

# THE SOVIET JEWISH MIGRATION

## Lessons for Professionals

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*The response of the laity and professionals to the tremendously increased demands of Soviet resettlement has important implications for the future of the Jewish community and the professional's role in that future. Three concepts central to the communal enterprise—filtered giving, Israel as centerpiece, and consensus—require re-examination in light of this recent experience.*

These days, every article dealing in any way with international matters refers to the rapid and dramatic developments occurring in the world. This one is no different—it discusses rapid and dramatic developments—but not the usual ones, such as the outbreak of freedom in Eastern Europe, the reunification of Germany, the collapse of the Soviet system, or the Baltic independence movements.

Although they were all triggered by changes inside the Soviet Union, the developments examined in this article concern *Am Yisrael* specifically. These developments are the Soviet Jewish migration and its impact on and the response of the North American Jewish community. Coping with the migration is itself a major undertaking for the North American Jewish community; understanding the lessons of the experience is crucial for our role as Jewish communal professionals.

It is necessary to examine first the facts of the Soviet Jewish migration and its unexpectedly rapid growth. In the 4 years from 1986 to 1989, the number of Jews permitted to leave the Soviet Union jumped from 900 to 8,000 to 21,000 to nearly 71,000, or 20,000 more than the previous record year of 1979. Likewise, a look at the monthly exits during these last three years shows a

reasonably steady growth. Certainly, by late summer of 1988, everyone knew we were in a "growth industry."

In late 1988, it began to be clear that the Reagan administration, panicked by the financial implications of granting refugee status to thousands of Soviet Armenians who were heading to the United States, had changed their historical practice of rarely denying refugee status to Soviet Jews. From that ill-considered decision, needless hardship was visited upon a persecuted people.

All the other major developments in the Soviet Jewish migration story, interestingly, occurred after that decision. What a time it was for HIAS and the rest of the American Jewish community as we processed unprecedented numbers of refugees; tried to overturn Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) denials, both administratively and legislatively; and addressed serious funding shortfalls, both governmental and Jewish.

The Passage to Freedom fund-raising campaign was organized in February 1989 and completed in December of that year, with results that did not meet expectations. Then Operation Exodus and its domestic counterpart began in early 1990, and the results seemed wonderful.

In October 1989—and only as recently as October 1989—the American Jewish communities, mobilized by their national leadership, began gearing up to deal with the growing numbers of immigrants. Some would argue that the mobilization had as

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Presented at the Plenary Forum on Soviet Resettlement at the Annual Meeting of the Conference of Jewish Communal Service, Philadelphia, June 5, 1990.

much to do with raising and saving Jewish dollars as it did with saving Jewish people.

At the same time, the U.S. government, with the concurrence of the American Jewish community leadership, placed a ceiling of 40,000 on the number of Soviet Jews to be admitted during federal fiscal year 1990—with government funding to be provided for only 32,000 of them.

Faced with the financial and operating implications of the resettlement of 40,000 Soviet Jews—8,000 of whom would have no government funding—many of the major local Jewish communities thoroughly re-examined and revised their resettlement programs and policies, suspending acceptance of new cases while they were doing so. Simultaneously, and in order to reduce the burden on the New York Association for New Arrivals (NYANA)—which had been taking 55% of the arrivals when its historical share had been closer to 45%—emigres without anchor families or friends were re-directed to other communities.

With so many crucial events happening contemporaneously with the mass movement of Jews through the European pipeline, something had to give—and it did! Instead of moving the 18,000 immigrants to the United States in the last 3 months of 1989 as some national leaders had hoped, only 11,000 came, leaving a caseload in Europe of almost 25,000. Gone were the simpler days of 1979 when a caseload of 9,000 created such dismay.

It was also at this time that the U.S. government changed the site and system for processing Soviet Jews to the United States. Instead of Vienna and Rome, it was to be done in Moscow, with a “back office” operation in Washington. So, while we all were mobilizing for the big, final push under the old system, HIAS needed to prepare for the new system.

One more important development occurred—in February 1990 at a special General Assembly of the Council of Jewish Federations. In 1979, when the Chicago federation called for a national funding pool for domestic resettlement, no one else was

interested. In fact, nothing was heard of such an idea until late 1989. And then, in an intense 3-month effort culminating on February 6, 1990, the American Jewish community took a revolutionary step. It agreed that the resettlement of Soviet Jews was a national Jewish obligation. That meant that those communities resettling less than a “fair share” of emigres would provide funds through a national pool to those communities taking more than their fair share.

This notion of equitable collective responsibility is a major step forward in the coming of age of the American Jewish community, with important implications far beyond resettlement. It is interesting to note that the Canadian Jewish community had taken a similar step 17 years earlier.

Today, the drama continues. As a result of the U.S. ceiling of 40,000 Soviet Jewish refugee admissions and the growing fears of anti-Semitism in the Soviet Union, tens of thousands of Jews are leaving each month for Israel, an enormous opportunity and challenge to revitalize and transform that nation. For North American Jews the challenge is twofold: participation in the return of thousands of Jews per month to the Jewish homeland and the resettlement of well over 40,000 Soviet Jews on this continent. At the same time, the struggle continues to convince the U.S. government to appropriate the funds necessary to hold up its end of the partnership.

These last 2 years have been an incredible period of change. The response of the North American Jewish community, good as it has been, raises a number of questions, only some of which are discussed in this article. These, and others, need much more exploration than can be given here.

First, why has there been so much more excitement and positive response to the fund-raising efforts undertaken with Operation Exodus and its domestic counterpart than there was to Passage to Freedom? Both were intended to raise funds for both Israel and domestic absorption. So why are we so energized for Operation Exodus, and

why were we so tepid about Passage to Freedom?

Second, the volunteer response in the local communities to assisting in the reception, resettlement, and absorption of Soviet Jews has been outstanding. People who have never been involved in Jewish communal life have come forward to adopt Soviet Jewish newcomers. Why has the turnout been so spectacular for this effort, when we have had trouble finding volunteer service roles for other communal programs and when our donor base has been shrinking in recent years?

This grassroots response to domestic resettlement raises another question. The laity's response to domestic resettlement seems to be in nearly inverse proportion to their level of leadership in Jewish communal life. American Jews who had little or no involvement in Jewish communal activities have stepped forward to donate time, services, and goods to aid in the resettlement effort. National Jewish leaders have been almost totally immersed in the challenges of Israel absorption efforts. Of course there are notable exceptions, but if indeed this is the case, why is it so?

My observations of the developments in the last few years lead me to conclude that, in general, we professionals tended to be more ambivalent than our laity about this migration, particularly about its domestic aspects. We worried about the extra efforts, new initiatives, and the changes in current programming that would flow from having to respond to 40,000 newcomers. Such worries were reasonable given the size of the challenge, but the question is, why were we more worried—or at least appeared to be so—than our lay leaders?

Why was it not until late 1989, months after it was apparent that a sustained and growing flow of Soviet Jews was coming to North America, that local communities began to examine their own programs and gear up to meet the new flow? What lessons for our planning functions can we learn from this tardy response?

Why was the notion of "equitable collective responsibility," which first surfaced in the late 1970s, not accepted until early 1990?

Why does it seem to take pressure on resources, usually money, to stimulate serious attention to problems? It can be argued that in the absence of a crisis over money, communal concerns have a lower priority. If so, why?

And finally, despite the occasional distasteful outbursts from various political leaders in Israel, why did the issue of the destination of Soviet Jews not become the "kulturkampf" that it had been 10 years ago? Why was the issue kept relatively quiet and "in the family" this time? What had changed?

In an effort to answer these questions, let me offer three speculations. Examination of the issues is crucial not merely so that we will handle migration and resettlement better but because the lessons to be learned have important implications for the future of the Jewish community and for our role as professionals in that future.

The North American Jewish communal enterprise can be described as based on three concepts: (1) consensus, (2) Israel as centerpiece, and (3) filtered giving. The first two concepts are familiar ones; the third needs some clarification.

When the centralized, local federation campaign asks a donor to give funds in a single gift, that gift is designed to cover the wide variety of programs that make up the Jewish communal enterprise on a local, national, and international scale. By participating, the donor implicitly agrees that the gift will be merged with all others and, through the filter of the federation allocation mechanism, distributed to the various programs of the Jewish communal enterprise. The very nature of this giving detaches the giver from the objects of the gift.

There is no question that the federation system has been one of the major strengths of the communal enterprise, especially in its ability to redirect resources to changing

needs in a relatively planned way. Yet, there is a cost to everything, and the cost of this system has been to remove the personal touch, the sense of personal involvement in helping others.

I am not suggesting in any way that we give up the filtered approach—the costs of that would be even greater than the costs of keeping it. It is a modern expression of Maimonides' next-to-the-highest form of giving. Yet, we do need to undertake even more serious efforts than have been made recently to find ways to return some sense of personal involvement to the helping enterprise. This is especially important in our world, where disconnection and alienation from others are all too common.

The concepts of Israel as centerpiece is also undergoing some significant change. Recently, much more attention has been paid to the need for North American Jewry to develop its own sense of identity, its own agenda, its own mission. Whether this comes from growing dissatisfaction with developments in Israel or a maturing of the North American community or a combination of both, it seems clear that change is occurring in our relationship to Israel.

There is a lot of discussion about this changing relationship in private, social gatherings of concerned Jews; there needs to be more discussion—still in the family—in official gatherings. Here the challenge is to define a distinctly North American Jewish identity, agenda, and mission without

diminishing our commitment to the nation and people of Israel.

Even the consensus basis for the North American Jewish community may have its costs. Consensus, by definition, compels change to occur more slowly, even though the change it produces is better accepted and more lasting. Yet, the danger of the consensus approach is that it may diminish the willingness of professionals to be creative and take risks. Since change is more difficult to achieve through consensus, does maintenance of the status quo become a safe and preferred method of operation for professionals?

We professionals need to examine this possibility very closely and carefully. Is this the modus operandi by which we want to be known? I think not. If it is, we are in danger of abdicating our own role in the Jewish people's mission to perfect the world. *Tikkun olam* is not just for the laity.

We are in the midst of a glorious time. Not only are we privileged to participate in the reunification of the Jewish people with its potential for transforming both Israel and the North American Jewish community but we can apply the lessons learned by this experience to much of the rest of our mission in the world. That is why we professionals need to examine and understand the experience thoroughly and candidly. Our leadership role in the Jewish community may depend on it.