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POLITICKING AND PEOPLEHOOD: AN EXPLORATION

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Abstract

This thesis explores the ways in which Jews all over the world have sought to improve their lot or the lot of their Jewish brethren at times of peril. The stereotype persists that the Jewish people have been docile throughout history, bending and contorting themselves to the demands of their host nations. In writing this thesis, I aim to dismantle that faulty assumption by tracing the ways in which Jewish communities have acted within their power to affect their immediate circumstances or the circumstances of beleaguered Jews in any part of the world. Typically, political actors are backed by sovereign states of their own, but the Jewish people have been in exile from their ancestral homeland for thousands of years while still managing to advocate on behalf of itself. The first chapter explores The Damascus Affair of 1840, one of the first recorded instances of Jews taking action to defend against a common danger to the Jewish people. The second chapter explores the ways in which Jews of different communities came together to improve the situation of Jews living under Soviet oppression during the late twentieth century. The third chapter examines this very same principle in a modern context with the modern State of Israel's daring hostage-rescue mission known as Operation Entebbe. Finally, the conclusion evaluates the significance of this question and its relevance to Reform Judaism.

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Introduction

Throughout history, the Jewish People have been plagued by stereotypes of weakness and passivity in the face of persecution. The character of this purported “weakness” is one of passivity and an absence of agency. I submit, however, that more often than not, Jews did *not* allow themselves to be defined by their circumstances; rather, they actively worked to define and improve their own condition, even when they lacked a state of their own. Efforts to improve their circumstances were manifest in Jewish political machinations that assumed a variety of forms. These machinations have roots as deep as the biblical Joseph who takes the mantle as Pharaoh’s advisor to become the world’s first “Court Jew.” Court Jews were not the only avenues of influence during times of political disenfranchisement throughout Jewish history. Jewish financiers and philanthropists have pooled resources to build and strengthen Jewish communities around the world, and international campaigns have been organized to defend Jews from persecution in any number of places.

Ever since the Temple’s destruction and the subsequent dispersion, Jews have been a people without a home whose situation has largely depended upon however the Jews were received by their particular host nation. From expulsion to expulsion, Jews have had little power over their political circumstances, and yet, this never stopped them from doing everything in their power to manipulate their lot for the better. Even in times of abject hopelessness, efforts by the greater Jewish community were often underway to advance Jewish interests. From negotiating charter protections in medieval towns to advocating for Jewish security in countries abroad, the Jewish People have a storied

history of politicking in an effort to make the most of the hand they were dealt, and to varying degrees of success.

Recent historical analyses conducted by scholars like Michael Walzer suggest the existence of a loose, Jewish political tradition that has operated in the background of history to promote Jewish welfare and security, independent of territorial sovereignty and outside the bounds of the nation-state paradigm. This is quite novel, for as Walzer explains in his introduction of *The Jewish Political Tradition: Authority*, “After...70 CE, there was no Jewish state for almost two thousand years; there were no sovereign agents, no coercive powers, no politics to think about.”¹ However, politics always exists in the background of history, and indeed, Walzer notes, “Jewish communities of the diaspora managed to organize a common life...” and in the process of doing so, “they made political choices about the distribution of power and influence...”²

Clearly, elements of politicking *did* exist in the Jewish realm, but it was, “a tradition of thought, theological and legal rather than autonomously political in form, but political in substance, nonetheless. Its point of departure is always the Hebrew Bible...”³ According to Walzer, the Hebrew Bible and its “radical reinterpretation” by the Rabbis is the unifying aspect of this Jewish political tradition in the way that, “a long series of writers have addressed political questions by referring themselves to the same authoritative texts and to the critical events on which these texts are focused: the exodus from Egypt...and then the conquests and revolts...that brought destruction, loss, and exile.”⁴

¹ Michael Walzer, Menachem Lorberbaum, Noam J. Zohar, Yair Lorberbaum, *The Jewish Political Tradition: Authority* (New Haven, CT: Yale University, 2010), xxi.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid, xxii.

In this thesis, I aim to contest Walzer's claim that the existence of an intertextual Jewish political tradition refutes the notion of a powerless people in the absence of their own nation-state. Instead, I propose that, in modern history, the Jewish people *has* abided by a political tradition of their own – however, one marked by action, and not merely by shared texts and traditional sources. While biblical and rabbinic literature might, as Walzer describes, “function as a surrogate home” for the Jewish people in the absence of their physical one, I argue that Jewish communities also have a history of engaging in *realpolitik* throughout their postexilic, non-surrogate homes.

Historically, the Jewish tradition has discouraged engagement in the political process. Realistically, the theological precept, “that God had set Israel apart” from politics, which tradition purports to be “mostly a matter of war and conquest,” fails to address the inherent political nature of an organized, communal society. While Walzer's work reflects on this “everyday practice of law and politics” centered on the textual tradition, I examine three major developments in Jewish history that suggest a pattern of Jewish politicking beyond that which is rooted in Jewish texts. Rather, these events are unified by the community's motivation to improve their own conditions or those of their less fortunate coreligionists elsewhere in the world.

In “Servants of Kings and not Servants of Servants,” Jewish history scholar Yosef Haim Yerushalmi describes how Jewish communities understood the value of forging vertical alliances with the greatest powers available to them so as to improve their lot. The survival of the community depended upon such practices for, “not only the physical survival of a people in dispersion, but Jewish communal and judicial autonomy, crucial to the practice of Jewish religion and the vital substructure of Jewish civilization, all

depended on as much stability and continuity in the rule of law as was possible, and on the establishment of a mutuality of interest with those ruling powers most capable of providing it.”⁵ This is especially true in the case of the Damascus Affair of 1840 where Jewish dignitaries from abroad served as emissaries by engaging the regional levers of power for the betterment of its Jews who were facing accusations of ritual murder.

Starting with the lens of such a framework, this investigation will examine a range of efforts by Jews around the world to maneuver their situation in the advancement of the Jewish people. While these efforts may – or may not – map neatly onto this emerging historical phenomenon of Jewish politicking, together they represent a consequential pattern of Jewish solidarity and agency that stand in contrast to the stereotype of the pre-modern Jew as weak and powerless. This research is limited by the scope of the examples taken under consideration and the varying periods of time in which they occurred, as well as differences in Jewish community characteristics from one to another that cannot be accounted for.

The status and well-being of virtually all diasporic communities depends largely on the Jewish community’s relationship with the powers-that-be as well as its rapport with members of the majority culture. Yerushalmi, a former professor of Jewish History at Columbia University, describes the cultivation of such relationships as a demonstration of “sophisticated and skillful Jewish politics” rather than “a story of political passivity” in what amounts to “a history of Jewish diplomacy.”⁶ Yerushalmi had been influenced by his mentor at Columbia, Salo Baron, who taught that the status of medieval Jews should be

⁵ Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Servants of Kings not Servants of Servants: Some Aspects of the Political History of the Jews* (Atlanta, GA: Tam Institute for Jewish Studies, Emory University), 3.

⁶ Yerushalmi, *Servants of Kings not Servants of Servants: Some Aspects of the Political History of the Jews*, 1.

translated as *servants* of the court as opposed to *serfs* – a distinction that highlights their privileged status. Yerushalmi would develop this argument even further, suggesting that in the Age of Emancipation, “...the new path toward citizenship for Jews in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries upheld the [royal] alliance but with one important difference: in lieu of the medieval king came the modern state.”⁷

Prior to the Age of Emancipation, however, Jewish communities understood the value of building vertical alliances with the greatest powers available to them. The survival of the community depended upon such practices for, “not only the physical survival of a people in dispersion, but Jewish communal and judicial autonomy, crucial to the practice of Jewish religion and the vital substructure of Jewish civilization, all depended on as much stability and continuity in the rule of law as was possible, and on the establishment of a mutuality of interest with those ruling powers most capable of providing it.”⁸

Examples of this occurring throughout Jewish history date back to the first century in 38 CE. After the Greek mob failed in its attempt to defile the Alexandrian synagogues by forcing the emperor’s image into them, a pogrom ensued and the local Roman prefect, Flaccus, failed to stop it. The Jews of Alexandria enjoyed long established rights and privileges, so “the eminent Jewish philosopher Philo and a group of communal leaders made their way to Rome to denounce Flaccus to the Emperor and ask for a confirmation of the rights granted by his predecessors.”⁹

Despite the minimal gains achieved by such a petition, the attempt represents a pattern of Jewish politicking that endures through the ages in various manifestations. As

⁷ Yerushalmi, *Servants of Kings not Servants of Servants: Some Aspects of the Political History of the Jews*, 2.

⁸ Ibid, 3.

⁹ Ibid, 3.

Yerushalmi explains, “the Jewish community of Alexandria...was a highly organized corporate entity. It enjoyed a sweeping degree of collective self-rule that would be inconceivable in any modern state.”¹⁰ It “regulated all its internal affairs...embracing the whole of life” and also maintained “a well-defined body of leaders...[who] ruled the community and represented it in all dealings with the government.”¹¹

In this same way, in later eras of Jewish history, those same recognized leadership roles that acted on behalf of the community in Alexandria again took on communal responsibility by negotiating charters and dealing with kings and nobles when Jewish rights were endangered. Yerushalmi continues by asserting that such events are instances of a “comprehensive history of Jewish diplomacy,”¹² which, “should finally explode the myth of Jewish passivity in the face of history.”¹³ In my investigation of three groundbreaking events in modern Jewish history – the Damascus Affair of 1840, the movement to liberate Soviet Jewry, and Israel’s Operation Entebbe – I contend that such occurrences are, in fact, instances Jewish communal politicking that undermine Walzer’s claim of the centrality of Jewish texts to the practice of politics in Jewish communities. Rather, these instances suggest that a Jewish political tradition exists by means of political action, not by textual analysis, and motivated by a desire to defend against a common danger. These three historical events also represent three distinct political conditions correlating with the political dynamic of their time – that is, powerlessness

¹⁰ Yerushalmi, *Servants of Kings not Servants of Servants: Some Aspects of the Political History of the Jews*, 4.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid, 1.

¹³ Ibid, 8.

without a state, emerging power with a burgeoning Israel, and constrained power but with the full agency of a sovereign state.

By writing this thesis, I hope to contribute to the understanding of both future rabbis and of Judaism itself. One of the goals of this writing is to highlight the transcendent nature of Jewish peoplehood – a nature that rises above the bounds of nationality and geography and which ties all Israel together in a common fate. The following exploration of the topic and treatment of the sources will demonstrate how Jews have politically operated on each other's behalf throughout the modern period beginning in the 1800s, largely unimpeded and undeterred by international borders. This research will also promote the understanding of a Jewish politic prior to the establishment of the State of Israel, when Jews lacked the political agency and resources that come with having a sovereign state, as well as highlight the successes and limitations it experienced after its establishment. As a more general contribution, I hope this discussion adds nuance to the discourse surrounding diasporic communities by underscoring their resourcefulness and resilience in times of danger and uncertainty. Coupled with the exploration of the role that the modern State of Israel has taken on with regard to Jewish security, my analysis illustrates that the imperative to be mindful of one's Jewish brethren remains an enduring force in contemporary Jewish life.

Walzer's *The Jewish Political Tradition* makes the case for the existence of a Jewish political tradition unified by an intertextuality made possible by a shared pool of traditional sources. Meanwhile, my thesis argues that, when considered side by side, the following case studies tell a story of the ongoing struggle for Jewish autonomy and illustrate what Jewish peoplehood looks like "in action." While Walzer's work

demonstrates a link between traditional Jewish texts and the history of Jewish “writers [who] have addressed political questions by referring themselves to the same authoritative texts,”¹⁴ my analysis traces the motivation for collective Jewish action by examining global Jewry’s responses to crises experienced by Jewish communities in faraway lands. Walzer provides a theoretical and scholarly basis for the foundation of the emergence of a Jewish political tradition. With this as a backdrop, I examine three events in Jewish history that serve as compelling instances of the Jewish political tradition as it plays out in real life. By gaining exposure and familiarity with this facet of our people’s history, contemporary Jews can grow to appreciate Jewish peoplehood in a deeper way.

This study is important to the wider Jewish experience because illuminating this aspect of our history will help us to better understand modern patterns and motivations of Jewish political engagement. I also intend for this investigation to add a dimension of understanding to the modern state of Israel as a manifestation of Jewish politicking in the quest for autonomy. The conclusion of this exploration presents Reform communities with an open-ended question: is this intrinsic aspect of our history one from which to learn and reflect, or one worthy of celebration and admiration? By reconnecting contemporary American Jews with these historical feats of our people, I hope to engender a discussion that ultimately strengthens American Jews’ sense of Jewish identity and *klal Yisrael*.

¹⁴ Michael Walzer, Menachem Lorberbaum, Noam J. Zohar, Yair Lorberbaum, *The Jewish Political Tradition: Authority* (New Haven, CT: Yale University, 2010), xxii.

Chapter 1

The Damascus Affair of 1840: An Awakening of Global Jewish Consciousness?

Introduction

The Damascus Affair of 1840 firmly supports the theory that the Jewish political tradition manifests itself in collective Jewish action, and not limited to textual reflection, to ensure Jewish survival at times of communal peril. While false accusations of Jewish ritual murder date back to William of Norwich, England in the 1144, this lie has managed to endure since then and continues to perpetuate throughout regions of the world today. Aside from the immediate threat they pose to the surrounding Jewish community in question, blood libels are particularly dangerous to the Jewish community at large because such accusations amount to ritual fabrications categorically attributed to the Jewish religion rather than one individual suspect or instance of an alleged crime.

The onset of the enlightenment era ushered in a period of emancipation and acculturation for Jews of the West. The rise of scientific inquiry and the diffusion of ideas and culture largely engendered societies in which most gentiles dismissed the absurd and superstitious charges of Jewish ritual murder.¹⁵ For this reason, in spite of the fact that blood libels have existed for centuries beforehand, it was particularly absurd that in a year as late as 1840, such fictitious charges were actually taken seriously and pursued vigorously to disastrous effect for the Jewish community. The political principles promoting individual freedom and equality under the law that had been introduced by the

¹⁵ Ronald Florence, *Blood Libel: The Damascus Affair of 1840* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2004), 57-58.

French Revolution beginning in 1789 served as an inadequate foil to the European anti-Semitism endemic at the time. This bias came into clear focus when the British consul of Damascus not only failed to dismiss the charge as outlandish, but he also passed the heinous accusation along as though it were true to the British Foreign Secretary, Lord Palmerston.¹⁶

So, what was the Damascus Affair and how did it unfold? The incident occurred in 1840 when a Franciscan monk named Father Thomas along with his servant disappeared while walking in Damascus; a local resident claimed to have last seen them entering the Jewish quarter. The longstanding tensions between the city's Jews and Christians acted as fertile ground for the seeds of a ritual murder charge to grow, with local and geopolitics as its sunshine and water.¹⁷ Since the beginning of the 16th century, Syria was a part of the Ottoman Empire. In 1839, the Sultan proclaimed the Edict of Gulhane guaranteeing for all Ottoman citizens the right to equality under the law irrespective of their religion or ethnicity. Unfortunately, in 1831 – only eight years before these reforms had been introduced – the viceroy of Egypt Muhammad Ali turned against the Sultan, bringing Ottoman Syria under his control. This had the practical effect of shielding Damascus and its inhabitants from the modernizing and tolerant policies enjoyed by those still living under Ottoman rule in 1839.¹⁸

Muhammad Ali, at the behest of the French, bestowed Christians more rights than they enjoyed before, which brewed resentment among the Muslim majority.¹⁹ Ali was trying to gain the support of the French because he needed their backing militarily after

¹⁶ Florence, *Blood Libel: The Damascus Affair of 1840*, 75.

¹⁷ Ibid, 50.

¹⁸ Ibid, 48-51.

¹⁹ Ibid.

breaking away from Ottoman Syria when the powers of Britain, Russia, Austria, and Prussia would pressure Muhammad Ali to restore the renegade holding to the Ottomans.²⁰ The majority Muslim community was in power, and in vertical-alliance fashion as explicated by Yerushalmi, the Jewish community aligned themselves with that Muslim majority. This had the effect of ratcheting up tensions between the Christian and Jewish community, exacerbating each other's mistrust prior to the explosive allegations of ritual murder that would later plague the Jews of Damascus. Christians also resented the Jews' economic prosperity, which stirred feelings of Christian resentment and helped fan the flames of animosity between the two groups.

Father Thomas disappeared amid these escalating tensions, prompting the Christians of Damascus to immediately cast blame on their Jewish neighbors. Complicating matters was the fact that Father Thomas was Franciscan, and his disappearance drew the interest and attention of Ratti-Menton, an unabashed anti-Semite who served as the French consul in Damascus at the time of the disappearance.²¹ Taking the side of the local Christians who were already convinced of the Jews' guilt, Ratti-Menton ordered an investigation into the Jewish quarter of Damascus. As the French consul, Ratti-Menton lacked authority to order an investigation in Egyptian-occupied territory that was ruled by Muhammad Ali, not the French.²² However, Sultan Muhammad Ali had strong ties to the French and wanted to curry its favor, which allowed Ratti-Menton to garner support for the investigation from the Egyptian governor, Sharif Pasha, who also happened to be the Sultan's son-in-law

²⁰ Florence, *Blood Libel: The Damascus Affair of 1840*, 173.

²¹ *Ibid*, 5.

²² *Ibid*, 29.

What happened?

With the Ali's approval, Ratti-Menton and the Pasha's investigation proceeded with the rounding up of any Jews who may have had any pertinent information as to the monk and his servant's whereabouts. The investigative methods they employed were far removed from the enlightened principles observed and practiced by the West.²³ The investigators were more concerned with extracting false confessions by means of torture than with actual information regarding the case.²⁴ Most Jews who fell victim to Sharif Pasha and Ratti-Menton's interrogation either died or suffered wounds from which they would never fully recover. 25

All the while, Damascus did not exist in a vacuum. The European consuls stationed in Damascus later got wind of what was happening and began to inquire about the investigation (torture) as well as the charges of ritual murder that had begun to spread. Meanwhile, the Damascus Jewish community was in crisis mode attempting to locate the monk and use whatever influence they could wield to free those falsely accused, imprisoned, and tortured, and perhaps most importantly, to clear the name of the Jewish community of the libel.²⁶ Between the mounting false confessions and plotted "evidence" of bones further implicating the Jews as a nefarious party to the disappearance, the community required some form of additional assistance or outside intervention to prevent the situation from spiraling out of control any further.²⁷ Already, local Christian

²³ Florence, *Blood Libel: The Damascus Affair of 1840*, 28.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 36.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 87.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 39.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 57.

communities outside of Damascus started to hear the rumor of the Jews of Damascus murdering Father Thomas for ritualistic purposes, and those Christian residents turned against their neighboring Jews, effectively surrounding the Damascus Jewish community by hostility on all sides. All hope seemed especially lost when Ratti-Menton tortured to death the only two known witnesses with legitimate evidence capable of exonerating the Jewish community.²⁸

Animosity between Jews and Christians in Damascus at the time of the Affair is hard to understate. The Christians were paranoid about losing their stature to the Jews, but they owed their improved status in the first place to the French who pressured the viceroy of Egypt to increase their rights. In spite of this, the Christians of Damascus maintained a negative view of the French because the French were more supportive of the Roman Catholic community than of their Christian community; moreover, France had already given their Jews equal rights as citizens (and had been the first nation to do so).²⁹ Throughout the Christian quarter, “everyone knew that Jews everywhere stuck together” which made it easier for gentiles to believe that Jews were secretly supported by a conspiracy of the “Jew-loving nations of Europe.”³⁰ This prevailing attitude gave rise to an environment that facilitated Ratti-Menton’s procuring of false confessions and assertions about dubious “evidence” – that is, “evidence” that had been “corroborated” by physicians who he *himself recruited* for the purpose of constructing his narrative against the Jews.³¹

Frighteningly, most skepticism about the ritual murder charges faded away in the face of evidence and testimony packaged as true and legitimate by authorities like

²⁸ Florence, *Blood Libel: The Damascus Affair of 1840*, 39.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 50.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 51.

³¹ *Ibid*, 74.

Muhammad Ali's son-in-law who authorized the investigation at the outset. Even the British consul of Damascus wrote back in his report to London that, "Jews...immolated clandestinely Christians to obtain their blood..."³² Typically, it would be unusual for a society as enlightened and advanced as England to buy into such a myth; however, forgeries claiming to have the answer to the "mystery of the blood" orchestrated by a cabal of rabbis, dissemination of Lucias Ferrari's *"La prompt Bibliotheca"* purporting to document the "homicidal Jewish hatred for Christians," and Ratti-Menton's clever lies all contributed to the perpetuation of belief in this dangerous myth in a year as late as 1840.³³

Also contributing to the spread of the libel were the false confessions orchestrated with and coordinated by officials of the French government, as well as one particular Jewish Damascan turncoat whose name was Rabbi Abulafia. Abulafia was the only rabbi to crack under the pressure of Ratti-Menton and the Pasha's torture. Abulafia offered a detailed false confession, converted to Islam, and immediately joined Ratti-Menton's persecutorial team.³⁴ His change of sides became official as he changed his name from "Rabbi Abulafia" to "Muhammad Effendi."³⁵ A former rabbi joining the investigation effectively served as a knowledge base for Ratti-Menton granting him unfettered access to the tradition. Ratti-Menton cleverly manipulated aspects of Jewish tradition to his advantage, twisting and contorting the teachings of the Talmud to conform to his message.³⁶ Another clever strategy of his was pitting Muhammad Effendi against Chief

³² Florence, *Blood Libel: The Damascus Affair of 1840*, 75.

³³ Ibid, 92.

³⁴ Ibid, 91.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid, 94.

Rabbi Antabi in formal disputations, where Antabi was actively prevented from mounting any defenses in response to Effendi's assertions.³⁷

Understandably, the Jewish community had been desperate for a solution at this point. Their situation began to shift, however, as the investigation began to churn wider geopolitical gears when an Austrian protege named Isaac Picciotto was named as a suspect in the investigation. The significance of this lies in the fact that the Ottoman Empire allowed for a protege status exempting certain individuals from the direct authority of the pasha.³⁸ Picciotto was a well-to-do Jewish merchant, and his family had a long history of diplomatic service to Austria from Aleppo; nobody could question his protege status. This protective status allowed for Austrian proteges to be tried under the authority of the Austrian consul as opposed to that of any other local authority that would otherwise have jurisdiction. In spite of the Austrian consul's own personal biases against the Jews, he was committed to his diplomatic duty of upholding the political interests of his home country rather than ceding his authority over to Ratti-Menton and the governor to try Picciotto.³⁹ Since Austria sided with England on the side of the Ottoman sultan against France and her Egyptian ally (that is, Muhammad Ali), this motivated the Austrian consul's defiance of Ratti-Menton and France, as well as Egypt.

Picciotto's politically protected status marks the entrance of the Great powers' involvement in the investigation's judicial proceedings. Accompanied by an Austrian official during his questioning to ensure his safety, Picciotto repeatedly defied his interrogators. Since his true testimony threatened the entire investigation and

³⁷ Florence, *Blood Libel: The Damascus Affair of 1840*, 95.

³⁸ *Ibid*, 100.

³⁹ *Ibid*, 102.

prosecution, the investigators presented additional false witnesses to counter his claims. Public opinion grew against the Jews, as “the foreign consuls all amplified their reports in Damascus with observations about the Jews, fueling the blood libel in nearby cities as newspapers carried the lie forward.”⁴⁰

As the ritual murder charge began to spread beyond Damascus, the first report received by Jewish authorities residing outside the city came to Hirsch Lehren, director of the Jewish Holy Land Fund in Amsterdam, whose office was in Beirut.⁴¹ At the same time, the Jewish community of Damascus also sent *their own* report to Raphael Alfandari, a key contact of Hirsch Lehren, who happened to be in Beirut at the time. To underscore the urgency of the issue, the community’s report to Alfandari was written in Hebrew.⁴² Alfandari then forwarded the report to Hirsch Lehren along with a note urging him to write directly to members of the Rothschild family beseeching they speak to kings to, “persuade them to write to Muhammad Ali for pasha to have the proceedings heard by him and by the consul-general.”⁴³ The “consul-general” is the Austrian consul and legal protector of Isaac Picciotto and the one who could seek standing in Muhammad Ali’s court.

Meanwhile, Anton von Laurin, the Austrian consul-general, and Colonel John Lloyd Hodges, the British consul-general (who was posted to Alexandria with explicit task of taking a firm line on Muhammad Ali) managed to persuade Ali to write an order denouncing the mistreatment of the Damscus Jews, which he sent to Sharif Pasha. Ali’s order enraged the Christians of Damascus who interpreted the move as another instance

⁴⁰ Florence, *Blood Libel: The Damascus Affair of 1840*, 111.

⁴¹ Ibid, 117.

⁴² Ibid, 122.

⁴³ Ibid, 124.

of Jews receiving special protections. In response to the order, they formed a mob, attacking the Jewish community both inside and outside of Damascus.⁴⁴

Separately, though at around the same time, the Rothschilds sprang into action after receiving Hirsch Lehren's reports, writing among themselves trying to muster whatever influence they had to act on helping the Jews of Damascus. Shortly thereafter, the Board of Deputies, which was founded in 1760 to coordinate between the five major London synagogues, met to discuss their response to the Damascus affair.⁴⁵ Among those invited to attend were Baron Lionel de Rothschild, Sir Moses Montefiore, and Adolphe Cremieux, a French Jew. Eventually, when it became clear that neither the British Parliament nor the French Chambre des Députés were willing to act on behalf of the Jews of Damascus, Nathaniel Rothschild wrote from Paris (where he was at the time) to his office in London that they should pay for Cremieux to travel to Damascus for a private diplomatic mission to save the Jews."⁴⁶ The mere fact that Nathaniel Rothschild's took this initiative demonstrates the financial, social, and political status the Rothschilds had achieved in societies of both England and France.

Nathaniel Rothschild's proposition was a novel one because, "the idea that the Jews of France would send their own representative on a quasi-diplomatic mission to the Middle East was a remarkably bold notion in 1840."⁴⁷ No organizational infrastructure existed to support such a task, and, "except for relatively new and inexperienced representative bodies like the Consistory in France and the Board of Deputies in London...there was no official Jewish institution in whose name a delegation could offer

⁴⁴ Florence, *Blood Libel: The Damascus Affair of 1840*, 134-135.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 139.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 163.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

credentials.” Cremieux’s limited experience outside of France coupled with his, “reputation for confrontation and sharp rhetoric” caused the Central Consistory in Paris to request from the London Board of Deputies that Cremieux be, “accompanied to the East by an eminent and influential personage who would worthily represent our brothers in England.”⁴⁸

Sir Moses Montefiore was the individual selected to accompany Adolph Cremieux on their trip to Damascus. Montefiore, the new president of the BoD, was wealthy enough to finance the mission, was related to the Rothschilds by marriage, and was renowned for his piety. The personality dynamic between the two made Montefiore’s pairing with the religiously unobservant Cremieux all the more intriguing. Montefiore also had a prior relationship with the Egyptian viceroy Muhammad Ali, making him an ideal candidate to escort Cremieux on the mission.

The London Board of Deputies organized a grand rally at the Great Synagogue in Duke’s Place on June 23 as a show of support for the two emissaries. British Jews of all kinds came together to rally support and listen to speeches emphasizing that “it was not only the Jews of the Middle East but ‘the Jewish religion’ which had to be rescued from the charges’.”⁴⁹ Enthusiasm and optimism poured in from across the Jewish world in support of the trip, with the exception of the Jews of France, who may have been “emancipated so long they had submerged their Judaism into a French identity.”⁵⁰

Somewhat predictably, publicity surrounding their mission attracted the attention of those who had opposed Jewish emancipation, where the mission fueled charges that

⁴⁸ Florence, *Blood Libel: The Damascus Affair of 1840*, 164.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 168.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 171.

Jews are a separate nation within the nation and are therefore “a threat to the fundamental values of France.”⁵¹

In a parallel development, Palmerston, the British foreign secretary, organized the Treaty of London on July 15 to end the stalemate with Muhammad Ali. To this effect, Britain, Russia, Austria, and Prussia drafted and signed an ultimatum offering Muhammad Ali possession of Egypt and southern Syria in exchange for returning to the sultan Crete, northern Syria, the cities of Mecca & Medina, and the Turkish fleet. The agreement was structured such that, after 10 days without Muhammad Ali accepting, the Ottoman sultan gains the right to make other arrangements for *all* the lands occupied by the Egyptians, including Egypt proper. The political game that would play out between the powers of Britain, France, and Egypt, “would determine the future of the region and the fate of Damascus’ Jews.”⁵²

While Cremieux and Montefiore were travel partners in a practical sense, they were by no means willful travel *companions*. Cremieux’s eschewing of traditional Jewish practice often clashed with Montefiore’s observant lifestyle. One particular recorded exchange between the two captures the essence of the pair’s working dynamic. When Montefiore’s travel party arrived in Lyon where Cremieux had arranged for them to have dinner, “Montefiore announced that the food was not properly kosher. He wrote in his diary that he distrusted and disliked Cremieux,” finding Cremieux, “intolerably French — intelligent, voluble and quick but facile and determinedly nonobservant.”⁵³ Cremieux’s flippancy with respect to Jewish tradition was on full display when, “Cremieux, who had

⁵¹ Florence, *Blood Libel: The Damascus Affair of 1840*, 173.

⁵² *Ibid*, 180.

⁵³ *Ibid*, 178.

conspicuously avoided accompanying Montefiore to synagogue services, at one point said that he intended to 'turn Jew' when they were on their way to Beirut and to continue so until they visited Jerusalem."⁵⁴ When Montefiore replied by expressing his hope that Cremieux would remain in that state of being Jewish, Cremieux responded in characteristic fashion: "it would not be convenient to submit to such an arrangement."⁵⁵

Cremieux disliked Montefiore in equal proportion; he "found Montefiore unbearably pompous, arrogant, and vain."⁵⁶ Their dysfunctional relationship, while entertaining to the outside observer, resulted in a failure to cooperate that caused mission inefficiency resulting in them both independently petitioning the viceroy. The viceroy promised both of them a response within two days, but never followed through with it after leaving for a trip to Cairo. At the same time, Muhammad Ali publicly rejected the powers' ultimatum arrangement, believing that France would have Egypt's back should war erupt.⁵⁷

When the ten day deadline of the ultimatum was set to expire at the end of August 1840, Muhammad Ali, "was suffering the pain and indignity of a boil on his bottom."⁵⁸ On August 27, the day the ultimatum expired, "he announced to a large group of counselors that he had changed his mind and was willing to forgo his claim to the hereditary rule of Syria."⁵⁹ Afterward, he was treated by two European physicians, one a Frenchman and the other an Italian; unbeknownst to him, both would make a habit of gravitating to the charismatic Cremieux in their spare time and grow a liking to him. When the physicians decided to lance his boil early the next morning, the topic of conversation turned to that

⁵⁴ Florence, *Blood Libel: The Damascus Affair of 1840*, 178.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 180.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 187.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 188.

of the Damascus Jews. Having the viceroy's ear, the physicians suggested that "with the international crisis in the Middle East at such a critical juncture, the voice of 6 million Jews in your favor would be of great importance."⁶⁰ In response, the viceroy announced that he would "grant the prisoners their liberty and permit the return of the fugitives."⁶¹ Following this development, the physicians returned to deliver the news to Cremieux, who then charged them with, "the responsibility of making sure that Muhammad Ali followed through on his promise to release [the Jews]."⁶² Acting on that charge, the physicians went to the viceroy's palace to pick up copies of the new proclamation, however, its language inappropriately contained the word "pardon," which was unacceptable because of its implication that a crime had indeed been committed. Acting on Cremieux's instructions, the doctors protested publicly about the usage of the word "pardon" until the viceroy agreed to substitute it for a Turkish term that could be interpreted as "release" – a marked improvement over "pardon."⁶³

While the order released the Jewish prisoners and vacated the arrest order for any uncaptured Jewish fugitives, the heinous blood libel would loom over the Damascus Jewish community until it had been officially declared innocent of the ritual murder charges.⁶⁴ After the proclamation had been secured, Cremieux wrote to Caspar Merlato, the Austrian consul in Damascus, urging Isaac Picciotto to draw up a formal complaint against the false charges brought by Ratti-Menton and to threaten to file a lawsuit for

⁶⁰ Florence, *Blood Libel: The Damascus Affair of 1840*, 189.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 191.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 192.

damages. This was an especially positive development because bringing up charges could expose the false evidence that served as the lynchpin for the ritual murder charges.

As for Montefiore, he continued triumphantly with a procession from Alexandria to Constantinople where he sought an audience with the sultan, believing that his uniform and rank would be received with greater deference and respect from him than had been true during his visit with the Egyptian viceroy. Montefiore met with Lord Ponsonby, the British ambassador to the Porte, and suggested that he request from the sultan a decree categorically denouncing the ritual murder charges in Damascus. Seeing Palmerston's idea of extending British protection over Ottoman's Jews as a counterweight to French protection of the Catholics, he arranged for Montefiore to meet with the sultan on October 28.⁶⁵

Montefiore met with the sultan, but, "the light in the receiving room was too dim for him to read, so he recited the speech from memory, praising the sultan, calling the Jewish people 'the most peaceful and loyal subjects...' and asking for a proclamation against the ritual murder charges in Damascus."⁶⁶ Ten days afterward, Montefiore received the decree proclaiming that, "the charges against the Jews were 'pure calumny' and the Jewish nation shall possess the same privileges as are granted to the numerous other nations who submit to our authority. The Jewish nation shall be protected and be defended'."⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Florence, *Blood Libel: The Damascus Affair of 1840*, 201.

⁶⁶ *Ibid*, 202.

⁶⁷ *Ibid*.

What made Jewish actions unique?

The legacy of the Damascus Affair is notable one. Jewish historians celebrate the episode as a collective rallying of the Jewish people; they also use the account to “trace the development of Jewish identity that pointed toward triumphs in the struggle for Jewish rights in established states and to Zionism.”⁶⁸ ⁶⁹ The Damascus Affair also represents an example of a conscious Jewish organizing effort that ultimately culminated in the successful mission to the East. Outside of Damascus, the blood libel refused to dissipate, and the accusations continued to live on. Tensions between Jews and Christians in the region persisted such that history repeated itself time and again with blood libel after blood libel occurring in the Ottoman Empire and beyond.⁷⁰ For instance, only seven years passed before a blood libel accusation was leveled against the Jews of Palestine in 1847 and 1848 by the Greeks and then later in 1870 and 1871 by the Armenians. In fact, the 1870s saw a spate of blood libel accusations against a number of Jewish communities such as, “Alexandria in 1870; Smyrna in 1871, and 1873; Damanhur (Egypt) in 1871, 1873, and 1877; and Mansura in 1877.”⁷¹

Few could have foreseen or anticipated the process of action that would later culminate in what became Cremieux and Montefiore’s mission to the East. The global Jewish community’s response to the crisis was completely unprecedented in historical

⁶⁸ Florence, *Blood Libel: The Damascus Affair of 1840*, 212.

⁶⁹ Joseph Jacobs, *The Damascus Affair of 1840 and the Jews of America* (*Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society*, 10, 119–128), 120. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43059668>.

⁷⁰ Florence, *Blood Libel: The Damascus Affair of 1840*, 212.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

memory. Never before was there such an instance of organized and comprehension action on behalf of the Jewish people. Jews aiding other Jews in need was hardly a new phenomenon, however, the scale of coordination and mobilization involved in this affair highlights the Jewish people's political agency *despite* their lack of a sovereign state and *despite* doubts from their own communities about the extent and level of their influence. Moreover, Cremieux's involvement itself is noteworthy because his disdain for Jewish religious and ritual practice had no bearing on his will to go to Damascus for the purpose of saving its Jews. In fact, Cremieux's secular background and his journey to Damascus epitomize the notion of Jews politically maneuvering the levers of power without engaging at all in the Jewish textual tradition. Motivated by a sense of responsibility for their fellow Jews under threat, both Cremieux and Montefiore were determined to end the sham investigation, sacrificing their time and personal resources (especially Montefiore who helped fund their trip) in service to the greater Jewish community.

Overview

From the bird's eye view that is history, while the course of events that unfolded as part of the Damascus Affair of 1840 all might seemingly amount to the eventual result (i.e., the liberation of the Damascus Jews) but in reality, this outcome was both unforeseen and unassured. A unified, coordinated response to the ritual murder charges required communal unity and effort; however, some in the global Jewish community were divided about how to approach the matter, as well as the extent to which they should intervene. For instance, Jews living in France and Germany were opposed to "ruffling the

feathers” of their gentile neighbors whereas Jews living in secure constitutional democracies were more enthusiastic about the mission.⁷² This was likely because Jews living in secure democratic societies were more secure in their societal position which gave them confidence to speak out for Jews abroad without fear that doing so would undermine the greater community’s perception of Jewish loyalty to their host nation.

One particularly illustrative example of this case was that of Salvatore Scala, the secretary of the Jewish community in Rome who, “did not hesitate to attack Cremieux explicitly for having indulged at such a time in ‘sharp criticism of the non-Jews’.”⁷³ Scala’s own efforts involved filing a joint appeal to the pope on behalf of the Jewish communities in Italy, instead preferring “to win protection from the church by quiet persuasion” as opposed to Cremieux’s characteristic bluster.⁷⁴ Scala’s efforts, though less effective and dramatic than the trip to Damascus, represent another instance of Jewish politicking separate from the political tradition described by Walzer because he too used his own connections in attempt to influence the direction of the fraudulent investigation of Damascus’ Jews.

Unfortunately, blood libels persisted throughout much of the diasporic age — that is, until Israel’s recognition as a regional power by the international community following its June victory in the War of 1967 — given the absence of a robust Jewish organizational body with power to enact agency on behalf of beleaguered Jews across the globe. As such, the Damascus Affair represents a seminal event in Jewish history, standing as one of the first recorded instances in which Jews organized themselves on an international

⁷² Jonathan Frankel, *The Damascus affair: "Ritual Murder", Politics, and the Jews in 1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 233.

⁷³ Frankel, *The Damascus affair: "Ritual Murder", Politics, and the Jews in 1840*, 239

⁷⁴ Ibid.

scale to positively affect change in the lives of persecuted Jews in foreign lands.⁷⁵ At the same time, the geopolitical situation engulfing the city of Damascus at the time of the Affair (around 1840) created an opening for the global Jewish community to exert whatever influence it had at its disposal so as to intercede on behalf of the victims.

While in today's contemporary world, the modern State of Israel has been known to violate the sovereignty of other nation-states to protect its security interests or to aid vulnerable Jewish populations; however, prior to Israel's founding (and eventual strengthening) Jews lacked a platform by which to organize or respond to Jewish crises in the world. Without a body politic with power to actualize its objectives, like governmental resources or the force of an army, the Damaskan Jews of 1840 were only left with whatever help that could be offered by wealthy and successful Jews of the West, like the famous Rothschild family and the charismatic Adolphe Cremieux.

For the most part, however, Cremieux and Montefiore's ostentatious arrivals in cities throughout Europe produced immense interest and attention throughout the Jewish communities living there.⁷⁶ Meanwhile, "prayers written specially to supplicate divine aid for the mission to the East were recited during services in various countries," and this, "provides the best witness to the way in which the sense of shared Jewish interests is awakening among us."⁷⁷ In spite of all the attention and the Jewish community's support for the pair and their noble mission, Cremieux and Montefiore were the only two key Jewish players actively working to help the Jews of Damascus in their time of need. As time moves on, more Jews would awaken to their responsibility to assist their

⁷⁵ Joseph Jacobs, *The Damascus Affair of 1840 and the Jews of America*, 120.

⁷⁶ Joseph Jacobs, *The Damascus Affair of 1840 and the Jews of America*, 255.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

coreligionists in crisis. The next example this thesis will address is the movement for Soviet Jewry in which large numbers of American Jews would come together in grassroots fashion to advocate on behalf of their oppressed Soviet counterparts.

Chapter 2

The Plight of Soviet Jewry: A Jewish “Call to Arms”

Introduction

While the Damascus Affair represents a pivotal moment in the history of global Jewish consciousness, the incident marks only the beginning of what would later evolve into a broad, grassroots political movement that worked toward the betterment of oppressed Jews across the world. Jews living in developed Western nations like the USA began to both recognize and wield the political power and social status they accumulated over generations of acculturation so as to influence the powers that be to act in their favor. While Rothschild and Cremieux were chosen as Jewish delegates because of their prominence and influence both at home and abroad, Jews of the later 20th century would collectively mobilize their own aid groups to establish and exert influence over their causes. Arguably, the most significant “Jewish cause” of the late 20th century involved advocating for the liberation of Jews living behind the Iron Curtain in what is now the Former Soviet Union.

During World War II, Nazi Germany sought to make Europe *judenrein* – that is, utterly free of Jews by means of deportation and mass murder. The fall of the Third Reich left the USA and Russia as the two greatest geopolitical powers of their time, each representing a different system of societal organization and governance. While the United States and most other Western nations cherish open, free, and democratic societies, the Eastern bloc of the Soviet Union embodied a communist political ideology that amounted to a dictatorial, totalitarian police state. Behind the Iron Curtain, the situation for Jews living in the Soviet Union grew dystopian in the face of severe treatment by the government and the KGB for the mere “crime” of Jewish expression. The Soviet Union as

a body politic promised utopian paradise led by the working class. What emerged instead, however, was a repressive, totalitarian entity that projected itself as a world power on the international stage. The Soviet Union's autocratic government had enforced societal conformity to nightmarish levels. The power of the Communist State reigned supreme, exerting total control over nearly every aspect of the lives of its citizenry. This absolute control enjoyed by the government engendered throughout its ranks a sense of paranoia about maintaining that control as well as the implications of losing it. This paranoia gave rise to a surveillance state that actively sought to police different forms of human expression, ranging from expressions of the individual to that of entire ethnic and religious groups. The Soviet Union's war on ethnic cultures, however, was relatively tame in comparison to the anti-Semitic, murderous policies that would advance under the notorious leadership of Josef Stalin.

Although efforts to aid Soviet Jewry started to pick up in earnest around 1964 with the launch of the American Jewish Conference on Soviet Jewry (AJCSJ), Soviet anti-Semitic policies had long been in effect prior to then.⁷⁸ Some of the most egregious examples of human rights abuses against Jews in the Soviet Union occurred under Stalin's reign between the years of 1951 – 1953. During this period, the Stalinist regime targeted Jewish writers, doctors, public intellectuals, and other cultural influencers in an attempt to crush political dissent and root out cultural transmission to make way for people's abject loyalty to the communist state.⁷⁹ One of the most infamous instances of Soviet-sponsored anti-Semitic activity occurred inside of a Moscow prison on August 12,

⁷⁸ American Jewish Historical Society, "Timeline of American Soviet Jewry Movement" <https://ajhs.org/timeline-american-soviet-jewry-movement>.

⁷⁹ YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe, "Doctors' Plot" https://yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Doctors_Plot.

1952. There, the execution of thirteen Soviet Jews marked the night that would later be known as the “Night of the Murdered Poets.”⁸⁰ Of the thirteen victims, five of them were Yiddish writers and members of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee, which was a committee formed by Soviet Jews in the midst of World War II. The goal of this Committee was to appeal for assistance from Jews abroad to aid in the Soviet Union’s fight against Nazi Germany at the time. Meanwhile, all of the thirteen Jewish victims of the Night of the Murdered Poets were arrested between 1948 and 1949 on trumped-up charges of espionage and treason.⁸¹ Prior to their unjust execution, the victims were severely beaten, tortured, and isolated even before they received their formal convictions.⁸²

The Night of the Murdered Poets pales in comparison to Stalin’s overall ambitions to purge the Communist party of dissidents, political opponents, and those whom he deemed an obstacle or inconvenient to the realization of his political objectives. Stalin’s anti-Semitic scheme known as the “Doctors’ Plot” was to be the foray into achieving that goal, although ultimately it was abandoned shortly after Stalin’s death in 1953.⁸³ The Doctors’ Plot – the brainchild of Josef Stalin spanning from 1951 until his death in 1953 – entailed fabricating the conspiracy theory that a cabal of Jewish doctors from Moscow were scheming to assassinate Soviet leadership officials. Alongside this package of false accusations came an anti-Semitic media campaign that fanned the flames of Jew-hatred and anti-Zionist sentiment all throughout the Soviet Union.⁸⁴ At the same time, the attention itself brought by the Soviet media to these libelous accusations wrought

⁸⁰ Joshua Rubenstein, *Stalin’s Secret Pogrom: The Postwar Inquisition of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee*.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Jonathan Brent, *Stalin’s Last Crime: The Plot Against Jewish Doctors, 1948-1953*.

worsening social conditions for Jews as they were summarily dismissed from their professions, both medical and otherwise.⁸⁵ Stalin's death on March 5, 1953 prompted the dismissal of the false charges by the new Soviet leadership that succeeded him, and approximately three years later, in Nikhita Khrustchev's "Secret Speech" of 1956, he acknowledged that the Doctors' Plot had been, "fabricated" and was "set up by Stalin."⁸⁶

Nikhita Khrustchev succeeded Stalin's rule, and in the 20th Party Congress in 1956, he openly condemned the crimes of his predecessor and promised to return the Soviet Union to the rule of law, as well as to its original founding principles.⁸⁷ In spite of Khrustchev's high-minded aspirations, the situation for Jews living in the Soviet Union failed to improve. Complicating matters was the fact that mistreatment of Soviet Jews under Khrustchev's leadership was less blatant than the overt actions undertaken by Stalin's administration, and therefore, "...Jewish opinion [abroad] had previously remained unconvinced of the special nature of anti-Jewish discrimination in the U.S.S.R."⁸⁸ A full ten years after Stalin's death, the Soviet Union's anti-Jewish policies went unchanged as Jewish cultural institutions and synagogues remained boarded-up from the days of his reign, "unlike other ethnic and national minorities in the Soviet Union."⁸⁹ As such, Jews as an *ethnicity* were singled-out and "deprived of schools, publications, and theaters."⁹⁰

⁸⁵ Jonathan Brent, *Stalin's Last Crime: The Plot Against Jewish Doctors, 1948-1953*.

⁸⁶ Nikhita Khrustchev, "Special Report To The 20th Congress Of The Communist Party Of The Soviet Union" <https://novaonline.nvcc.edu/eli/evans/HIS242/Documents/Speech.pdf>.

⁸⁷ Jonathan Brent, *Stalin's Last Crime: The Plot Against Jewish Doctors, 1948-1953*.

⁸⁸ Jerry Goodman, *American Response to Soviet Anti-Jewish Policies* (The American Jewish Year Book 66, 1965), 312-319. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23603171>.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

Reports of ongoing Soviet oppression against its Jews described how, “synagogues were being closed, the ban on the production of religious articles continued, baking and distributing *matzot* were forbidden or hampered, and the training of religious leaders was made impossible.” Even Jews considering themselves to be secular faced discrimination as, “it had become increasingly apparent that opportunities for Jews in higher education and in certain fields of employment were being curtailed.”⁹¹ In addition to these discriminatory policies was the anti-Semitic propaganda campaign meted out by the Soviet-run press that vilified all things Jewish, exacerbating and sowing the seeds for anti-Semitism throughout the greater Soviet populace.⁹²

Arguably worse than the mounting indignities making Jewish life in the Soviet Union untenable were the consequences for those Jews who attempted to leave. The Soviet Union denied exit visas to Jews on a routine and regular basis, citing bogus risks to national security that were often loosely (if not tenuously) tied to the profession of the applicant, though not in all cases.⁹³ People who were denied exit visas not only were doomed to remain in the Soviet Union, but the very denial of their application conferred them the unwelcome status of “refusenik.” Those who were branded as refuseniks faced further discrimination and fell under the careful watch of the KGB. Refuseniks were treated as unemployable, second-class citizens and were viewed with suspicion as being hostile toward the State by mere virtue of their request to exit. There were serious consequences to being unemployable in the Soviet Union, which created a frustrating paradox for refuseniks because the stripping of their employment in the first place was

⁹¹ Jerry Goodman, *American Response to Soviet Anti-Jewish Policies*, 312-319.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Abraham J. Bayer, "American Response to Soviet Anti-Jewish Policies." (*The American Jewish Year Book* 74, 1973), 210-225. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23605680>.

purely a function of state policy. The Communist state required every person to have a job, and those without one were labeled as “parasites” to the state, which carried severe and unpredictable penalties.⁹⁴ As the Soviet economy grew increasingly weak, its Jewish population became a convenient scapegoat for the communist state to cast blame for its economic woes onto a population historically considered as “the other.”⁹⁵

What happened?

In the face of these challenges to Soviet Jewish life, Chabad was among one of the international organizations advocating on behalf of Soviet Jewry that enjoyed tangible gains in progress as a direct result of their political activism. In 1957, “Soviet authorities allowed 10,000 copies of the ‘Shalom Prayer Book’ to be printed in Moscow, in addition to the opening of a rabbinical seminary there with thirty-five students and eight teachers.”⁹⁶ This “apparent relaxation in policy” was the result of an unprecedented visit to Soviet Union during summer 1956 by a delegation of five American Orthodox rabbis led by Rabbi David Hollander of the Bronx, who served at the time as President of the Rabbinical Council of America (RCA), the governing body of American Orthodox Rabbis.⁹⁷ The visit spearheaded by Rabbi Hollander succeeded in receiving the blessing of the Soviet Embassy to the United States because Khrushchev sought a thaw in Cold

⁹⁴ Abraham J. Bayer, "American Response to Soviet Anti-Jewish Policies." (*The American Jewish Year Book* 74, 1973), 210-25. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23605680>.

⁹⁵ Jerry Goodman, "American Response to Soviet Anti-Jewish Policies." *The American Jewish Year Book* 66 (1965): 312-19. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23603171>.

⁹⁶ Philip Spiegel, *Triumph over Tyranny: The Heroic Campaigns that Saved 2,000,000 Soviet Jews* (Devora Publishing Company, 2008), 21.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

War diplomatic relations with the US. Underpinning Chabad's motivations was belief in the principle that "there is an indistinguishable Jewish spark within even the most secular and assimilated Jew, a spark that fulfills the Talmudic dictum: '*kol yisrael arevim zeh bah zeh*'.⁹⁸" In response to the delegation, "the communist leaders said they were fully capable of printing their own prayer books. Printing the Peace Prayer Book was subsequently used by the Soviet UN delegation as an example in support of their statement that, 'the Jews of Russia enjoy full religious freedom'."⁹⁹

Alongside Chabad's incursions into the USSR on behalf of Soviet Jewry was the American Jewish Committee (AJC), which formed in 1906 in response to the pogroms in Tzarist Russia, as well as the Jewish Labor Committee, which formed in 1934 in response to the predations of Nazi Germany.¹⁰⁰ In the 1950s, most Americans were preoccupied with other matters of foreign policy (such as the Korean War, the Cold War, McCarthyism, etc.) but the AJC and JLC actively worked to expose the anti-Semitic policies propagated by the Soviet Union. Their collective data on news pertaining to Soviet Jews in Russia proved valuable to one Moshe Decter, a Zionist Jew from Russia. Decter worked for the Anti-Defamation League in the 1950s on Jewish foreign affairs. Later in 1958 he became managing editor of the *New Leader*, which was a weekly magazine with original socialist ties that later became independent and moved toward accepting articles from anti-Communist American liberals.¹⁰¹ One of Decter's most notable contributions in the effort to raise awareness for the plight of Soviet Jewry was in 1959 with the September 14 publication of his Special Issue on "Jews in the Soviet Union." The Special Issue

⁹⁸ Philip Spiegel, *Triumph over Tyranny: The Heroic Campaigns that Saved 2,000,000 Soviet Jews*, 21.

⁹⁹ Ibid, 22.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, 48.

¹⁰¹ Ibid, 48.

contained quotes from Communist party writers who had visited the Soviet Union and subsequently expressed horror at the anti-Semitism they witnessed there. Witnesses described how, “for years under Stalin they covered up what they knew was going on, but after Khrushchev’s 1956 denunciation of Stalin’s excesses, they felt free to question the issue of Soviet anti-Semitism.” In spite of this, the “Soviets would not ‘admit its discriminatory policy toward them, because doing so ‘would reveal a sharp clash between Soviet constitutional doctrine and the real situation, and more significantly, a profound contradiction of basic ideology.”¹⁰² As a result of this policy, “Soviet Jews would suffer in silence for another decade before they validated Decter’s assessment by openly demanding their rights to live or leave as Jews.”¹⁰³

As word began to spread about the treatment of Jews in the Soviet Union throughout the United States and across the Western world, a grassroots movement rooted in the idea of a greater, shared Jewish consciousness began to take hold. The precipitous growth *itself* of this grassroots movement and their collective actions suggest the existence of a political movement based on a shared sense of and concern for the Jewish people as a nation. That sense of kinship and concern would manifest into a 3-person study group dedicated to the issue at Beth Israel in Cleveland in 1962. What started as a small but mighty crew of three determined Clevelandite Jews soon blossomed into an international coalition movement that won the support of one global superpower and convinced the other to live up to its human rights commitments. After the trio discovered that the Soviet Union housed a quarter of the world’s Jewish population at the time, they felt a responsibility to act given both their knowledge that Jew-hatred

¹⁰² Ibid, 49.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

there was alive and well and their fear that a second holocaust would happen in their time.¹⁰⁴ Members of the group felt strongly that, “their parents’ generation of Jews had failed in their response to the events that followed Hitler’s rise to power in Germany: the Nuremberg Laws, Kristallnacht and the Holocaust.”¹⁰⁵ This, in conjunction with the strong desire to aid Soviet Jewry, compelled the group to formally organize into the Cleveland Council on Soviet Anti-Semitism (CCSA) in October 1963.

As the CCSA became more active, it garnered support from Cleveland’s mayor at the time, Ralph Locher, along with other public officials and also welcomed both Jewish and Christian clergy to join the ranks of its board. The members of the CCSA were so thoroughly committed to the Soviet Jewry cause that they took the extraordinary step of converting their temple’s choir loft in order to “serve as an office for the council that would be operating on a shoestring because the mainstream Jewish organizations would not provide financial support” at this point in the campaign.¹⁰⁶ It was important for the group to demonstrate that concern for Soviet Jewry’s plight, “was not just a parochial Jewish issue.” Therefore, the CCSA wrote letters to well-known human rights leaders, enabling the group to publish an open letter to Soviet leaders making the powerful statement that, “...the struggle for world peace and the effort to save Russian Jews are both part of the same struggle directed and inspired by the same leaders.”¹⁰⁷

In 1965, around two years after the organization was officially founded, the Jewish Federation of Cleveland agreed to co-sponsor a rally with the CCSA. The co-sponsored event effectively brought the Soviet Jewry issue to the attention of the East Side of

¹⁰⁴ Philip Spiegel, *Triumph over Tyranny: The Heroic Campaigns that Saved 2,000,000 Soviet Jews*, 64.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, 65.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

Cleveland, after which, council membership spiked to over 600 members. The explosion in membership numbers persuaded the Cleveland Jewish Federation to agree to fund some of the CCSA's projects on an annual basis the following year in 1966. In order to broaden their support base and to expand their mission, the Federation provided partial funding for the "Handbook on Soviet Anti-Semitism" that served as a model of grassroots organizing for more Soviet Jewry councils to develop in the future. The Handbook's introductory chapter was an explicit call to action for world concern to shift toward the plight of Soviet Jewry. The introduction also pointedly alludes to the failure to act by the generation of Jews living at the time of the Holocaust: "...it is our task to redeem the captive. We dare not fail again."¹⁰⁸ Dr. Louis Rosenblum, one of the founders of the CCSA, also took his own independent initiative on the issue by privately producing an educational film called "Before Our Eyes." Rosenblum sold the film to groups in the US and abroad, helping new Soviet Jewry councils generate interest for this issue in their own communities.

Outreach efforts by the CCSA later proved efficacious in the process of ameliorating the condition of Soviet Jews, specifically through phone contacts. The effort that went into collecting Soviet Jews' contact information spanned many channels and reveals an undercurrent of Jewish solidarity among ordinary Jews as well as activists. The process by which the CCSA succeeded in calling Jews behind the Iron Curtain reveals the organic formation of a network of Jews offering their own independent skills to aid other Jews in need. To elaborate, "the CCSA started making phone calls in 1969 with Sue Somers, a Russian language student at Oberlin acting as translator."¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁸ Philip Spiegel, *Triumph over Tyranny: The Heroic Campaigns that Saved 2,000,000 Soviet Jews*, 66.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid, 69.

Naturally, before placing any calls, the group first needed to acquire names and phone numbers of Jews in the Soviet Union desiring to leave. This critical information was obtained from a non-governmental source in Israel: Ann Shenkar, an American activist who made aliyah. While in Israel, Shenkar gathered information from newly arrived Soviet Jews of those whom they knew who were still trapped behind the Iron Curtain. Shenkar would collect and compile all of this contact information and then send her “News Bulletin on Soviet Jewry” to activists in the West for their support and for the CCSA to make their calls.¹¹⁰

Aside from helping to restore a semblance of Jewish spirit and identity to Jews stuck in the Soviet Union by way of phone conversation, these phone contacts also played an important role in the passing of the Jackson-Vanik Amendment in 1974. The Jackson-Vanik Amendment established that trade and credit must be tied to US concern for human rights in its dealings with foreign nations.¹¹¹ In spite of the ethical nature of the bill, it still required Jewish politicking to intervene for its support and eventual passage. More specifically, in 1973, President Richard Nixon met with the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations (CPMAJO) asking them to back off their support for the Jackson-Vanik Amendment. Initially, the CPMAJO capitulated by omitting any mention of the Amendment, which strongly serves their interests, in the statement they released following the group’s meeting with Nixon. When Dr. Rosenblum discovered this news, he called a journalist in Moscow about the statement and its omission; then, he proceeded to ask him for a position statement from Soviet Jews on the matter. Two days

¹¹⁰ Philip Spiegel, *Triumph over Tyranny: The Heroic Campaigns that Saved 2,000,000 Soviet Jews*, 70.

¹¹¹ Ibid, 69.

later, ten leading Soviet Jewish activists sent messages expressing support for the Amendment to CPMAJO, which at that point had little choice but to endorse it.¹¹²

Another highly influential, grassroots Jewish movement advocating for Soviet Jewry started to take shape across college campuses throughout the United States thanks to the herculean organizational effort by then-college student, Jacob Birnbaum. Originally from Germany, Birnbaum first moved to London and then later in 1963 to New York City for the express purpose of reaching “a huge Jewish population and creating a student movement that would mobilize American grassroots support for the rescue of Soviet Jews.”¹¹³ As a transfer student at Yeshiva University, the initial resistance he encountered from fellow students and the administration was significant, where the school directors themselves advised him that, “...Jews didn’t protest; that was for the Blacks who were being segregated down South.”¹¹⁴ Birnbaum persisted, however, and eventually found the support of students from other colleges.

On April 27, 1964, Birnbaum invited students to a meeting at Columbia University on a letterhead that read, “College Students’ Struggle for Soviet Jewry” (SSSJ). The content of Birnbaum’s letter epitomizes the sense of peoplehood that motivates Jewish communities to look out for one another, and sheds light on the process by which Jews collectively engage to affect political change for their co-religionists elsewhere in need:

The net result is that masses of Jews are in an increasingly ambiguous position, neither assimilating nor living self-respecting Jewish lives, nor yet being able to emigrate. This is an intolerable situation and a moral blot on humanity. Justice is indivisible. Just as we, as human beings and as Jews, are conscious of the wrongs suffered by the Negro and we fight for his betterment, so must we come to feel in ourselves the silent, strangulated pain of so many of our Russian brethren. We

¹¹² Philip Spiegel, *Triumph over Tyranny: The Heroic Campaigns that Saved 2,000,000 Soviet Jews*, 70.

¹¹³ Ibid, 77.

¹¹⁴ Ibid, 78.

who condemn silence and inaction during the Nazi Holocaust, dare we keep silent now?¹¹⁵

The stirring words of Birnbaum's letter exemplifies the sentiment of many American Jews of his time when they became aware of the Soviet Jewish condition. Birnbaum's invocation of the Holocaust and the generation of Jews who failed to act echoes what would grow into a recurring theme (if not a rallying cry) surrounding the movement to liberate Soviet Jewry. In other words, a foremost motivation for the advancement of this grassroots endeavor to support Soviet Jewry was to avoid repeating history by refusing to remain silent on the matter. Moreover, advocacy groups established to assist the movement for Soviet Jewry like the SSSJ often cited as one of their primary motivations the moral imperative to prevent a second European Holocaust from happening.¹¹⁶

The SSSJ was the world's only full-time organization working in support of Soviet Jewry. In May 1965, the group held its first demonstration at the Soviet Embassy in Washington, DC where speakers called upon Soviet officials to keep their promises to allow the baking of matzah for Passover as well as the printing of Yiddish books.¹¹⁷ After nearly a year without conditions improving for Jews in the Eastern bloc, in April of 1966 the SSSJ organized its *Geulah* March from the Soviet Mission to the UN in which fifteen thousand marchers joined to participate. The turnout from the *Geulah* March was the largest gathering at the time in show of support for the Jews of the Soviet Union, and there, Jacob K. Javits himself demanded, "complete equality for Jews...in the Soviet Union."¹¹⁸

¹¹⁵ Philip Spiegel, *Triumph over Tyranny: The Heroic Campaigns that Saved 2,000,000 Soviet Jews*, 78.

¹¹⁶ Ibid, 77.

¹¹⁷ Ibid, 84.

¹¹⁸ Ibid, 85.

While American Jewish organizations like the CCSA and the SSSJ were major gears in the advocacy engine for the liberation of Jews in the Soviet Union, the Zionist movement and the State of Israel also contributed to the growing Jewish cause. At the time of Soviet Jewry's oppression, the Zionist movement had yet to flourish into the success that it would later enjoy following Israel's victory in the War of 1967. While the promise of Zionism and the State of Israel was a potential avenue of solution for the plight of Soviet Jewry, neither Israel nor the Zionist movement could offer *the* solution because, prior to 1967, there was little desire on behalf of Soviet Jews to immigrate to Israel (not to mention that refusenik status would bar them from departing from the bloc in the first place).

The Zionist cause contributed to the efforts to aid Soviet Jewry as early as the mid-to-late 1950s when the First Secretary of the Communist Party in Poland, Wladyslaw Gomulka, "negotiated an agreement with Khrushchev allowing for the repatriation to Poland of Polish citizens living in the Soviet Union."¹¹⁹ In this political maneuver, Israel acted as a "secret catalyst" to the agreement, under which, Jews repatriated to Poland would in fact be transported to Israel. The arrangement was both limited and delicate, for "...there was one condition attached to the agreement. If any word be[came] public, the Soviets would immediately cancel the arrangement..."¹²⁰ The delicate nature of this arrangement reveals how, in spite of the existence of a sovereign Jewish state at this time, Israel was not always in a position to assume responsibility for beleaguered Jews living beyond its borders. Also, Israel's dependence on Polish cooperation underscores

¹¹⁹ Philip Spiegel, *Triumph over Tyranny: The Heroic Campaigns that Saved 2,000,000 Soviet Jews*, 21.

¹²⁰ *Ibid*, 24.

the importance of the grassroots nature that was the Soviet Jewry movement, for in the end, there was no single entity that was solely responsible for their eventual liberation.

Between 1956 and 1959, two-hundred fifty thousand Poles were repatriated to Poland, of which, twenty thousand were Jews who continued onward to Israel. In spite of this positive development, the number of Jews granted passage to Israel from Poland as part of this covert arrangement represented only *less than one percent* of the total Jewish population living in the Soviet Union.¹²¹

Requests for Jewish emigration out of the Soviet Union reached new heights in the wake of Israel's decisive victory in the Six-day War of 1967. Beforehand, Israel had not been on the minds of many Soviet Jews as a desirable place to immigrate, but the Jewish State's astonishing win awakened the consciousness and captured the imagination of Jews in the USSR while at the same time, also ruffling feathers in the geopolitical realm given the context of the Cold War. The Soviet Union had thrown its support behind Israel's enemy Arab states amid the Six Day War, but their crushing defeat humiliated the Communist Bloc, prompting them to cut diplomatic ties entirely and to end all emigration to the Jewish homeland. In support of these "deprived Soviet Jews," Aryeh Kroll, a religious Zionist originally from Minsk, met with David Ben-Gurion to relate the message that Israel, "must send tourists there and have them carry Hebrew textbooks, Scriptures, prayer books, song books, and records. If we persist in this activity, we will be able to bring about a real revolution; we will stop the assimilation, and the great aliyah will not be far off."¹²² The desire to provide Judaica to Jews trapped in the Soviet Union reveals something about the priorities and motivations of those who offered their support. For

¹²¹ Philip Spiegel, *Triumph over Tyranny: The Heroic Campaigns that Saved 2,000,000 Soviet Jews*, 24.

¹²² Ibid, 38.

Kroll, that motivation was not merely to ensure Jewish cultural and religious survival, but rather, to facilitate an eventual mass immigration to the Jewish state. The fact that any “tourist” would put him or herself at risk of attracting the ire of the KGB by smuggling in Jewish religious items – items that in any other setting might seem mundane – demonstrates a recognition and internalization of the obligation that Jews have toward their fellow Jews around the world.

Following Israel’s victory against its Arab nemeses backed by the Soviets, Israeli passports were no longer welcome in Moscow. So as to avoid this new obstacle, “[Kroll] would go to Western Europe and the US to recruit volunteers for missions under the cover of innocent tourism. After selecting Jews who were knowledgeable in Hebrew and Jewish religious practice, he trained them on what they should and should not do in their missions to make contact with Soviet Jews.”¹²³ Aside from instructing them to keep a low profile on their mission, Kroll, “would strategically schedule their visits over periods of Jewish holidays so the emissaries could easily meet Jews at the few synagogues remaining without drawing the attention of the Soviet authorities.”¹²⁴ The other crucial task assigned to the emissaries was collecting names of the Soviet Jews who wanted to emigrate and live in Israel.¹²⁵ This was important to the Jewish advocacy groups who contributed to the greater movement by writing letters to those Jewish contacts, thereby establishing for them a connection abroad that Soviet authorities required for those who wished to leave the USSR. Meanwhile, the organization of such groups and missions, as well as the financial investments required for their execution, stands as further evidence of the

¹²³ Philip Spiegel, *Triumph over Tyranny: The Heroic Campaigns that Saved 2,000,000 Soviet Jews*, 38.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

Jewish people recognizing their collective responsibility for one another on a global scale, and mobilizing within their power to improve the situation on the ground for their contemporary coreligionists in peril.

What made Jewish actions during the event unique?

The American and the global Jewish community's responses to the Soviet Union's persecution of its Jews represent a concentrated effort by localized, grassroots campaigns with a mission of putting plans into action that would significantly contribute to the preservation of Jewish life and spirit for Jews living under Soviet oppression. One of the most unique features of the movement for Soviet Jewry was the widespread involvement of ordinary Jews from abroad participating in the struggle. Moreover, the State of Israel's limited involvement in the movement indicates that, even at a time when a Jewish sovereign state does exist, this fact was no guarantee that it would be able to marshal its resources and expend political capital to provide Jewish aide. Instead, vast numbers of Jewish leaders and laypeople joined efforts to contribute to the movement in whatever ways possible.

One of such ways, as briefly mentioned earlier, were letter-writing campaigns to Jews living in the Soviet Union. This simple but vital task doubled as a highly accessible point of entry for anyone seeking a way to contribute their time and effort to the Jewish cause. The Cincinnati Jewish community took on an active role in the drive for national and international attention toward this issue. Jewish holidays and ritual observances were ideal for carrying on the message of Soviet Jewish oppression. The Jewish narrative of

overcoming hardship comes to life for American Jews at a time in which their Jewish brethren across the world *were* experiencing persecution. Passover seders augmented with info pamphlets about the mistreatment of Jews in the Soviet Union were scattered across seder tables all over America, reminding Jews of the free world that there are those who are still in *mitzra'yim* – that is, their Soviet Jewish counterparts. On March of 1983, Dr. Richard Sarason, who was then Chairman of the Cincinnati JCRC Soviet Jewry Committee, released memos appealing for the community to engage in these acts of solidarity with Soviet Jewry.¹²⁶

The message is clear and direct from the very first sentences, reading, “the upcoming Passover holiday provides us with the opportunity to draw attention to the plight of Soviet Jews. As we celebrate this festival of freedom, hope, and renewal, we cannot forget those Jews in the Soviet Union who are not free.” To that end, a “Matzah of Hope” pamphlet was enclosed for reading in the homes of American Jews hosting their own Passover seders. The “Matzah of Hope” pamphlet is an aspirational and educational insertion for the Haggadah that included tributes to the Soviet Jewish condition with such invitations to engage as the following: “Tonight, when we drink the four cups, let us dedicate our thoughts to Soviet Jews...”¹²⁷

Raising awareness of the situation for Soviet Jewry throughout the American Jewish community was a movement-wide objective, but it was equally important to make Soviet Jews aware that their American counterparts support them and have them in their thoughts. The final appeal in Dr. Sarason’s memo speaks to this communicative endeavor

¹²⁶ Memo to JCRC Board from Dr. Richard Sarason, 17 March 1983, Passover Activities 1983-1988, MSS #202/box135/folder1, AJA, Cincinnati, OH.

¹²⁷ Matzah of Hope Pamphlet, Passover Activities 1983-1988, MSS #202/box 135/folder 1, AJA, Cincinnati, OH.

with instructions for mailing, “a Passover greeting card which has been pre-addressed to a Soviet refusenik.” A simple, personal note in the greeting card would be like one grain of sand in the larger dune of solidarity – and all that for only 28 cents postage! The concluding line of Dr. Sarason’s memo underscores the importance of this overall mission in which even the smallest of efforts to help can make a difference. The memo signs-off by noting that, “efforts such as these, as small as they may seem, help to keep hope alive for the valiant refuseniks.”¹²⁸ Hope itself was a lifeblood for Soviet Jews, for without it, the Soviets would have succeeded in destroying all Jewish culture within its boundaries by snuffing out the sheer will to be Jewish.

Writing letters to Jews in the Soviet Union was an ongoing campaign that sought to boost morale for the Jews and refuseniks living there. The Jewish Community Relations Council (JCRC) was responsible for organizing letters from local chapters, and the Cincinnati JCRC newsletter had included detailed instructions for writing and mailing these letters. The restrictive nature of these guidelines reveals the precarity of the situation for Jews there, instructing in capital letters, “DO NOT write about Israel; DO NOT write anything anti-Soviet.”

Guideline numbers five through nine indicate maneuverings for a secondary objective of the letter-writing campaign *in addition* to bolstering hope for refuseniks. Meanwhile, at a Paris press conference on December 3, 1966, then-Soviet Premier Alexei Kosygin declared permission for Soviet Jews to emigrate but *only* on the basis of the principle of family reunification.¹²⁹ As such, the letter writing guidelines are a vehicle for

¹²⁸ Memo to JCRC Board from Dr. Richard Sarason, 17 March 1983, Passover Activities 1983-1988, MSS #202/box135/folder1, AJA, Cincinnati, OH.

¹²⁹ American Jewish Historical Society, “Timeline of American Soviet Jewry Movement”.

the fabrication of familial narratives between American and Soviet Jews, and the trail of letters written between them may constitute evidence of family abroad in the eyes of the Soviets.

Such evidence potentially raised the chances for approval on their exit visas with the stipulation that they would be reuniting with the “family” at the other end of the letter chain. This prospect may help to explain the purpose of guideline number five: “identify members of your family as ‘my wife, Rachel,’ or, ‘our youngest son, Joseph.’ Enclose photos, as feasible. This helps sustain the appearance of a continuing correspondence.”¹³⁰ The intentions behind guideline number seven present more explicitly than in guideline number five: “Be sure to CONTINUE to write, even if no response is forthcoming; should your correspondent be granted permission to emigrate, stay in touch.”¹³¹ Guideline numbers eight and nine instruct the writer to be mindful of the censor such that the letter’s contents will muster review and possibly serve as the basis for future emigration. For instance, the eighth guideline directs a person to “write clearly so the censor will know and understand, and if possible, type your letter.” For good measure and to demonstrate continuity in the chain of correspondence, the ninth and last guideline exhorts the writer to, “NUMBER your letters in sequence.”¹³²

The Soviet Union proved sensitive and susceptible to criticism and condemnation from the growing chorus of outside groups advocating to hold the Communist regime accountable for its anti-Jewish policies. This later manifested itself in the passing of the Jackson-Vanik amendment to the Trade Act of 1974 that tied privileges in trade

¹³⁰ JCRC Soviet Jewry Committee Guidelines for Writing Letters to the Soviet Union.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Ibid.

agreements to freedom of emigration and human rights in non-market (Communist) countries.¹³³ The mobilization of the American people and the US government to enact legislation in support of the Soviet Jewish cause stands as one of the greatest and most unique accomplishments borne from this bottom-up movement. Moreover, the intricacies involved in the letter-writing process, as one can discern from the specifics of the JCRC guidelines, called for a level of commitment on behalf of the letter-writing volunteer. Fabricating familial connections with Soviet Jews by writing them letters entailed an iterative process since multiple correspondences were required to convince the Soviet censors and authorities of their authenticity. Dedicating oneself to this process while knowing that these letters have the chance to provide hope to oppressed Jews abroad is suggestive of a deep-seated motivation to abide by Jewish tradition's charge for Jews to be responsible for one another.

Overview

While the Damascus Affair of 1840 marked one of the first times in history when Jews from abroad took collective action on behalf of a far-away community, the movement for Soviet Jewry represents another instance of this pattern. The Jews involved in coming to the Damascus Jewish community's aid hailed mostly from Europe – specifically, Britain and France because of Montefiore and Cremieux – whereas the United States became home to most advocacy groups that formed on behalf of Jews in the Soviet Union. In addition to this geographical difference was the difference in time at

¹³³ Jerry Goodman, "American Response to Soviet Anti-Jewish Policies."

which they occurred. European Jews of 1840 were in a different position to help their Damaskan counterparts than were the American Jews who became active in the struggle for Soviet Jewry in the late twentieth century. Also, the fact that this movement began over a century after the Damascus Affair took place speaks to the fact that the Jewish sense of responsibility for other Jews was not exclusive to a particular event in a particular era, but rather is an ongoing phenomenon that expresses itself most clearly in the study of Jewish responses to anti-Semitic crises throughout history.

While European Jewry only had the resources and political capital to send two delegates as emissaries to Syria, the movement for Soviet Jewry presented anyone desiring to get involved with the opportunity to do so, and in a variety of capacities. This enabled widespread participation in a grassroots fashion, facilitating the overall movement's success in pressuring the powers that be to act in a way that served both American *and* Soviet Jewish interests.

While Israel's involvement in the movement was relatively minimal, there is evidence of the Jewish state acting on its own behalf to rescue a Jewish population in trouble. Israel's Operation Entebbe in 1976 is one of such examples. In the case of the Soviet Jewry movement, Israel was politically hamstrung from making a greater contribution because of the delicacy with which it needed to conduct international diplomacy. Operation Entebbe, on the other hand, stands as one of the rare examples in which Jews *do* have the political agency and force to act on their own *without* having to consult or persuade any greater powers, which constitutes a major development in the greater historical saga of Jewish collective action.

Chapter 3

Modern Manifestations: Operation Entebbe

Introduction

From the Damascus Affair to the efforts of everyday American Jews working to liberate the Jews of the Soviet Union, global Jewry has demonstrated a consciousness for its Jewish brethren and a willingness to act on their behalf through time and space. In the cases evaluated thus far, the Jewish communities in both Europe and North America organized for collective action in the mid-nineteenth century and the late-twentieth century, respectively. Given the modern State of Israel's relative political power and supreme military capabilities, the Jewish state has, at times, taken on the role of helping Jews in distress by means of exercising that historically newfound power characteristic to a self-determined people. Although Operation Entebbe occurred around the same time as the movement for Soviet Jewry was active, Operation Entebbe constitutes one of such times at which Israel acted unilaterally on behalf of faraway Jews in crisis.

In the same way that Rothschild and Cremieux served as delegates of the Jewish community with the purpose of ameliorating the miserable condition of the Damascus Jews, and just as grassroots organizations mobilized for Soviet Jewish liberation, Israel too has executed its own covert missions in modern contexts hoping to achieve similar results. Perhaps one of the boldest examples of such mobilizations was Israel's Operation Entebbe, which entailed violating international norms and laws for the express purpose of saving Jewish lives.

Before the Modern State of Israel was established, the Jewish people lacked a centralized governing body with the political power capable of acting on Jewry's behalf; as such, this protectionary role fell at the feet of influential Jewish individuals and

communities throughout the world. Even after Israel became a recognized state, it was not always in a position to marshal its resources on behalf of Jews in need living beyond its territorial borders. While, as mentioned earlier, Israel and the Israeli government played a role in helping Soviet Jews escape from what is today the Former Soviet Union, its methods were purely diplomatic and often tenuous. For instance, if word had reached the Soviet Union that Poland arranged with Israel to send Jewish Poles to Israel upon their repatriation to Poland, the plan would have fallen apart.¹³⁴ This is a clear example of how the early State of Israel was sometimes hamstrung by its dependence on the whims of other countries.

In the past, Jewish dignitaries might have appealed to politicians and figureheads behind the scenes to create more favorable circumstances for Jews abroad, as in the case of Rothschild who often tried to make use of his own clout in his attempts to dispel the blood libel in Damascus. In 1976, however, these same attempts at politicking continued, but in a modern political context: Israel has its own official channels through which to address and respond to such crises.¹³⁵ Operation Entebbe was only possible by virtue of the fact that such channels existed, where analyzing the development of Operation Entebbe provides valuable insight into how a modern Jewish political body continues in the tradition of acting for the benefit of Jewish communities facing peril.

The aftermath of the operation and the consequences of having executed such a mission on foreign soil highlights the audacity and determination of will that the Jewish state is willing to endure to protect the Jewish people, even at the state's political expense.

¹³⁴ Philip Spiegel, *Triumph over Tyranny: The Heroic Campaigns that Saved 2,000,000 Soviet Jews* (Devora Publishing Company, 2008), 24.

¹³⁵ Amos Gilboa, Ephraim Lapid, & Yochi Erlich, *Israel's Silent Defender: An Inside Look at Sixty Years of Israeli Intelligence* (Gefen Books, 2012), 90.

What in years past could *not* have been done to help in such situations by virtue of the fact that the Jewish people had no central force of command, Israel had taken the opportunity *to* do so when the hijacking of Air France Flight 139 occurred. This step by the Israeli government also marks a continuation of Jewish policy of politicking; however, in this particular example, Jewish collective action is organized by a centralized Jewish authority that is the Israeli government and is backed by the force of its army. Consequently, Israel's response to the hijacking and how the operation unfolded mimics, in principle, a longstanding pattern of the Jewish community of doing whatever it takes to succeed and triumph over whatever threats encountered by the Jewish people around the world.

What happened?

The ordeal began on Sunday, June 27, 1976 when, at 6:45am, the Singapore Airlines Flight 763 carrying four anti-Israel commandos (a Palestinian couple and a German couple) landed in Athens en route to Paris.¹³⁶ The night beforehand, the commandos managed to persuade a baggage handler at the Bahrain international airport to smuggle weapons aboard the Singapore Airlines flight they planned to hijack the next morning after boarding it in Bahrain and arriving in Athens. The terrorists chose to execute their plot at the Athens Ellinikon International Airport because, relative to other modern airports, this one lacked many of the safeguards widely employed elsewhere to protect passengers from terrorist attacks. As one example, "few security officers circulated in the

¹³⁶ Marc E. Vargo, *The Mossad: Six Landmark Missions of the Israeli Intelligence Agency, 1960-1990* (McFarland & Company, 2015), 162.

terminal, and even fewer outside...moreover, conditions were worse than usual owing to a workers' strike that had left the facility with an insufficient number of staff."¹³⁷ Perhaps unsurprisingly, those who had shown up for work that day were unenthusiastic and averse to shouldering the extra duties abandoned by their coworkers on strike. As a result, airport security carelessly waved through the German couple without bothering to have them pass through metal detectors or even conducting a routine body search. Had airport security done its job adequately, the pistols and hand grenades concealed on their bodies would have likely been discovered. The Palestinian couple were similarly waved through security where the metal detector through which they passed was unmanned, rendering it useless. It was in this unregulated, poorly managed, and understaffed setting that enabled the terrorists to move forward with their plot.¹³⁸

Only seven minutes elapsed after takeoff from Athens when the terrorists initiated their hijacking of the Airbus A300 that carried aboard two-hundred fifty-eight passengers along with the flight crew. The incident began to unfold when a scream was heard on board and someone proceeded to thrash on the door of the cockpit from the cabin side. Amid the chaos, the flight engineer opened the cockpit door but immediately was "knocked aside by Wilfried Böse who was clutching a hand grenade in one hand and a pistol in the other."¹³⁹ Böse, one of the German commandos, trained his gun on the pilot's head, which effectively gave full control of the flight over to the terrorists. While Böse remained in the cockpit guarding the crewmembers, the three other terrorists on board announced over the intercom that the aircraft was being seized by the Che Guevara

¹³⁷ Marc E. Vargo, *The Mossad: Six Landmark Missions of the Israeli Intelligence Agency, 1960-1990*, 162.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Ibid, 163.

Group and Gaza Unit of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. Any passengers who voiced resistance invited upon him or herself a berating, and in some cases a striking, by the hand of the terrorists.¹⁴⁰ Meanwhile, the two Palestinian commandos rushed to the emergency exits where they placed packages that they claimed contained explosive devices onto the doors. This later proved to be a false assertion, however, there was no way for anybody on board the plane to ascertain that fact.

Back in Jerusalem, Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin was in session with his cabinet members when his senior military advisor interrupted by slipping him a note informing him of the hijacked Air France jet.¹⁴¹ Rabin immediately alerted the Sayeret Matkal, the Israeli Defense Forces' elite counter terrorism unit. Aside from conducting reconnaissance missions and the occasional targeted assassination, the Sayeret Matkal also occasionally participated in rescue operations. The unit's skill profile made it a great fit for the Prime Minister to call on for assistance in this mission. Meanwhile aboard the plane, the terrorists proceeded to share their rationale for the hijacking with the passengers, declaring that, "this hijacking is being carried out because of the Zionist crimes in Palestine and throughout the world...Israel has taken it upon herself to usurp territories and suppress peoples who are only fighting for their freedom."¹⁴²

The hijacked airliner arrived in Entebbe shortly after 3:00am the very next morning on Monday, June 28. Upon landing, the passengers and crew were deplaned at gunpoint.¹⁴³ Rather than leading the hostages to the main terminal at the Entebbe

¹⁴⁰ Marc E. Vargo, *The Mossad: Six Landmark Missions of the Israeli Intelligence Agency, 1960-1990*, 163.

¹⁴¹ Ibid, 164.

¹⁴² Ibid, 165.

¹⁴³ Ibid, 166.

International Airport, the hostages instead locked the victims up in the airport's old, dilapidated terminal located a mile away from the landing site.¹⁴⁴ The terrorists' logic behind this step was to keep their victims both isolated and inaccessible in the event of an attempted rescue mission. As the hostages began to reorient themselves in their new surroundings, they were paid a visit by Idi Amin, the vociferously anti-Semitic president of Uganda at the time of the hijacking.¹⁴⁵ Amin's decision to involve himself in the issue highlights the *anti-Semitic nature* of the attack on the jet and its passengers, in contrast to the terrorists' narrative that the hijacking was motivated by a sense of political, and not religious, animus.

In support of this view is the claim from Arye Oded, former Israeli Ambassador to the UN, that Amin, "[sent] a telegram to UN secretary-general Kurt Waldheim in which he applauded 'the massacre of the Israeli Olympic athletes in Munich', asserting that Germany was the most appropriate locale for this because it was where Hitler burned more than six million Jews."¹⁴⁶ The joy garnered by Amin when visiting the captives is reflective of the overall anti-Semitic character of the event, which would suggest a threat to Jews as an ethnicity rather than simply because Israel was listed as their country of citizenship. In this way, Israel's decision to rescue the hostages had implications not only for Israeli citizens, but for Jews all over the world. Also, it was clear to the hostages that "there was complete cooperation between the terrorists and the [Ugandan] soldiers" who also joined in harassing the captives.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁴ Marc E. Vargo, *The Mossad: Six Landmark Missions of the Israeli Intelligence Agency, 1960-1990*, 166.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid, 166-167.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid, 167.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

The following day on Tuesday, June 29th at 3:30pm, the terrorists announced their demands over the Ugandan airwaves, however, Israel only became aware of them through France's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which relayed the message to the Israeli Embassy.¹⁴⁸ Their ultimatum called for the release of fifty-three prisoners – nearly all of whom were convicted terrorists – forty of which were incarcerated in Israel, while the rest were held in Europe and Kenya.¹⁴⁹ The terrorists gave a deadline corresponding to 2:00pm Israel time on Thursday, July 1, and if their demands were not met by then, they threatened to blow up the terminal with all the hostages inside.

Rabin, against the advice of some members in his cabinet who “believed Israel should cede to [the terrorists’] ultimatum,” instructed his general to begin planning a rescue mission.¹⁵⁰ The lack of operational intelligence regarding the situation at the Ugandan airport was a major complicating factor, so the Prime Minister called on the Mossad for their assistance to fill in the informational gaps. For any rescue mission, it is crucial to determine ahead of time both the layout of the facility itself to familiarize themselves with the environment and the level of armed resistance they may encounter along the way. To acquire this information, the Mossad employed multiple avenues of intelligence, and even drew upon the knowledge of Israeli citizens who were not a part of the state's Intelligence apparatus. Luckily, a well-known construction company in Israel called Solel Boneh had *built* the airport in years past when Uganda and Israel were still

¹⁴⁸ Marc E. Vargo, *The Mossad: Six Landmark Missions of the Israeli Intelligence Agency, 1960-1990*, 169.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid, 170.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

on friendly diplomatic terms, and the building plans were made readily available to Israeli military and intelligence officials in both Jerusalem and Tel Aviv.¹⁵¹

Solel Boneh's assistance in providing information critical to the hostage rescue mission demonstrates how ordinary Jews *as well as* career defense officials and politicians alike sought to help the hostages who were also their Jewish brethren. To gauge the level of resistance on the ground at the airport, the Mossad dispatched one of its units to inspect the former headquarters of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) in Entebbe – one of the terrorist groups with which the hijackers were affiliated. Once there, the unit discovered the former headquarters to have been completely vacated, suggesting that resistance to a potential Israeli raid would be minimal.¹⁵² While their finding was a positive development, the hostage situation at the airport increased in urgency as the victim's captors "examined captives' passports and separat[ed] the Israelis in the crowd from the hostages of other countries."¹⁵³ In doing so, the terrorists segregated Jewish hostages, Israeli or otherwise, from those who were gentile, which was both a menacing and ominous indicator of the terrorists' intentions. The terrorists' segregation of Jewish from gentile passengers underscores the anti-Semitic nature of the attack, rather than it having been exclusively motivated by anti-Israel bias.

The very next day, as the prime minister assessed the situation and whether or not a rescue mission would be a viable alternative to ceding to the terrorists' demands and granting them the terms of their ultimatum. At the same time, Israeli officials began

¹⁵¹ Marc E. Vargo, *The Mossad: Six Landmark Missions of the Israeli Intelligence Agency, 1960-1990* 172.

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Ibid, 173.

planting disinformation into the terrorists' orbit, "suggesting that Israel believed it had no choice but to give in" to their demands.¹⁵⁴

As Rabin and his cabinet evaluated the situation and considered all possible maneuverable options, it eventually became clear that only a rescue mission by air would be feasible. The idea that gained traction among officials called for a "team of commandos arriving in Uganda in the middle of night in a small fleet of Hercules C-130 planes to liberate the hostages."¹⁵⁵ Fortuitously, one of the non-Israeli passengers released by the terrorists, a former French military officer, proved extremely helpful as "his prodigious memory provided a wealth of intelligence that had been completely lacking to date."¹⁵⁶ With his help, the Mossad learned exactly where in the dilapidated terminal the hostages were located, as well as the locations at which the terrorists could often be found gathering. The former officer also confirmed the success of Israel's disinformation campaign by assuring the IDF that the terrorist cell, "was convinced that the Israeli government was preparing to concede and had therefore let down its guard."¹⁵⁷

On Thursday, July 1, the day of the terrorists' ultimatum deadline, "the military had not yet devised a strategy for neutralizing the terrorists and removing the hostages," a fact that Rabin took into his calculus when deciding what Israel's next move would be.¹⁵⁸ Critics of the rescue mission proposal cited the operational challenges inherent to conducting a mission so far away from Israel's shores. The families of those taken hostage also advocated against the idea of a rescue mission because the lives of their

¹⁵⁴ Marc E. Vargo, *The Mossad: Six Landmark Missions of the Israeli Intelligence Agency, 1960-1990*, 174.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid, 175.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid, 176.

loved ones were at stake. Although Rabin favored a rescue operation, he called his cabinet into session hours before the deadline and reiterated to its members the gravity of the situation: the hostages would be executed if Israel failed to meet the terms of the ultimatum. In the face of this grim reality, the cabinet agreed unanimously to fulfill the terrorists' demands; however, Israel would pursue a dual course of action.¹⁵⁹ As Rabin's administration began to arrange for the release of the prisoners, the military readied itself for the impending rescue mission.

On Friday, July 2, the IDF and the Mossad continued collecting and sharing information that later proved crucial to the mission's operational success. One of such pieces of information pertained to the Entebbe airport's radar protocols and its practice of intermittently shutting down the runway lights.¹⁶⁰ While the IDF readied the aircraft assigned to the mission, the lead pilot practiced "blind landings" in preparation for the possibility that the runway lights would be shut off after sundown. Meanwhile, "the Mossad assigned a specialty unit to modify a Mercedes Benz so it would appear identical to the one in which Idi Amin was known to travel."¹⁶¹ With the airport's blueprints in the hands of Israeli strategists and knowledge of the captives' location garnered from former hostages, Sayeret Matkal commandos were prepared to deploy for their extraction.

Operation Entebbe entailed serious potential risk, for its failure – or even its success – could have resulted in a major international incident. Unsure exactly of how the terrorists would react upon discovering the presence of Israeli forces, strategists believed there would be a high number of casualties among the hostages with an estimated death

¹⁵⁹ Marc E. Vargo, *The Mossad: Six Landmark Missions of the Israeli Intelligence Agency, 1960-1990*, 176.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid, 177.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

toll of up to twenty-five percent. This figure caused Rabin and his administration to hesitate greenlighting the mission while the IDF and Sayeret Matkal waited anxiously for authorization. By 1:20pm, authorities gave the order for Operation Entebbe to commence despite the fact that it had yet to be sanctioned by the cabinet.¹⁶²

Israel mobilized an impressive number of forces to meet the challenge that was this mission. Five planes departed from Lod airport in Tel Aviv at five-minute intervals in order to avoid the suspicion that may have arisen should they have departed together as a fleet.¹⁶³ Of these five planes, four of them were Hercules C-130 transports carrying the Sayeret Matkal and the IDF support troops that would land at the airport. The fifth aircraft served as the mission command and control center charged with the task of relaying information to the Israeli forces on the ground from the military headquarters back in Tel Aviv. Two additional planes were dispatched to Kenya; one was stationed at Nairobi airport to provide medical treatment to casualties after the rescue, the other was stationed in Kenya's Chalbi Desert to refuel all the other aircraft before their journey back to Israel.¹⁶⁴ Together, the Hercules C-130s were carrying: twenty-nine Sayeret Matkal commandos, fifty members of the elite Golani Brigade, seventeen paratroopers, a ten-person medical crew, a ten-person refueling crew, four Armored Personnel Carriers with a total crew of sixteen men, and nine additional vehicles. Jeeps and Land Rovers were selected for the mission, but the most important vehicle by far was the Mercedes refashioned by the Mossad in the image of Amin's own personal Mercedes.

¹⁶² Marc E. Vargo, *The Mossad: Six Landmark Missions of the Israeli Intelligence Agency, 1960-1990*, 178.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid, 179.

In hindsight, one might consider this amount of firepower to have been excessive given the task that we now know lay ahead of them. However, this level of force was necessary because the mission was set to unfold far away from Israel and would entail confronting both the terrorist cell *plus* another country's armed forces (Uganda). Yonatan Netanyahu, one of the principal planners of the operation and Commander of the Sayeret Matkal, designed a plan of attack led by elite commandos and supported by conventional military forces. As the planes passed through Ethiopian airspace, the Israeli cabinet's authorization arrived in the form of a cryptic message in the event it had been intercepted: "Mazel tov. Authorized. Good luck."¹⁶⁵

Right after midnight struck (local East Africa time) the lead plane carrying Israel's commandos known as Hercules One landed in the midst of a violent rainstorm. The severe downpour obfuscated the runway lights, but the lead pilot's "blind landing" exercises beforehand had equipped him to land the plane safely.¹⁶⁶

As soon as the lead plane hit the tarmac, "only a few seconds elapsed before [the commandos] were on their way to the terminal."¹⁶⁷ The guise of the refashioned Mercedes succeeded in fooling Amin's forces as they were duped into thinking their president's car had driven by them because the vehicles looked identical to one another. All but one of the sentries were tricked into ignoring the vehicle, and when that sentry aimed his rifle at the convoy, two Israelis panicked and fired at him with their suppressors attached. The sentry falls, but not before ringing out a shot whose sound of gunfire alerted everyone in the area to the Israelis' presence. At once, the Ugandans shut down the power, turned

¹⁶⁵ Marc E. Vargo, *The Mossad: Six Landmark Missions of the Israeli Intelligence Agency, 1960-1990*, 180.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid, 181.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid, 182.

off the lights, and a firefight in the dark ensued.¹⁶⁸ The commando unit split into three separate groups. Storming into the old terminal through separate entrances, they gathered in the room where the hostages were being held. As the IDF support troops rushed to take control of the overall facility, blocking the entrances and exits and securing the runway, the Sayeret Matkal liquidated the terrorists and evacuated the hostages.

Charging into the old terminal, the commandos' brash arrival had bewildered the terrorists. Confusion descended upon the enemy combatants, briefly immobilizing the terrorist cell. The commandos acted nimbly as, "the fighters who had burst into the hall shouted warnings in Hebrew to the captives to lie on the ground and they then wiped out the Palestinian Arab terrorists in the hall within a few seconds with crackling volleys of automatic fire...the terrorists had no had time to hurl grenades at the soldiers or the hostages."¹⁶⁹ Within forty-five seconds of the commandos entering the old terminal, all of the terrorists had been killed. Tragically, two of the hostages were accidentally shot and killed amid the crossfire.

When the terrorist threat was eliminated, the newly liberated hostages sprinted to the idling Israeli airplanes awaiting their rescue. Yonatan Netanyahu, the unit commander, had not been as lucky; his wounds were life-threatening, and he succumbed to his injuries thirty minutes later. Ironically, Yoni Netanyahu, who played an outsize role in planning what turned out to be this highly successful operation, also turned out to be the only Israeli casualty suffered throughout the course of the mission apart from the hostages.¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁸ Marc E. Vargo, *The Mossad: Six Landmark Missions of the Israeli Intelligence Agency, 1960-1990*, 181.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid, 182.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid, 183.

Ultimately, the entire mission was completed in under one hour on that day, July 4, 1976, which happened to coincide with the bicentennial of the United States. The return of the hostages ushered in a wave of joy all over the country that rivaled the national sentiments of pride following Israel's victory in the War of 1967. The hostage rescue operation had significance for Jewish state beyond that of saving the lives of its citizens, for it also held immense symbolic value for the Jewish people as a whole.¹⁷¹ The mission's success helped send a message to the world that anyone who oppresses the Jewish people will be held to account. This was also a major departure from the decline in national morale after enemy troops launched surprise attacks on Israel's Sinai Peninsula and the Golan Heights on Yom Kippur three years earlier in 1973. As such, Operation Entebbe renewed the Israeli citizenry's pride in its country's military. At the same time, other countries were more perturbed by Israel's endeavor.¹⁷²

Following the mission, two draft resolutions reached the desk of the United Nations Security Council, both contending that, "the operation violated the rule of non-aggression between nations," and both echoing the rhetoric of UN Secretary-General Kurt Waldheim: "...this constitutes a serious violation of the sovereignty of a State Member of the UN."¹⁷³ Waldheim was far from unbiased, however, as he failed to mention that Uganda had not been a neutral bystander throughout the ordeal and that Idi Amin's troops had been observed cooperating with the members of the terrorist cell. This would prove unsurprising in the future as he was later exposed as having been an intelligence officer in Germany's Wehrmacht during the Holocaust where his "initials seen on reports about

¹⁷¹ Marc E. Vargo, *The Mossad: Six Landmark Missions of the Israeli Intelligence Agency, 1960-1990*, 184.

¹⁷² Ibid.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

mass deportations of Jews from Greece to death camps, the bloody suppression of partisans, the use of Italian troops as forced labor after Italy's surrender, and the 'special treatment' ordered for captured British commandos'.¹⁷⁴ In characteristic fashion, instead of acknowledging the success of an international hostage crisis, Western nations at the UN attempted to shift the global body's attention to the problem posed by international terrorism and the need to address it while at the same time condemning the Israeli raid. Neither resolution passed the Security Council.¹⁷⁵

Aside from the politics of international relations that plays out at the United Nations, experts from all over the world concurred that Israel's Operation Entebbe had been a "brilliant piece of work" from both an intelligence and military standpoint. The mission's success demonstrated how various components of Israel's defense infrastructure could unite and produce outstanding results in a brief period of time. The impact of the operation itself was powerful and permanent, especially its "long term effect on air piracy against the Jewish state."¹⁷⁶

In addition to rescuing the hostages, Israel also pursued the terrorist mastermind of the affair, Wadia Hadad, who, "seemed certain to be planning more attacks on Israelis...and the Mossad intended to erase him first."¹⁷⁷ One of his associates was recruited to deliver the fatal blow while being careful not to leave behind evidence that could be traced back to Israel. The Mossad had discovered that Hadad had a love for fine chocolate. So, a year later after the rescue, the Mossad instructed his associate they had

¹⁷⁴ Marc E. Vargo, *The Mossad: Six Landmark Missions of the Israeli Intelligence Agency, 1960-1990*, 184.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid, 186.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

recruited to deliver tainted Godiva chocolate to him. The assassination attempt was successful as he suspected nothing while he steadily lost weight and died only a month later. As such, the State of Israel “prevailed over the organization that had abducted its citizens holding them hostage and equally important, it had ensured that such an offense would not recur. And in no small measure it had succeeded because of the supreme efficiency of the Mossad and its affiliates and their laudable teamwork alongside Israel’s military establishment.”¹⁷⁸ Israel’s success in Operation Entebbe not only deterred future external aggression, it also demonstrated Jewish self-determination and agency before the eyes of the world, effectively broadcasting the message that this politicking people, formerly without a territorial home, is now a true force with which to be reckoned.

What made Jewish actions unique? / Overview

The efforts that went into Israel’s counter-terrorism mission of rescuing the hostages aboard Air France flight 139 were largely unprecedented in Jewish history. While events like the Damascus Affair and the movement for Soviet Jewry illustrate a trend in Jewish collective action in times of communal crisis, Israel’s Operation Entebbe represents an added dimension to this historical phenomenon since it was carried out by the only nation-state that fits the paradigm of Jews assisting other Jews – that is, the State of Israel. The attack that was the hijacking of the flight and subsequent hostage-taking of its passengers was an act of asymmetrical warfare leveled against the Jewish

¹⁷⁸ Marc E. Vargo, *The Mossad: Six Landmark Missions of the Israeli Intelligence Agency, 1960-1990* 186.

state.¹⁷⁹ As a result, there were no diplomatic levers to politically maneuver in the background because the only ones with whom the Israelis could effectively negotiate were the few individual terrorists directly involved in the plot. For the most part, this precluded the same kind of political machinations that constituted the efforts of Jews in Europe to resolve the Damascus Affair and the attempts by North American Jews to rescue Soviet Jewry. Instead, Israel saved the hostages in Entebbe by acting decisively and in a military fashion rather than conceding to the terrorists' ultimatum that would have encouraged terror attacks in the future. Furthermore, Israel's lack of diplomatic relations with the African nation also precluded the opportunity for Israel to negotiate with the captors.

One major complicating factor throughout this ordeal was the fact that the terrorists, the main party with which to negotiate, were independent of the nation that hosted them despite the Ugandan military's eager cooperation in working with the terrorists. There was no central body for Israel to negotiate with because Idi Amin and his government were not directly responsible for the holding of the hostages or their release. The lack of a diplomatic solution lent further credence to the idea of conducting a rescue mission amid cabinet deliberations about how best to bring the hostages home safely. One of the hesitations in executing the mission was that it would require Israel to violate another foreign country's sovereignty and open the door to potential diplomatic repercussions. Israel's Operation Entebbe succeeded in spite of this risk, and afterward, it gained the international praise and recognition that it deserves. Moreover, western nations described the mission as one of "self-defense." By that same logic, so too was

¹⁷⁹ Sexton, E. (2016, November 17). *asymmetrical warfare*. *Encyclopedia Britannica*. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/asymmetrical-warfare>.

the Damascus Affair and the movement for Soviet Jewry organized in “self-defense” of the greater Jewish people, and such was the motivation for Jews to come to their aid. In the same way that Cremieux and Montefiore traveled to Damascus and the undercover emissaries did to the Soviet Union, so too did IDF and IAF soldiers with knowledge of Uganda step up, as “they arrived, on their own initiative one after another, during the night and until the operation itself.” Their assistance was critical, and without their help, Operation Entebbe might never have happened.¹⁸⁰

Conclusion

Subject to the rule of others throughout much of its history, the people of Israel have managed to band together and thrive in whatever society would allow for it. As regimes changed and economies shifted, the Jews of the world often found themselves powerless in the face of these changes and frequently targeted as the scapegoats. While such a description might evoke the image of a docile people, the truth behind the matter remains much more complicated because the Jewish people have rarely historically behaved in a docile fashion. As has been explored in this paper, the Jewish people, internally, have a rich history of political activism at times when the continuity of Jewish life in any particular region comes under threat. The Damascus Affair of 1840, the movement for Soviet Jewry in the late twentieth century, and Israel’s Operation Entebbe constitute three examples of such activism. Examined collectively, these three grand-scale instances of Jewish

¹⁸⁰ Gilboa, Lapid, & Erlich, *Israel’s Silent Defender: An Inside Look at Sixty Years of Israeli Intelligence*, 90.

political maneuvering are suggestive of a historical arc that contradicts the stubborn and prevailing narrative that is “the passive Jew.”

The exploration of this question today is a particularly important one, I believe, for contemporary Reform communities here in the United States of America. As a religious group that prides itself on its flexibility with respect to Jewish practice and matters of normative boundaries and ritual law, a binding and *abiding* undercurrent is necessary to sustain a level of kinship and cohesiveness from one community to the next. Reform communities are unencumbered by the strictures of traditional Jewish law, but at the same time, those strictures also double as communal scaffolds on which the foundation of the community lies. From Jewish history, another enduring principle emerges as a supplement to the lack of those scaffolds – that is, the notion of a Jewish political tradition that comes most clearly into focus at times of precarity. As Walzer defines this tradition in terms of a shared pool of traditional sources that interplay throughout different Jewish communities over the course of Jewish history, the Jewish “political tradition” rooted in Jewish *action* at times of crisis expresses itself in more practical terms. While Walzer describes this political tradition as a self-referential process of textual interpretation, the three case studies analyzed earlier demonstrate historically how such politicking occurred throughout Jewish communities *without* their having to consult or engage with traditional sources.

The crisis that was the Damascus Affair of 1840 required an urgent, tangible response to the false accusations of ritual murder not only because Damascus’ Jews were unfairly in danger, but because of the fear that the accusation would spread to other Jewish communities if it continued to propagate unfettered. Likewise, the political tradition

described by Walzer would not have been helpful to those who sought to help Jews as part of the movement for Soviet Jewry, for while drawing on traditional Jewish texts may yield insight into life's challenges, it was the efforts of those brave enough to connect with Jews trapped behind the Iron Curtain that helped maintain the spark of Jewish life there. Finally, the lack of diplomatic framework through which Israel might have negotiated the return of hostages aboard Air France flight 139 contributed to the government's decision to instead pursue a more aggressive strategy with the military. The hostages were able to be rescued because of the Jewish people's modern political agency, manifest in the State of Israel, as well as the strength of its military prowess, rather than deferring to traditional Jewish sources for guidance and direction. As such, this action-oriented tradition of Jewish politicking might just add the compelling nuance that inspires the next generation of modern Reform Jews to continue in that very same tradition – from generation to generation.

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