

# Soviet Jews

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When I lived in the Soviet Union during the Second World War, many of my friends were Jews because so many of the Soviet intelligentsia among whom I moved are Jewish. In those days not one of them showed any interest in religion, with the shining exception of Boris Pasternak; and his religion was Christian. I thought then and for many years after, as most people thought, that the Russian Jews were well on the way to assimilation. What a mistake! The revival of Jewish consciousness in the last 15 years is most remarkable. I add in parenthesis that this is part of a wider phenomenon. Every single one of the Soviet nationalities with which I am acquainted has undergone a striking revival of its national consciousness, and I have every reason to think that this is true of those nations of the Soviet Union which I do not happen to know personally. In the case of the Russians their increase in consciousness of themselves as specifically Russian and not merely Soviet is particularly strong, but of course this is only indirectly reflected in what is officially published.

Such is the setting of the Jewish revival, but it is not the less remarkable because it does not stand by itself. And the Jews are different, though it is not always easy to say what the difference is.

What, then, is the religious significance of this? In Jewry the people and the religion are so closely related that it is impossible to make a clear distinction. It is certain that the revival of Jewish consciousness has gone with a revival of religious feeling, but it is very difficult to say in what this consists. By contrast it is easy to write of the revival or persistence of religion among, for instance, the Russians, the Armenians or the Lithuanians, but much more research is needed before one can speak with the same confidence about religion among Soviet Jews.

I have before me as I write over 650 pages of Jewish *samizdat* from the Soviet Union. This consists mainly of copies printed in Israel of *Yevrei v SSSR (Jews in the Soviet Union)* but I also have over 150 pages of typescript by G. M. Manevich. Surprisingly, this mass of material casts little light on the practice of the Jewish religion and what it means to Soviet Jews. Yet some things are clear.

This material is almost all on a remarkably high level, both intellectually and spiritually, using that word in its broader sense. There is much discussion of what it is to be a Jew, some very interesting Jewish history, and of course much about the sympathetic feeling of Soviet Jews for the State of Israel and the belief that its establishment is a fulfilment of divine destiny. Much space is rightly given to the problems and difficulties of Soviet Jews, a substantial part of it being connected with questions of emigration. Yet I detect no bitterness against Gentiles. The generosity of spirit of these Russian Jews puts Christians to shame. And I know from personal experience that the disgusting descriptions of Soviet anti-semitism (and before it of tsarist anti-semitism) are not exaggerated. It is bad enough that the Soviet authorities revive the substance of the forged *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, but it is worse that Christians should express irrational prejudice against the Jews. The Church does not stoop so low as the State but a frightening degree of unreasoning anti-semitism can be met in the Church, and sometimes in circles where in other respects one finds independence of thought and deep spirituality. It is all the more remarkable that their almost instinctive inherited aversion to Christianity has disappeared among Soviet Jews and, when they turn to religion, it may well be to the Christian religion. Indeed there are touching cases of religious co-operation. I know one Soviet Jew who was determined to learn Hebrew, but the only teacher he could find was an Orthodox priest. With this teacher he learnt both the Hebrew language and Christian theology, but the final result was that he became an Orthodox Jew.

To return to the Jewish *samizdat*. It is very Russian, has an excellent sense of Russian style, and shows in spite of all a deep love of everything Russian. Magazines, whether printed or typed, as Soviet *samizdat* is typed, generally fall down when they publish poetry, but I was particularly struck by the quality of the poetry published in *Jews in the USSR* and by its love of Russia as well as of the Jewish people. Most of it is in Russian but some is in Yiddish. I only half understand the latter language but I liked the look of the Yiddish poetry. I did not come across much that is specifically religious, but it is clear that these poems come from people whose culture is steeped in religion. It seemed that, so far, little of this had become articulate but one felt it just below the surface. I was reminded of some Russian friends who have received an atheist education but look long and lovingly at an icon. Timidly they ask, "Who are these people? What is hapenning?" You tell them and there is a sudden gasp of joy and a recognition of something that seems to have been with them without their knowing what to call it.

More particularly, in the Jewish *samizdat* there are some brilliant discussions of the philosophical basis of modern science. This is too technical for this article but it would be good to see some of it translated and

printed in Western scientific journals. Those who write on this subject in *Jews in the USSR* do not always agree with each other, but they are all concerned with the proper relation between the Hellenic and Hebraic elements in modern thought. If I understand them, they are saying that the habit of abstract thought has got out of hand, even for the purposes of science. Reality is concrete and we need the Bible and its tradition to remind us of that. They refer to the Bible as the source of truth without inhibition but always in general terms. At least I have not come across any attempts to articulate the argument with reference to particular passages in the Bible.

G. M. Manevich goes further and applies Hebrew numerology to our understanding of the physical universe. He seems to have a Teilhardian view of the creation as a big bang in which the original nucleus of all matter contained the "super gene" which determined the whole subsequent development of the universe. The meaning of this is given us in the Bible through symbols and numbers. In the papers that I have he does not work this out in detail but, for reasons which I do not fully understand, he argues that the number 137 is fundamental both in Jewish spirituality and in the universe. This points us to Psalm 137, "By the waters of Babylon . . ." in the Hebrew numbering of the Psalms, which is taken over in the Authorised Version of the Bible and indeed by all the Churches of the Reformation. The reader will hardly need to be reminded that this Psalm continues, "If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, may my right hand forget its cunning". The conclusion he draws is that Jerusalem is central to the divine purpose. One may agree with that conclusion without necessarily agreeing with the reasons Mr. Manevich gives.

Himself a loyal Soviet citizen, he gives it as his firm belief that, whereas Jewish emigration from tsarist Russia was for "politico-economic reasons", today the vast majority of emigrants leave for "religious-national considerations and through a desire for reunion with relatives". He does not define the religious element in these considerations. He does, however, examine the position of religious Jews in the Soviet Union. Mr. Manevich defines a religious Jew as one who sincerely believes in and fears God and prays three times a day. He adds that a religious Jew remembers Jerusalem at least 50 times and after all meals thankfully recites the 137th Psalm, but I understand from a Jewish friend that there is some doubt about the details.

Mr. Manevich calculates that there are about 250,000 religious Jews among a total Jewish population of about two million. It should be added that some students would put the total number of Jews at nearer three million. Even so this gives a total of distinctly more than 10% religious Jews, because under Soviet conditions children under 18 could hardly be included among the number of religious Jews. Having said this, I must add that I suspect that some of those counted as

"religious" by Mr. Manevich are marginal. For instance, he uses for his calculation the fact that 80 tons of motza are baked in Moscow every year, but surely there must be many Jews who like to keep the Passover and other great festivals but are otherwise lukewarm in their observance of the Jewish religion? Moreover there seems to be some doubt about the amount of motza baked. Other sources indicate a figure of 120 tons which would give a higher number of religious Jews. Perhaps the quantity of motza baked varies with changes in the political climate.

In Russia proper the proportion of religious Jews to the total Jewish population may be, on these and other calculations, about 10% as indicated, but in the Caucasus, the Baltic and Central Asia the proportion is much higher.

The reasons which lead Soviet Jews to the Synagogue are as various as the reasons which lead Soviet Christians to the Church. Some come because they have had a religious upbringing. Others are brought back by the stresses of life. For myself I would like to know more about those who seldom or never go to Synagogue but yet are upheld by their religion. It is known that some follow the Hasidim or the mystic tradition of the Kabbalah, but how many are these and how do they find their way? Only a few know Hebrew, and Yiddish seems to be dying out among the younger generation. Writing in 1971 Mr. Manevich says that in "the last ten years young people have appeared more and more frequently in the Synagogue". This is parallel with the experience of the Church, but one wants to know more. Is this trend confined to Moscow and has it continued in the last five years? Certainly the festival of *Simhat Torah*, Rejoicing in the Law, now attracts crowds inside and outside the Moscow Synagogue and leads to dancing in the streets.

It is often claimed by Jews that in the Soviet Union the Christian religion is in a much better position than the Jewish religion. It is certainly harder to be an "observant" Jew than to be a practising Christian. Circumcision is rare and strongly discouraged, kosher meat is only available in certain places and always at a very high price. The positions of Rabbis, cantors and other necessary posts are becoming very hard to fill. It must be almost impossible for anyone who is working to keep the Sabbath strictly. One particular scandal which, according to Mr. Manevich, afflicts the Jewish religious community and has, so far as I know, no parallel among Christians is that Jewish tourists continually bring religious presents such as prayer books which are given to the Moscow Rabbi and his assistants. These presents are then sold to the faithful at exorbitant prices and the official, who receives them, puts the money in his pocket. I do not have enough knowledge to judge the truth of this accusation, but if it is true, the corruption of some of the servants forced on the Jewish community is greater than anything alleged in any of the Churches, with the single exception of the Georgian Orthodox

Church. In general the Jewish religious community is in an even worse situation than the Russian Orthodox Church, but it is in a much better situation than some other Churches. The three million Ukrainian Uniates, a community fully as large as the Jewish community, have no legal existence at all and can only be served by underground priests who are continually on the run. And there are other Christian communities whose existence is almost equally difficult. There is, however, one point on which religious Jews are always in a worse position than the believers of other faiths. If they protest against the corruption of faithless Jews put in authority over the Synagogues, they run a serious risk of being accused of Zionism and punished accordingly. Those who protest against similar abuses in the Churches, do indeed run a serious risk but they are at least safe from that particular accusation.

However, the Georgian Jewish community of about 35,000 enjoy better conditions. They are a more ancient community than the Russian Jews. Among them more Synagogues are open, circumcision is almost universal and Mr. Manevich assures us that "no one persecutes them". It is all the more remarkable that so many of them have emigrated to Israel or would like to do so.

All this is very interesting but it reveals how little we know and how much remains to be done. It would be possible to add a little about the Jews of the Baltic and the ancient community of Central Asian Jews. But what about the "mountain Jews" of Daghestan? What about... But the list would be too long. Keston College intends to investigate the life of religious Jews in all parts of the Soviet Union, as soon as money is available. The subject is of the first importance and the field for research is open wide.