

# Jewish Loyalties, Citizenship, and Politics in Israel and the Diaspora

*Olena Bagno-Moldavski*

**Jews are a people full of paradoxes.** Against all odds they survived, landless and stateless, through centuries of political limbo. As individuals they suffered because of their religious, ethnic, and cultural dissimilarity, but these same differences secured Jewish longevity as a collective. Depending on the level of legitimacy given by a state to the community, Jews eager to advance their political careers either relied on Jewish communal structures or ignored them. The establishment of the State of Israel added another wrinkle to this already complex relationship between Jewish politicians and the state. New existential questions have emerged, and political science does not always have satisfactory answers.

What does it mean for an individual to enter politics when he or she belongs to a majority nation as opposed to being part of the minority? And what does it matter vis-à-vis his/her political career that in one's own land a citizen does not speak the language of the place, while in the Diaspora the person is completely indistinguishable from the locals? Does it help to "play the Jewish card" to enter local politics in the Diaspora? Is it the same as playing an "immigrant card" or an "ethnic-origin card" to enter Israeli politics? These and other related questions should be addressed, and not only for the sake of satisfying intellectual curiosity. Making sense of the relations between Jews and the states in the Diaspora and in Israel contributes to our understanding of the meaning of citizenship, of being a non-citizen, and of being a Jew in a Jewish nation-state and a Jew in a foreign nation-state. It also sheds light on ontological questions related to the nature of concepts of loyalty, collective responsibility, and kinship.

Jews who originated from the former Russian Empire played important roles in the State of Israel several times during the 20th century. The "founding fathers" brought

with them socialist ideas inspired by Russian political movements of all kinds (Bolsheviks, Mensheviks, Socialist-Revolutionaries, liberals, monarchists, constitutional monarchists, conservatives, et al.). Forty years after Israel's establishment as a state, a million former Soviet citizens brought to their new country the political culture that was a product of the Soviet system. However, Israel was only one of their destinations: Soviet and post-Soviet Jews immigrated to Germany, Australia, Canada, the United States, and other Western countries. A minority chose to stay in the former Soviet republics, despite political chaos, failing healthcare, economic hardships, and rising crime rates.

Analyzing the political behavior of these three groups of Jews—those who left for Israel, those who chose other destinations (my research focuses on Germany), and those who decided to stay in the former Soviet Union (in particular in Ukraine)—enhances our insight into individuals' adjustment to different political opportunities.

The political life of Jews from the former Soviet Union in Germany, Israel, and Ukraine differs from country to country in many respects. In this essay, I focus on three elements: citizenship, loyalty, and the way former Soviet citizens make use of communal organizations for political purposes. Differences in the social contract between Jewish citizens and the nation-state as expressed in different perceptions of good citizenship constitute the key to understanding the political behavior of Jewish public figures in these three countries.

In post-Soviet Ukraine, Jews, like all others, received citizenship. Ukraine is a state where Jews, however assimilated they may be, are not part of the ethnic majority collective. They are a minority that throughout Ukraine's history has had to prove its loyalty. Jewish politicians are distrusted and suspected by

their political opponents and elements of the general public if not of treason, then double standards and intrinsic loyalty to the Jewish collective at the expense of the Ukrainian state. Therefore, Jews who enter politics in modern-day Ukraine—and compared to their numbers in the general population, relatively many do—deliberately downplay their Jewish roots and instead emphasize belonging to the Ukrainian nation. They do not rely on Jewish organizations to get elected, and wherever possible choose to run as independent candidates in single-member districts rather than as party nominees. Once in politics, Jewish public figures create their own Jewish organizations or support existing ones. However, to strengthen their legitimacy as Ukrainian politicians, they usually also support non-Jewish groups and initiatives on a larger or similar scale as Jewish ones.

Thus, the Ukrainian model of citizenship for rank-and-file Jews is as inclusive as the Israeli model. But when Jews enter politics in Ukraine, they reemphasize loyalty to the Ukrainian people by assuming an all-national agenda, and, paradoxically, by being as non-partisan as possible. Paraphrasing Plutarch, Jewish politicians in Ukraine should, like Caesar's wife, be above suspicion of holding ethnic loyalties.

Jews from the former Soviet Union were invited to live in Germany in the 1990s, and to maintain their Jewishness as part of the “social contract” between the group and the German state. Germany is a nation-state, though it struggles with finding a way to incorporate a de facto multiethnic society into a rigid model of a coherent nation. Representatives of ethnic minorities in Germany, including Turks, Italians, and Poles, would feel uncomfortable relying on ethnic organizations to make their way up the ranks of major national political parties. However, the genocide of European Jewry during World War II places Jews in Germany in a

position where the need to prove their loyalty to the state is much less urgent than it is in Ukraine (or than it would be for other minorities inside Germany). Jews are not required to be politically loyal to the German nation. To the contrary, the state wants them to be loyal to their Jewish *volk*. The relationship between the state and the Jewish community is more structured and institutionalized compared to Ukraine. Therefore, politicians and public figures of Jewish origin feel comfortable deploying their Jewish ethnicity and Jewish organizations for political purposes.

In Israel, Jewish émigrés from the former Soviet republics receive citizenship as an entrance ticket to the national collective. The paradox is that they may have little or no knowledge of local realities in general and political life in particular, but even at the outset their loyalty to the new state is never questioned. Former Soviets are loyal Israeli citizens and are part of the ruling majority. Yet, as in Ukraine, those Soviet Jews who came to Israel in the 1990s and became politicians tend to adopt all-national agendas and downplay their immigrant status; the Israeli state does not legitimize Soviet immigrants as a group, and this spills over to immigrant organizations. Organizations that unite former Soviet Jews reflect a lack of integration into society by those who immigrated. As a result, immigrant politicians quickly stopped relying on immigrant organizations to advance their political careers.

Overall, the political behavior of former Soviet Jewish public figures in the Diaspora and Israel differs depending on the relationship between the respective states and the group. Paradoxically, the political behavior of Jewish politicians in two diasporas (Ukrainian and German) differs from one another, with the Ukrainian case bearing more similarities to the situation in Israel. In both Ukraine and Israel, the states prefer to ignore the collective of

former Soviet Jews, albeit for entirely different reasons. In contrast, in Germany, the state encourages and supports the Jewish collective communal structure. Therefore former Soviet Jewish politicians in three countries adopt different election strategies, ignoring communal structures in Israel and Ukraine and relying on them in Germany.