restoration of Judaic infrastructure such as a ritual bath in Leningrad or a kosher restaurant in Moscow. The Soviet Jew may soon forfeit the dubious distinction of being the only recognized nationality in the USSR not to have a legitimate cultural outlet. Today, rabbis from Western countries and from Israel frequently visit their coreligionists in the USSR, take part in celebrations, and address mass audiences in public. There are several attempts now underway to open rabbinical colleges in order to train Judaic leaders.

In short, a normalization of Soviet Jewish identity may well be attempted. While the Soviets understand that Judaism offers more solid reasons for aliya than the secular Zionism which used to animate thousands of Soviet Jews in the early 1970s, the new generation of Soviet decision-makers is sufficiently worldly to realize that Judaic observance impedes neither allegiance nor productive contribution to society. Gorbachev's own book Perestroika contains strikingly positive references to religion which may reflect not only greater toleration, but a modicum of appreciation of religion as a social force.

"The Jewish Nationality"

While making concessions to Judaic observance, Soviet experts in Jewish affairs are even more likely to pursue the "normalization" of the Jews by facilitating genuine assimilation. Soviet Jews had reached high levels of assimilation and identification with the Soviet state before, but many were frustrated by the impossibility to rid themselves, and especially their children, of formal Jewish identification because of the item on the Soviet identity card which lists nationality.

To make assimilation a viable option, the Gorbachev administration must either abolish the definition of nationality altogether or, which is more likely, make it voluntary. This would rapidly boost the numbers of Russians in the Soviet population since Jews and other ethnics indifferent to their heritage would opt for the dominant nationality which many of them have culturally embraced for several generations. They would thus complete their dissolution into Russian culture. Gorbachev cannot help worrying about the widening gap between the dwindling proportion of Russians among Soviet citizens and the growing Russification of the higher echelons of the Soviet government. Given the demographic decline of the Russian ethnic group, such an influx should reinforce the Russian character of the Soviet state.

Nationalists of all sorts, not only Jewish but other ethnics such as Armenians or Ukrainians, may object to such a measure. Since Gorbachev initiated sensitive innovations in nationality policies, he has so far come out on top; if not a winner, then at least as a recognized arbiter of interethnic tensions. For example, the appointment of an ethnic Russian to head the Republic of Kazakhstan, even though it sparked violent protests in the Kazakh capital, was not rescinded. Similarly, even though Gorbachev stopped short of supporting their demands, he was hailed by Armenians claiming annexation of Nagorny Karabakh to their republic. The more dispassionate approach of the Gorbachev team to the potentially explosive nationality problems in the USSR suggests that making national identification voluntary or doing away with it altogether is not impossible. For the Jewish people this means that the second largest diaspora may formally shrink in size almost overnight.

Several Israeli policies are also having a sobering effect on Soviet aliya. One is the rerouting, at the request of the Israelis, of Soviet Jews via totalitarian Bucharest and away from free-world Vienna. This measure, meant to reduce the number of Soviet Jews settling in the West rather than in Israel, is likely to reduce the number of Soviet Jews applying for exit visas altogether. Pressure applied by successive Israeli governments on the United States to deny refugee status to Soviet emigres, if it succeeds, will keep more Soviet Jews in their native land. In this instance, Israel may be acting in its state interests, even if these are at variance with the aspirations of the majority of Soviet Jews who are now choosing not to live in the State of Israel.

Another, admittedly paradoxical, measure to moderate the attractiveness of aliya would be to open an office of the Jewish Agency in Moscow. Operating in concert with Soviet authorities and staffed by Israelis, the office should not prove a greater stimulant to aliya than similar offices in Western countries. The opening of a Jewish Agency office in the Soviet capital would immensely improve the Soviet image in the West. At the same time, it may serve as a deterrent, particularly if the would-be emigrants are realistically advised about employment possibilities in Israel. Soviet Jews are mostly university educated, and many identify more with their work than with their roots. They will think twice about emigration if their professional future may be hampered by such a move.

Doing Business with the Soviets

Notwithstanding the absence of diplomatic relations, the Soviet Union can influence Israel through mutually beneficial economic links. For example, should just one Soviet republic, even tiny Armenia, decide to alleviate its chronic food shortages by buying chicken from Israel, the kibbutz movement, a major chicken producer, would acquire an important and non-ideological stake in strengthening Soviet-Israeli cooperation.

Technology transfer is another probable outcome of such cooperation. Israel could not only supply Soviet industry and agriculture with modern technology, it could supply it more cheaply and in more usable forms than many Western competitors. Moreover, since Israel is not a partner in COCOM, a group of Western nations and Japan controlling sales of strategic technologies to the USSR and the Communist bloc, it can pursue a more independent policy regarding technology transfer. The rumored sale of Israeli materiel and know-how to China is a recent sign of such independence. Moreover, recent reports of Israel's reluctance, even when advised to do so by the United States, to undertake commitments similar to those of COCOM, seem to indicate that Israel prefers to have a free hand in technology transfer to partners of its choice.

Another Soviet advantage in acquiring technology from Israel includes the opportunity to mobilize the services of tens of thousands of industrial managers, engineers and scientists trained in the USSR and possessing inside knowledge of the Soviet economy. These former Soviets are uniquely qualified to adapt modern technologies to actual Soviet needs and to reduce the difficulties of assimilation of foreign technologies into the Soviet economy. No European country can promise the Soviets such service. Conversely, the USSR can offer important raw materials and intermediate technologies which can prove attractive to Israel, particularly in view of the proximity between the two countries. Becoming an important economic partner, the USSR can thus come to wield a certain influence on Israeli policies in a variety of domains including Soviet Jewry. In addition, the substantial reservoir of good will still extant in Israel towards the Soviet Union can further cement a close, albeit "unofficial," relationship.

The new Soviet concern to see "their Jews leave with agreeable memories of their country" (Jerusalem Post, October 5, 1987) is an indication that this reservoir has a potential for growth. There is no Soviet ambassador in Israel to address a festive meeting of Soviet olim the way

U.S. ambassadors often appear at meetings of the Association of Americans and Canadians in Israel, but visiting Soviet dance and song groups have begun to strengthen the cultural links so far maintained by means of books and television broadcasts from "the old country." The Soviets have a vast arsenal of peaceful means to influence Israeli policies without an embassy in the country.

A Spy Story

The arrest late in 1987 of Shabtai Kalmanovich in Israel should be seen in the context of evolving Soviet-Israeli relations. The detainee, suspected of spying for the Soviet Union, is otherwise a rare success story: a Soviet emigre who became a millionaire after a decade in the Promised Land. A generous host to retired generals and others in Israel's political and business elites, he had easy access to the nation's parliament and its economic tycoons. While Israel's security services and the courts tackle this hapless nouveau-riche, his case makes this author wonder what constitutes illegal intelligence-gathering in Israel. Equally important is to see the arrest of Kalmanovich in the context of Israel's relations with the United States and the Soviet Union.

Collaboration with the KGB is a common feature of Soviet life. A student, such as Mikhail Gorbachev in the fifties, who shared a hostel room with a foreigner, would be required to collaborate with the KGB in a routine manner. A tourist guide, even a student, like this author, who worked with foreign tourists during the summer to make money and practice a foreign language, must report on them in writing every day to the thinly disguised local KGB representative. A scientist working with a visiting foreign colleague must do the same, albeit less frequently. The KGB is truly ubiquitous and involves millions of people in some form of collaboration. It is only natural to find some of them among Soviet emigres in Israel and elsewhere.

Yet there is no reason to fall into anti-Soviet paranoia. Most of those who promised to collaborate had undergone no intelligence training, and many reveal the KGB connection immediately upon arrival in Israel or the United States. Only a small number of these "agents" have been, or may eventually be, approached by the KGB for collaboration. Even among the few approached, some will no doubt follow in the footsteps of the spy immortalized by Graham Greene in Our Man in Havana: supplying blueprints of a vacuum cleaner in lieu of some strategic information.

It may be more instructive to ponder a peculiar coincidence in the announcement of the arrest of Kalmanovich. The very fact of his arrest being publicly acknowledged is a testimony to his visibility. Otherwise he could be arrested, tried and imprisoned without anyone ever realizing it. This is what was obviously in store for Mordecai Vanunu, who exposed Israel's nuclear weapons industry to the world, and only persistent publicity in the West forced Israel's security services to at least acknowledge his arrest.

The news of Kalmanovich's arrest was allowed to appear on Israeli TV less than a fortnight after the Jerusalem Post had stunned its readers with the revelation that Israeli intelligence had allegedly passed to the Soviets classified data purloined from Washington by Pollard. Kalmanovich is known to have been active in matters related to Soviet Jewish emigration. According to the Post, the transfer of the Pollard papers was done in exchange for a deal expected with the Soviets on Jewish emigration.

The proximity and the order of the publication of the two events suggests a connection between them. It is plausible that Kalmanovich could influence the Israelis in charge of the Pollard file to design the barter deal. At least, it is plausible that he could serve as an intermediary in arranging it. Kalmanovich could also recruit Israelis -- acting "on their own" to an even greater extent than the handlers of Pollard -- to transfer the data to the Soviets. In this case his actions would likely constitute a criminal offense. Whatever the real facts, they

cannot help affecting Israel's relations with the two superpowers.

Israel Between the Superpowers

Israel has paid dearly in its short history for ignoring advances made in the Soviet Union. Underestimating the sophistication of Soviet military equipment is not necessarily more grievous than underestimating the political evolution currently underway. The Soviet Union is today by far more dynamic and optimistic than at any time since the 1950s. While one should not expect a rapid transformation in the Soviet regime -- it matters little whether or not the changes in the USSR are "face-lifting and window-dressing" (Jerusalem Post editorial, October 4, 1987) -- the pace and modalities of change impress even the most sceptical observers of the Soviet scene. It is beyond dispute that the USSR is becoming not only a more skilled adversary for the United States, but a more professional and formidable player in many regional conflicts including the Middle East.

Dismissing changes in Soviet Jewish policies with the usual scepticism is becoming counterproductive. Rather one should give the Gorbachev administration the benefit of the doubt and test the limits of perestroika as it applies to Jews and Jewish culture. It is also essential to be prepared for bold initiatives and sophisticated approaches emanating from the Kremlin. Israel must now learn to deal with a superpower capable of studied innovations in foreign policy.

The United States may still remain the most frequent destination of Israeli travelers, but its proximity is illusory. The Soviet Union is and will remain a next-door neighbor.

A rapprochement between Israel and the USSR can only benefit the United States as a step toward a comprehensive Middle East settlement. It is the price of such a rapprochement that should be of concern. If transferring purloined U.S. intelligence data to Moscow is part of that price, then it is imperative to reassess Israel's status as a strategic partner of the U.S. The Pollard scandal has not been forgotten in the United States and its alleged Soviet follow-up can only exacerbate tension between Jerusalem and Washington. This is why Israeli policy-makers appear tempted to put the blame on Kalmanovich and claim innocence in the wake of another "rogue" operation of Israeli intelligence against U.S. interests.

Israel's government, concerned about Jewish population figures in Israel, is interested in increasing Soviet aliya rather than improving the fate of Soviet Jews in their country. On the other hand, Israel may be less than anxious to resume full diplomatic relations with the Soviets, lest this facilitate the imposition of a Soviet-American solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The alleged transfer of the Pollard data to the Soviets, apparently an instance of intimacy between the Israeli and Soviet intelligence services, need not lead to a consummation of full interstate relations. Some Israelis would rather see less glasnost and fewer Soviet tourists. A greater emigration from the USSR and the perpetuation of a stalemate in its relations with Arab countries and the Palestinians may be easier to attain when formal relations with the Soviets are at their low and when Soviet Jews entertain no hope for the future in their native land. This viewpoint may inform future Israeli attitudes toward its nearest superpower.

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* In this connection, see Benjamin Fain and Mervin Verbit, Jewishness in the Soviet Union (Jerusalem: Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, 1984).