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POST-SOVIET JEWRY: AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE

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Post-Soviet Jewry in Flux

Tradition holds that 600,000 Israelites left Egypt for the Promised Land during the great Exodus several millennia ago. Even more Jews — approximately 800,000 — have left the Soviet Union and its successor states during the emigration of the past two decades. More than two-thirds have settled in Israel, and perhaps 500,000 more are expected in Zion by the end of the century.

For many Jews, in Israel and across the diaspora, the ongoing aliyah from lands simultaneously rich and tragic in Jewish history is a contemporary miracle. Great efforts are underway to support the departure of Jews from the Soviet successor states and their subsequent resettlement. Israel and a diaspora sorely afflicted by a lingering recession are straining to fulfill their obligations and to convert those obligations into opportunities for the redemption of captives and the strengthening of Zion.

A concurrent effort is in progress to rebuild Jewish life in Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, the Baltic countries, and other traditional areas of Jewish

settlement. Some participants dream glorious dreams of revitalized diaspora communities, self-sustaining and vibrant. Others perceive renewed Jewish life on post-Soviet soil mainly as preparation for exodus, a type of "preabsorption" intended to facilitate a smooth aliyah later this year or next year or five to ten years from now.

Difficulties in Renewing Community

The renewal of Jewish community in the successor states is proving an arduous task. The Soviet system denied the human spirit, glorifying collectivism and centralized authority. It diminished individuals, families, and voluntary structures — the very fabric of community. Restoration of community requires attitudes and skills beyond the experience of any post-Soviet Jews. Individual initiative, civil debate, respect for differing political and spiritual positions, planning and priority-setting, consensus-building, and accountability were of little significance in Soviet society — and the absence of such values and skills grievously impedes communal development today.

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Nonetheless, as *glasnost* permitted the formation of groups independent of Communist party or state control in the late 1980s, Jews in the USSR began to form local Jewish associations that focused on Jewish history and culture, Hebrew and/or Yiddish study, Israel, and children's activities. Over time, many communities established Sunday schools (currently more than 160 in nearly all of the successor states), Jewish day schools (approximately thirty), Jewish newspapers (nearly fifty), and Jewish charitable groups. Most such enterprises are fragile, lacking consistent responsible leadership and independent financial support.

The need for rabbis, Jewish educators, and Jewish communal organizers is acute. Many rabbis and other synagogue officials from pre-*glasnost* years are suspected as collaborators with the KGB and thus lack credibility. The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, the Jewish Agency for Israel, and other overseas organizations all operate leadership training programs, but the needs exceed supply.

Financial support from many post-Soviet indigenously-managed Jewish organizations derives from appeals to local Jewish businessmen and from special fundraising events, such as concerts and other cultural presentations. Systematic community-wide fundraising drives, similar to those operated by Jewish federations in North America, are as yet unknown in the Soviet successor states. Israeli and diaspora agencies and institutions provide some financial assistance to various Jewish organizations, and day school education is subsidized by municipal and national governments (as is the practice in many European countries). Although the eventual development of post-Soviet financial and legal structures may encourage more systematic local fundraising in the future, demographic characteristics of the Jewish community — continuing emigration of younger people and aging of those remaining behind — suggest diminishing local resources for an increasingly needy population.

Exacerbating the financial burden imposed by service demands, many Jewish organizations are reclaiming synagogues and other communal buildings confiscated by the state during the Communist period. Although such structures provide space for community activities, they are also problematic. Reflecting lack of routine maintenance during the decades of Soviet control, many facilities are in poor condition and none is energy-efficient. Only a modest number of organizations have succeeded in obtaining funds for renovations by obtaining back "rent" from authorities in compensation for past use by the state.

Most Jewish educational and cultural institutions in the successor states are dependent upon the Joint Distribution Committee and Israeli agencies for educational materials — textbooks, video cassettes, and the like. Yet no organization produces or distributes a comprehensive graded series of suitable school texts in Hebrew, Judaism, Jewish history, or any other relevant subject. Pedagogical guidebooks are also lacking, and many teachers leave on aliyah within two to three years after completing Israeli-sponsored training courses.

Disputes continue in some post-Soviet Jewish institutions over the primacy of Hebrew or Yiddish, a choice inherently tied to the role of Zionism in shaping Jewish life in the successor states. Invariably, the teachers of Hebrew are Israelis or Israeli-trained, and the champions of Yiddish are residents of the diaspora, some seeking to restore a culture of generations past. Yet to dismiss advocates of Yiddish as mere prisoners of nostalgia is to deny the peculiar history of post-Soviet Jewry, a history with a gap of fifty years or more in which Soviet power vigorously suppressed Jewish life. As Soviet Jews entered their decades-long isolation from world Jewry, Yiddish was the dominant Jewish language; when they emerged in the late 1980s, the Holocaust and the vitality of modern Israel had combined to thrust Hebrew forward as the more robust and pragmatic tongue. For some post-Soviet Jews, the breach in history has not yet closed. Unable to integrate contemporary reality with language, they cleave to the comfort of a tradition that ill prepares them for aliyah or even for a vibrant Jewish life in the diaspora. Only the passage of time will permit post-Soviet Jews to recover their history and determine appropriate roles for Hebrew and Yiddish.

A Spiritual Void

An even more critical — and elusive — issue for Jews in the successor states is a spiritual framework, a system of tradition-based values that provides guidance and succor in a world of cataclysmic change. For many well-educated post-Soviet Jews, such a belief system must be intellectually coherent and capable of synthesis with the modernity they so avidly pursue. Only a few have found spiritual community in the embrace of Hasidism, the form of Judaism most readily available with the post-Soviet Union. Re-emerging on the territory of its birth, the Chabad movement, in particular, has opened synagogues in several dozen cities. The more savvy and successful Chabad rabbis, most of whom were raised in Israel or the United

States, initially downplay their Chabad particularity in favor of a more generic approach to Jewish life. They are promoting a variety of Jewish educational, cultural and welfare programs in addition to traditional Chabad worship and ritual. Several other Orthodox rabbis — from non-Chabad Hasidic and from Aguda backgrounds — also have pursued broader agendas than might be expected. Additionally, many have shown remarkable astuteness in forging relationships with government authorities, from municipal to state levels, establishing alliances that have borne fruit in gaining various benefits for local Jews.

Despite their diverse and often modern agendas, few such rabbis have been able to attract even moderate numbers of local Jews to Orthodox ritual. The spiritual desert that was the Soviet Union has left many unable to think in non-material terms. The concept of a Supreme Being, the purpose and practice of prayer, and similar ideas are beyond their vision. Others are more open to abstract thinking, yet they are searching for a moral code uncluttered by religious specificity; they are wary of doctrine, whether it be Marxism/Leninism or what they perceive as an equally rigid code of Orthodox Jewish law.

Responding to the expressed desire of some post-Soviet Jews for more liberal approaches to Judaism, both the Masorti (Conservative) and Progressive (Reform) movements have initiated programs in the former USSR. The Masorti effort emphasizes schools and summer camps, and Progressive interests have made a significant commitment to congregation-building. Many Orthodox rabbis in the post-Soviet Union have actively opposed such Masorti and Progressive endeavors, some citing the historic role of Orthodoxy in pre-revolutionary Russia as precedent for contemporary Orthodox monopoly and others attempting to delegitimize non-Orthodoxy as "unauthentic" Judaism. (In an eventually successful effort to wrest a Moscow synagogue building from the Progressive movement, a local Hasidic rabbi declared to municipal authorities that Progressive Judaism is a political party, not a religious denomination.)

Both the Masorti and Progressive initiatives suffer from a lack of rabbis and educators able and willing to work in the former USSR and insufficient funding to pursue their objectives. Although Hasidic groups have been able to place competent professionals in a number of post-Soviet cities, the more liberal movements have been less successful in extending their operations to the various communities that would welcome them.

Israeli and Diaspora Activism

Involvement of Israeli and other foreign Jewish agencies in the former USSR has proceeded alongside and often overshadowed attempts by Soviet/post-Soviet Jews to organize themselves. In addition to religious institutions, four non-indigenous largely secular Jewish organizations, all dependent on UJA/federation-based funding, support a variety of Jewish educational, cultural, religious, welfare, and general communal initiatives in the successor states. The Jewish Agency for Israel operates more than twenty field offices in the former Soviet Union, each of which concentrates on promotion and organization of aliyah. The Agency sponsors a number of informal Jewish/Zionist educational programs (including youth groups and vacation camps), teacher-training seminars, community holiday celebrations, and Russian-language publications. The annual JAFI budget for such activity is approximately \$4.5 million. The Jewish Agency spends \$100 million more in actual transportation of immigrants to Israel, their absorption, and related activities.

Prior to being expelled from the Soviet Union in 1938, a victim of Stalinist paranoia and tyranny, the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (often referred to as JDC or "the Joint") offered a rich program of educational, cultural, welfare, and economic development services to Jews in interwar Russian and Ukraine. Since being invited to return in the late 1980s by the Gorbachev regime, the JDC has emphasized social services, community centers, Jewish religious and cultural life, and Jewish education. Because infrastructure development, leadership training, and general community-building form significant components of many JDC activities, the organization has been criticized by some Israelis and diaspora Zionists as fostering an illusion that an eventually self-sufficient and vibrant Jewish community can flourish in the post-Soviet Union. The most common JDC response is that its educational programs are Zionist-oriented and its other operations address the likelihood of a continued Jewish presence in the successor states for at least a generation. JDC spends approximately \$6 million for programs under its own auspices within the former USSR and allocates about \$4 million more to Azriel, an Israeli-based non-government organization, for parallel and coordinated operations in the post-Soviet Union.

Azriel works closely with the Lishkat haKeshet, a bureau attached to the Israeli Prime Minister's office. The Lishkat haKeshet has long had responsibility for directing Israeli state policy on Soviet Jewry and

receives significant government financial support. Among the most visible Lishka projects in the Soviet successor states is the operation of Israel cultural centers in eleven post-Soviet cities, institutions that focus on aliyah-oriented activities and also offer some general Jewish programming similar to that of Jewish community centers in the United States.

The various organizations cooperate in emergencies — such as the evacuation of Jews from areas of conflict in Central Asia, the Caucasus, and Moldova — but systematic collaborative planning and programming involving all agencies are conspicuously absent. Competition between several organizations, particularly the Jewish Agency and Lishka, is evident to foreigners and local Jews alike.

National Jewish Organizations

As local Jewish communities attempted to develop services in the rapidly changing Soviet Union of the late 1980s, an indigenous national organization emerged with the aim of coordinating Jewish activity throughout the fifteen republics. At its peak, the Vaad (Confederation of Jewish Organizations and Communities) included about 350 Jewish groups and boasted an ambitious agenda of information collection and distribution, development of Jewish culture and education, outreach and aid to smaller communities, defense against anti-semitism, and political representation of Soviet Jewry in the Soviet Union, Israel, and various international arenas.

Established in Moscow, the Vaad was soon accused of ignoring its constituents outside the capital, failing to provide services, and tolerating managerial and administrative incompetence. As the Soviet Union disintegrated, Jews in the European successor states moved to form their own umbrella organizations, leaving the new multinational Vaad with an unclear agenda at best.

The new national (republic) organizations are also seeking to define their roles. In some former republics, including Ukraine (Jewish population of approximately 500,000), several groups claim to be the representative national Jewish authority. The Russian Vaad resembles the previous Soviet Vaad, retaining many of its pretensions and problems.

Regardless of specific organizational agendas, many Jewish activists in the successor states barely conceal their unhappiness with Israeli and Western diaspora agencies operating programs in the former USSR. Most commonly, such groups are accused of paternalism in planning and implementing various programs

without consulting local Jews. Some activists raise additional criticisms, expressing annoyance that foreign agency officials develop independent relations with local governments and media without working through post-Soviet Jewish organizations striving to increase their own influence with these institutions or that they are too eager for credit and recognition. Several Vaad leaders have asked that all funds raised in the diaspora for Jews in the former Soviet Union be turned over to them for distribution, brushing off suggestions that they have not proved accountable in the past, that they are inexperienced in priority-setting, that they have no planning and allocations mechanisms, and that they may lack credibility among those whom they claim to represent.

Turmoil in Borderland Areas

Of particular concern to many Jewish leaders and activists are the Jewish communities of the peripheral regions of the former USSR. Almost without exception, these areas are in turmoil, beset by ethnic conflict and economic dislocation. Not surprisingly, local Jewish populations are emigrating from these new states in large numbers. Only about 25,000 Jews remain in the three Baltic states — Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania — where independence has been accompanied by strongly nationalist sentiments that exclude Jews.

In Central Asia, approximately 100,000 Jews remain in five largely Moslem republics — Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tadjikistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan — that share borders with Iran, Afghanistan, and northwest China. Severely underdeveloped, these new states are also plagued by active ethnic and even tribal warfare, and, in some areas, Islamic fundamentalism. Nationalist hostility has convinced many of the Russians and other Slavs who managed these republics under the Soviet colonial system to depart, leaving untrained local people in charge of suddenly independent new governments.

Comparable volatility affects the nearly 40,000 Jews who remain in the Caucasus area — Azerbaidzhan, Armenia, Georgia, and adjoining territories of Russia, such as Daghestan on the shores of the Caspian Sea. Although local Jewish populations are not directly involved in the various conflicts, they are inevitably endangered by the surrounding turbulence. Many Jews are fleeing, leaving regions where Jewish communities have flourished for more than two millennia. Israeli organizations have arranged direct flights from district centers and maintain the capacity to operate emergency evacuations should the need arise.

Debate Over the Future

Some observers question whether scarce diaspora resources should be committed to Jewish communal infrastructure development anywhere in the post-Soviet successor states. They are uncertain that Jewish communities can thrive in lands of bitter Jewish history and contemporary political disarray. They doubt that it is even wise to create Jewish organizations in countries that lack consistent legal procedures and dependable banking systems. And some will note that Jewish community development in the diaspora challenges a basic premise of Zionism — that Jews in lands of distress will "naturally" migrate to Israel, thus strengthening the Jewish state.

In its most simplistic form, the debate over the future of post-Soviet Jewry is between undiluted Zionism and reductive community-building — whether Jews in the successor states should/will leave on mass aliyah to Israel or should/will remain to build Jewish communities on former Soviet territory. (Entry quotas in most Western countries limit the likelihood of a third alternative — continued large-scale emigration to the diaspora.) As often happens with many simplistic arguments, the question itself lacks validity because even the most ardent Zionists acknowledge that a significant Jewish population will remain in the post-Soviet Union for at least a generation, especially in the largest European cities with substantial Jewish concentrations. (Post-Soviet Jewish demography is an inexact science at best, but some broadly accepted estimates of Jewish populations in major cities are: Moscow, 250,000; St. Petersburg, 150,000; Kiev, 120,000; Odessa, 70,000 to 90,000; Kharkov, 70,000; and Dnepropetrovsk, 60,000.) Many of these Jews will defer departure for some time, citing well-publicized absorption difficulties in Israel and the development, however uncertain, of democratic tendencies in several of the Soviet successor states. Other factors are attenuated Jewish identity, relative prosperity for some in emerging capitalist economies, inertia, and the hope that Western countries will ease immigration policies.

Recognizing that post-Soviet Jews will continue to live in a number of the successor states for the foreseeable future, a more valid question concerns their ability to flourish in unstable societies. Of immediate concern is an ongoing escalation of popular antisemitism, a traditional and pervasive force in the lands of the former Soviet Union. Fed by local nationalisms — Russian nationalism, Lithuanian nationalism, Ukrainian nationalism, etc. — antisemitism in the successor states is growing and increasingly threatening. Ethnic quotas

are in place at many universities and workplaces, and extremist newspapers of both the right and left inflame local bigotries.

In response, more and more parents are encouraging adolescents and young adult children to emigrate as individuals. Uncertain about their own abilities to find suitable work abroad in middle age, they hope that the youthfulness of their offspring will facilitate adjustment to new societies. Both the Jewish Agency and the Israeli government are sponsoring high school-in-Israel programs for such youngsters, and other opportunities are available to older youth. The parents remain in the Soviet successor states, seemingly secure (if somewhat uncomfortable) in their present careers; should employment prospects brighten in Israel, they will follow their children.

Local Jewish populations, even those in the largest Russian and Ukrainian Jewish centers, lack the resources to combat antisemitism. Municipal and state authorities, while often acknowledging the fears of Jews and other minority groups, are reluctant to confront vocal nationalists. Few city councils or state assemblies are willing to enact protective legislation. General political instability and economic disarray in almost all regions of the former Soviet Union ensure that scapegoats will be sought — and found.

Political uncertainty and economic chaos are also among the causes of a burgeoning welfare crisis afflicting the Jewish population in the post-Soviet Union. Municipal welfare services barely exist, even in the more sophisticated western regions of the former USSR. A disproportionately large Jewish elderly population is growing larger and older almost daily as younger Jews emigrate, thus depriving seniors of family support. Pensions lag far behind inflation. Disabled individuals and handicapped children are also without adequate care.

Many basic medications, such as aspirin and insulin, are impossible to obtain through conventional channels; patients are compelled to provide their own pharmaceutical supplies — through the black market at exorbitant cost in hard currency or from sympathetic foreigners who happen to be aware of their needs. Similarly, medical equipment and aids, such as wheelchairs and walkers, are unavailable.

The beginnings of a Jewish welfare infrastructure are visible in several localities as the Joint Distribution Committee, the primary international Jewish relief organization, works with other diaspora agencies and Israeli institutions in responding to Jews in need. Yet the demand for welfare services far exceeds the resourc-

es available to JDC and all other organizations combined.

Role of Western Jewish Communities

Inescapably, Jews in the West — and especially in North America — are drawn into deliberations about the future of post-Soviet Jewry because it is North American Jews, through their contributions to UJA/federation campaigns, who are the major supporters of those agencies that promote aliyah as the only valid course for post-Soviet Jews as well as those organizations that nurture the building of Jewish community life within the former Soviet Union. Additionally, federation campaigns provide the largest portion of the budget of the National Conference on Soviet Jewry, the primary Soviet Jewry monitoring and advocacy organization in the United States; its role remains vital in the post-Soviet era, yet its contemporary mandate is little understood in the American Jewish organizational world.

The challenge to diaspora Jewry in the months and years ahead is to develop policy that is both sensitive to the turmoil in the former USSR and attentive to the needs of three critical constituencies — post-Soviet Jewry, Israel, and diaspora Jewry. The disintegration of the Soviet Union had been unforeseen; the Jewish community must generate the vision and resources to seize the historic opportunities arising from its chaotic aftermath.

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