

A Religious Minority Among Soviet Jewry

HAVDALLAH WEIN

Only a minority of Soviet Jewry are religious and these are divided between, on the one hand, the "establishment" of officially recognized communal leaders and institutions, and on the other hand, those who wish to practice Torah Judaism, yet who must conceal their faith and behave outwardly like any other Soviet citizen in the street. They risk losing their jobs or getting into trouble with the authorities – neighbours have been known to complain about private prayer meetings – and they cannot accept the ethical compromises made by the officials in the synagogues, where nearly all those praying are past middle age.

There are a handful of young people who have not had any religious background, and whose mothers would probably barely remember a smattering of Yiddish, who now wear the four-cornered ritual garment (*tsitsit*). They can be compared with the *marranos* of Spain and Portugal who accepted baptism rather than be put to death by the Inquisition, but who secretly adhered to the religion of their forefathers. However, whilst the *marranos* were prepared to accept double loyalty and a form of heresy which they passed on to their children, the faith of their modern Soviet counterparts is pure, and their allegiance to the system superficial. They would be ready to die as martyrs, but by not dissenting in public they are able to continue their religious activities in secret.

Little publicity has been given them in the West and it is unfortunately not sufficiently realized that the difficulties facing Soviet Jews when they reach Israel and the reasons may never go to Israel stem, to a significant extent, from lack of Jewish education. There has been in the last decade a growing tendency among the post-Stalin generation to reassert their Jewish identity and rediscover their roots in Judaism: their motives for emigration are much less materialistic and more idealistic. The religious revival affects only a small part of the Jewish activist movement, but it is nevertheless an indication of general trends and a pointer for the future.

Soviet Jews who are committed to their religion know that they have no future in the USSR. Their need for the basic daily requirements of Jewish life – history books and prayer books – is denied by the Soviet

system. Bibles are not on the open shelves of libraries. Little wonder that immigrants from the Soviet Union arrive in Israel and find they have no roots there, no common background with the local inhabitants; nobody has given them the opportunity to learn why they are Jews, let alone why they should go to a Jewish homeland. The young Jewish activists in the Soviet Union have to fall back on their own resources. Yet because it is so difficult to get hold of the small trickle of supplies which do get smuggled or posted from abroad, their will to persevere and to improvise is encouraged.

Some activists are critical in this respect of the "exodus" campaign in the West: this policy, in their view, betrays a misunderstanding of the realities of Soviet life and of the real needs of Soviet Jews. Too frequently it is forgotten that the Jews who will be forced for personal reasons, or because of the State, to stay in the USSR, will need a Jewish life support system to help them survive. A few Jews can, as at present, make their own kosher wine and distribute *matsot* (unleavened bread), but the next generation, born and bred in complete ignorance of Jewish traditions, may only know about their Jewishness from what is written on their identity papers, if the statistical trend continues.

The prospects for future Jewish life grow dimmer daily. Those waiting to leave as well as those who cannot or will not leave the Soviet Union now face a *numerus clausus* in the universities and professions traditionally occupied by Jews, less job security and less chances of promotion. In conjunction with the alienation enforced by Russo-Soviet society, young religious Jews today are increasingly drawn to rediscover their own history, ideology, and religion. It is not uncommon to hear of Jewish prisoners claiming their religious as well as political rights.

"Our business needs no publicity," Eli reminded each of us in turn. Five of the ten men around the green baize-covered table were aged between 60 and 85. None of the other five were over 24. "Our parents taught us nothing," said one young man who wore a Star of David in his lapel. "If it wasn't for you old men we would know nothing about our lost religion." "We have come to a time," replied the 85 year-old uncle of one of the old men, "when there are only the very old left who are about to die and those who have just been born, only recently awakened to our faith. As the Psalmist says, 'both young men and maidens, old men and children'. I wish you *L'kheim*, to life!" And he drank down another glass of vodka.

"Young maidens" referred to Rivka who sat shyly to one side, looking like one of Chagall's newly-weds. She had recently married – only not in the synagogue, which would have caused too many complications at work, but at a private ceremony. She had sworn to herself that her children would be brought up with a full knowledge of the religion her parents kept from her; they were, perhaps, afraid, after the experience

of the Stalinist Terror, that being Jewish would bring too much suffering. So, brought up to pay lip service to modern Soviet ritual, Rivka was only now rediscovering Jewish consciousness. The Jewish traditions and forms of worship were still a little baffling, but it was comforting to know that there were others also trying to learn about their past.

Small groups meet to study Hebrew and the Bible. Their source material is scarce, but it is as if they were spurred on by atheist indoctrination at school and in the daily newspapers. At heart they have a Jewish soul which conflicts with all that the ideal of *homo sovieticus* and its apotheosis stand for. The Revolution declared Jewish culture and religion to be the tool of the bourgeoisie and the opium of the working class. Articles in *Science and Religion* and *Soviet Culture* equate Jewish religion with Zionism and the enemies of the State. Brought up in total ignorance of Judaism and Zionism, these young Jews are psychologically conditioned to see themselves spiritually and ideologically as Zionists and Jews. Moreover, the difficulties they encounter in meeting the requirements of their new found faith (particularly the dietary laws and Sabbath observance) act as a challenge which encourages them to reach levels sometimes not found in certain assimilated communities in the West among people of their age group. Those old men from provincial religious families who grew up before the closure of the rabbinical seminaries and religious schools, practised secretly at home and are now providing the seeds for the spiritual revolt of the young Maccabees by giving them the practical example of their faith.

Eli, for example, retired after 37 years working for the State without ever breaking his strict observance of the Torah. His son was arrested during the years of the "Personality Cult" for teaching children Hebrew. On Passover in the Lubyanka prison he ate nothing but sugar lumps. He died in Siberia. Yet on the face of the bereaved father and on the faces of all the people praying together in his flat there were no tears – only joy and faith. Tears are better reserved for the living. There was nothing extraordinary about that room with its divan beds, the children's toys in the corner and the ubiquitous china souvenirs from Volgograd and Kalinin. Radio Moscow droned on in the kitchen, mainly for the benefit of the neighbours. But when the two *sifrei torah* (scrolls of the law) were brought in from a cupboard in the corridor there was no mistaking that unique combination of joy and faith in their eyes.

The young have taught themselves Hebrew, and from these old men they borrow holy books over a century old and Jewish encyclopedias wrapped in the daily newspaper *Trud* ("Labour"). Ravenous for the least scrap of knowledge, in a country lacking any ecclesiastical authority, they come for advice to these old men, the last storehouses of Jewish wisdom. One 16 year-old decided to be circumcised in secret, despite the opposition of his Jewish father and his Russian mother. The wheel of

assimilation and intermarriage turns full circle. Someone summed up the spiritual revolt that is taking place with the words, "We are rushing forward headlong into our past".

This phenomenon of a new wave of Jewish national (religious and secular) consciousness, especially among the young, can be explained partly as opposition to the conventions and morality of a conformist, intolerant society. But then many Jews are affected by the disillusion with the ideals of Marxism-Leninism, the official creed of the State, and turn to western consumerism or Russian Orthodox Christianity. Some veer off into ideological or psychological deviancy (the terms are sometimes considered synonymous). A few, however, fly against the wind of history and choose a culture and a way of life that are alien to almost every aspect of Soviet life, that belong to a civilization which they have been taught is harmful and as good as dead. These young Maccabees feel that they no longer need be afraid in the way that the victims of the Stalinist cult were, though they still preserve the habits of fear. Caution is still sometimes required to protect others, even if nothing is going to happen to oneself. By denying all the values of the Soviet way of life they place themselves above the fear of doing or saying anything. They put belief and freedom of conscience before jobs and university places. Hence the joy in their faith of the few who have come back to their people and their religion. The Jewish equivalent of "repentance", *tshuvah*, literally means "turning back".

It is of course anything but easy to reject the world in which one has been educated and in which one lives every day. The moral problems are not always simple. One person who stands up to the challenge is a school-leaver who looks away when women pass him in the street. He shuns as worthless all art or literature not based on Torah. Yet he himself is a musician with high hopes of getting into the Conservatoire. At the moment, however, he faces the prospect of either being conscripted for military service or getting himself certified as insane. The latter would indeed be preferable to being isolated from other Jews, living in a remote camp without the chance of keeping the Sabbath or the dietary laws. Indeed, there is something a little crazy about this tall young man with long straw-coloured hair and a wisp of straw where he is trying to grow a beard. He wears a hat in the street so as always to cover his head.

So the Jewish worshippers who gathered clandestinely at Eli's flat were defying all the odds to rediscover the overgrown paths of Judaism. Thousands have been lost to the Jewish flock in the last 60 years alone. They do not want their culture to perish completely. They identify themselves not with the Soviet future, but with their roots in the Jewish past.