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The action of Nativ's emissaries in the United States:
a trigger for the American movement to aid Soviet Jews,
1958-1974¹

At the end of 1952, an office code-named "Nativ" –"Way" in Hebrew– was created in Tel-Aviv in the tightest secrecy. Also known as the Liaison Office or "Lishkat ha-Kesher", this small structure was called upon to play a great role in the future of Israel. From the very beginning, its importance was signified by its direct accountability to the Prime Minister's office. Its purpose was to secretly renew ties with Soviet Jews who had been totally cut off from the Zionist movement since the 1930s and who were victims of successive waves of repression, with the still very utopian hope to trigger their aliyah. Three coinciding decisive events led to the creation of Nativ. In 1951, immigration to Israel started diminishing seriously; an interest arose in the gigantic reservoir represented by the 3 million Jews living in the Soviet Union. Also, the revival of anti-Semitism in the years preceding Stalin's demise called for solidarity with the diaspora in distress. Finally, as Jerusalem had decided to put an end to its non-alignment policy, it could voice its demand that Jews be allowed to emigrate, as stipulated by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, a demand that had not been raised until then. However, the Hebrew State refused to sacrifice its relation with Moscow for the sake of Soviet Jews. A clandestine body was

¹ This article is based on several interviews with Israeli emissaries who worked for Nativ in the United States between 1958 and 1983. These interviews have been conducted between October 2002 and July 2003 in Israel and in the United States. I would like to thank the Centre de recherche français de Jérusalem whose support helped me carry out this project in the best possible conditions. So far, no academic study has been devoted to the activities of Nativ emissaries in the United States. Since the Archives of the Liaison office remain classified, interviews are the only way to understand their work abroad.

List of Nativ emissaries who worked in New York : Uri Ra'anan (1958-1961), Benyamin Eliav (1960-1961), Meir Rosenne (1961-1966), Yoram Dinstein (1966-1970), Yehoshua Pratt (1970-1973), Yitzchak Rager (1973-1975), Haim Ber (1975-1978), Sara Frankel (1978-1983). Nativ emissaries in Washington: Nechemia Levanon (1965-1969), Nir Baruch (1969-1973), Jerry Shiran (1973- ?).

Benyamin Eliav and Yitzchak Rager are deceased. Nir Baruch, Jerry Shiran and Haim Ber, whom I have been unable to locate, have not been interviewed.

designed to reconcile the interests of Israel as a State –to maintain its relations with the second superpower at any cost–, and its goal as the nation of the Jewish people –to help endangered Jews in the diaspora and make sure that immigration would not be halted.

Upon the creation of the Israeli secret services out of the clandestine organs that had been operating during the British mandate, Shaul Avigur was assigned as leader of the sensitive task of creating Nativ. With this new mission, this very secretive man pursued his previous activity as head of the Aliyah Bet, the organ that had been in charge of clandestine immigration to Palestine. As early as 1952, Nativ's objective was to « ingather the exiles » from the Soviet Union. The choice of the recruits was another link between the two organs. Avigur was determined to surround himself only with Zionists close to Mapai² and, preferably, with kibboutzniks known for their idealism, their experience abroad and their discretion. Though secular, Nativ's emissaries nevertheless had to be familiar with Jewish traditions and religion. Avigur also selected *olim*³ who had come from Eastern Europe or from neighbouring countries of the Soviet Union for their knowledge of Yiddish, Russian, and other Slavic languages⁴. In contrast with emissaries who had worked for the Aliyah Bet, those of Nativ sent behind the Iron Curtain were protected by diplomatic status which guaranteed their immunity and facilitated their access to the highest levels of the government of the country they were serving in. The liaison office chose respectability as its frame of action. The principles destined to guide it were defined as the following: the Soviet regime should not be attacked in any way, Nativ's action should remain distinct from Cold War antagonism and its methods should avoid endangering Soviet Jews at all costs. Its emissaries complied with these principles until diplomatic relations broke in 1967, putting an end to all types of operations, clandestine included. Until then, under their diplomatic cover, the men posted in Moscow were assigned the task of maintaining a constant link with Jews they met, of helping them, and, most importantly, of providing them with information on Israel and religious objects so as to encourage their identification with the Hebrew State. The mission of the emissaries posted in the Eastern democracies was more ambitious. Emigration, as long as it was payed for, was indeed tolerated. But the very limited results and the unlikelihood of success, which in the best case would be obtained only in the very long term, enticed Avigur to expand Nativ's action to the rest of the world as early as 1955⁵.

² Palestine Workers' Party, created in 1930 under the aegis of Ben Gourion.

³ « Immigrants » in Hebrew.

⁴ « Conspiracy of silence », *Kol Ha'ir Yerushalayim*, 20 November 1992.

⁵ Interview with Nechemia Levanon, 24 October 2002, Kfar Blum, Israel. On Nativ's first years of activity, Levanon, Nechemia, *ha-Kod Nativ*, Tel-Aviv, Am Oved Publishers Ltd, 1995, chapters 1 to 7.

His idea was to launch a campaign in the West, called "Bar", in order to sensitize international public opinion to the plight of Soviet Jews, so as to provoke from the outside what seemed impossible to obtain from the inside. Once more, this strategic choice was made in a specific international context. Starting in 1955, the Hebrew State recognized the pro-Arabic turn of the Kremlin : criticizing Moscow's disrespect of emigration rights was not as costly as before. Also, at a time when Khrushchev's new government attempted a rapprochement with the West, initiating "Bar" was fully justified due to the Soviets' new sensitivity to their image in non-Communist countries. The new criticism of Moscow in the wake of the Soviet invasion of Budapest in 1956, and the condemnation of the Stalinist regime during the XXth Congress of the Soviet Communist Party were opportunities Nativ did not want to neglect. Distinguishing Nativ's campaign from an anti-Soviet attack remained, however, an imperative for its leaders, for Israel still refused to take the risk of being held responsible for increased East/West tensions, though everything was done to conceal the Hebrew State's role as initiator and organizer of the campaign⁶.

Still deeply shocked by the Shoah, Europe appeared as the best ally to help Soviet Jews. Wishing to have an international impact, however, Nativ enlarged its field of action to countries of major Jewish immigration, whether old or new, such as Australia, New Zealand, Latin America, Canada and the United States. To each of these countries, Nativ sent emissaries posted in Israeli embassies or consulates. Most of them matched the profile defined by Avigur during the first years –old stock Zionists who generally knew the Soviet Union. The rest were members of the new Israeli elite that had made aliyah during or after the War. The mission of each of them was to implement an identical scheme of intervention designed in Tel-Aviv, though local adaptations were allowed. Everywhere, Jewish communities were to be the main allies. But since these communities were initially reluctant to get involved, Avigur and his second in command, Benyamin Eliav, decided that intellectuals and politicians would be the primary targets of the liaison office. Not having local Jewish communities in the front line contributed to maintaining the doubt about the real origin of the campaign⁷. The greatest originality of this campaign was to look for support among liberals and, in Europe, also among communist sympathizers. These personalities' condemnation of the Kremlin was likely to be extremely disturbing for the Soviet Union and very impressive to the international public opinion.

⁶ Govrin, Yaacov, *Israeli-Soviet Relations 1953-1967*, Portland, Oregon, Frank Cass, 1998, pp. 181-182.

⁷ Levanon, Nechemia, « Israel's role in the campaign », in Friedman, Murray, Chernin Albert D. (ed.), *A Second Exodus. The American Movement to Free Soviet Jews*, New England, Brandeis University Press, 1995, p. 73.

Thus, the Hebrew State could conduct its campaign fully under cover and prevent the plight of Soviet Jews from being a religious and partisan issue.

It was not until 1958 that Avigur started considering the United States as the best place for his emissaries. In the event that it was possible to influence the Soviet Union, Washington was the only power able to do so. The United States was also very promising because it possessed a pluralist and open political system, and a system on which the American Jewish community –the most numerous, the most powerful and the most anxious to put an end to its association with Communism and to compensate for its inaction during World War II– was likely to have an influence. From 1958 to the end of the 1980s, the Israeli office sent its best emissaries to America, men with the finest knowledge of Communist countries and masters in tactics of influence. Their ideological and professional trajectory reveal Nativ's expectations regarding "Bar" in the United States⁸.

The first Israeli to be sent to New York by Nativ in 1958, Uri Ra'an, operated with great independence from Tel-Aviv's office, but he did not have the power of his successors. Born in Austria before finding refuge in England during the War, he had no direct experience of the Soviet regime. However, after his studies at Oxford, Ra'an worked for the international division of the BBC and became, after his aliyah, editor of the international section of the *Jerusalem Post* and later of *Ha'aretz*. It was for his expertise on Communist countries gained in journalism, but also probably for his friendship with Moshe Sharett that he was selected to implement "Bar" in the United States. The exact nature of his assignment was far from clearly defined. Ra'an decided to use this freedom to cultivate the press, a professional environment he knew well, to make the first contacts in the literary and artistic world, and to recruit a small number of American Jews to plant the first seeds of the mobilization of the Jewish organized community. Nativ's action gained professionalism with the arrival of Benjamin Eliav in 1960, about whom little is known. The appointment of this former emissary to Moscow and Latin America, and foremost thinker of the liaison office, symbolized Nativ's will for increasing sophistication of the Israeli action in the United States. As Consul General, Eliav had little time to devote to Soviet Jews after his regular business was finished. It was he, however, who defined the first goal of the Israeli action in the United States: to convince progressive Americans to put pressure on the Kremlin in order to obtain the

⁸ Unfortunately, we possess very little information on Benjamin Eliav and Yitzchak Rager. The bibliography, which is focused on Levanon, ignores their actions, which was most likely more important than these paragraphs suggest.

respect of their rights⁹. In 1961, both men left New York, Ra'anana to enter the diplomatic service, Eliav to pursue his work for Nativ in London.

Meir Rosenne succeeded them. This future Israeli ambassador to Paris and Washington fulfilled all the criteria defined by Shaul Avigur. Born in Romania in 1931, Rosenne grew up in a francophile, cultivated and Zionist family closely linked to Palestine. In 1944, he made aliyah with the rest of his family and, a few years later, demonstrated his attachment to his new country by enrolling in the Haganah¹⁰. Once the State of Israel was created, Rosenne swore to serve it by becoming one of its diplomats. He learnt this profession in Paris, at the Institut d'Etudes Politiques, where he made many contacts that would be very precious once he worked for Nativ. He stayed in Paris for seven years, long enough to finish his dissertation at the Sorbonne. Seduced by this young man with strong Zionist convictions, well introduced in the Parisian intellectual and political world, Eliav persuaded Rosenne to defer his entry into the diplomatic career to work for Nativ. Attracted by the Lishkat's visionary goal, Rosenne organized a campaign to sensitize the French to the plight of Soviet Jews, before moving to New York where his actions were targeted to the United Nations and to relations with American and Canadian Jewish organizations¹¹.

This mandate partially overlapped that of Nechemia Levanon's who arrived in the United States in 1965 to serve in Washington. It was from this time that dated the bipolar representation of Nativ in America. When he settled his headquarters in the federal capital, Levanon had already done a lot for the Lishkat, not only in the Soviet Union where he had been its first emissary, but also in Tel-Aviv where he had actively participated in the conception of "Bar." For Avigur, he was the ideal recruit. Born in 1915 in Latvia to a father who was a member of a clandestine Jewish group, Levanon was from very early on exposed to the risk of underground activities. He had also demonstrated many times his attachment to Zionism. Noticed at a young age for his organizing skills, his power of persuasion and his humour, he was recruited by one of the Latvian heads of the "Netzah," a Zionist youth movement influenced by socialism, to collaborate in the creation of one of its branches in Estonia. Later, Levanon supervised the preparation of young Zionists to aliyah. In 1938, he and his "halutzim"¹², abandoned a Europe threatened by Nazism for Palestine, where they attempted to found a kibbutz in Northern Galilee. During all these endeavours, Levanon showed his ability as a leader – a skill that led once more to his selection

⁹ Interview with Yoram Dinstein, New York, 18 July 2003.

¹⁰ Jewish Clandestine Army created in 1920 in Palestine, integrated into the new secret services in 1951.

¹¹ Interview with Meir Rosenne, Jerusalem, 17 October 2002.

¹² « Pionneers » in Hebrew.

by the “Netzah” to be its emissary in England¹³. When Shaul Avigur asked Levanon to join Nativ in 1952, he hoped his command of several European languages, his direct knowledge of the Soviet Union, his experience of clandestinity and, more than anything else, his leadership talents would help the cause of Soviet Jewry. In 1965, when he arrived in Washington, Levanon was already one of Nativ’s pillars. After the demise of its founder in 1970, he took over the leadership and, as its director, came back to the United States during the following decade every time a sensitive political choice had to be made.

While Levanon operated in Washington, a young diplomat arrived in New York to succeed Meir Rosenne. Like his predecessor, Yoram Dinstein had been convinced by Eliav to interrupt his diplomatic career to serve Nativ. A brilliant lawyer, familiar with the intricacies of international and American law after a year at New York University and a semi-official membership in the Israeli delegation to the United Nations, this dedicated Zionist did not hesitate to take the risk to sacrifice a career which some foresaw as extremely promising –Golda Meir herself had noticed two reports he had sent from New York, one dealing with the incoherence of Israeli discourse on Palestinian refugees at the UN, the other dwelling on the necessity to condemn the Soviet Union for its violation of the human rights of Jews in international organizations. Impressed by Eliav, Dinstein accepted to implement with the greatest loyalty the directives decided upon in Tel-Aviv. He earned a reputation for dogmatism which might have hindered him from fulfilling his objectives, though his work was greatly facilitated by the aura the Hebrew State gained during the Six Day-War¹⁴.

Yehoshua Pratt, who followed Dinstein, had a very similar profile to that of Levanon, but he had neither Levanon’s charisma, nor his psychological stability. Born in 1915 in Warsaw, he belonged to the same generation and was bred by the same political culture as Levanon. Raised in a socialist Zionist family, he was a member of a group which prepared young Jews to aliyah. In the wake of World War II, he became one of the organizers of a clandestine group whose aim was to help Jews residing next to the Polish border to flee the Soviet Union. Once the action of this group was discovered, Pratt was tortured in Soviet jails. Helped by a KGB officer, he succeeded in escaping and crossing the border to Poland from where he emigrated to Israel. There, he served in the army and studied law at the university before working as a legal counselor for the *Histadruth*¹⁵. As Rosenne and Dinstein before him, Pratt abandoned his career to answer the call of Avigur, in whom he saw his mentor. He was set apart from others by very precious

¹³ Levanon, Nechemia, *The Road to the Banks of the Jordan*, Kibbutz Ein Dor, Israel, « HaMadpis », 2002, and interview with Nechemia Levanon.

¹⁴ Interview with Yoram Dinstein.

¹⁵ Israeli Federation of Labor created in 1920.

qualities: he had already experienced the methods of the KGB, possessed a high level of education, and, though he was an Atheist, had a very good knowledge of Judaism. For all these reasons, Avigur sent him to Moscow from 1959 to 1962, and later to Warsaw. He also worked for Nativ's central office before being posted in New York in 1970 where his friendliness contrasted with Dinstein's inflexibility¹⁶.

The circumstances that led to the appointment of the last emissary (of the period studied) to work for Nativ remain unknown to us. The fact that Yitzhack Rager was born to a Russian mother as well as his experience in journalism surely played a role in the decision to recruit him. As a young reporter for the European office of Israeli broadcasting, Rager was noticed by Avigur during a trip he made to the Soviet Union to cover de Gaulle's official visit, during which he met with Soviet Jews¹⁷. He was sent first to London and in 1973 to New York where, taken over by Levanon, he played only a minor role in an oversensitive American and international context that required the intervention of the Office's head himself.

The task of these emissaries, selected for their Zionism and their power of conviction, was to implement in the United States a strategy designed by the direction of Nativ in Tel-Aviv. As in all the other countries to which the Lishkat had sent its men, the Israelis sought to sensitize three types of groups: intellectuals, politicians and Jewish organizations –which were “Bar”'s veritable targets and were given the greatest attention by Nativ emissaries.

An important part of Ra'anán and Eliav's work consisted of approaching journalists and progressive intellectuals. They provided newsmen with information about the Soviet Union, a rare material at that time, with the hope of inspiring confidence and enticing them to publish articles on Soviet Jews. They were less careful when it came to sensitizing intellectuals to the cruelty of the Soviet Jews' plight and persuading them to publicly condemn Moscow's discriminatory treatment of its Jewish nationals. In New York, as well as in London, Paris, or Buenos-Aires, Nativ also secured the assistance of Jewish intellectuals whose roles were to trigger influential progressive figures' sympathy for the cause. Ra'anán and Eliav obtained the support of Moshe Decter, a journalist well introduced in progressive circles and, most importantly, an anti-Communist. Son of an orthodox rabbi, Decter moved toward the Socialist Party and Americans for Democratic Action after his studies at the Jewish Theological Seminary and his PhD in social science at the New School. He was also close to Elliot Cohen's *Commentary* at a time when the magazine

¹⁶ Interview with Yehoshua Pratt, Tel-Aviv, 25 October 2002.

¹⁷ Interview with Yitzhack Rager, 1989, « Soviet Jewry movement in America », New York Public Library and American Jewish Committee Oral History Collection.

distinguished itself for its systematic opposition to the Soviet Union. Decter was the editor of the *New Leader*, a low-circulation magazine associated with the American Labour Conference on International Affairs, a liberal anti-Communist organization. During the first two years of his association with Nativ, Decter kept his editorial job and worked as a volunteer for Eliav who gave him information that provided the core of the notes he handed out to his journalist or academic friends, and that inspired his articles on Soviet Jews, such as that published in *Foreign Affairs* with quite some success in January 1963. In the meanwhile, cooperation with the Israelis had deepened. In 1960, with the help of Ra'anana, Decter created an institutional cover for his activity, the Jewish Minority Research. To pay for his services, a financial set-up was designed by Nativ – paying Decter directly would have made him an Israeli agent–: Nahum Goldmann, the president of the World Jewish Congress, accepted to contribute 25 000 dollars yearly to the American Jewish Congress which, in turn, contributed the sum to the Jewish Minority Research whose office it housed in its headquarters¹⁸.

During the following fifteen years, Decter, as director of this organization that was nothing but a cover, enrolled intellectuals and public figures as spokesmen for the movement to help Soviet Jews. His recruits –researchers, writers, Supreme Court Justices, union and Black leaders, clergymen– were very high-level personalities, often engaged in other combats –such as the Civil Rights or the pacifist movements–, and whose respectability enhanced the legitimacy of the cause of Soviet Jewry. Decter convinced most of them to participate in conferences he was organizing to popularize the plight of Soviet Jews among the American public. He also initiated a correspondence on the treatment of Jews by the Kremlin between Eleanor Roosevelt, Justices William Douglas and Thurgood Marshall, and theologian Reinhold Niebuhr on the one hand, and Khrushchev on the other hand. In Great-Britain, Nativ had similarly triggered a widely publicized letter exchange between Lord Bertrand Russell and the General Secretary of the Communist Soviet Party. Until 1975, though fearful that his association with Nativ might be discovered, Decter accepted to play the role of ghost-writer and shadow-organizer. Starting in 1969, he was helped by William Korey, another recruit of Nativ, co-founder of the Academic Committee on Soviet Jewry, an organization created to accelerate the mobilization of the academic world at the instigation of Levanon¹⁹. However, in the late 1960s, the participation of intellectuals in the campaign became secondary²⁰. The beginning

¹⁸ Interview with Moshe Decter, 1989, « Soviet Jewry movement in America », New York Public Library and American Jewish Committee Oral History Collection.

¹⁹ Interview with Bill Korey, New York, 7 May 2002.

²⁰ Decter, Moshe, « Crisis in the Soviet Jewry Movement », *Moment*, April 1976, p. 38.

of Soviet Jewry activism in the wake of the Six Day-War and the show trials orchestrated by Moscow functioned as crucial accelerating factors for the mobilization. No American with even the slightest interest in politics could any longer ignore the existence of discrimination against Soviet Jews, and the interdiction to emigrate from which they suffered. For Nativ, it was time to move from information to action. To fulfill this task, politicians and Jewish organizations were the best allies.

In order to increase efficiency, starting in 1965, the workload was divided between the emissary based in Washington, the political capital, and the emissary working in New York, the center of American Jewish life and the headquarters of the United Nations. However, until Levanon's arrival, Rosenne, in New York, was in charge of creating political alliances and approaching Congressmen, the Congress being the lever on which Nativ could hope to have the greatest influence. It is indeed always easier to make friends among those who are accountable to their constituency, than among bureaucrats or career diplomats, more conservative and naturally less sensitive to the pressure of public opinion. Rosenne secured allies among Jewish politicians who would remain loyal to the cause until the end of the 1970s –Senators Abraham Ribicoff (Democrat of Connecticut) and Jacob Javits (Republican of New York), and Congressmen Seymour Halpern and Leonard Farbstein, both Democrats of New York. He also won to his camp Congressmen with an important Jewish constituency, as well as loyal friends of Israel, such as Senator Henry Jackson, Democrat of Washington. Once their awareness to the plight of Soviet Jews had been raised through pertinent information produced by Nativ in Tel-Aviv, they were easily convinced to insert documents relating to them in the *Congressional Record*²¹, to voice in Congress their attachment to the respect of Soviet Jews' right to emigrate, and to introduce, as early as 1963, resolutions condemning Soviet antisemitism, the closing of places of Jewish worship and the banning of matzoh-baking. The Kennedy administration was also approached by Nativ's best political allies, Javits, Ribicoff, and Justice Arthur Goldberg who was Jewish as well. Despite the State Department's refusal to intervene in Soviet internal policy –in the wake of Cuba's missile crisis, Soviet Jews were barely a priority– Kennedy's sensitivity gave hope that dissipated immediately after his assassination²².

²¹ The *Congressional Record* is a daily verbatim transcript of all speeches made by Senators and Representatives in Congress. It also includes bills, resolutions and motions, as well as texts proposed for insertion by Congressmen.

²² See Ro'i, Yaacov, *The Struggle for Soviet Jewish Emigration, 1948-1967*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 1991; and Weinstein, Lewis H., « Soviet Jewry and the American Jewish Community 1963-1987 », *American Jewish History*, vol. 77, June 16, 1988, pp. 600-605.

Nativ's political action gained a new scope with Levanon's arrival in Washington. Appointed number three in the embassy, he cultivated the Congressional contacts of his predecessors and created new ones among recently elected Congressmen, such as Robert Kennedy in New York whom he helped prepare a trip to the Soviet Union. However, with the appeasement brought on by new leadership at the Kremlin, the amount of legislation dealing with Soviet anti-Semitism diminished. Levanon therefore concentrated his action on the administration, and, more precisely, on the State Department where he was well received by the contacts of Israel's ambassador, Abraham Harman. He introduced himself as the Israeli specialist of the Soviet Union, with an expertise gained during a unique experience behind the Iron Curtain –which no other Sovietologist had–, expanded by a daily reading of the Soviet press. Levanon was therefore a highly informed man, an extremely interesting contact for American diplomats always looking for news. On a regular basis, he met the men of the State Department who were in charge of the Soviet Bureau –Malcolm Toon, later to be American ambassador to Moscow, Helmut Sonnenfeldt²³, future counselor of Henry Kissinger, or Walter Stoessel, Deputy-Assistant Secretary for Eastern Europe–, and those in charge of intelligence on the Soviet Union²⁴. He shared with them precious information on the Soviet internal situation that only the Israelis possessed, thanks to the exclusive source they had in the persons of Soviet Jews debriefed upon their arrival in Tel-Aviv. It is likely that this informal communication of intelligence at the initiative of Israelis encouraged the Americans to ignore the activities of Nativ's emissaries in the United States. In any case, this information-sharing allowed the Israelis to discreetly pass on information relating to the situation of Soviet Jews to the State Department, and thus to strengthen from inside the effect of the mobilization on their behalf taking place in the Congress and in society²⁵. Through Levanon, the Administration had without any doubt become aware of the violation of cultural and religious rights of Soviet Jews, and the ban on emigration from which they suffered. Yet, his action enticed neither the Johnson administration, though sensitive to their cause, nor the Nixon administration, much less so, to make any move to help them. No matter the President, until 1971, the plight of Soviet Jews remained a minor issue on the agenda of Soviet-American relations, on which were such burning questions as the Vietnam war, the resolution of the Middle East conflict, and, at the end of the 1960s, a détente that required, according to

²³ The occurrence of these meetings was confirmed by Helmut Sonnenfeldt himself (interview, Washington, 11 June, 2003). He also stated that he was fully aware of the nature of Levanon's activities in the United States.

²⁴ Levanon, Nechemia, *ha-Kod Nativ*, Tel-Aviv, Am Oved Publishers Ltd, 1995, p. 202.

²⁵ Interviews with Yoram Dinstein (New York, 18 July, 2003), and Baruch Gur (Tel-Aviv, 21 October, 2002).

Nixon, silence on all polemical issues that could antagonize the Soviet Union. To all demands of intervention on behalf of Soviet Jews, the successive administrations answered by a shrug and passed the responsibility on to NGOs. It was only in 1972 that the action initiated much earlier on by Nativ's emissaries started producing an effect on the American political scene. This success, on which we will dwell later, was made possible by the mobilization of the organized Jewish community that created, with the help of the Israeli emissaries based in New York, the necessary means to have leverage on American foreign policy.

Paradoxically, obtaining the mobilization of American Jewish organizations was not an easy task for Nativ. Some grassroots organizations²⁶ were created spontaneously and independently from the Israelis with the objective to help Soviet Jews –the Student Struggle for Soviet Jews in New York and the Cleveland Council on Soviet Anti-Semitism in Ohio. For the Lishkat, it was a first step toward an effective mobilization of the community. For this reason, Meir Rosenne and Nechemia Levanon decided to encourage them and to find American funds to help them carry out their activities, before opposing them for their radicalism at the end of the 1960s²⁷. What the Israelis really sought was the involvement of the American Jewish establishment²⁸ and of the most influential Jewish leaders, which should lead, according to them, to the creation of an organization fully devoted to the Soviet Jewish issue. This creation would show the importance the establishment gave to this new issue confronting the Jewish world, and would allow the participation of organizations that were not Zionist or not members of the establishment umbrella-organisations. Meir Rosenne and Nativ's leadership had a hard time convincing Jewish organizations to unite their strengths for this cause. They were resisted by pure inertia and by endless discussions on the responsibilities which this new organization should have. The very influential Conference of Presidents of Major Jewish Organizations already considered the new scheme a threat to its power. Added to these fears in a Jewish community that was already deeply divided, were ideological oppositions, underestimated by the Israelis, which were beginning to resound. A most extreme version came from the World Jewish Congress and its president, Nahum Goldman, who opposed the goal of triggering Soviet Jews' emigration on the grounds that Jewish life should be maintained in the Soviet Union. The other organizations resisted because they refused to take orders from the Israelis. For

²⁶ Grassroots organizations, as opposed to interest groups, have a leadership closer to the support base and put more emphasis on local action.

²⁷ Levanon, Nechemia, *ibid.*

²⁸ Relatively small, self-perpetuating leadership at the head of American Jewish organizations, drawn mainly from traditionally wealthy families or high-status Jewish elites.

American Jewish leaders, the relationship between Israel and American Jewish organizations had to comply with the Blaustein/Ben-Gurion Pact of 1950, in which the Israeli Prime Minister had officially renounced Israel's entitlement to speak on behalf of world Jewry and had accepted the principle of non-interference in the American Jewish community's affairs²⁹. Though discreet and, in general, subtle, Nativ's intervention was a major violation of this Pact.

However, an *ad hoc* conference, named the American Jewish Conference on Soviet Jewry, was finally born in April 1964, after numerous Israeli intercessions behind the scenes. With a ridiculously low budget and a revolving leadership shared among member-organizations, this conference could have but little weight. Besides the constitutive weakness adopted to keep opposition quiet, another feature of this young organization was disappointing to the Israelis: they were unable to persuade its leadership to make as its first priority the reunion of families that would bring Soviet Jews to Israel. In the Conference's founding declaration, Jewish establishment leaders defined the defense of cultural and religious rights as the main objective of their action, despite Nativ's advice. The Israelis portrayed the struggle for emigration as the goal to accomplish: according to them, it implied no intervention in Soviet affairs and treated the Soviet Union like any other country from whom was demanded the recognition of the Jews' right to go back to their "historical homeland". For the Israelis, the real advantage of emigration to the respect of minority rights was, first and foremost, to enable them to reach their real objective: provoke the aliyah of Soviet Jews. On the other hand, American Jewish organizations claimed that it was easier to obtain concessions on rights that the Soviets granted to other minorities than to demand emigration that was not granted to any Soviet citizen – for that would have implied demanding exceptional treatment for Soviet Jews. Behind this argument, one should read the refusal of American Jews to take the risk of being accused of dual loyalty by playing too obviously the Israeli game. One should also decipher the higher priority they gave to the survival of Soviet Judaism to the fulfillment of the Zionist ideal. However, this firm resistance to the Israeli emissaries vanished in the euphoria created by the Israeli victory amidst the Six Day-War, which put an end to the American Jewish community's opposition to Zionism.

Nativ progressively succeeded in imposing its strategy and its men. During the first years of the AJCSJ, non-Jewish personalities who had been approached by the Israeli office during the early 1960s became honorary members of the new organization. Many politicians enrolled by the Israeli emissaries or by Moshe Decter appeared regularly at demonstrations coordinated by the new

²⁹ Beilin, Yossi, *His Brother's Keeper. Israel and Diaspora Jewry in the Twenty-first Century*, New York, Schocken Books, 2000, p. 57.

organization. Nativ also encouraged the collaboration between the AJCSJ and its political friends in Congress so as to politicize the Soviet Jewish issue. The Lishkat emissaries never gave precise orders. But, attending most of the AJCSJ meetings and counting on the help of a few devoted Jewish leaders –Jerry Goodman of the American Jewish Committee, William Korey of B'nai B'rith, or Phil Baum of the American Jewish Congress–, they were sure to communicate information favoring the Israeli objectives and to try to convince the American Jewish organizations to achieve them. Nativ's emissaries and leadership intervened directly only in cases of serious divisions between establishment organizations, for example à propos the nature of public demonstrations, or for major international events –such as the Leningrad trials³⁰ or, later, the adoption of the emigration tax by the Soviets³¹– which required a coordinated response between Israel and the American diaspora organizations. As time passed and as the aura of the Hebrew State increased in the American Jewish community, the Israeli intervention in community affairs was better accepted. Yoram Dinstein and Yehoshua Pratt took advantage of this new situation to obtain, in 1971, the transformation of the AJCSJ into a permanent conference, the National Conference on Soviet Jewry (NCSJ), possessing a decent budget and a permanent staff headed by a faithful friend of Nativ, Jerry Goodman³². The slogan chosen by the NCSJ, “Let my people go !”, an obvious quote from the Book of Exodus, left no doubt as to the goal of this new organization. Another cause of satisfaction for Nativ was the decisive role played by the NCSJ at the International Conference on Soviet Jews which took place in Brussels in 1971 and was organized by the Israelis together with many other diaspora organizations, during which the Zionist dimension of the movement appeared strikingly. The Israelis seemed to have had finally reached their goal vis-à-vis the American Jewish community.

Without any doubt, the action of Nativ's emissaries contributed to putting the Soviet Jewish issue on the agenda of American foreign policy, though the increasing role of the grassroots organizations should not be neglected. The Israelis played a role in the birth and the popularization of this cause in the press, among progressive political circles and in the Jewish establishment, years before

³⁰ In 1970, a group of eleven Soviet Jewish activists attempted to leave the USSR by hijacking a plane from Leningrad airport. This aborted attempt took them to court for « high treason ». Two of them were condemned to capital punishment. This trial, that brought back to life the darkest times of the Stalinist regime, gave birth to a massive international condemnation of the Soviet Union, which led to the change and reduction of the sentences and to an increased international sensitivity to the situation of Soviet Jews.

³¹ This tax required that each candidate to emigration pay back the education fees the Soviet State had spent for him/her.

³² Interview with Jerry Goodman, New York, 25 April, 2002.

anything had been heard about Soviet dissidents in the U.S. However, starting in 1972, once the necessary context to the success of the agenda-setting was made, the Israeli emissaries retreated temporarily to make way to Americans: Congressmen and Jewish leaders. The latter became the main actors of the movement to help Soviet Jews at a time when Moscow seemed to realize that opening its borders could be rewarding to its relations with Washington, and at a time when sensitive events took place that were particularly favourable to a maximum politization of the cause: the first Nixon-Brezhnev summit held in Moscow in May 1972, the still unexplained adoption of the education tax that hit Soviet Jews in August, and the coming American presidential elections the following November. In this second phase, a fully political one, Israelis intervened only to help the establishment organizations play their new role, and to lift doubts and hesitations.

Since the Leningrad trials, the Jewish establishment, as well as grassroots organizations, had multiplied their demands for an intervention on behalf of Soviet Jews at all levels of political responsibility –municipal, state, congressional and executive. With the help of their long time allies, they were sufficiently vocal so that the plight of Soviet Jews was mentioned every time Soviet-American relations were discussed, and so that the White House finally considered raising the issue with its counterparts at the Kremlin. Resolutions had also been introduced in both congressional houses to put pressure on Moscow, but none of them had been adopted. At the end of September 1972, a great opportunity for the movement appeared: Henry Jackson, a fierce opponent of Nixon's and Kissinger's détente, decided, at the instigation of his legislative assistant Richard Perle, to engage in the fight for Soviet Jewry's emigration rights. He introduced an amendment to a trade law linking the extension of economic privileges –most favored nation and credit guarantees– for a non-market economy to its respect of minority emigration rights. Though Levanon insisted that he was responsible for Perle's conversion to Zionism³³, Nativ played no role in the phrasing of the amendment; it is more toward the grassroots organizations that one should look to find its origin. But Levanon, as director of the Lishkat ha-Keshet, intervened personally to persuade the few Jewish leaders close to Nixon who were hesitating to back Jackson's legislative initiative. From October 1972 to the adoption of the amendment in December 1974, the establishment and grassroots organizations acted fully independently as real lobbies, submitting to Jackson and his staff all the information on Soviet Jews they needed, playing the role of intermediaries between Soviet Jewish activists and the U.S. Congress, using well-planned techniques to convince those Congressmen whose vote was decisive to co-sponsor the amendment, and

³³ Interview with N. Levanon.

coordinating massive letter-writing campaigns when the text was being voted on by the two houses.

However, the Jackson-Vanik amendment did not owe its success only to the mobilization of American Jewish organizations. It also was supported by a very large bi-partisan coalition uniting Human Rights defenders, anti-Communists, détente opponents, and protectionists hostile to trade with the Soviet Union. As well, the Jewish establishment was at times painfully shaky, as reported extensively by the press. Three times during 1973, the Jewish leaders closest to the White House were pressured by Nixon to withdraw their support to the amendment. They were torn between their gratefulness for his supportive policy to Israel –Nixon had rejected the Rogers Plan³⁴ and increased to as of yet unattained levels the financial and military help toward Israel– and their loyalty to Soviet Jews. The most delicate moment occurred when, in the middle of the Yom Kippur War, precisely at the time when Israel so badly needed American help, Nixon tried to convince Golda Meir that she persuade American Jewish organizations to stop supporting Jackson. Nechemia Levanon, for whom such an act would have discredited the Jewish establishment on the American political scene, intervened once more. To make his point, he first had to oppose the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Israeli ambassador in Washington, Simcha Dinitz, who were ready to sacrifice the hope of help to Soviet Jews with uncertain effects, to a military and financial assistance to Israel, which was not sure to be linked to the the abandonment of the Jackson-Vanik amendment. In the end, Levanon was authorized to impress upon Jewish leaders the necessity of remaining at Jackson's side³⁵. This success is an excellent illustration of the trust shown to Levanon and his office by the Prime Minister, and of the importance that was given to "Bar" by the Israeli state. But it is likely that the intervention of Nativ's director was not as decisive as he would have liked to think. A retreat of the establishment would have been impossible within the context of the extreme mobilization of so many local Jewish organizations, unless it had been ready to accept a schism with its support base. Until December 1974, the Jewish organizations increased their support of the coalition backing the amendment without Nativ needing to intervene again. Its adoption was considered more a decisive turn in American foreign policy –it provoked the demise of détente and implied the success of humanitarian concerns of the Congress over the realism of the Executive–, than a victory for American Jewish organizations. In January

³⁴ In December 1969, the State Secretary came out with a settlement plan for the Arab-Israeli conflict, that required a next to total withdrawal of the occupied territories. On January 26, 1970, the Presidents' Conference assembled a thousand Jewish leaders in Washington to obtain the deletion of the plan. Advised by Kissinger, Nixon decided to abandon it.

³⁵ Levanon, Nechemia, *op. cit.*, pp. 397-401.

1975, refusing to give in to the pressure of the Congress, the Soviets decided to impose a new limit on Jewish emigration, which had reached the level of 35,000 in 1973, and to renounce the economic advantages the American Executive was willing to extend to them, in order to avoid the conditions the Jackson-Vanik amendment had imposed on them.

In about fifteen years, the undercover activities of Nativ's emissaries created the context and the conditions that were necessary to shape foreign policy to help Soviet Jews. The men of the Lishkat ha-Kesher pulled the strings that led to the condemnation of Moscow for its discriminatory treatment of Soviet Jews and to the implementation of leverage against the Soviet Union. With the adoption of the Jackson-Vanik amendment by the Congress in 1974, a chapter of the American movement to aid Soviet Jews as well as a decisive stage of Nativ's action in the U.S came to an end. The objective that Washington put pressure on the Kremlin had been reached, though the outcome was not quite what had been hoped for in the early 1950s. Israelis would have to wait another fifteen years for the doors of the Soviet citadel to open completely. Until then, Nativ's activity in New York and Washington went on in conditions that were very different from the improvisation that had characterized its beginnings: the influence of the Israeli office became much more visible as it became more institutionalized. Another decisive change was due to the violent fight that, starting in 1974, opposed Israel and the American Jewish organizations as to Soviet Jews' country of immigration –whether Israel or the United States–, in other words as to the Zionist vs. non-Zionist nature of the movement. This new quarrel was the beginning of a new period in the relationships between the Lishkat ha-Kesher and Jewish American organizations.

To this day, Nativ's activity in the United States remains shrouded in mystery. Most former emissaries have accepted to speak about their past experiences. But Americans who worked more or less closely with the Israeli office have chosen to remain silent –some negating the very existence of such a collaboration, others protecting themselves behind an alleged clause of secrecy that would have been imposed on them by Israel. Their attitude contributes to creating suspicion about the real nature of Nativ's action in the United States. However, the Lishkat ha-Kesher seems to have been careful to remain within the borders of legality, paying no one but its own emissaries, counting only on the power of its cause to convince and on the loyalty of the American Jewish organizations for Israel's well-being. The declassification of Nativ's archives will certainly shed a clear light on the exact nature of "Bar" in the United States. For the time being, interviews reveal the deep concern of Israelis to abide by American law, a concern they had to reconcile with a well-known predilection for secret operations and an attitude totally devoid of scruples faced with influencing the Diaspora.

The action of Nativ's emissaries

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