



## Diasporic Identities and EU Civil Society: Jews, Muslims and Israel

### The Jewish Communities Relations with their National States and the EU Institutions - The Challenges of Representation

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*Ben-Gurion University, Beersheva, 24 May 2009*

Thank you first of all to the Centre for the Study of European Politics and Society, and to JPR, for organizing this seminar, and especially for allowing me to come to this second installment of the series.

First, allow me to put my topic in perspective: Representing Europe's Jews sounds like a huge task, but in reality, we're talking about some 1.1-1.5 million Jews (I am looking here at the European Union). Relative to Israel and North America, this is a fairly small portion of the world's Jewish population.

Moreover, of those Jews, no more than about 20% are members of the various communities. In fact, in most places the only organisations that manage to attract more than this 20%, are the Jewish social work organisations, which do not deal with European politics, such as Jewish Care in the UK or JMW in the Netherlands.

This means that representation is a very iffy business: how does one represent people that are not members, and whose voices are therefore not represented even at national level?

At national level, this is already problematic. Witness for instance Belgium, where there are three umbrella organisations, all of which claim to represent the Jews: one Dutch-speaking, one French-speaking, and one Orthodox-religious in the European sense, which is actually run by the state.

At European level, then, representing the Jews is even more difficult. In this presentation, I want to briefly look at three parts of this equation:

Firstly: the Jews, or if you wish, the representees.

Secondly: the institutions where the representation takes place.

And Thirdly: Jewish organisations at European level.

### The Jews of Europe

Jews are a difficult group to define: not a race, not just a religion, not just an ethnicity.

European Jews were, as has been described among others also by Steven Beller<sup>1</sup>, an ethnic community before the ethnically-based nation states even existed, and therefore they were what we now call transnational: willfully ignorant of petty little things like borders. This *Schicksalsgemeinschaft* was literally a community of fate, as fate decided

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<sup>1</sup> Steven Beller, *Is Europe Good for the Jews? Jews and the Pluralist Tradition in Historical Perspective* (Institute for Jewish Policy Research: London, April 2008), pp. 2-3

in which country you lived, which ruler expelled you from your homestead, and where you would end up next.

They were Europeans *avant-la-lettre*, but they seem to an extent to have lost some of that quality. As Jews became more integrated and emancipated in the European nation states, and as they wholeheartedly bought into the idea of nation states, they left behind their old trans-national habits and attitudes.

In the past, to quote from Beller<sup>2</sup>, “*Jews, sometimes against their will, played an emancipatory and leavening role in modern European culture.*” Did they also play this role in modern European politics? It looks like they did, and when European countries were formed, Jews played a role in this and became nationally focused. This would be a logical outcome of emancipation: being granted civil rights like everyone else creates a dependency, a certain loyalty.

As a side-note, and without having done any research into it, I would even venture to add another factor: Zionism.

As the idea of the nation state gathered steam, and European national entities created countries, the Jews of Europe realized that they could get a similar entity for themselves: a Jewish State. Perhaps, demanding a nation state for themselves caused them to start thinking in a particular political paradigm, a model that is more nationalist and less trans-national. This is simply a question I want to throw out there, not something I have studied.

So, back to Europe: slowly, the European Union is learning to cater to what in America is already common: the hyphenated or multiple identity. It is becoming more and more common to see, for instance, a Polish-British plumber; a Nigerian-Austrian professor; a Jewish-Dutch publicist.

This is an expected and logical outcome of the process of European unification, of the so-called freedom of movement in the EU, and of migration.

European Jews are slowly regaining this quality, which was theirs to begin with: We see that young people are interested in European Jewish parties and other social events, and a little further down the line, they more often move to a different country and marry someone from a different community. And we see that the European Jewish organisations are slowly developing and becoming more interested in European affairs, which we will get to in a moment. European Jews are becoming slowly more comfortable with the idea that they can be Jews, and Italians, and Europeans at the same time. In this sense, Jewish Europeans seem to be not much different from all other Europeans, their history notwithstanding, though it might be interesting to research whether Jews are more likely than others to be at ease with this idea of multiple identities.

But, as was pointed out by Diana Pinto during the previous seminar, there is not quite yet a European Jewish identity. This will take time to develop.

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<sup>2</sup> Idem, p. 6

## The European Institutions

Equally still under development are the European institutions. The European project, which started soon after the war, is still experiencing growing pains and is trying to chart its course in a unified Europe.

With regards to its relations with the Jewish communities of Europe, the European Union's attitude is not much different from that of its Member States, or from other international organisations such as the United Nations or the Council of Europe.

This attitude basically comes down to the fact that these governments and intergovernmental organisations would like to hear NGOs speak with a single, unequivocal voice.

In an ideal world, they want to receive a clear document, endorsed by all of civil society, and not have to engage with a multitude of opinions. This would make their lives a lot easier.

For example, and I will step briefly beyond the EU, let's look at the UN Durban Review Conference, which took place just a month ago. Already in Durban in 2001, at the World Conference Against Racism, the signs were clear: an NGO-Forum cannot come out with a single and clear document that reflects all of the third sector. The failure in 2001 notwithstanding, the United Nations attempted to set up a similar system for its Review Conference, whereby a small number of NGOs was to speak for civil society as a whole. In fact, the only thing most of the NGOs present did indeed agree upon, was that this was not a good idea. And thankfully, it did not happen. NGOs spoke on behalf of themselves alone.

A similar, and less noxious example, comes from the European Commission: On May 11th, President Barroso, together with the European Parliament's President, was to receive a group of about 20 European religious leaders for his annual dialogue meeting. The Council of Europe, by the way, organizes similar meetings, whereby Jews are invited as a religious group. Mostly, they end up being represented at these gatherings by the religious leadership. Secular Jews, the vast majority of identified Jews in Europe today, are skipped over. The purpose of this Commission meeting, besides being a photo opportunity, is of course to show that Christian, Muslim and Jewish leaders as well as the European Union are on the same page – that they all are worried about climate change (last year's theme) and about the financial crisis (this year's theme). It exemplifies in a picture-perfect manner the motto of the Union: United in Diversity.

The European Union, and in this case it is no different from its Member States or many other countries and organisations, picks the representative NGOs it wants to hear. And so, when this year at the last moment, the Conference of European Rabbis, the religious Jewish organisation of Barroso's choice, refused to participate because their Muslim counterparts "belong to organizations affiliated to the international Muslim Brotherhood"<sup>3</sup>, this threw a spanner in the propaganda works of the Commission. Thus, the lone Chabad-maverick (not affiliated with the CER) who did show up to the dialogue meeting, was suddenly made the Jewish guest of honour, preserving the façade of unity.

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<sup>3</sup> Conference of European Rabbis, *Statement on behalf of the Conference of European Rabbis*, 11 May 2009

## Jewish Organisations at European level

This recent episode brings us neatly into the third section of this presentation: the current state of play at European-Jewish level.

I would argue that there are two kinds of Jewish NGOs around at European level today: those that claim to represent the Jews of Europe, and those that claim to have a certain expertise and knowledge about the issues they advocate.

The first category consists of a number of organisations: the European Jewish Congress, which includes as its members the various Jewish communities on the continent; the aforementioned Conference of European Rabbis, which federates Orthodox rabbis; the World Jewish Congress, which has an office in Brussels and which co-operates with the European Jewish Congress; and the European Union of Jewish Students.

From what we see at ground level (a funny expression when related to the European Union), these organisations are often largely reactive. This is logical, as they have to consult with their membership on political issues, and they are therefore forced to expend much energy on internal processes. Thus, it is easier to find out what issues are topical, and to react to those in emergency mode. This way, the consultation with the membership can be done relatively swiftly and without too much intervention of national interests.

That is to say: brief, urgent and targeted campaigns on specific issues work well. A recent example is the issue of *shechita*, which was debated over the last months in the EU's new regulation on agriculture. The CER, together with an *ad hoc* coalition called Shechita EU, worked hard to get an amendment in the text that essentially guarantees the rights of religious groups to slaughter animals in a different way. The amendment was adopted, and *shechita* and *zabicha* are safe again. A similar example is the work done by the Committee for the Preservation of Jewish Cemeteries in Europe. This organisation, in co-operation with the EJC and the CER and local communities, springs into action whenever Jewish graves are under threat of being dug up.

A lot of this work is done behind the scenes, and the political agenda is set, not by the organisations themselves but by external actors: in the case of *shechita*, this was the EU. In the case of the Iranian atomic bomb, it is Iran. In the case of the Middle East it is whoever you would like to blame. But the agenda is not set by the representative European Jewish organisations, which is why I call them mostly reactive.

The other category of organisations is made up of those who do not claim to represent the Jews, but who claim a certain expertise. An example of this is CEJI. We do not represent anyone except our membership. Yet our knowledge in the fields of discrimination and education allows our voice to be heard at European level.

Other examples of this include B'nai B'rith, but also organisations such as Independent Jewish Voices, and non-European organisations such as the ADL and the American Jewish Committee. And Chabad. What these organisations have in common is that they more or less set their own agenda. Whether this is about international relations (AJC and B'nai B'rith), combating defamation (ADL), or Israel (Independent Jewish Voices): they have a topic of interest, and they lobby to get their voices heard.

Chabad, by the way, is a difficult animal in this sense. They really represent no one except their own group, and yet, especially at EU-level, they purport to speak on behalf of all of the Jews.

So, to quote Michael Galchinsky, the Jews do not “*engage in a participatory, bottom-up process by which individual Jews would be polled to find consensus issues. Instead, modern Jews organize their politics through a variety of associations, none of which represents the whole, and each of which brings its own constituency and mission to the table.*”<sup>4</sup>

This is a nice summary of the state of affairs at European level. So allow me to conclude with two observations:

Firstly: the representative Jewish organisations are not necessarily representative. The CER is Orthodox only. The Committee for the Preservation of Jewish Cemeteries in Europe is self-appointed. And the EJC is likely to lose ground as affiliation rates drop further, and their voice becomes one of many Jewish voices, independent or otherwise. Meanwhile, governments around the world, including the European Union, will have to come to terms with the fact that they cannot expect civil society, much less the Jews, to speak with a single voice.

Secondly: the other Jewish organisations will gain ground, as they can indeed engage more proactively with issues, leading the way on matters in which they have accumulated an expertise. And of course, if anyone is interested in setting up their own interest group and raises the money to pay a lobbyist, they are free to do so. This is happening more and more, and that allows me to finish on the age-old Jewish dictum:

*Two Jews, three opinions. And four organisations.*

Thank You.

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<sup>4</sup> Michael Galchinsky, *Is There a Global Jewish Politics?* (Institute for Jewish Policy Research: London, January 2009), p. 1