

# The Jewish Community in Romania during the Post-Communist Era. Challenges on the Path to Normality

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In the last few years, there appeared a growing interest in the multi-faceted research of the Community, as the institutional structure which manages the daily life of certain social groups. Given the process of globalization, specific governing acts are sent to suprastatal, regional or continental organizations. This "upwards" shift of sovereignty is balanced by the "downwards" takeover of a package of policies – generally connected to the primary requirements of any social group: education, justice, social security, religion, etc. – supported by structures which are close to the citizens. These structures, which implement "grass-root" policies, are *relatively small social groups and, due to the fact that there are objectively closer to individuals and that they know their needs better, they can better find solutions for their immediate needs.*

Jews have a lot of experience, as far as communal life is concerned, due to the specific feature of their history, i.e. the lack of a state for a long time. Thus, for about two millennia, they developed their life while being spread in various political and cultural milieus. They were a minority, generally not accepted by the social and political establishment. This fact had a decisive influence upon the various processes of alteration of their identity. Either the persecutions or the various pressures of the cultural establishment

where they lived made it necessary for them to find certain strategies for survival, both at a social and individual level. As a part of this effort, Jews found a replacing formula for the state. It was a type of self-governing, meant to answer to the needs of the collectivity. This formula was the Community. Its evolution is essential for the history of the Jewish people. Moreover, the Jewish Community served as an institutional model for other cultural fields, as well. For example, the European urban organization took over certain organizational patterns used by the Jewish communities. These patterns were included in the look of European towns. At the historical time of the urban apparition and development in Carolingian and Merovingian Europe, the Jewish communities were already formed as urban centers.<sup>1</sup>

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Moreover, by developing organizational forms of activity, meant to manage the various functions of the community (education, social welfare – *Gmilut Hasidim* – or funerary issues – *hevrat kdosha*) they became autonomous. This way, the Jewish society cultivated the early apparition of the Civil Society, which is an extremely important phenomenon in European history. Later on, it was the basis needed for the creation of European democracy. In this context, I can say that the communal structure is an important brick used in the development of democratic regimes. This is precisely why I consider it is essential for it to work properly.

The return to normality proved to be a complicated process, full of challenges. Sociologists, psychologists and historians had to notice that this "return" faced more challenges than they might have hoped. Decades of totalitarian regime have falsified social life, have destroyed the Civil Society and left behind an ambiance deserted of moral ideas and values. The Jewish community is part of this desert left after the totalitarian regime.

In order to take a look at Jewish life as it currently is, after the communist regime, we have to take into consideration a series of factors and especially not to forget the dynamics of history.

I shall focus on the type of reaction of the communal institution, given the context of certain developments in the Jewish world. I want to underline that I consider it is our duty to focus on certain aspects which seem to be "pastiche", on certain gaps between the communal construct, on one hand, and modern, democratic values, on the other hand, as well as on the Jewish tradition. I consider it is a priority to debate on them, not as a result of a "demolition" wish, but because I believe it is necessary to have such a debate. I will not deny the positive aspects, the "authentic" features of the contemporary Jewish communal construct, but I think they are mentioned more often and it is necessary and good to refer to the "pastiche"-type elements, too.

The Jewish Community of Romania was dramatically affected in all fields, including its spirituality, during the 50 years of totalitarian regime, in its various forms.

During the Holocaust, the violently anti-Semitic policies of the fascist government led by Ion Antonescu were meant to "cleanse Romania off the Jews" – which they did, to a certain extent. Those measures followed the typical recipe of the Holocaust: the definition of the Jews, their isolation and civic degradation, plundering, deportation and extermination. Almost half of the Jewish population (circa 40%) died as a result of the orders given by the Antonescu Government and of the pro-Nazi Hungarian authorities, who ruled over Northern Transylvania.

That period left behind a group of survivors which were traumatized and downhearted. They lost faith, their fortune and health. I can say, without exaggerating the seriousness of the situation, that the whole Jewish population was ousted from the borders of historical normality and what remained was a long-term trauma.

After a very short period of hopes and normalization, following the collapse of the fascist dictatorship, on August 23, 1944, a new totalitarian regime came to power. Apparently, only for those who were not able to grasp reality, it was opposed to the previous regime. But in fact, it had the same mental structure, being hostile to differences, too, including ethnic differences.

From the very beginning, the communist power tried to erase the very content of Jewish life, mainly by falsifying" the communal life.

Thus, in the beginning of 1948, the new Power took absolute control of the Jewish

life. They initiated a complex of measures meant to leave the community, which was the fundamental institution of Jewish life, void of its content. Step by step, the communists confiscated - in the name of the false slogan of "equality" of rights - the educative and socio-medical functions, by closing all Jewish schools and by nationalizing the hospitals, senior homes, canteens and other similar institutions. This is not the proper place for a detailed analysis of the process. I did it in my book on communism and the Jews.<sup>2</sup>

I want to point out that the whole policy of the new power was based on ambiguity: on one hand, the Jewish community was supposed, according to the communist power, to be "strictly religious", with no educational or social activity whatsoever. The latter belonged to the monopoly of the communist power. On the other hand, the political resolutions of the new communist-affected Federation included, for example in January 1949, a mention of the need to "isolate the religious sphere". Militant communists were promoted into the leadership of the Communities, especially in 1948-1960. They were completely loyal to the one and only party. Most of them did not show any sensitivity towards Jewish life. This entailed a series of hilarious situations, such as the launch of a "socialist competition between communities", in 1948 (!!!).

Another hilarious provision, which proved the obtuseness of the new communal structure, imposed by the communist Power, was a directive issued in 1951, during a full campaign of "combat against Zionism, as an imperialistic enterprise". The Jewish Democratic Committee - which was the puppet of the Romanian Communist Party in the Jewish world, imperatively asked all communities:

"We are to remove all plaques from communal institutions and synagogues which carry Zionist inscriptions. We shall change the names of certain synagogues, such as *Or Zion*, *Agudas Israel*, *Col Israel Haverim*, *Beth Israel*".<sup>3</sup>

The gross confusion between Zionism, which was incriminated by communists, and traditional Jewish names, proves the total lack of Jewish culture of the new communal leaders.

Even if this process went through a "period of relaxation" after 1960, it continued so that everything connected to communal life and Jewish traditions was left in an ambiguous, grey area, which was in fact a "limited tolerance" and permanent monitoring. Thus, this area was under the permanent surveillance of the political police agencies. Despite the fact that the community was "communized", it became a "permanent objective of the Securitate."

The period after 1960 has certain special features: from the propagandistic point of view, it was relaxed, but only the "volume" was turned down. There was no change of policy. Zionism was no longer mentioned, but it still had a negative connotation. There were relations with the State of Israel, but they were limited, without normality. Those connected with that state or those who came from there were "closely followed".

The valorization of cultural traditions was done to a much lower extent than during the previous period. Actually, they were close to zero.

According to the definition provided by two Italian researchers of Jewish origin, the policy of the communist parties towards the Jews transformed them into an "invisible mass".<sup>4</sup> The word "Jew" was practically eliminated from the political discourse. There was no mention of Jewish history and culture, and this deep silence was interrupted very seldom, for propagandistic reasons. The Jewish Community was kept, but marginalized and it became void of its content. Despite the fact that it was part of the propagandistic game

and the discourse of the communal leaders belonged to the communist political machine, the Jewish community – as well as other bodies representing minorities – was viewed with a deeply-rooted lack of sympathy. The very concentration of a minority was seen as a possible danger for the Power, perhaps especially because such a concentration of people could have entailed the creation of an “alternative milieu”, which could have become an element of the Civil Society.

During both periods, it was not advisable to be seen in the various communal institutions. A series of Jews who were “integrated” – at different levels – into the structures of the regime would make great efforts to avoid going the headquarters of the Jewish community or having any contact with the Jewish world at all.

A certain change took place during the 1980's, with a rise of anti-Semitism, which was a deeply-rooted part of Ceaușescu's national-communism. This policy was visible in the “go-ahead” granted to deeply anti-Jewish writings (see the two episodes about Corneliu Vadim Tudor, in 1979 and 1982, and others) as well as in the intensification of the policy which began during Dej's time, by which they eliminated – or marginalized – Jewish elements in various fields. These measures would entail a fragile, not very determined “feeling of unity.” A series of personalities began being seen at the communal headquarters in Popa Soare Street, but, with a few exceptions, *only after* they had been marginalized by the communist regime. Nevertheless, even in this situation, they were very... shy and discreet. There were exceptions, but these were so rare that they only underline the isolation that the Community was subjected to. Among these exceptions – in the order in which they “found back” the Community – I remind of Professor Engineer Theodor Blumenfeld, Linguist and Academician Alexandru Graur or Professor Dr. Academician Nicolae Cajal (the latter after 1989).

The communist regime fell in December 1989. In the whole Romanian society, the transition to democracy proved long and difficult. Similarly, the Jewish microcosm was as complicated and difficult.

The confusion, the reversal of values during the communist time, the lack of authentic connections with the Jewish world – especially with the Israeli reality – as well as the lack of an authentic political culture in the spirit of democracy, all these influenced the later developments within the Romanian-Jewish world. Being a part of the Romanian society as a whole, the Jews suffered the devastating effects of the “creation of the new man”, as well. This was an obstacle in finding back the normality of democracy.

A way out of the “totalitarian desert” and the adaptation to the new democratic realities was a general challenge faced by Jewish communities in all former communist countries. In 1990, a leader of the World Jewish Congress asked “the Jewish world to make its own *Perestroika*” (!!!). In reality, things were much more complicated. In Romania, given the drastic decrease of the Jewish population – due to the strong *Aliyah*, as well as to biologic reasons, i.e. the ageing process suffered by this population – the situation was more difficult. In fact, it may be that the Romanian Jewry was the least prepared to do what is called “*pikuah nefesh*” in Hebrew (an approximate translation is “purification”). The Jews of Romania lacked an authentic communal elite, with a complete respectability in the Jewish world. All the attributes of the power, in the Jewish world, were held by one person only: Chief Rabbi Moses Rosen, who was both the communal leader, as President of the Federation, and the spiritual leader, as Chief Rabbi. Having been the leader in the last 40 years and absolute leader in the last 30 years (since 1960), Rosen

did have remarkable merits in his attempt to protect Jewish life from the totalitarian regime. In the communal mentality, but also outside the Community, a certain idea developed, according to which he was the only one who could solve the most difficult problems. In the discussions among the people, he was praised for all accomplishments, as well as blamed for failures. For Jews and gentiles alike, he was the image of the Community. In fact, he considered about himself that he was the only one capable of solving the most difficult problems. He never felt the need to have a team, but only loyal people who performed the tasks set forth by him. Some were competent, others were not.

His strategy of finding solutions for Jewish survival was admired in the Occident too, in the great Jewish organizations, and his successes were important, unique in the Jewish world under communist states: "kosher" restaurants; a magazine of the community published in four languages: Romanian, English, Yiddish and Hebrew, which was avidly read by the Jews of Romania, as well as of other communist states – also by gentiles who considered the "Mosaic Congregation" to be some kind of a change; Talmud Torah classes and especially the possibility of *Aliyah*.

But they did not notice the "empty space" around the leader, the lack of a certain category of officials, as prescribed by the Jewish tradition (*mehubadim*). Of course, there were a few important people, leaders of communities, who had gained a capital of trust, but they were only "administrators". The strategy came from only one person who was omnipresent and omnipotent.

After December 1989, he could not – perhaps because of his old age or because of the fact that he was used to the anomalies of the totalitarian regime – understand the "rules of the game" within a pluralist regime. He was scared by the complexity of the new realities, by the virulence of the polemics published by the free press and, to a certain extent, by the presence of leaders he did not know. Rosen felt he was entering an uncharted territory, so that his old strategies of self-defense, as well as for the defense of the community, which had been skillfully used, sometimes with positive results, could no longer be useful in the new context, after 1989.

It is necessary to explain one thing, though. Immediately after the fall of democracy, Rabbi Rosen made certain statements in which he expressed a certain distrust and fear of the democratic regime. His fears referred to the danger of renewed anti-Semitism. These statements resulted and still result in attacks against the rabbi, both from within and from outside the Jewish world. Some people present him as the last supporter of the dictatorship, as an antidemocrat, etc. Of course, the moment chose by Moses Rosen and his formula were improper. But, at this time, we have a certain historical perspective and we cannot ignore a fact: the emergence of a very vocal anti-Semitism which resumed the interwar clichés, in the Romanian media at the beginning of the 1990's. This is a general phenomenon. The first to benefit from the freedom of expression are extremist, anti-democratic forces. For them, anti-Semitism is a weapon of choice.

During the last years of the 1990's, there was an explosion of anti-Semitism, hosted by the main newspapers of the time. The "Adevărul" newspaper, controlled by the National Salvation Front, at the time, and the newspaper of the National Peasant's Party, "Dreptatea", made no exception. Historian Gheorghe Iscru wrote virulent anti-Semitic articles there. As far as "Dreptatea" is concerned, the anti-Semitic articles were interrupted suddenly, in 1992, due to Corneliu Coposu's strong intervention. The latter was an important leader of the National Peasant's Party and he had strong democratic beliefs. Gheorghe

Iscru "migrated" to the "România Mare" publication two years later, where he continued his xenophobic articles.

Interestingly, the media's anti-Semitism existed in Romania, in the 1990's, before the apparition of "România Mare" newspaper. Corneliu Vadim Tudor has the "merit" of having radicalized the anti-Semitic discourse, but he is not its initiator. Thus, the rabbi was a good political analyst. He correctly intuited the dynamics of anti-Semitism. Of course, he can be blamed for certain formulas and for not having understood the democratic mechanism, but his political "instinct" was correct.

Nevertheless, one should not think that freedom of speech favors the apparition of anti-Semitism, but the lack of understanding, as far as this principle is concerned, the tolerance of extremism – both by state institutions and by the Civil Society – favored the emergence of anti-Semitism in the 1990's.

It is certain that Rabbi Rosen feared for his own position, as well. He was afraid of Romania's new leaders, whom he did not know, he was afraid of anti-Semitic forces and of a possible "mutiny" within the communal structures.

Interestingly, on December 22 he sent a message in which he saluted the new Power. At the same time, the Joint Distribution Committee – seemingly at Rosen's suggestion, for he had an excellent relation with the JDC – recognized the new government formed by the National Salvation Front, and announced they would help Romania with a series of products, especially medicines – they underlined that they would keep in touch with Rabbi Rosen. It was a clear message sent to the new Power, according to which Rabbi Rosen was to remain as the only connection between the Joint – which was, at the time, the most active Jewish organization in Romania – and the new Government.

The lack of a certain category of Jewish leaders, close to Rosen, was one of the most important causes of the difficult transition of the Jewish Community, during the 1990's.

Given the context of the "hot" political life in Romania, after December 1989, a series of Jewish intellectuals initiated a process meant to democratize Jewish communal life. This action targeted Rabbi Rosen and his dictatorial style. They did not succeed, for several reasons. The organizers of this endeavor were respected intellectuals, but not well-known personalities. Also, apart from certain general phrases and some criticism against the Rabbi-President of the Federation, they did not provide a reform program for the Jewish life in Romania. Nevertheless, the main cause of the failure of the "revolt" against Rosen was the strong, brutal development of anti-Semitism. As before 1989, the main target of the anti-Semites was the old leader. Given this context, in front of the common enemy, the "revolutionaries" were forced to step back, to stand behind the Rabbi in the fight against the anti-Semitic wave and to keep on accepting the "iron hand" leader.

Being used to "negotiating" with the Power during the communist period, Rosen introduced, in the communal strategy after 1990 an important policy: the active support of the Power. He considered the Power, the Government, to be the main defender of the Community, in front of various dangers. As in previous times, despite the fact that he was old and weakened, the Rabbi tried not to upset the Power. He protested against anti-Semitism, but only up to a point. He has the merit of having initiated a strong reaction against Holocaust deniers, but, in 1992, when he published a volume of testimonies about the harsh realities of the Holocaust in Romania, he complied with the request of the Romanian President at the time, Ion Iliescu: the term of "Holocaust" did not appear in the title or anywhere in the text of the book. I am referring to the book "*Martiriul evreilor din România*

(The Martyrdom of the Jews in Romania), published in 1991, at the Hasefer Publishing House. It was the first book published there.

The idea of not disturbing and, as far as possible, of supporting the Power was a direction which, with certain changes, was adopted by the communal establishment in Romania after the communist regime. This policy continued after Rabbi Rosen passed away, in May 1994, aged 82. Of course, there were specific shifts and a declining tendency, due to the change of the general political conditions in Romania.

This allegiance to the stand of the various Governments was not specific to the Jewish Community, only. It was shared by all ethnic minorities of Romania. Perhaps this is a significant fact, entailed by a certain political culture shared by the minority and the majority, as well.

Thus, a first feature seems to be a visible pro-governmental attitude, no matter what government was in power.

The communist period was one of absolute silence about everything that was Jewish, about the history and culture of the Jewish people.

After 1990, this "taboo" was crossed, due to various initiatives, both from the country and from abroad. I am referring to the activity of the *Sochnut Haieudim* Organization (The Jewish Agency, which opened its first office in Bucharest, in the beginning of the 1990's), as well as to the context of the cultural relations between Israel and Romania. Since 1990, there appeared the Romania-Israel friendship organization, which has many branches. Also, certain activities were hosted in Romanian universities, such as the first *Congress of the History of the Jews in Romania*, organized in 1991 by the Institute for the Research of the Diaspora – the University of Tel-Aviv, or exhibitions, etc. All these entailed a certain revival in this direction, but here too, the Jewish Community was a secondary actor during these last years. The initiative was taken over by state institutions or non-government organizations. Moreover, certain Israeli initiatives of collaboration were viewed with suspicion by the communal leadership, especially by Rabbi Moses Rosen. A certain fear of losing his monopoly upon the aspects of Jewish life – which he received during the communist period – made him oppose certain cultural projects coming from Tel-Aviv or Jerusalem.

One of the most important problems is that of the communal structure. I have already mentioned that, during the communist rule, this structure lost the traditional functions of the Jewish community: education and socio-medical activities, etc. The perspective of the one and only Party was that the Community was actually tolerated and marginalized. Only one function was left to it, that of religion. This happened in a state where religion, despite the fact that it was seen as a negative *issue*, was tolerated, as an expression of the supposed freedom of opinion assured by the Communist Party. According to the Statute of the Mosaic Congregation, imposed by the communists in 1949, the community was defined as "the gathering of the Mosaic believers who lived in a certain place." Implicitly, they denied the existence of an ethnic minority ("cohabiting nationals" as the communists named them). This is why all official documents of the Community included the initial M between brackets, from the word *mosaic*. In fact, the monitoring of the State Power (Guidance and Control) was performed by the Power, more precisely the Department of Religion, which controlled religious life in Romania. Thus, the stand of the communist state, as far as the Jewish Community was concerned, was based on a contradiction: it was strictly seen as a religious body and, at the same time, it was asked

to "limit religious influence within the Jewish mass."<sup>5</sup>

The main cause of this stand was the refusal of the communist power to view the Jews as a minority. They only recognized the Mosaic religion. This stand allowed the Communist Party to oppose any communal activity which is specific to an ethnic minority, from the cultural, educational and social perspectives. These functions were part of the monopoly of the only Party, imposed on the society as a whole.

Given the new conditions, after 1990, there was a possibility to get over this situation imposed by the communist regime. Nevertheless, it did not happen. Moreover, on August 27, 2008, the Federation voted its own statute, which was later confirmed by the Government. I underline that this statute was written by the leaders of the Federation of Jewish Communities of Romania, with no interference from outside. And still... they kept the old direction which defined the Community as a religious institution. Thus, Article 1, Paragraph 1 provides:

**The Federation of Jewish Communities of Romania - The Mosaic Congregation... is the organization which freely reunites Jewish Communities - The Mosaic Congregation from all over the country, in compliance with the provisions of the Constitution, with Law no... on religious freedom and the general requirements for religious groups, the provisions on national minorities, as well as in compliance with international legislation.**

In Article 1, Paragraph 4, they mentioned:

**Communities are made up of persons of Mosaic religion... the Jewish communities are meant to satisfy the religious needs."**

Moreover, by the new statute, the official name became the Federation of Jewish Communities of Romania –the Mosaic Congregation. This last phrase is meant to underline the religious feature of the body, strengthening the tendency entailed by the discreet – and mysterious, for some – initial (M) from the communist period.

True, in a separate place, in Article 2, they mentioned:

**The Federation has a religious, ethnic, cultural, socio-charitable and educational profile.** By this article a concession was made to the secular field: they acknowledged the legitimacy of non-religious activities. It is a very slow progress, too slow if compared to the legislation imposed in 1948, by the communist authorities.

A delicate issue is that of the legitimacy of the supra-communal body, the Federation of Jewish Communities of Romania (FCER). In order to underline this fact, the new statute, adopted in 2008, focuses on the idea of continuity with the previous supra-communal bodies, beginning with the Federation of Unions of Jewish Communities in Romania (FUCER), founded in 1936. Thus, Article 4 of the new statute provides:

**FCER is the ... tinuator of FUCER, founded in 1937, and of FCER, founded in 1949.**

The formula includes a basic contradiction: the two quoted bodies are not connected by any common element and they did not refer at all to continuity at the time. In 1948, there was no mention of a previous similar body. The organizational past, as well as the whole Jewish past in Romania was condemned to oblivion. Thus, the idea of continuity with the two Federations is excluded. Moreover, after 1990, the name of the body founded in 1948 was kept.

In this case, I have to mention that the idea of the continuity of the current body, the Federation of Jewish Communities and of the body from 1936 is forced, for their orga-

nizational structure is completely different. Thus, it was created only as an "umbrella" of the communities and they were allowed to decide in most of the specific activities. The Federation of Unions was created only as a means of connection with the gentile world, especially with the government, given the brutal development of anti-Semitism, at that time. *But the management of specific functions was performed by the communities, which had their own executives.* This apparatus was practically missing from the Federation of Unions.

In fact, the continuity of the current structure, with the institution imposed in 1948, is clear. This is why the issue of legitimacy is difficult. After 1990, no one tried to change the structure of the Federation, in order to make it closer to the way it was before 1948. Even the name of the institution remained the same as the one provided by the Statute of 1948.

The importance of the religious factor is also visible in the organizational chart of the Federation. The President of the Federation and the Prime-Rabbi of the Mosaic Congregation have equal positions. This is not compliant with the Jewish communal tradition, which gives precedence to the secondary leader. The rabbi was always hired by the Community. His role was important, since he was given a great honor, but he enjoyed the status of an employee.

In the current formula, the principle of precedence granted to religious activities is seen in the allotments of budgetary priorities. The chapter of religious expenses is disproportionately large when compared to the other chapters, especially to that of scientific and cultural activities (The Center of History, the Hasefer Publishing House, the magazine, museums, etc). This is the situation, despite the fact that the number of those who are **really religious**, (who are called *shomrei mitzvot* in Hebrew) does not even include 10% of all members of the Community. Unfortunately, a type of "quasi-official", but incisive discourse, leads to a certain fear felt by the Jewish mass about openly debating the issue of their stand on religion. Because of that, it is currently impossible to make a correct assessment / poll on the topic, for many members of the community, because of *their defensive reflex from passed times, fear saying that they are atheists, since they do not want to be seen as not complying with the "direction" established by the leadership of the Federation.*

Moreover, certain leaders have an obsession about the need to "fill the synagogue". Sometimes, there are situations of people being "summoned". This reminds me of other times and of... "enthusiastic voyages" to Otopeni or to stadiums, in order to organize a "large popular gathering." (!!!)

This "anti-secular", implicitly "anti-enlightening" tendency – which also goes against Jewish tradition, that never forced its followers to go to the place of worship, as it was never an administrative obligation – is also explained by the influence and cultural pressure of the Romanian majority, which displays an excessive religiousness and has a strong tendency to create a "culture of large wooden crucifixes (troitzas) and of holy religious objects". At the same time, the Romanian society – and the Jewish world makes no exception – cultivates the anti-individualist and anti-European idea of a *mandatory belonging*, in other words, the need to be "classified" from the religious point of view.

One episode, which proves the fact that the leadership of the Federation wants to follow the pro-religious tendency, happened in 2006, when the representative in the Parliament of the Jewish minority voted –together with the conservative majority – against a proposal made by the Civil Society – also endorsed by a series of Jewish intellectuals

– in order to eliminate religious symbols – mainly icons – from schools. When he was asked to provide an explanation, he motivated his vote by the impossibility of associating (the Federation) with an anti-religious project (!!!). Isn't there a visible danger for the democratic regime, as well as for the Jewish population: the emergence of an aggressive Christian Orthodox trend, filled with nationalist, xenophobic and anti-Semitic elements? I consider that this is a lack of sensitivity to the historical memory of the 1930's, when the Christian Orthodox discourse actually prepared the path for the Holocaust. That project which asked for the removal of icons from schools was not against religion. It was a form of defending the laic character of the Romanian State and of European moral values at the beginning of the third millennium.

It is strange that, given the new conditions of democracy, the monopoly of the Federation remained intact. Thus, there was no gesture meant to represent, in its structures, the various tendencies which are only natural in a Jewish body: conservative, liberal, laic and orthodox trends, etc.

Even if this is a small, aged community, its members embrace various trends and it is not mandatory for them to act in a unitary manner. It would be natural for the leadership of the Federation to include all the trends existing in the Jewish world, so that the Federation becomes an authentic umbrella organization for them. We have the example of the Hungarian Jews, by which several Jewish organizations are represented in a central forum: The Alliance of the Jewish Communities of Hungary. At the same time, they have an alternative laic organization, the Jewish Hungarian Cultural Union. In France, for example, there is the central Jewish body, the CRIF (The Representative Consistory of Jewish Institutions in France) which includes a series of organizations, such as a body of the laic and democratic French Judaism. The existence of a large series of political visions can only strengthen and vitalize the CRIF.

Is it that such European democratic models could not be debated upon and taken into consideration in the Romanian-Jewish world? Are they less attractive than the monolithic visions imposed in the past by a totalitarian regime, which could not accept pluralism in any way? I don't think that the quantitative argument (the small number of Jews living in Romania) can be invoked in order to keep and cultivate the monolithic system. Those who pay attention to the dynamics of a small Jewish collectivity, such as the one in Romania, already know that, many times, the complexity of reality is even greater than in larger collectivities and that the small or very small number of communal members does not exclude pluralism.

The maintenance of good relations with other religious groups, especially with the Romanian Orthodox Church (BOR), is an important objective of the Jewish leadership in Romania. It is a positive fact, but it does not mean they should close their eyes in front of anti-democratic campaigns, of acts that encourage extremism, which were sometimes under the patronage of the Romanian Orthodox Church. Moreover, the various contacts, materialized as "audiences" entail a paternalistic attitude displayed by BOR. I personally consider this paternalistic attitude not to be in compliance with the relations existing between two bodies which belong to a modern, democratic society.

In this sense, a strange, curious fact is the annual commemoration of Jewish heroes who fell during various Romanian wars, together with the Romanian heroes, during a great Christian Orthodox holiday: The Ascension of Jesus. This is not a grave matter, but the forced closeness sets the Jewish community in a stand of inferiority. I am sure that the

plentiful Mosaic calendar could inspire another, more proper date for honoring the Jewish heroes who fell during various Romanian wars.

A beneficial fact after 1990 was the foundation, again, of traditional Jewish organizations. Of them, B'nei Brith has gained a larger membership, during the last decade.

The revival of this organization is a beneficial sign of normality and it shows that they got over the gap provoked by the 50 years of totalitarian regime.

*The membership of the organization increased little by little and it includes almost all the employees of the Federation, mainly in positions of responsibility (with a few exceptions of people who refused to join them), as well as other Jewish personalities. Step by step, the mentality of the Jewish microcosm included the idea that, in fact, one cannot activate normally within Jewish structures unless they are members of B'nei Brith. This is another alarming way of thinking for those who have a certain influence over historical memory. In this case, we are witnessing a bizarre combination between a beneficial phenomenon, the reconnection with the Jewish world – the beginning of a proper educational activity – and the fact that this activity is surrounded with prejudice and totalitarian reflexes. Moreover, we see that important debates, of interest for the whole Jewish mass, are taken over by B'nei Brith. Thus, little by little, the Federation was transformed into some kind of a "state and party institution", in compliance with the everlasting formula of the political discourse during the communist "golden age". (!!!) This is not just a formal matter, since it can lead to an alteration of basic issues, by violating the individual sphere and by creating the impression that there is a mandatory "direction" to follow.*

In general, debates and polemics are not encouraged. Similarly, critical positions about certain stands, which are considered to be the "official direction" of the Federation's leadership, are blamed. Such critical stands could not find their place, so far, in the articles published by the "Jewish Reality" Magazine. This happens in a society for which its intellectual traditions, such as polemics (*pilpul*), which was seen as a means to deepen the teachings of the Torah, had an important place.

There are two fundamental levels around which Jewish identity is currently defined, all over the Diaspora. The first level is the major interest in and solidarity with the State of Israel. *The second level is the reaction against various forms of anti-Semitism.*

Given this situation, let me point out a few specific features of these fundamental identity axes in the Jewish world today.

The interest in and solidarity with the State of Israel is omnipresent among the Jews in Romania and it is always visible. No matter if we are talking about a majority which decided to make Aliyah in Israel, or about a minority which, for various reasons, has not decided to emigrate, or has not decided to emigrate yet, there is an emotional interest for all things connected with the State of Israel.

The problem is that the extremely complex Israeli reality is not always correctly understood. Because of that, there are some confusions, reservations and incorrect classifications.

There is no scale of real values and the language barrier makes it possible for many communal leaders to get their information, as well as views, from materials published in the sub-mediocre Romanian-language Israeli magazines. This is the situation, despite the many Romanian gentile intellectuals who read *Ha'aretz* on the Internet on an almost daily basis. This is a very good quality Israeli newspaper, being considered one of the best in the world. Its site is written in English. Nevertheless, the improper understanding

of the Israeli complexity has deeper causes, such as the take-over of simplistic clichés, since they lack contacts with relevant sectors of the Israeli society.

As far as the reactions of communal bodies to various anti-Semitic events are concerned, let me explain the following:

The communal structures have quite a "soft" reaction towards various "events" with an anti-Semitic connotation. There is a certain attempt to spare the government from criticism, to defend its image.

This policy was stronger in the 1990's – when the formula of **real-Semitism** was launched. This thesis was issued by the leader of the Federation from 1994 to 2003, Academician Nicolae Cajal and it was transformed into a quasi-official concept. Please see the thesis according to which anti-Semitic outbursts are caused by the fact that Jews and their civilization are not known by the larger society. Moreover, according to this thesis, Romania has no **anti-Semitism, but only anti-Semites**. It is a nice, interesting piece of witticism, but it is not true.

They did not give this theory up, despite the fact that there is a certain change of tone, i.e. they are trying to have a more coherent reaction. Still, they protest with a certain softness of tone, a certain attempt not to disturb decision factors.

It is true, sometimes they issue press-releases, they organize meetings, but, at other times, there is no reaction or only a late, shy reaction.

As part of its socio-political strategies, the communal body exaggerates its relation to the government, which is, in fact, necessary, but it is not the only important relation. They neglect the connection to non-governmental organizations, despite the fact that the Jewish community should be a part of the Romanian civil society.

Also, they do not take into consideration that it is mandatory for the fight against anti-Semitism to include the combat of any form of xenophobia or racism. There is no "partial" racism. Any exclusion or discrimination suffered by the Roma population, for example, also includes a potential for anti-Semitism. It is very seldom that they make a firm stand against certain practices which afflict the Roma population. Implicitly, there is no solidarity with their organizations.

I will try to find the causes of the continuous pro-governmental direction: a certain reflex entailed by fear, which was cultivated during the 50 years of totalitarian regimes; the take-over of certain behaviors and reactions which are specific to the communist period.

True, this is the main cause, but it is not the absolute cause; certain attitudes which betray a lack of sensitivity to Jewish realities and which distort the culture and history of the Jewish people are displayed by people which had nothing to do or very little connection to the communist regime. Thus, negative influences are much more complex, being also connected to personal issues, frustrations, etc.

I spoke mostly about the central body of the communal life: the Federation. I did it because this is the body which makes stands about major topics and it represents the connection of the community to various institutions: the government, Jewish international organizations, etc.

Nevertheless, a large part of Jewish life is being developed within the Jewish communities. During the communist rule, they had been considered to be of a minimal importance; in fact, they were seen as simple branches of the central body. After 1990, by a slow process, the field of initiatives implemented by the communities developed, as well. This is one of the important developments during these last 15 years in the Jewish life in Ro-

mania. True, we have not reached the moment for an open, honest debate on the issue of the competence between the central forum and the communities. In 2002, due to the initiative of a group of communal presidents, especially from Transylvania, which has richer communities, some of them asked to be granted a certain communal autonomy. The reaction of the Federation was tough. They refused to grant autonomy and the magazine of the Federation published a series of articles which condemned "the selfishness of certain communities". It is a significant fact, for certain anachronistic reflexes, that these articles had all the features of an ordered campaign. Of course, as far as this matter is concerned, there are pros and cons. The Jewish tradition, as well as the democratic norms of self-governing, lead us to the solution of autonomy. On the other hand, the uneven financial situation of the communities is an argument in favor of the coordination from the center. Of course, this issue is hard to manage, but a democratic ambiance can assure a balance between the principle of autonomy and that of solidarity between communities. Still, we are witnessing a process of consolidation of local communal leaders, despite continuous tensions - in general, over budget-related issues - which is a worth commending thing.

I underlined these gaps with certain Jewish realities in Romania due to the interest I have in the communal body and to the belief that, in a democratic regime, the strategy of the Jewish bodies should comply with the spirit of the time.

Historical experience made it possible for the Jewish society to be extremely receptive about the issues faced by democracy. The lack - or even the imperfections - of democracy led to serious suffering. This is why, due to its bodies and intellectual elite, the Jewish society has a very serious role: to defend democratic norms. But one cannot be the "guardian hound" of democracy when one's model of internal organization has flaws, in this sense.

At the same time, it is true that the return to normality is a long, winding road, the side-effects of the totalitarian past are still visible and the lesson of democracy is sometimes hard to understand.

## References

- 1 See Irving Agus, *Urban Civilization in pre-Crusade Europe*, New-York, 1965, two volumes
- 2 Liviu Rotman, *Evreii din România în perioada comunistă. 1944-1965* (The Jews in Romania during the Communist Period), the Polirom Publishing House, Iași 2004
- 3 *Ibidem*, p. 78
- 4 Gabriele Eskenasy, Nissim Gabrielle. *Ebrei invisibili*. (Invisible Jews) Milano, 1995. The Hebrew edition was published in 1998
- 5 Liviu Rotman, 2004, p.76

