

# PERSPECTIVES ON THE RESETTLEMENT OF SOVIET JEWS

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*To enhance communication between Soviet Jewish immigrants and the professional and lay leaders of the Boston Jewish community, a day-long seminar of dialogue was held recently. Its two-fold focus was on the images and expectations that each group held of the other and how as Jews the immigrants and the community leaders could understand each other better. A number of valuable insights were gained during the seminar.*

The recent and long-awaited influx of Soviet Jewish emigres into Jewish communities across the United States has highlighted both the importance and the complexity of mounting a successful resettlement effort.

The complexity is reflected in a growing body of research that describes the immigrants and analyzes some of the specific dynamics, social processes, and outcomes of resettlement (American Jewish Committee, 1987; Council of Jewish Federations, 1980; Federation of Jewish Philanthropies of New York, 1985; Gold, 1988; Simon, 1985; Simon & Simon, 1982). That literature describes Soviet Jewish emigres who are significantly different from the East European Jewish immigrants who arrived in the United States at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries. In contrast to the earlier immigrants, the recent arrivals are

educated, skilled, and possess extensive urban experience, have little religious training . . . or experience with voluntary associations . . . . Hence, the patterns of adjustment, interaction and community formation which were common to earlier Jewish immigrants . . . may be inappropriate models for understanding the resettlement of this recent group (Gold, 1988, p. 87).

Despite their obvious lack of Jewish background, the Soviet Jewish emigres see their primary identification as Jews. They associate overwhelmingly with other Jews,

especially with other Soviet Jewish immigrants. In addition to their initial Jewish ethnic identification, substantial proportions of the emigres also become more religious in the American setting. Their observance patterns, in fact, evolve to resemble those of American Jews. Strikingly, they want their children to be both connected to the Jewish community and knowledgeable Jewishly. These positive Jewish expressions do not, however, result in a great deal of formal affiliation with the organized Jewish community (Federation of Jewish Philanthropies of New York, 1985; Simon & Simon, 1982).

The Soviet Jewish immigrants often find the process of connecting to American Jews and the American Jewish community especially problematic because of the

. . . cultural and linguistic gulf between them and the host community . . . . While the Soviet Jewish enclave is united by common language, immigration experience, networks of sponsorship and social bonds among the elderly, it is also atomized by several factors (including) occupational, regional, and cultural origins in the USSR (Gold, 1988, p. 90).

This is one of the reasons for the relative lack of formal organization within this immigrant community.

In terms of their general adjustment in the United States, the Soviet emigres appear to be rather successful. Clearly, the most immediate focus is on survival. In

this regard, the immigrants tend to come with good work skills and begin to earn quickly and well, although continuing to feel socially and culturally more fulfilled in the USSR (Simon & Simon, 1982).

The literature encourages us to view the acculturation and eventual integration of the immigrants as very extended processes, evolving over decades rather than the much shorter time frames usually discussed. Clearly there is a need to know more about both the dynamics of identity formation among the immigrants, as well as the provision of services to them (American Jewish Committee, 1987).

As increasing numbers of Jewish immigrants from the Soviet Union settled in greater Boston—prominent among the “Big Six” resettlement areas—during 1988 and 1989,<sup>1</sup> there was a sense in the local Jewish community that more preparation was necessary to receive the current influx, as well as the wave that might follow.

Initially, it was thought that further orientation and training needed to be provided for middle management professionals and line staff working in the various Jewish communal agencies most directly in contact with the new arrivals. However, response from the community was not enthusiastic to this proposal. The feeling was expressed by some upper-level management professionals that community resources—both financial and personnel—were so overburdened by the task of meeting the immediate needs of the unexpected numbers arriving that any pause to assess and retrain was perceived as an unwarranted diversion.

Further examination of the resettlement situation as it was unfolding led to the realization that potential immediate and long-range problems were brewing. Disappointment was being voiced in regard to the *apparent* disinterest of the Soviet immigrants in their own Jewishness and in the affairs of the Jewish community. Re-

sentment was increasing among both lay and professional leadership over the lack of appreciation expressed by the new arrivals for efforts and aid provided by the Jewish community that its leadership perceived as both massive and a significant strain on resources. Negative mutual stereotypes were developing among the communal leaders and the Soviet Jews in the community. These increased the mutual disenchantment as neither group lived up to the unrealistic images that had blossomed in the heyday of the struggle to free Soviet Jewry and the early efforts at resettling Soviet Jews.

#### SEMINAR OF DIALOGUE

Considering this new set of problems and the realities of resettlement, the need for effective communication between Soviet Jewish immigrants and professional and lay leaders of local Jewish communities became increasingly clear as a requisite in the resettlement process. As a step toward that end, the idea emerged of designing a seminar of *dialogue* for Soviet Jewish immigrants and American Jews. The seminar would be intentionally planned to maximize community involvement. It would serve as an opportunity for both veteran and recent Soviet Jewish immigrants and professional and lay leaders of the Jewish communities in Boston and several other New England locations to speak and listen carefully to each other. The seminar was designed by the Hornstein Program in Jewish Communal Service at Brandeis University in collaboration with the Combined Jewish Philanthropies of Greater Boston, the Jewish Federation of the North Shore, the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS), and the Synagogue Council of Massachusetts.

As planning proceeded, a two-fold focus was defined for the seminar: to deal with the images and expectations that each group holds of the other and to examine together how *as Jews* we could better understand each other and find common ground.

<sup>1</sup>The number of arrivals were 703 in fiscal 1988 and 1414 in fiscal 1989.

Invitations to participate in the seminar were sent to lists of Soviet Jewish immigrants generated from a range of communal sources. Those who expressed interest were sent registration materials; such materials were sent to a total of 82 Russian Jews, of whom 24 actually participated in the seminar along with 45 American Jews. No claim is made as to the representative nature of this self-selected group of participants, although many of the conclusions based on this experience are supported in the literature previously cited.

The results of a questionnaire administered to the Soviet Jews in attendance at the seminar and mailed to those who had expressed interest but did not participate indicate that the Soviet participants were primarily from the large cities, especially Moscow and Leningrad. The majority reported that they were refuseniks in the Soviet Union. They ranged in age from the early twenties to the mid-sixties, with a mean age of 43 years. Almost three-quarters of the emigre participants were married, and over 80% had children. As a group, they were very highly educated, with virtually all holding higher education degrees (Showstack & Rimor, 1990). The majority of the Soviet immigrants had arrived in the United States very recently: almost half since 1988, one-quarter from 1981-1987, and almost all the remainder in the years 1976-1979. Although as a group they were recent arrivals, over two-thirds reported being employed full-time and 8% part-time, with an additional 12% currently in school.

The Soviet Jewish immigrants who participated in the seminar appear as a group to be quickly on their way to settling into the American and the American Jewish communities. They appear to be committed Jewishly, in the process of overcoming resistance to Jewish and organizational life bred by habits acquired in the USSR, and interested in Jewish learning and doing. Although they may not be representative of the entire population of recently arrived Jewish immigrants from the Soviet Union,

such a group may well speak to the potential for indigenous leadership among this population.

The seminar was designed to maximize participation by those in attendance. The day included two panel presentations, each of which was followed by small group workshops. All of the panels and the workshops involved both Soviet immigrants and American Jews. The day concluded with perspectives offered by Karl D. Zukerman, the executive director of HIAS.

#### PERSPECTIVES ON RESETTLEMENT

A number of points with important and immediate bearing on the resettlement process emerged from that day of dialogue. They are presented here both as a report on the seminar experience and in the hope that they might inform resettlement policy and the resettlement agenda in other Jewish communities around the country.

#### CULTURAL DIFFERENCES, MOST ESPECIALLY LANGUAGE: BARRIERS TO UNDERSTANDING THE OTHER AND OFTEN A CAUSE OF ANGER AND DISAPPOINTMENT

American Jews must be fully aware of the different cultural and ethnic background of Soviet Jews and their essential lack of English language skills. The barriers to integration into the community include major differences in language and culture, as well as personality. They are very Russian; we very American. In addition to speaking different languages, we have different understandings of what it means to be Jewish, to believe in God, to belong to the Jewish community, to develop friendships, to express appreciation, or to associate within a Jewish framework.

The discomfort and time it takes to learn to speak English are seriously underestimated as a factor affecting the acculturation of Soviet Jews. Many of the Soviet Jews at the seminar referred to these difficulties, and they are perhaps the elite of the immigrants. It is language discomfort that

inhibits them from social interaction with American Jews; it is just simpler to stay with people with whom one can relax and speak the language with which one is most familiar.

#### DIVERSITY WITHIN THE SOVIET JEWISH IMMIGRANT POPULATION: THE SOVIET JEWS DO NOT SEE THEMSELVES AS A COMMUNITY, AND BECOMING ONE MAY NOT BE THE GOAL OF MANY IMMIGRANTS

It is most important for the American Jewish community to understand the diversity within the Soviet Jewish immigrant population. Clearly, the Soviet Jews represent many different elements.

Reference was made, for example, to Soviet Jewish high school students who were associating primarily with their fellow Soviet Jews from the same community to the exclusion of other Soviet Jews. At a high school there may be a "Moscow table," a "Leningrad table," an "Odessa table," and so on. We do not fully understand the differences that exist among Soviet Jews.

These diverse Soviet Jews do not see themselves as a community; becoming one may not be a high priority for the majority of immigrants. In addition to their different backgrounds, these groups may have greatly differing interests, motives, and needs.

#### DISTRUST OF THE "ESTABLISHMENT" AND THE NEED FOR ORIENTATION TO AMERICAN AND JEWISH COMMUNAL ORGANIZATION

Many of the Soviet Jews described their negative reaction to organizations and establishments, which reflects their negative experiences with the Soviet bureaucracy. Accordingly, they are reluctant to become involved in Jewish communal organizations. They may also have no conception of what we mean when we speak of "community." This lack of understanding may have nothing to do with their Jewishness per se, but rather with their prior lack of positive

communal experience and their general antipathy to organizations.

We must understand the profound reluctance of a people coming from an ideology dominated by a totalitarian system to participate in organized forms of social activity. Further, we must ask: If Soviet Jews are suspicious of a bureaucratic, institutionalized system of governance, what can we do to bring them into the organized Jewish establishment? Is it doable? Do we need to create new mechanisms and develop new strategies to reach the mainstream of the Soviet Jewish immigrants?

Beyond the distrust of and distaste for bureaucracy and its implication for Soviet Jews joining the organized Jewish community, we must also recognize the basic differences in the way each "system" works, e.g., in terms of education, employment, housing, etc. These basic differences may further prevent each population from understanding the assumptions of each other and cause anger and disappointment.

There is a need for careful orientation of Soviet Jewish immigrants to the nature of voluntarism in the American Jewish community in the context of voluntarism in the larger American society. There is a need for information about the workings of the American Jewish community. Some have even suggested providing an orientation in Europe for Soviet Jews awaiting their visas.

#### THE IMPLICATIONS OF BEING A FIRST-GENERATION IMMIGRANT

All first-generation immigrants, whether Jews or whatever nationality or non-Jewish ethnics, face the same challenge: how to accommodate to the new society and find an economic niche. Economic issues are overriding considerations for new immigrants and are seen as a first priority, with social and communal integration seen at best as priorities to follow.

In the short term, this basic economic concern and the need to achieve a related language facility override all other considerations. Therefore, it should be neither a

surprise nor a source of disappointment that finding a connection to the Jewish community is not an immediate and primary motivation of the current generation of Soviet Jewish immigrants.

This in turn raises a policy question with clear practice implications. Can the Jewish community learn to "relax," to be patient with this first generation, with the expectation that in being sufficiently responsive to the acculturation agenda of the first generation, the Jewish community's initiatives will later bear greater success?

#### DIFFERENCES FROM OUR GRANDPARENTS AND MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT THE SOVIET JEWS BEING HEROES AND SUFFERERS

As implied above, these Soviet Jews are different from our grandparents who were reared in rich Jewish environments and whose Jewishness was central to their lives. The current Soviet Jews are much more Russian in their attitudes and identification as their primary culture has been the Russian society. Comparisons by American Jews of this generation to their grandparents are therefore not only misleading and a potential source of misunderstanding and disillusion, but also are not well received by Soviet Jews. Misconceptions about the Soviet Jews all being heroes, sufferers, or old-fashioned grandparent types can only interfere with serious and productive communication.

#### JEWISH RECEPTIVITY

Soviet Jews indicate that, with all the other priorities in becoming adjusted to American society, their involvement in the Jewish community is not at the top of the list. This does not necessarily mean that they are indifferent or hostile to their Jewishness. Further, we must remember that they had virtually no formal nurturing of their Jewishness. If anything, it was presented to them as a negative aspect of their lives by the Soviet authorities and by their Soviet neighbors as well. There is a need

to change the perception of Jewish identity from obstacle to asset.

Our surprise should be that, despite these factors, it seems that many immigrants indeed have a positive receptivity to finding out more about their Jewish heritage and how it may enrich their lives. Their receptivity to Jewish initiatives will be enhanced to the extent that the presentation of the American Jewish community responds to two features that would make the approach more meaningful: a Jewishness that is consistent and compatible with modern ideas and sensibilities, and a Jewishness that helps them connect and feel a sense of community with other Jews, as well as with the Jewish heritage.

#### MEANINGFUL CONTACT WITH INDIVIDUALS AND FAMILIES, BASED ON MUTUAL INTEREST AND FREE OF PATRONIZING AND SUPERFICIALITY

Although organizational affiliation is not appealing, many Soviet Jews report that they are responsive to personal invitations and involvement. So, for example, rather than being invited to a formal organizational meeting, they would be more responsive to being invited to share Shabbat dinner at an American Jewish family's home or to participating in a small havurah studying basic Judaism or in having opportunities for informal social interaction. The most comfortable and useful way for Soviet Jews to learn about and feel connected with American Jewish life may be from meaningful contact with individuals and families.

This finding suggests a particular style of outreach that is likely to have more success than initiatives based on formal organizational membership or involvement. Outreach efforts should reflect the discomfort expressed by Soviet Jews with typical American social "chatter" and "instant intimacy" in relationships. This discomfort reflects deep cultural differences. Americans are perceived as being warm and friendly with total strangers; Soviets tend to use

the word "friend" in a significantly more serious way than do Americans.

Mutual interest on the personal level that is free of patronizing and superficiality can help open the door for Soviet Jews to the mainstream of American Jewish life. One thrust of the effort should be directed at activating former Soviet immigrants who have been successfully integrated into the community and thus can become role models for the newcomers.

Clearly there is a need for deeper and more extensive involvement by individual Americans. Volunteers can be assigned to incoming families to help them learn English and introduce them to American culture and American Jewish life. American families can be organized to invite the new immigrants into their homes on the holidays. We must understand and stress to the people involved that this type of social and emotional support is at least as important as financial support.

#### SPECIFIC PROGRAMS AND ORGANIZATIONS FOR SOVIET JEWS OR INTEGRATION INTO EXISTING PROGRAMS WITH AMERICAN JEWS

There is no consensus on the direction that programs, after the initial resettlement stage, should take regarding the integration of Soviet Jews into the larger Jewish community. Should the community encourage the creation of specific programs and organizations aimed primarily or even exclusively at Soviet Jews, or should Soviet Jews in this generation be stimulated to integrate into existing programs with American Jews? Some express with strong conviction the need to foster the evolution of indigenous Soviet Jewish organization(s) that would serve as an entry point into communal life.

Whatever the decision on the general thrust of such communal involvement, some feel that the synagogue must play a central role in the overall process. Free memberships in a "home" synagogue and scholarships to children for religious schools

may be specific tools of integration. More broadly, however, it appears that our synagogues do not yet know how to embrace New Americans and make them feel comfortable in our uniquely American religious institutions. (We have trouble welcoming not-so-new Americans; how much more difficult is the task of reaching Soviet emigres.)

Others are of the opinion that, although synagogue adoption is meaningful for some, alternatives for connecting with Jewish life need to be developed. Given the general absence of traditional religious background among the immigrant population, integration into the synagogue community may be particularly difficult, and nonreligious communal organizations may be seen as less threatening. Organizing around a "landmanshaft" idea with a focus on matters of concern in the "old country" can also be potentially productive.

#### FORUM FOR AIRING OF ISSUES

Several individuals representing different backgrounds and organizational ties expressed particular interest in participating in an advisory committee on policies and programs for Soviet Jews. The kind of forum in which the people, groups, and organizations involved can reflect on and debate current and future actions seems to be lacking.

New Americans have little or no contact with most of us who are involved as leaders in Jewish life. How can we expect significant changes if there is neither dialogue nor social contact?

#### ROLE OF SOVIET JEWS IN DECISION MAKING: SOVIET JEWS AS RECIPIENTS OF COMMUNITY HELP OR ORGANIZING SOVIET JEWS TO MEET THEIR OWN NEEDS, AND THE EMERGENCE OF SOVIET JEWISH LEADERSHIP

Although implied in several of the points above, it must be re-emphasized that the question of the optimal role that Soviet Jews can and should play in formulating

programs to meet their own needs has not yet been adequately considered.

How much energy is being put into involving Soviet Jews in decision making on issues related to Soviet Jews? Are they increasingly locked into the role of recipients of community help, or is there also facilitation of the organization of Soviet Jews to meet their own needs as Jews, especially through the emergence of Soviet Jewish leadership? Ongoing dialogue is critical. Soviet Jews must play a pivotal role in discussions regarding their resettlement and integration.

### CONCLUSION

The insights gained from this seminar of dialogue are clear evidence of the communal benefits that can be realized when responsible and involved people are brought together to listen to each other in a setting that encourages frank exchange and sensitive response. With all we may have learned, however, from this experience and other reports in the literature, there is the need to know much more about the Soviet Jews, their demographic and socioeconomic profiles, their Jewish identity, and their expectations and desires with regard to participating in Jewish community life.

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