Behavior Unbecoming a Communist: Jewish Religious Practice in Soviet Minsk

Elissa Bemporad

ABSTRACT

By focusing on Minsk, a historic Jewish demographic, religious, and political center in pre-revolutionary Russia and capital of the Belorussian Soviet Socialist Republic after 1919, this article examines two aspects of Jewish religious practice in the inter-war period: the production of kosher meat, and the practice of circumcision. As the persistence of kosher butchering and circumcision during the 1920s and mid-1930s reveals, Jewish life did not change radically in the immediate aftermath of the Bolshevik Revolution; even some of the most devoted Communists maintained an allegience to specific features of Jewish self-identification. A study of religious practice in this Soviet city provides a window into the fragmented lives of post-1917 Russian Jews, illuminating the complexity of their acculturation into Soviet society and showing that religious identification was common and multifaceted.

Key words: Minsk, kosher butchering, circumcision

Situated between the Low Market and Cathedral Square, and home to numerous pre-Revolutionary Jewish religious and communal institutions, the Jewish quarter of Minsk, also known as Nemiga, was the arena of a violent clash in the spring of 1922. The conflict broke out between two factions of the local Jewish population. On one side were the students and faculty of the Jewish Pedagogical Training College, or Evpedtekhnikum, a Soviet institution intended for the creation of a cadre of communist teachers who would serve as instructors in the newly established network of Yiddish

Elissa Bemporad, "Behavior Unbecoming a Communist: Religious Practice in Soviet Minsk," *Jewish Social Studies: History, Culture, Society* n.s. 14, no. 2 (Winter 2008): 1–31

schools in the city and district of Minsk. The founders of the Evpedtekhnikum set up the new Soviet Jewish institution in a two-story brick building located at the intersection between Rakovskaia and Zamkovaia Streets, or, as the Jews used to call it in Yiddish, *Shlos gas*. This had been the building of the city's Talmud-Torah, the traditional Jewish school built by the local Jewish community for the education of the poorest children in Minsk.[1] Because of its location in a densely populated Jewish area, the Talmud-Torah was the ideal venue for spreading communism on the Jewish street.

The other participants in the strife were ordinary residents of the Jewish quarter: mainly workers, artisans, and small peddlers, most of whom were committed to some Jewish religious practices and probably angry at Communist officials for confiscating their synagogues and transforming them into clubs and warehouses.[2] Whether they were strictly observant or lenient in their adherence to Judaism, these "petit bourgeois" residents of Nemiga viewed the Talmud-Torah as their own collective property, which they and their ancestors had used since its establishment in the early nineteenth century. They expressed their resentment over the seizure of the Talmud-Torah by entering the building's courtyard and disrupting classes.[3]

On May 7, 1922, the students of the new Pedagogical Training College tried to chase out of the Communist institution a number of young Jews who had stepped into the building uninvited. When asked to leave, the young "criminals"—as they were referred to in the official report of the clash—began to throw stones at the students and the windows of the Talmud-Torah's building. As soon as the "red students" caught one of the "criminals" and came to blows with him, a large group of local residents gathered on Rakovskaia Street in heated protest. According to one witness, a hundred people surrounded the building, and shouts of "Communists are thrashing children" echoed throughout the street. The uproar ceased only when Yudl Frankfurt, the Training College's director, instructed the students to end the fighting and return to the courtyard. The "red educator" shut the gate, and the restless crowd slowly disbursed.[4]

The Nemiga strife can be seen as a microcosm of the civil war that erupted in the midst of the Jewish urban population, following the Bolshevik Revolution, between supporters and opponents of the new Soviet system. As intense as this conflict was, however, it would be inaccurate to view its outcome as the sudden demise of religious Judaism and the irreversible rupture of Russian Jewish society into two entirely separate encampments: the new Communist Jewish elite, on the one hand, and the observant "ancien régime" Jew, on the other. Although the clash between

those Jews who supported communism and those who resented the new system significantly influenced the Sovietization process of the Jewish population, other factors (social, cultural, and family-related) came into play and shaped the dynamics of Jewish everyday life in the 1920s and mid-1930s, especially in the areas of the former Pale of Settlement.

By using the case study of Minsk, a historic Jewish demographic, religious, and political center in pre-revolutionary Russia and capital of the Belorussian Soviet Socialist Republic after January 1919,[5] this article will focus on two aspects of Jewish religious practice. First, it will look at the persistence of kosher butchering (*shehitah*) in a Soviet capital and show how a number of traditional Jewish institutions, which made the production of kosher meat possible, continued to function in the interwar period, albeit in a customized Soviet fashion. Second, it will examine the practice of circumcision, mainly among Jewish Communist Party members, and argue that the relationship between party allegiance and family loyalty was a complex dialectic of struggle and compromise.

At its inception, the Bolshevik revolutionary regime offered those Jews who were not politically or socially tainted as bourgeois or nationalist full-fledged membership into a universal, classless society in which national identity would eventually, in the distant future, wither away and yield to the Marxist utopian vision of the "merging of nations." With regard to the Jewish question, Lenin's government extended to most Russian Jews a wide array of civil rights, ending their decades-long preclusion from social integration. But while opening its doors, the new Bolshevik state banned Jewish political organizations outside the Communist Party, prevented Jewish religious institutions from functioning freely and thriving, and destroyed autonomous Jewish cultural and social organizations. Confronted with their sudden inclusion into the state, many Jews eagerly embraced the new possibilities. As Yuri Slezkine has noted, they rushed into government positions and state institutions of higher learning, for the first time open to them without quotas or discrimination, and readily dissociated themselves from any vestige of their Jewish identity. Sons and daughters rebelled against their fathers' and mothers' cultural, political, and—above all—religious backgrounds, integrated into Soviet society, and came to form the backbone of "the new Soviet intelligentsia." For those Jews who partook in "the Jewish social rise, Jewish patricide, and Jewish conversion to non-Jewishness," integration meant escaping religious as well as cultural and political Jewish particularity.[6]

But this path to acculturation in the Soviet system, ascribed by Slezkine to an entire generation of Soviet Jews, was taken by just one seg-

ment of the Jewish population, which resided mainly in the two Russian metropolises, Moscow and Leningrad, and in the new Soviet industrial hubs that emerged outside of the former Pale of Settlement. In many of the medium-to-large urban centers, which had a considerable proportion of Jews and were located on the pre-1917 territory of designated Jewish residence, the response to the Bolshevik emancipation project in the 1920s and 1930s was not circumscribed by "communism as anti-Jewishness" and "Jewishness as anti-communism." In other words, while adapting to the new system, many Jews, whether former Bundists, Yiddish activists, political Zionists, religious practicing Jews, or Russified liberals, remained committed to some expressions of Jewishness, and they attempted to walk the fine line between accepted Soviet behavior and social norms and expressions of Jewish particularity.

In his discussion on the intricate relationship between micro- and macro-histories, Carlo Ginzburg has noted that "a close-up look allows us to grasp what eludes us from the overall view."[7] A glimpse into the practice of religious Judaism in a Soviet city reveals that Jewish life did not change radically overnight, in the immediate aftermath of the Revolution; even some of the most devoted Communists maintained an allegiance to specific features of Jewish self-identification. Geography curbed the Sovietization process, impinged on the intensity with which the Communist project took hold of the Jewish street, and facilitated the preservation of less evident and more subtle lines of continuity with pre-revolutionary Jewish life. The transformation of the core of Jewish life—of which dietary laws and circumcision were crucial aspects—occurred at a slower pace in Minsk than in Moscow also because of preexisting social networks and family ties that were not suddenly wiped out by the Revolution. We may assume, in fact, that a number of actors in the Nemiga strife knew each other, were neighbors, or were even relatives. Because staunch supporters of the new regime and its antagonists happened to live together under the same roof or on the same street and had to deal with the conflicting pressures of these social settings, they inevitably affected each other's lives, prompting not only conformity with but also deviance from Soviet social norms.

The Soviet Korobka and the Underground Educational System

Founded in February 1921, the Union of Congregants of Synagogues and Houses of Prayer in Minsk (Soiuz prikhozhan evreiskikh sinagog i molitvennykh domov v Minske) became the official body responsible for supporting Jewish religious practice in the Belorussian capi-

tal. Under the direct authority of the Minsk Executive Committee, the union counted 155 members (most of them Jewish religious leaders) at the time of its establishment.[8] Besides safeguarding the city's synagogues and *mikvah* (ritual bath house) and obtaining matzah flour for the Passover holiday, the union served another key function. Point two of its statute asserted the importance of fulfilling "the needs of those who observe the laws of kashrut."[9]

Consuming kosher meat and fowl during the 1920s was relatively uncomplicated in Minsk. The Union of Congregants relied on the same traditional taxation system that, for many decades, Jewish communities throughout Russia had imposed on their members as an indirect levy on kosher meat. Known as *korobka* (or "little box"), this tax had been the source of constant friction between the Jewish community's leadership, which administered the levy, and the less well-to-do Jews who had to deal with the financial burden. Yet the tax enabled the community to meet its debts to the state and to private creditors as well as to set aside enough funds to renovate synagogue buildings, look after cemeteries, and finance communal institutions and welfare associations.[10] The korobka system was fundamentally unaffected by the Revolution and retained the same modus operandi of its pre-1917 equivalent. The *shohtim*, or ritual slaughterers, worked under the supervision of the city's rabbi; a *mashgiah*, or ritual supervisor, made sure that the slaughtering process strictly abided by Jewish dietary laws and collected a tax on each animal slaughtered according to the ritual. The proceeds of ritual slaughtering were then divided between the ritual slaughterers and the rabbi, and the meat was sold to the local Soviet food cooperatives at a higher cost than nonkosher meat.[11]

No longer designed to pay for state tax arrears, as it was in the nineteenth century, the new Soviet korobka was intended for internal Jewish activities only. It served two main functions. First, it represented the primary (and typically only) source of income for rabbis. Together with members of the pre-revolutionary political elite, former officers, and high-ranking bureaucrats in the tsarist state service, religious functionaries were included in the notorious *lishchentsy*—or disenfranchised persons—lists and were officially deprived of Soviet electoral rights. As lishchentsy, they became social outcasts and had restricted access to employment, housing, higher education, and medicine.[12] Such limitations affected entire families, even if only one member had been disenfranchised.[13]

A second function of what might be called the "red korobka" was to support the network of underground religious educational institutions. These sprung up in Minsk following the Soviet ban of June 27, 1922,

when the Council of People's Commissariats of Belorussia sanctioned "the closing down of all existing heders, yeshivahs, and Talmud-Torahs."[14] Although this decree represented a blow to Jewish religious education, it did not put an end to it. Under the leadership of Rabbi Yehoshua Tsimbalist, also known as Rabbi Horodner (a native of Grodno who moved to Minsk during World War I),[15] Jewish religious education underwent a substantial resurgence, albeit underground.

In 1924, Tsimbalist established an underground yeshivah in the women's section of the Shoavei Mayim synagogue, located on Zamkovaia Street, near the building of the former Talmud-Torah.[16] With 70 students, the Minsk yeshivah was the largest one in the Soviet Union.[17] It attracted students from throughout the Soviet territory as well as from neighboring Poland. Born in Lodz in 1913, the young Moshe-Zvi Neriyah (who would later become a prominent rabbinic figure in the Yishuv and the State of Israel) left his native Poland in 1926 to study Torah in the Minsk yeshivah at a time when Jewish religious education was considered obsolete in other Soviet cities.

There were 400 pupils studying in the Minsk underground heders in 1926. By 1929 the number was still significant, amounting to 324.[18] A *yeshivah ketanah* (lower-level yeshivah) was set up on Staro-Vilenskaia Street, with 20 pupils whose ages ranged between 12 and 15. Ten students came from outside Minsk. Not only was tuition free but the students were also provided meals. One of them recalled that Minsk families would invite them over for the Sabbath and serve herring and challah.[19] As Neriyah observed:

> Rabbis from other cities in Russia would come to Minsk and be surprised by what they saw. Something of this nature in a time like this? How is that possible? They never imagined that there was still such a place. After all, such activity is connected to the dangers of arrest and deportation. From where does one find the courage and strength to do such things?[20]

Yeshivahs and heders enjoyed clandestine financial support from the American Joint Distribution Committee (JDC), but the amount provided from the outside was not adequate to sustain a similar enterprise. According to the 1926–27 reports of the Vaad Rabane SSR, or Council of Rabbis of the USSR, the financial need to support the educational institutions amounted to more than 2,200 rubles a month. Minsk received from the JDC only 826 rubles a month. As for the heders, the 1929 report of the Vaad Rabane SSR confirms that JDC relief amounted to just 30 percent of the budget for religious education; the rest was raised within the city.[21]

In addition to the support from the JDC and the cooperation of local Jews (who perpetuated the East European Jewish custom of providing meals, clothing, and shelter to yeshivah students, especially those who came from other cities and could not count on their families), the continued existence of these institutions depended largely on the korobka system.[22] During the 1920s and early 1930s, profits from kosher butchering covered tuition expenses and teachers' compensation, which few parents could pay given the duress of the economic situation and the outlawing of a large chunk of private trade and business. The korobka system and the underground educational network were so deeply entrenched in the daily life of the city that the divide between permissible and impermissible was sometimes puzzling and blurry for city residents themselves. At a Minsk conference of non-party Jewish workers, during which the practice was to submit queries anonymously in writing to the presidium, two questions were asked: "Do the Minsk heders operate legally or illegally?" and "Are the authorities aware of the existence of yeshivahs with large numbers of students . . . who are being supported with room and board?"[23] Both questions were asked in all seriousness. It was 1927, five years after the official closing down of all Jewish religious educational institutions in the city.[24]

The Shohtim Trial

Although the Soviet system seemed to tolerate—or at least show little interest in—the kosher butchering business, the leaders of the local Evsektsiia (the Jewish Section of the Communist Party) attempted to bring the shohtim's activities to an end through intimidation. In their struggle against clericalism, they viewed the performance of this ritual as ideologically repulsive, primarily because it created a source of income for the rabbis.[25] Taking advantage of what seems to have been nothing more than a skirmish between shohtim, the Evsektsiia organized a show-trial against the so-called "Gluskin trust," a group of 25 Minsk ritual slaughterers who worked under the supervision of the main rabbi of the city, Menachem Mendl Gluskin (1887–1943).

In early March 1925, in the locale of the former Chorale Synagogue, now the Jewish Workers' House of Culture,[26] in front of 3,000 people, the head of the shohtim-trust, Yankev-Tevye Rapoport, was accused of the attempted murder of another *shohet*, Droykin, who had moved to the Belorussian capital from Vitebsk.[27] Apparently, the newcomer's slaughtering method did not meet the religious standards set by Rabbi Gluskin. Not allowed to be part of the official butchers'

trust, Droykin joined another group of shohtim who operated independently from the rabbi's supervision and sold their product to the same cooperatives that purchased kosher meat from the shohtim working for Gluskin.[28] In addition, by charging less (only 5–10 kopecks for one chicken instead of the 15–20 kopecks charged by Rapoport), the Droykin group became a threatening competitor for the "Gluskin trust." Although Rabbi Gluskin and strictly Orthodox Jews could not accept as kosher the cattle and fowl slaughtered by Droykin (who almost certainly did not make use of the rabbi's ritual supervisor, and who possibly did not comply with the strict rules pertaining to the knife used and the postmortem examination of the animal), many consumers did.[29] Whether they purchased the meat because of its lower price or because of their poor knowledge of the laws and customs of kosher butchering, their action represented the first stage in the breakdown of the historic monopoly of rabbis over the consumption of meat among Jews. Together with the initial collapse of kosher meat production, the Minsk shohtim trial also reveals, perhaps more interestingly, its persistence. As a journalist from Warsaw remarked, "the shohtim trial disclosed aspects of Jewish life that we thought had already disappeared."[30]

The trial, which began at six o'clock in the evening on Saturday—after the end of the Sabbath—received extensive coverage in the local and foreign press. Possibly the first show-trial in the Soviet Union against Jewish ritual slaughter, it also became the subject of a musical satire in Yiddish by the worker and aspiring playwright M. Shimshelievitsh. Performed on the stage of a number of workers' clubs in and around Minsk, with Yiddish folk songs and traditional religious melodies, the play depicted Rabbi Gluskin as the wealthy city villain who monopolized the production of kosher meat throughout the Belorussian capital.[31] The language of the trial was Yiddish. The shohtim were represented by the best lawyers in the city, Fridman, Tseytlin and Gurevitch.[32] Rabbis, *dayanim* (scholars of Talmud law), shohtim, *shamashim* (sextons), shopkeepers, luftmenschen, underworld Jews, artisans, and workers were cross-examined as witnesses. Recounting the trial for the Warsaw Yiddish newspaper *Moment*, one reporter pointed out that the rabbinic terminology used to describe the ritual slaughtering process and the talmudic intonation of both the prosecutors and the defendants could have easily deceived the audience: "If you close your eyes you might feel like you are somewhere in a shtetl, in the *beys-medresh*, twenty years before the Revolution."[33]

The Jews of Nemiga, or, as the Moscow Yiddish daily *Der emes* defined them, "the foundation of the black market . . . , bourgeois society . . . ,

contraband, . . . Zionism, . . . [and] the Jewish counter-Revolution,"[34] talked about a new "Beilis trial." The public prosecutors—Shmuel Agursky, Leyme Roznhoyz, and a third man named Volobrinskii, all of whom were members of the Minsk Evsektsiia—repeatedly disclaimed that the trial was an attack on the Jewish religion, as the foreign press declared. Rather, they emphasized the criminal nature of the accusations. Drawing parallels with Mendele Moykher Sforim's *Takse* (The Tax), in which the Yiddish writer severely criticized the korobka institution, Agursky stated that all the blame should fall on Rabbi Gluskin, who oppressed poor Jews, forcing them to pay extra for kosher meat, and not on the shohtim, who were "just workers in the slaughterhouse." "The fact that religious Jews wish to eat kosher meat does not trouble us," continued Roznhoyz, and he asserted that "[w]e do not want to use the trial to compromise the Jewish street. We are not maskilim who believe their main goal is to struggle against religion. . . . In our system, religion will die out, without violent measures."[35] In the final verdict, the judge emphasized the criminal nature of the case, ridiculed the insinuations of religious persecution in the USSR conjured up abroad, and sentenced Rapoport and his accomplices to prison.[36]

The Red Army Eats Kosher Meat

In spite of the 1925 show-trial, which the Evsektsiia had indeed intended as an instrument to attack or at least to discourage ritual slaughtering in the city, the production of kosher meat in Minsk continued to thrive. By early 1928, most beef cattle in the city were slaughtered according to the ritual laws of kashrut. The meat distributed in the main food cooperatives of the city—Central Workers' Cooperative, Belorussian Meat Trade, and Belorussian Agricultural Union—had been slaughtered according to the Jewish method. Indeed, when a housewife planned to purchase nonkosher meat, she had to go to one of the city's food cooperatives, approach the shop's counter, and specifically ask the store clerk for *treyf* ("forbidden" meat).[37] The number of cattle killed through shehitah traditionally exceeded the demand for kosher meat because of the specific dietary restrictions connected to kosher butchering. More precisely, a portion of animals slaughtered through shehitah usually wound up on the general market because of the prohibition to consume "the sciatic nerve or the fatty portions of the animal carcass as well as animals that, on further inspection, are found to have blemishes or lesions."[38] However, it was the historic Jewishness of the city, the number of shohtim operating there, and the viability of kosher butchering

under the Soviets in the 1920s that accounted for the large number of cattle slaughtered according to the Jewish ritual.

A correspondent for the Yiddish daily *Oktiaber* expressed his outrage after discovering that "[t]he whole population of Minsk is forced to eat kosher meat. Even the Red Army."[39] The Belorussian Agricultural Union, the cooperative that supplied foodstuffs to the Red Army, exclusively sold meat that had been slaughtered ritually.[40] The author of the same article also complained about the absence of high-quality nonkosher meat in the Central Workers' Cooperative: here, he argued, "almost all employees in the meat sector are former *katsovim* [butchers]." Most kosher meat in the city was sold with a stamp certifying its authenticity. There were *mashgihim* (supervisors of Jewish dietary laws) working in the City Slaughterhouse, sometimes acting as the only veterinary inspectors of the animals, determining whether they were medically fit for slaughter or not.[41] And the korobka, the existence of which had very much surprised the correspondent of *Der emes* in 1925,[42] was still in effect in 1928. For each cow slaughtered, the shohet received one ruble, which corresponded to 1,800–2,000 rubles a month. Forty percent of the ritual slaughterer's revenue went to the rabbi.[43]

With few exceptions, there was little opposition to the production of kosher meat on the part of local Jews. In an open letter published in *Oktiaber* in February 1928, Khaym Vilentshik invited Rabbi Gluskin to reimburse him the extra money he paid in the course of several years for unknowingly purchasing kosher meat.[44] In another instance that same month, a delegation of 40 Jewish working women signed a petition to the Minsk City Soviet in which they condemned the extensive production of kosher meat, "11 years after the October Revolution."[45] Although women were more likely to engage in protests when the price of foodstuff was at issue, besides the abovementioned petition (probably staged by the trade union's leadership), Jewish housewives did not organize a grass-roots campaign against the rabbis demanding a just price for meat. In fact, the absence of a popular protest indicates that a large proportion of Jewish women were willing to purchase kosher meat, or at least were accustomed to paying a higher price to bring it to their tables.[46]

In the effort to discontinue or, at least, to reduce the production of kosher meat in the city, the local Evsektsiia appealed to the Central Bureau of the Jewish Section of the Communist Party in Moscow. The Moscow Evsektsiia called for the creation of a special commission under the leadership of Bruskin, the deputy people's commissar for trade. In its resolution on slaughtering and meat production in Minsk, the commission demanded that "cattle not intended for ko-

sher consumption should not be killed in accordance with [Jewish] ritual laws."[47] There is no evidence that the city agencies actually endorsed and carried out this resolution, but the Minsk Evsektsiia did achieve a small victory: the Central Workers' Cooperative agreed to open two shops in which meat would be sold without distinction between kosher and nonkosher quality.[48]

The Evsektsiia, however, was far from securing its control over the local production of kosher meat. In mid-April 1928, for example, the Thirteenth City Cooperative in Nemiga, also known as the Artel (cooperative association of workers) of the Disabled, began selling a new kosher meat product. Badras, the official in charge of the manufacture of intestine products at the City Slaughterhouse, supported the proposal of the cooperative's chairman to process kosher sausages. The mashgiah in charge of verifying that sausage production met the standards of kashrut was none other than a relative of the *Minsker godl*, the great scholar of Minsk and famous nineteenth-century rabbi, Jeroham Judah Leib Perelman (1835–96).[49]

Soviet authorities did not resist religious slaughtering within governmental structures so long as it did not interfere with the "rationality" of production. On Friday, April 7, 1928, a group of shohtim refrained from slaughtering the entire quantity of beef cattle ordered by the three main food cooperatives in Minsk because of the imminent advent of the Sabbath. The financial loss inflicted on the City Slaughterhouse by the shohtim's decision prompted the party-cell to subsequently employ former shohtim, who were now members of the Butchers' Trade Union, and probably no longer religious, as slaughterers. The latter slaughtered the cattle in the manner to which they were accustomed, in accordance with the basic precepts of shehitah.[50] The shift from religious supervision over shehitah to state control symbolized the progressive loss of rabbinic authority. Employed as state workers, most shohtim continued to slaughter cattle following the traditional rituals, generally without the inspection of the rabbi's appointed mashgiah. From the vantage point of Orthodox Judaism, meat from cattle or fowl slaughtered without the supervision of the rabbi was not kosher. Yet for a significant proportion of Jewish consumers such meat was sufficiently kosher, even without rabbinic certification. This combination of the decline of the traditional role of the rabbi and the retention of conventional kosher slaughtering methods generated a new kind of folk-kashrut, based on dietary customs and eating habits rather than on religious authority.

By 1930, the "red korobka" institution, which had ensured financial support for the rabbis and the illegal educational network throughout

the 1920s, began to collapse and slowly gave way. The regime's turn to rapid industrialization, forced collectivization, and a centralized economy (which caused, among other things, massive food shortages in urban areas) made kosher butchering increasingly difficult. Kosher meat was no longer available in the city's cooperatives; the Minsk yeshivah was closed down in the early 1930s; and Rabbi Tsimbalist, the driving force behind the underground educational network, managed to leave for Palestine in 1933.[51] Whereas cattle slaughtering according to the Jewish method became almost impractical in the 1930s—primarily because the government took control of food production and restricted cattle supply for religious purposes—kosher fowl was easily accessible.[52] Upon the request of individual citizens, state-employed former shohtim or unemployed religious shohtim slaughtered chickens throughout the mid-1930s, generally undisturbed. As late as 1934, for example, a small slaughterhouse for kosher fowl operated on Karl Libknekht Street; Soviet citizens brought their own chickens, and the shohet performed the ritual slaughter.[53]

In April 1934, kosher butchering in Minsk was dealt a mortal blow and driven to the margins of even smaller underground circles. The butcher Yankev-Tevye Rapoport, the same shohet indicted in the 1925 notorious shohtim trial, was accused of raping several young girls who had been sent by their mothers to the shohet with a chicken to slaughter.[54] Exploiting Jewish sexual anxieties associated with the figure of the shohet—the only man who in traditional Jewish society had regular contact with women, often in semi-private settings—the masterminds of the new Rapoport case were hoping to bring the kosher business in Minsk to a close, for good.[55] The show-trial took place April 2–4 in the locale of the Belorussian Yiddish State Theater—the former Choral Synagogue and the same venue as the 1925 shohtim-trial—in front of a large audience, a significant proportion of which was almost certainly drawn by the lurid details of the alleged rapes.[56] The public prosecutors—Leyme Roznhoyz, delegate of the Central Committee of the League of the Militant Godless (*bezbozhniki*), and Khazkl Dunets, deputy people's commissar for education and chief editor of *Oktiaber*—emphasized the relationship between the shohet's religious beliefs, his social background (he was a relative of the wealthy Wissotzky tea-merchant family), and his sexual deviance. Rapoport was sentenced to eight years in prison.[57]

Whether as a consequence of the 1934 show-trial or because of the relentless assault on religious practice under Stalinism, the demand for kosher fowl significantly declined during the 1930s. However, it most likely did not subside entirely. After all, Minsk remained the

destination of a large and steady migration movement of thousands of Jews from the surrounding provincial cities and shtetls who relocated to the capital in search of employment and a better livelihood. Although it is hard to ascertain how many of these new migrants were religiously observant, it is fair to say that a number of them came from traditional homes and abided by certain religious practices. In fact, it may have been easier to purchase kosher meat in the anonymity of the big city than in a small shtetl where everyone knew what everyone else was doing. Furthermore, unlike most Jews who moved to faraway Moscow, those who settled in Minsk preserved family bonds more often than not, chiefly because of the geographic proximity between their shtetl or city of origin and the Belorussian capital. The constant influx of this population into the city probably resulted in the persistence of kosher butchering in Minsk in the second half of the 1930s.[58]

To Circumcise or Not to Circumcise?

On September 19, 1928, the construction worker Orman, employed in a Minsk state factory, addressed a letter to the Jewish Section of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Belorussia, the Evsektsiia. He complained about his son not being accepted into a local Soviet Yiddish kindergarten. The reason, he stated, was that his son (presumably born in 1922) had not been circumcised.[59] At first, the possibility of such a case occurring in the late 1920s in the capital of a Soviet Republic might seem highly remote. As a Soviet institution, the Yiddish kindergarten was, at least in theory, committed to conveying to the younger generation the ideals of communism and the rules and principles of good Soviet behavior, which included among the core foundations an atheistic approach to the world and a passionate criticism of religious beliefs. However, viewing the worker's letter within the context of the widespread observance of this Jewish practice allows us to reconsider the nature of this case, therefore complicating our understanding of Jewish integration in Soviet society. During the 1920s and early 1930s, circumcising one's son was the norm among Soviet Jews, not the exception. This norm could have led some Jews to view with disfavor Jewish children who had not been circumcised, and it could even have been shared by the personnel of a Soviet Yiddish kindergarten. After all, this was probably the first time that a Jewish child who was not circumcised attended that Yiddish kindergarten.

The archives contain much evidence of Jewish Communist Party members who had their newborn sons circumcised. The observance of

religious rituals was considered especially deviant when carried out by party members, who supposedly were professional revolutionaries well versed in the works of Marx, Engels, and Lenin and were affiliated with the country's most sacred institutions. As the vanguard of Soviet society, their adherence to party discipline had to be flawless and their conformity to Soviet practice unconditional. Yet, though Jewish Communists rarely married with a religious ceremony and rarely, if ever, attended synagogue or performed the Sabbath ritual of candle-lighting, many of them were still committed to the tradition of circumcision. As one member of the Minsk Construction Workers' Communist Party-cell pointed out in 1927, "The performance of circumcisions among workers who are members of the Communist Party and are employed in the factories of the city of Minsk is so widespread that it has assumed a 'chronic character' . . . it has become an epidemic."[60] In most cases, the circumcision, or bris, was performed by a mohel. In other cases, especially among the local party leadership (as, for example, the chairman of the Minsk Metal Workers' Union), Communist Party members requested a doctor's certification of medical necessity and had the circumcision performed as a medical procedure.[61]

Two observations seem necessary prior to the examination of specific cases of circumcision. First, if a significant proportion of Jewish party members performed the ritual, we must assume that circumcision was even more common among those Jews, workers and nonworkers alike, who did not belong to the Communist Party. Second, the commitment to the practice of circumcision on the part of Jewish Communists should not necessarily be seen as an indication of religious behavior. Circumcising one's newborn son was perceived, at least by many Jewish Communists who had it privately performed, as the expression of ethnic identification, and it was the outgrowth of a specifically Jewish mentality (or, in the words of Jacques Le Goff, "what changes less in the historical evolution of the everyday man"),[62] which even Communists found difficult to renounce. As Jacob Katz explained in his study about the debate on circumcision in nineteenth-century Central Europe, the power of circumcision lies in "a ritual instinct in the human psyche [that] predisposes us to attribute more importance to once-in-a-lifetime rituals than to repetitive rituals. . . . It is this instinctual response that assures the greater persistence of the practice of circumcision over those rituals performed daily or weekly or yearly."[63] Katz's anthropological explanation of circumcision becoming the indispensable marker of Jewish identity was true not only for many Jews in Central Europe in the second half of the nineteenth century but also for most Soviet Jews in the interwar period.

In Minsk, the first debate about circumcision in a public Communist setting took place in mid-May 1924, when an investigative commission found three members of the Communist Party-cell of the Construction Workers' Union guilty of circumcising their sons. Although there was no official Soviet prohibition on circumcision, there were numerous restrictions, which varied according to local ruling and were aimed primarily at the mohels. In the Soviet understanding of the ritual, mohels were not doctors and should not have been performing an unnecessary medical procedure detrimental to the infant's health.[64] The investigative commission was usually composed of three fellow party members who would go to the home of the accused member after the birth of the baby to verify whether the newborn son had been circumcised or not. Following the uncovering of the 1924 transgression, the guilty party members attempted to avoid the standard punishment for non-Communist behavior: their expulsion from the party. One man, Gurvitch, stated that he found out about his son's circumcision only several weeks after it was carried out; as soon as he did and decided to inform the party-cell, his wife implored him not to, promising him that no circumcision would be carried out in the future. "In a couple of months we will have another baby," Gurvitch stated to the party-cell, "and I swear that there will be no bris." He stressed his loyalty to communism and emphasized his service as a volunteer in the Red Army and as a member of the local communist underground movement before the Revolution. Another comrade, whose son had been circumcised, underscored his commitment to the Soviet value-system by stating that "I would more easily accept a death sentence than expulsion from the party"; a third man asserted that "the verdict of exclusion from the party will be a huge blow; I'd more easily agree to divorce my wife."[65] Yet they did not deny that they had had their sons circumcised. There is no reason to doubt the sincere communism of these party members, who sought to deviate, privately, from party norms in this one specific area.

Whereas Gurvitch was expelled from the party for one year, his two comrades were advised to bring those responsible for carrying out the circumcision before the Minsk Central Jewish Court, a body that functioned in Yiddish and tried both criminal and civil cases. In the meantime, the Construction Workers' Party-cell resolved to report the circumcision cases to the city's Executive Committee of the Communist Party; they expected the local party agency to petition higher all-Belorussian party organs so that these would in turn issue a directive forbidding the carrying out of circumcision without the consent of both parents.[66] The Construction Workers' Party-cell was evidently in search of an official party line on circumcision.[67]

The Case of Comrade Gorlin

At the end of 1924, a case of deviance in the Communist Party-cell of the clothing factory of Minsk set off another debate pertaining to Communists and circumcision. During the 1920s and early 1930s, the working force of the Minshvei clothing factory was largely Jewish.[68] Precisely because of the high proportion of Jews, the outcome of the debate was viewed as crucial to determining the accepted norm of behavior vis-à-vis circumcision for Jewish workers—Communists and non-Communists alike. Very few issues concerning the lives and identity of Jewish workers emerge in the protocols of the factory's party-cell. Besides questions related to the use of Yiddish in everyday life, the only "Jewish topic" that regularly appears in the minutes of the Minshvei party-cell is the circumcision of children of Communists.

Comrade Gorlin informed the party-cell that his wife's parents had "performed the religious rite of circumcision during his and his wife's absence." After further investigation, the commission found that Gorlin's wife was aware of her parents' initiative. One comrade argued that Gorlin should leave his wife; if he refused, he should be expelled from the party. In the opinion of another comrade, Gorlin was not guilty and should not be deprived of his party membership: had it not been for the "bourgeois environment" surrounding his wife, the religious ritual would not have been carried out. It was the Communist Party member, not his wife or the milieu in which he lived, however, who was held responsible. By neglecting to educate his wife and prevent the circumcision from taking place, he had failed to behave as a true Bolshevik. Although he had foreseen the possibility of the circumcision being carried out, he had not taken the necessary steps to prevent it. After all, besides the substantial set of privileges to which the party card paved the way (such as job advancement, priorities for the acquisition of a new apartment, and permits for vacations in resort areas), being a Communist also entailed a "special calling" and an absolute faith and devotion to the party's "sacred cause."[69]

In the mid-1920s especially, Communists such as Gorlin were punished for having their sons circumcised mainly because their behavior represented a threat to the primacy of communist norms in Soviet society. If the small caste of party members set the wrong example—in 1924, there were 847 Jewish party members and candidates out of a population of approximately 50,000 Jews[70]—their transgressive behavior would become the accepted social norm for non-Communists. As the party-cell resolution of January 9, 1925, stated, "[T]he circumcision ritual discredits the prestige of the party in the eyes of non-

party workers . . . for carrying out such an act it is necessary to expel from the party." And Gorlin was, accordingly, expelled.[71]

But during the January 13, 1925, meeting, the party-cell seemed to retrace its steps. There were protests on the part of several members, who argued that the resolution was too severe and that Gorlin, a party member since 1920, was not guilty. Another party-cell member emphasized that it was precisely because of his party experience and service as a volunteer in the Red Army that Gorlin should have prevented the circumcision from being carried out. Because of his weakness, argued another party member, Gorlin should at least be reduced to the status of candidacy for party membership. In spite of the numerous protests and suggestions to reduce the punishment, the party-cell confirmed the verdict: expulsion from the party.[72]

The closing chapter of the Gorlin affair took place on May 5, 1925, during the meeting of the Minshvei party-cell, in front of 240 party members and candidates and with the participation of higher party organs. In his opening statement, the secretary of the Central Control Commission, Beilin (himself a Jew and most likely circumcised), explained that "[w]hoever joins the party in order to benefit from it, whoever acts against what the party fights for, and whoever does not behave as a Communist and does not educate those around her/him is not a party member and, consequently, not a Communist." The last two points, he continued, applied to Gorlin, who was rightly expelled from the party because of religious practice. However, the party-cell and the District Control Commission failed to consider that "Gorlin is a worker, and when he was mobilized by the party to the front he did not refuse. His level of political consciousness is mediocre. . . . [In other words,] we should not execute someone who is ill when he can still be saved. . . . Gorlin acted against the party . . . , but we can still cure him, we must try." To the Central Control Commission's proposal to reinstate Gorlin in the party, several party-cell members reacted with surprise and pointed out that "Jewish workers still abide strictly by the tradition of circumcision, even when they do not attend synagogue or believe in God, . . . and a Communist who carried out a circumcision cannot be a model of behavior for non-party members . . . this act [i.e., circumcision] concerns not only Gorlin but the party as a whole." In spite of the opposing view, the party-cell resolved to reinstate Gorlin in the party, albeit with a warning, and to pay close attention to his work and education as a Communist.[73] The outcome of the Gorlin case, in which the party member was ultimately not punished with expulsion but was encouraged to "recover from his bourgeois illness," might indicate the intention of local party leaders

to warn other party members: the first time you will be spared expulsion, but, if you engage in the anti-Communist practice of circumcision again, eviction from the party will become the stringent norm.

Jewish Social Studies
•
Vol. 14 No. 2

Backward Wives and Family Matters

In his short story "Karl-Yankl," Isaac Babel lays out a brilliant satire of Jewish religious life during the early Soviet years. It takes place in the 1920s, in the suburbs of Odessa, and depicts a family conspiracy against a good Communist father who is duped by his wife and mother-in-law. While Ofsey Belotserkovsky is away on a business trip, his mother-in-law (with the approval of his wife) takes the newborn grandson to the mohel Naftula and has the baby circumcised "in the presence of ten doddering wrecks—ten ancient and impoverished men, denizens of the hasidic synagogue." Upon returning from his trip and discovering the women's evil scheme, Ofsey takes the mother-in-law and the mohel to court, in what becomes a show-trial at the Odessa Petrovsky factory. He also names the baby Karl, in honor of Karl Marx, refusing the traditional Jewish name that the grandmother and mother opted for during the clandestine ceremony.[74] In this story, Babel-the-narrator holds accountable for the circumcision scheme the mother-in-law and the wife, and he presents the reader with an idyllic portrait of a Communist father who is absolutely unaware of the women's plot and wrongdoings. In reality, however, family matters involving circumcision were much more complicated, and Communist men were more implicated in the bris-plots than Babel's story seems to suggest.

When confronted with the failure to behave as true Communists, party men were usually willing to blame their wives and mothers, who allegedly associated with dangerous "bourgeois circles," in order to avoid expulsion from the party. Blaming one's wife as the exclusive source of "bourgeois behavior" became the standard reaction of a man who was a member of the Communist Party and was found to be breaking the rules of "party mindedness." In November 1927, Comrade Zorin warned the party-cell to which he belonged about the likelihood of his wife planning to have their son circumcised (which almost certainly implies that the deed was already done). When, a few weeks later, the investigative commission of the party-cell confirmed that the infant had indeed been circumcised, Zorin was held responsible. As the party-cell resolution stated, by failing to convince his wife to renounce her "bourgeois beliefs," he had fallen short both "as a man and as a Communist."[75] Also in November 1927, the construc-

tion worker and party member Funt was accused of circumcising his newborn son, and he provided the following explanation. At first, when he worked at a construction site not far from home and could easily check on his son, the wife agreed not to have the baby circumcised. But as soon as he was transferred to a second construction site, far from home, and could no longer keep an eye on his wife, her parents pressured her and the circumcision was carried out. Funt told the party-cell that he would leave his wife at once, divorce her, and pay alimony. Comrade Lerner blamed Funt for not implementing the "revolution at home." Another party-cell member, Reginbogin, was proud to share with his comrades how successfully he had applied the revolutionary tenets to the home: two years earlier, his wife had their first-born son circumcised without his permission, but when their second son was born, his wife did not even hint at the possibility of carrying out a circumcision: "The truth is that wives can be easily bent in our direction."[76]

In these instances, the man is expected to forge the woman's behavior: his conduct is tantamount to that of a good Communist, whereas hers is closer to that of a bourgeois still anchored to the principles of the old world. In this Communist version of "paternalism," in which the husband is responsible for his wife's behavior, a Jewish man—whether Communist or non-Communist—uses his "backward wife" as a pretext to engage in religious practices. After all, wives were usually excluded from skilled or professional employment and had no careers to lose, whereas the husbands, as members of the party, could lose the privileges that party membership entailed and be dismissed from their jobs. Justifying behavior by blaming one's wife was so common that, in February 1930, *Oktiaber* sarcastically condemned this misuse of gender. Entitled "Our Backward Wives," the article reads:

> If you meet on the street a worker who, on the eve of Passover, is sweating, carrying a sack of matzah, you might think that he is religious and follows religious traditions. God forbid . . . he has nothing to do with that. It is she, the "cursed wife," who persists and wants only matzah. When someone carries out the barbaric ritual of circumcising a newborn son, the blame falls again on the wife, who put her foot down and wanted the baby to be Jewish.[77]

During the late 1920s, most members of the Communist Party who had their sons circumcised and whose cases became known to party officials, were ipso facto expelled from the party. On October 6, 1928, the party-cell of the Metall factory in Minsk debated the case of Comrade Yofin. After the investigative commission established that his

son had indeed been circumcised, Yofin resorted to the usual ploy of blaming his wife and parents for performing the religious ritual supposedly without his approval, while he was out of town. Yofin might even have been the same Minsk worker who some months before sent an anonymous letter to *Oktiaber* with a warning: "I advise all the mohels of Minsk not to circumcise my son. If my son is circumcised, I will hold responsible each and every mohel in Minsk."[78] Although the Minsk mohels were most likely not reading official Communist Yiddish newspapers, Yofin could still have used this letter as evidence of his "Communist" attempt to prevent the circumcision of his newborn son. Openly advertising one's objection to this "shameful practice" was a rather common practice among Communist fathers.[79] But in this case, at least, the party-cell did not fall for the cunning scheme and thus resolved to exclude Yofin from party candidacy. Incidentally, his sister, a member of the Komsomol (the Young Communist League), was also present at the circumcision ceremony.[80]

The Complicated Lives of Jewish Communists

The official Yiddish press carries almost no reference to the aforementioned circumcision cases of children of Communists debated at length during the closed-door meetings of local party-cells. The most plausible reason seems to be that many Jewish Communists, in particular those who had had their sons circumcised, might have felt uneasy revealing how common this unbecoming behavior was among party members. Whether they resented their families for pressuring them to act against the party or were ashamed of the "religious weaknesses" of their fellow comrades, they recognized that, unlike other forms of Jewish religious practice or ethnic identification, circumcision remained a fairly conventional practice for Communists. In other words, lighting candles on the Sabbath or purchasing kosher meat in the city cooperative was, for most Jewish Communists, anachronistic; therefore, it was easy to point a finger at the "bourgeois elements" on the Jewish street that carried out such behavior, and, for example, to campaign publicly against the production of matzah flour for Passover. Circumcision, by contrast, was performed also by Communists, and thus was not called into question in the public forum of the newspaper with the same frequency and invective.

During the early 1930s, cases of Communists having their sons circumcised were hardly ever debated in local party-cells. Not only was their number in progressive decline but also the practice itself was

considered socially deviant regardless of the specific context in which it occurred. In other words, no matter who orchestrated the circumcision, expulsion from the party had become the standard punishment for party members whose sons had been circumcised. When, in 1933, the Oktiaber factory workers D. M. Dvorkin and E. S. Deifer, party members since 1931 and 1930, respectively, were expelled for having had their sons circumcised, their behavior was simply deemed "a violation of party discipline."[81] Debate had become superfluous.

With the fierce assault on religion that characterized the campaign for collectivization and industrialization of the 1930s, maintaining the practice of circumcision became more challenging for Soviet Jewish citizens. The social pressure on those who carried out the ritual intensified, and the number of active mohels, or doctors willing to perform the procedure, gradually decreased. In the case of a newborn's accidental death, the mohel was brought to court in a show-trial, usually found guilty of performing an "unnecessary surgical treatment," and sentenced to prison.

In March 1931, the Minsk mohel Yoyne Radunski was accused of circumcising a newborn baby unbeknownst to the father (a 23-year-old member of the Construction Workers' Trade Union), thereby causing the infant's death by hemorrhage. The show-trial against the "slaughterer of chickens and children," as he was referred to in the trial's official account, was held in the Lenin Jewish Workers' Club, on March 21–24, 1931. During the trial, the mohel admitted that the ritual was not carried out according to traditional Jewish law: it was performed without *metsitsah* (the sucking of the blood at circumcision) and in the absence of a minyan. "In our times," Radunski pointed out, "the *narod* [people] . . . are satisfied without this." Yet the prosecutor asserted the hollowness of the 1921 document that certified the mohel's expertise in performing circumcisions and was signed by a Minsk doctor. He also emphasized the lack of hygiene and poor sanitary conditions in which the ceremony was carried out, accusing the mohel of storing his ritual instruments in the slaughterhouse in which he worked as a shohet.[82] In the final verdict, the Proletarian Tribunal blamed the infant's death on the "barbaric practice of circumcision" and, in full agreement with the official Soviet medical view, rejected circumcision as a harmful procedure that causes illness and death.[83] Radunski was sentenced to three years in prison.[84]

In spite of the growing demand to conform to Soviet behavior and thereby reject circumcision, most Jews—and among them a large segment of Jewish Communists—continued to look for ways to abide by this Jewish practice. Some even deferred their son's bris by a few years

in order to circumvent the party's official line and avoid finger-pointing by the investigative commission of the local party-cell.[85]

One final observation seems useful with regard to the coexistence between Jewish Communists and circumcision. The Bolshevik ideal of a revolutionary vanguard of young true believers who were fiercely committed to the creation of a new socialist system and devoted to the cause of communism often shapes our perception of party members. Although most party members might have matched this ideal, many did not. For some of them, the borderline between proper Communist behavior and deviant social practice was unclear or of little concern. Because Communist Party policy on member recruitment fluctuated during the interwar period, different groups of people with different aims and motivations aspired to become part of the new elite class in Soviet society and joined the party. Following Lenin's death in 1924, and throughout the late 1920s, Stalin launched heavy recruitment campaigns to strengthen his base in the party and reduce the influence of Communist veterans, or Old Bolsheviks. This mass intake of members saw the party expand from approximately 470,000 members and candidates in 1924 to several million in 1933. For many, membership in the party became first and foremost a path to privileges, such as access to housing, holiday resorts, and prestigious jobs usually denied to average Soviet citizens. But party membership had its risks, particularly in the 1930s when reviews (*proverki*) and purges (*chistki*), during which the member's past was closely scrutinized, resulted in the expulsion of those "hostile elements" who failed to adhere to party discipline.

In 1930, during the review of party members and candidates of the Communist cell of the Minsk factory Elvoda, Lipa Livshits, who had served on the Western front from 1919 to 1922 and had joined the party in 1924, was accused of being a Trotskyite. He was also found guilty of having kept for five years a mezuzah attached to the doorpost by the entrance to his home. When asked why he did not remove it, Livshits replied that he had not noticed it.[86] During the 1933 party review, Yankl Bliakher, a worker in the Telman Minsk shoe factory and a party candidate since 1931, was expelled from the party for attending synagogue services. Born in 1870, Bliakher had joined the party at the unusually late age of 61.[87] David Shapiro, a worker in the Kaganovich Minsk factory since 1930, had joined the party in 1932. Although he had served in the Red Army from 1919 to 1923, which was considered an asset, he had also worked as a *sofer*, or religious scribe, from 1926 to 1928, an occupation that was not exactly in tune with Soviet social norms and that ultimately led to his expulsion from the party in 1933. What is interesting is not so much that a former sofer was expelled from the party but,

rather, that a Red Army soldier would become a sofer and, later, apply for party membership.[88] Whether the ambition for a career and social mobility in the Soviet system persuaded Shapiro to join the party, or whether he did so out of ideological conviction, is hard to establish. What seems likely, however, is that the former sofer did not reject all expressions of his Jewish religious identification.

Body, Gender, and Family Networks

Why were many Jewish Communists so committed to this one element of traditional Jewish identity—circumcision—and not, for example, to the purchase of kosher meat? The practice of circumcision, it seems, was integral to the question of "being a Jew." In defiance of Jewish law, according to which one is Jewish even in the absence of circumcision, Jewish folk mentality considered circumcision to be the bedrock of Jewish ethnic identity. In Soviet public settings away from the family, these Communists acknowledged the importance of the Marxist idea of the "merging of nations" to build socialism, but in the private sphere of their home they could not fully renounce the deeply entrenched notion that only through circumcision would their son be truly Jewish. Even for Soviet Jews, circumcision was, as Sander Gilman put it, the body marker that set the boundaries of Jewishness.[89] Unlike Ukrainian, Russian, and Belorussian Communists, who in the absence of baptism were no longer Christians but were still Ukrainians, Russians, and Belorussians, many Jewish Communists could not envision Jewishness without circumcision, as echoed in the Yiddish expression for circumcising one's son: *yidishn dos kind*, or to make the child Jewish. And the only way they could ensure this ethnic continuity was by relying on their wives and mothers, the alleged corrupting force on the Jewish street and the barrier against the Sovietization of the Jewish home. Instead of enlightening their wives and mothers, Communist men joined with them, in secret, to circumvent the Soviet code of behavior for Jewish members of the Communist Party.

The practice of circumcision cannot be examined at length without taking into account two intertwined and largely unexplored themes in the study of everyday Soviet Jewish life in the interwar period—namely, gender and family networks.

If we compare the circumcision debates in interwar Soviet Minsk with the circumcision debates in Germany during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, or with the well-known 1908 debate that erupted in the Warsaw Jewish community when the Hevrah Kadishah

(burial society) refused to bury an uncircumcised Jewish child, we notice a striking difference in the role played by women. In Robin Judd's discussion of the German debate over circumcision, as well as in Gershon Bacon's discussion of the Warsaw debate, women are completely absent, the only actors there being men, fathers, rabbis, German Jewish thinkers and reformers, and Yiddish writers and journalists.[90] In the Soviet context, however, circumcision becomes for the first time a women's domain and liability. Communist men, or men who held key positions in Soviet society, would publicly blame their wives and mothers for circumcising their sons while privately entrusting them with the responsibility of arranging this "new Soviet Jewish ritual," secretly performed by a doctor or by a mohel. Mothers and grandmothers thus came to replace fathers in this traditionally all-male Jewish covenant.

Although generational conflicts played a crucial role in the process of Sovietization of Russian Jewry, it seems that the importance of the family and close-to-kin network in Soviet Jewish life should be reconsidered and not reduced to "Jewish patricide."[91] As a rite of passage, the practice of circumcision (like baptism for Soviet Christians) was closely connected to the life of the family, the community, and deeply ingrained social customs.[92] In the case of Jewish Communists, living in large Jewish centers such as Minsk, family loyalty was a source of tension with their party allegiance. Although sons and daughters rebelled against their families and background, they still had to come to terms with their parents' views and traditions, particularly when coping with the everyday reality of living together in the same home, on the same street, in the same neighborhood, or even merely in the same city. This was much less the case in Moscow and Leningrad, which were centers of recent migration from the former Pale of Settlement, often by young people without their parents and relatives. The degree to which family ties shaped the decisions and views of the younger Jewish generation of the 1920s and 1930s, and influenced their level of obedience to party guidelines, awaits further investigation. This study of circumcision suggests that they did.

Conclusion

In every society, individuals are forced to adapt to the commonly accepted social norms—all the more so, of course, in a ruthless system like the one created by the Soviets, where the individual was expected to subscribe to the tenets of Soviet ideology and spiritually merge with the collective, converting his or her private sphere into a public one. It

was extremely difficult, and it entailed a considerable amount of skill and luck, to survive in the Soviet system without participating in it (using the bureaucratic agencies, offices, institutions) and without accepting, or at least acknowledging, the principles of Communist behavior. The rhythm of the lives of Soviet citizens (Jews and non-Jews alike), so profoundly marked by the familiarity of the religious experience, was suddenly altered, and behavior that had been perfectly normative in pre-Soviet times came to clash with the new Soviet worldview.

The study of religious practice in an urban setting provides a window into the fragmented lives of post-1917 Russian Jews, illuminating the intricacies of their acculturation into Soviet society and showing that religious identification was more common and multifaceted than is usually thought. Making a tabula rasa of the past and erasing centuries-old traditions was not so easy in a place like Minsk, where Jewish religious practice was deeply embedded in daily life. If the number of rabbis and Orthodox Jews involved in organizing religious and educational institutions in the city was comparatively small and in progressive decline, the number of Jews who participated in religious life, together with those who supported the institutions that made religious practice possible, was significant—especially given that Minsk was not a shtetl or a small provincial city, further removed from the violence of Bolshevization, but was the capital of a Soviet Republic.

The lives that Jews came to lead involved participation in, circumvention of, and resistance to the terms of daily life that developed in Soviet Russia. The tendency to conform one's behavior to the norms, values, and practices accepted in Soviet society, which Stephen Kotkin has called "speaking Bolshevik,"[93] inevitably came to clash with "acting Jewish" or conducting oneself according to Jewish customs, religious practices, or political beliefs. Within the context of the new system, the Jews of the Soviet Union were constrained to redefine their lives and reinvent an identity that was Soviet and Jewish, universal and particular, at the same time. Some were indeed eager to speak Bolshevik. Others could not avoid doing so. Most continued acting Jewish: at times in public spaces, at times circumscribing their Jewishness to the private sphere of their lives only.

Ironically, neither of the parties who took part in the 1922 strife over the former Talmud-Torah building noted at the beginning of this article (Jewish Communists versus rank-and-file Jews) relied on official religious institutions to express their Jewish identity. Although some Jews were impatient to escape the confines of Jewish religious practice, many others sought ways to maintain religious traditions in light of Soviet reality, either out of their own desire or because of

their allegiance to preexisting social networks and family ties. The sharp decline of rabbinic authority due to Bolshevik persecution did not lead such Jews to abandon folk *yidishkayt*. In fact, the latter emerged with unusual strength precisely because of the weakness of official religious authority. The persistence of kosher meat production (often without rabbinic supervision) and circumcision (often by a medical doctor) are indicative of the evolution of Jewish practices from religious commandments to ethnic habits and the transformation of Jewish identity from a religious to an ethnic category.[94]

Notes

I would like to thank Marion Kaplan, Nancy Sinkoff, and Barry Trachtenberg for their comments and suggestions.

1 Natsionalniy Arkhiv Respubliki Belarus (National Archive of the Belarus Republic, hereafter NARB), f. 42, op. 1, d. 1437, ll. 53–69.

2 On Apr. 16–18, 1922, a group of delegates from the Commission for the Requisition of Church Treasures of the Minsk Region, agents of the Belorussian Secret Police (GPU), and members of the Evsektsiia (the Jewish Section of the Communist Party), took possession of synagogue buildings and nationalized ceremonial objects for propaganda and cultural purposes. See NARB, f. 521, op. 1, d. 1, ll. 1–5. By 1924, Soviet authorities had confiscated approximately 70 of the 120 synagogues and houses of prayer existing in Minsk before the Revolution. Gosudarstvenniy Arkhiv Minskoi Oblasti (State Archive of Minsk Oblast, hereafter GAMO), f. 591, op. 1, d. 14, l. 82.

3 On the conversion of the Minsk Talmud-Torah building into a secular Yiddish school and a center for orphaned children after 1917, see Elias Schulman, "Yidishe kultur-tetikayt in Minsk, 1917–1941," in *Khesed le-Avraham: Seyfer ha-yoyvel le-Avraham Golomb tsu zayn akhtsikstn geboyrn-yor*, ed. Moshe Starkman (Los Angeles, 1970), 782; NARB, f. 42, op. 1, d. 1137, l. 117; and NARB, f. 42, op. 1, d. 649, ll. 8–11.

4 GAMO, f. 37, op. 1, d. 224, ll. 97, 99.

5 In 1897, there were 47,562 Jews living in Minsk, forming 52.3 percent of the city population; in 1923, the Jews numbered 48,312 and constituted 43.6 percent of the population; in 1926, they numbered 53,686 and, though their percentage of the population dropped to 40.8, they still constituted the single largest national group in the city after the Belorussians: 43 percent of the city population was Belorussian, 10 percent was Russian, and a little over 3 percent was Polish. "Minsk," *Bolshaia Sovetskaia Entsiklopediia* 39 (1926): 465–68.

6 Yuri Slezkine, *The Jewish Century* (Princeton, 2000), 254.
7 Carlo Ginzburg, *Il filo e le tracce: Vero, falso, finto* (Milan, 2006), 258.
8 In 1924, there were 30 registered rabbis living in Minsk. See GAMO, f. 591, op. 1, d. 14, l. 82.
9 GAMO, f. 48, op. 1, d. 51, ll. 4, 8.
10 On the institution of the korobka, see Isaac Levitats, *The Jewish Community in Russia, 1772–1844* (New York, 1943), 52–57, as well as his *The Jewish Community in Russia, 1844–1917* (Jerusalem, 1981), 23–31.
11 Kh. Ber, "Der protses fun shokhtim-trest in Minsk: Driter briv," *Der emes*, Mar. 6, 1925, p. 3.
12 Nikolai V. Brovkin, *Russia After Lenin: Politics, Culture, and Society, 1921–1929* (London, 1998), 30–31.
13 Gita Gluskina, daughter of the Minsk rabbi Menachem Mendel Gluskin, recalls that her family was not entitled to an apartment because of her father's lishchentsy status. As a result, the rabbi, his wife, and their three daughters lived in the Main Synagogue, also known as Kalte Shul, located on Shkolnaia Street in Nemiga, and part of the city's Synagogue Courtyard, or *shul-hoyf*. With no access to heating or water, they slept in the women's section of the synagogue, among *sefo-rim* (religious books), until 1930, when they moved to Leningrad. Personal interview with Gita Gluskina, June 18, 2004, Ramat Gan, Israel.
14 NARB, f. 6, op. 1, d. 133, l. 13.
15 On the life and activities of Rabbi Yehoshua Tsimbalist, see *Rabi Yehoshua me-Horodna zatsal moreh tsedek ve-rosh metivtah, kovets le-zikhro* (Jerusalem, 1949).
16 A. A. Gershuni, *Yahadut be-rusyah ha-sovyetit: Le-korot redifot ha-dat* (Jerusalem, 1961), 140–42. Tsimbalist was the founder and head of the yeshivah, Rabbi Leibovich was the *magid shiur* (instructor of Talmud), and Rabbi Yitzchak Tuvya Goldin was the administrator. I thank Ben-Tsion Klibansky for sharing this information with me.
17 "Report of the Accomplishments of the Rabbinical Board in Russia During 5688," JDC Archives, Collection 21/32, file 476, p. 11.
18 Ibid., p. 3. For more on the Council of Rabbis of the USSR, see David E. Fishman, "To Our Brethren Abroad: Letters and Reports by Soviet Rabbis, 1925–1930," *Jews in Russia and Eastern Europe* 1–2, nos. 54–55 (2005): 108–79.
19 GAMO, f. 12, op. 1, d. 1016, ll. 25–30.
20 *Rabi Yehoshua me-Horodna*, 36–37.
21 "Survey of the Religious and Cultural Work Accomplished with the Funds Offered by the Joint Distribution Committee in the USSR by Means of the Rabbinic Committee of the USSR," JDC Archives, Collection 21/32, file 473, p. 3, and file 476, p. 3. On Jewish students in Minsk who attended both Soviet schools and heders in 1929, see GAMO, f. 320, op. 1, d. 600, ll. 3–6, 10–12.
22 See Yidsektsye fun der Vaysrusisher visnshaftlekher akademye, *Di Rabonim in dinst fun finants-kapital* (Moscow, 1930), 26–27.

23 GAMO, f. 428, op. 1, d. 164, ll. 80–81, 93, 119–23, 137.

24 In 1935, a number of underground heders still operated in Minsk. See Arn Rozin, *Mayn veg aheym: Memuarn fun an asir-tsiyon in ratn-farband* (Jerusalem, 1981), 76. For the existence of an institution for adults to study Torah in Minsk until the eve of World War II, the so-called "heder Shul," see Gershuni, *Yahadut be-rusyah ha-sovyetit*, 142.

25 See, e.g., Yidsektsye fun der Vaysrusisher visnshaftlekher akademye, *Di Rabonim in dinst fun finants-kapital*, 26–29.

26 Inaugurated on Sept. 1, 1906, the Great Minsk Choral Synagogue was requisitioned on Feb. 2, 1923, "to satisfy the cultural needs of the Jewish working masses of the city." First transformed into the Jewish Workers' House of Culture (Evreiskii Rabochii Dom Kul'tury), a club that hosted political and cultural events, in 1928 the synagogue was converted into the Belorussian Yiddish State Theater. See NARB, f. 4, op. 1, d. 1, ll. 192–93, and GAMO, f. 591, op. 1, d. 13, l. 19.

27 Kh. Ber, "Der protses fun shokhtim-trest in Minsk: Tsveyter briv. Der tog fun protses," *Der emes*, Mar. 5, 1925, p. 3. Here, for the shohet Droykin, and for a number of other people mentioned in this article, I identify them by surname only because the documents did not provide first names or initials.

28 Kh. Ber, "Der protses fun shokhtim-trest in Minsk: Zekster briv," *Der emes*, Mar. 11, 1925, p. 2.

29 Known as *halef*, the knife used during kosher slaughtering must have a perfectly sharp blade, free of dents or imperfections. If the blade is damaged or uneven, the meat may not be eaten by Jews. According to custom, the rabbi is the person who inspects the knives of the ritual slaughterers and provides them with a written authorization attesting their qualification as *shohtim*. As a result, even if Droykin followed the remaining rules of *shehitah* but did not operate under rabbinical supervision, his meat was technically not kosher.

30 Zelig Kalmanovitch, "Yidishe bildlekh fun rusland," *Letste nayes*, Mar. 24, 1925, p. 2; Zelig Kalmanovitch, "Yidishe tipn in ratn-rusland," *Letste nayes*, Apr. 7, 1925, p. 3. I thank Joshua Karlip for bringing these articles to my attention.

31 M. Shimshelievitsh, *Minsker shokhtim-trest*, (Minsk, 1925).

32 Ber, "Der protses fun shokhtim-trest in Minsk: Zekster briv," 2.

33 Kalmanovitch, "Yidishe bildlekh fun rusland," 2.

34 Kh. Ber, "Der protses fun shokhtim-trest in Minsk: Ershter briv," *Der emes*, Mar. 3, 1925, p. 3.

35 Kh. Ber, "Der protses fun shokhtim-trest in Minsk: Zekster briv. Haynt iz der yom ha-din," *Der emes*, Mar. 10, 1925, p. 2.

36 Kh. Ber, "Der protses fun shokhtim-trest in Minsk: Der psak-din," *Der emes*, Mar. 11, 1925, p. 2.

37 GAMO, f. 12, op. 1, d. 539, ll. 22–24.

38 Robin Judd, "The Politics of Beef: Animal Advocacy and the Kosher

Butchering Debates in Germany," *Jewish Social Studies* n.s. 10, no. 1 (Fall 2003): 126–27.

39 Abe, "Zol nemen a sof tsu der shvartser khutspe!," *Oktiaber*, Feb. 4, 1928, p. 3. See also Yidsektsye fun der Vaysrusisher visnshaftlekher akademye, *Di Rabonim in dinst fun finants-kapital*, 27.

40 GAMO, f. 12, op. 1, d. 1016, l. 37. For a similar case in Germany in which the German Army consumed meat from cattle that had been slaughtered ritually, see Judd, "Politics of Beef," 127.

41 An eygener [pseud.], "Gots-straptshes in Minsker shekht-hoyz," *Oktiaber*, Feb. 25, 1928, p. 3.

42 Ber, "Der protses fun shokhtim-trest in Minsk: Ershter briv," 3.

43 Abe, "Zol nemen a sof tsu der shvartser khutspe!," 3. This amount included only cattle, not chickens, sheep, or calves slaughtered according to the Jewish method.

44 Khaym Vilentshik, "An ofener briv dem Minsker rov Gluskin," *Oktiaber*, Feb. 5, 1928, p. 4.

45 GAMO, f. 12, op. 1, d. 1016, ll. 37, 43–44. See also "Di yidishe arbetndike froy kegn shtrayml: Rezolutsye fun der yidisher sektsye fun der delegatn-farzamlung in shtotishn rayon ongenumen 22 februar 1928," *Oktiaber*, Feb. 26, 1928, p. 4.

46 On the involvement of Jewish women in food riots, see, e.g., Paula E. Hyman, "Immigrant Women and Consumer Protest: The New York City Kosher Meat Boycott of 1902," *American Jewish History* 20, no. 1 (Sept. 1980): 91–105.

47 GAMO, f. 12, op. 1, d. 1016, ll. 34–35.

48 See GAMO, f. 12, op. 1, d. 1016, l. 74, and "Afn veg fun opshafn di takse," *Oktiaber*, Feb. 26, 1928, p. 4.

49 G. Naumov, "A koshere artel," *Oktiaber*, Apr. 18, 1928, p. 4.

50 GAMO, f. 12, op. 1, d. 1016, l. 48.

51 According to Rabbi Asher Karshtein, the Shoavei Mayim yeshivah was closed down following Rabbi Tsimbalist's departure for Palestine in 1933. See *Rabi Yehoshua me-Horodna*, 7.

52 A. A. Gershuni, *Yehudim ve-yahadut bi-vrit ha-moatsot: Yahadut rusyah mi-tkufat Stalin ve-ad ha-zman ha-aharon*, vol. 2 (Jerusalem, 1970), 86.

53 Shifres, "Shoykhet Rapoport, der held fun mord un oysgelasnkayt," *Oktiaber*, Mar. 30, 1934, p. 3.

54 A.D., "Di klerikal-sadistishe fizionomye fun reb Yankev-Tevye Rapoport," *Oktiaber*, Apr. 2, 1934, p. 3. For a radically different assessment of Rapoport's figure, see Gershuni, *Yehudim ve-yahadut bi-vrit ha-moatsot*, 88–91, and Rozin, *Mayn veg aheym*, 38, 43–45.

55 On sexual anxieties and Jewish butchers in fin-de-siècle Germany, see Judd, "Politics of Beef," 125.

56 For the official account of the Rapoport show-trial, see "Gerikht ibern farbrekher-sadist-shoykhet reb Yankev-Tevye Rapoport," *Oktiaber*, Apr. 1, 1934, p. 4, and "Protses ibern klerikal, farbrekher-sadist dem shoykhet Yankev-Tevye Rapoport: Ershter ovnt fun gerikht," *Oktiaber*, Apr. 3, 1934, p. 4.

57 "Protses ibern klerikal, farbrekher-sadist dem shoykhet Yankev-Tevye Rapoport: Urteyl," *Oktiaber*, Apr. 7, 1934, p. 3.

58 For the influence that the shtetl had on Jewish life in Soviet urban centers until World War II, see Mordechai Altshuler, *Soviet Jewry on the Eve of the Holocaust: A Social and Demographic Profile* (Jerusalem, 1998), 45–46. On the persistence of kosher butchering in Soviet cities in the 1930s, see Gershuni, *Yehudim ve-yahadut bi-vrit ha-moatsot*, 86–87.

59 NARB, f. 63, op. 2, d. 462, ll. 24–25, 72.

60 GAMO, f. 37, op. 1, d. 229, ll. 417–18.

61 Ibid., ll. 408–10.

62 Francois Furet and Jacques Le Goff, "Histoire et ethnologie," in *Methodologie de l'histoire et des sciences humaines*, vol. 2 of *Melanges en l'honneur de Fernand Braudel* (Toulouse, 1973), 237.

63 Quoted in Elizabeth Wyner Mark, ed., *The Covenant of Circumcision: New Perspectives on an Ancient Jewish Rite* (Hanover, N.H., 2003), xx.

64 Joshua Rothenberg, *The Jewish Religion in the Soviet Union* (New York, 1971), 142–43.

65 NARB, f. 37, op. 1, d. 228, ll. 37–38.

66 Ibid., l. 38.

67 As of 1924, 984 (or 60 percent) of the members of the Construction Workers' Union in the city and district of Minsk were Jewish. GAMO, f. 12, op. 1, d. 166, l. 11.

68 In 1928, e.g., the party-cell of Minshvei counted 155 Jewish members and only 6 Belorussians. GAMO, f. 1260, op. 1, d. 3, ll. 37–41.

69 Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization* (Berkeley, 1995), 295.

70 GAMO, f. 12, op. 1, d. 166, ll. 11–12.

71 GAMO, f. 1260, op. 1, d. 2, ll. 54–56, 64.

72 GAMO, f. 1260, op. 1, d. 3, ll. 75–76.

73 Ibid., ll. 99–101.

74 "Karl-Yankl," in *The Complete Works of Isaac Babel*, ed. Nathalie Babel (New York, 2002), 619–27.

75 GAMO, f. 37, op. 1, d. 308, ll. 16–17.

76 GAMO, f. 37, op. 1, d. 229, ll. 216–17, 408–10, 417–18.

77 Sholem Levin, "Undzere 'opgeshtanene' froyen," *Oktiaber*, Feb. 28, 1930, p. 2.

78 "A briv in redaktsye," *Oktiaber*, Jan. 15, 1928, p. 4.

79 See, e.g., Rothenberg, *Jewish Religion in the Soviet Union*, 147, and Arkadii Zeltser, *Evrei sovetskoi provintsii: Vitebsk i mestechki, 1917–1941* (Moscow, 2006), 271.

80 GAMO, f. 37, op. 1, d. 1335, ll. 5–6.

81 GAMO, f. 164, op. 5, d. 89, ll. 231–34.

82 "Di klerikaln-shediker farn proletarishn gerikht," *Oktiaber*, Mar. 22, 1931, p. 3.

83 For Soviet propaganda literature against the practice of circumcision, see Dr. Olshanetskii, "Doloi obrezanie," *Bezvirnik*, nos. 21–22 (1930): 33–36,

reissued in L. I. Kilimnik, ed., *Kommunisticheskaia vlast' protiv religii Moiseia: Dokumenty 1920–1937 i 1945–1953 gg.* (Vinnytsya, 2005), 146–51, and G. Ia. Kiselev, *O kreshchenii i obrezanii* (Moscow, 1937), esp. 24–30.

84 "Di klerikaln-shediker farn proletarishn gerikht," *Oktiaber*, Mar. 25, 1931, p. 3.

85 See, e.g., Gershuni, *Yehudim ve-yahadut bi-vrit ha-moatsot*, 93–95, and David L. Mekler, *Mentsh un mashin in Sovyetn-land: Faktn, bilder, ayndrukn fun a rayze iber Sovyet Rusland* (Warsaw, 1936), 297–98.

86 GAMO, f. 1257, op. 1, d. 21, ll. 32–35.

87 GAMO, f. 164, op. 5, d. 94, ll. 17–30.

88 GAMO, f. 164, op. 5, d. 92, ll. 143, 175.

89 See Sander Gilman, *The Jew's Body* (New York, 1991), 123, 155.

90 See Robin Judd, "Circumcision and Modern Jewish Life: A German Case Study, 1843–1914," in Mark, *Covenant of Circumcision*, 142–55, and Gershon Bacon, "Kfiyah datit, hofesh bitui ve-zehut modernit be-polin: Y. L. Peretz, Shalom Asch ve-shaaruriyat ha-milah be-varshah, 1908," in *Mi-Vilna li-Yerushalaym: Mehkarim be-toledotehem uve-tarbutam shel yehudei mizrah eropah mugashim le-profesor Shmuel Werses*, ed. David Assaf et al. (Jerusalem, 2002), 167–85.

91 Slezkine, *Jewish Century*, 254.

92 On baptism, see Christel Lane, *Christian Religion in the Soviet Union: A Sociological Study* (Albany, N.Y., 1978), esp. 59–62. With the exception of Lane's sociological study, which focuses primarily on the postwar years, there is no historical research about the practice of baptism among Soviet citizens during the 1920s and 1930s. One plausible reason for this deficiency is that, in the absence of a "body marker" such as in the case of circumcision, it is more difficult for historians to ascertain the level or degree of baptism. Likewise, Communist Party officials could not easily check after the fact whether a child had been baptized, as they could with circumcision.

93 Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain*, esp. chap. 5.

94 This kind of synthetic Soviet Jewish identity has been explored recently by Anna Shternshis, who examines similar phenomena but from an anthropological vantage point. Anna Shternshis, *Soviet and Kosher: Jewish Popular Culture in the Soviet Union, 1923–1939* (Bloomington, Ind., 2006).