

SOVIET JEWISH IMMIGRATION AND THE STATE OF ISRAEL

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The massive migration of Soviet Jews to Israel, which will represent a 10% population increase over the next few years, will transform the Jewish state demographically, socially, economically, and politically. In contrast to earlier aliyot, this immigration is being handled for the most part by the private and local government sectors. Diaspora Jewry can play a crucial role in helping Israel meet the challenge posed by this aliyah.

If this article were written less than a year ago, it would have focused on somewhat typical immigration issues. Probably the most critical issue relating to Soviet Jewish immigration would have been the impact of the *Intifada* on the attitudes of Soviet Jews considering aliyah. However, what has unfolded in the last few months has been as unexpected as it has been historic—historic not only in terms of its impact on immigration but also on the entire Jewish world.

After the end of World War II, there was still a significant reservoir of Jewish life in the Soviet Union. Although subjugated, the population of Soviet Jews was over two million strong. There were also struggling Jewish communities in Eastern Europe.

Even a year ago, who would have predicted the recent changes in Eastern Europe? I believe that many of the Jewish communities in Eastern Europe will change dramatically or even disappear in the near future. The new "democracies" that are emerging in Eastern Europe will pose extraordinary problems for the Jews, creating an environment that will unleash latent

anti-Semitism and, as a result, hasten the demise of the Jewish communities in their midst. Those Jews who can get out will do so. Most who elect to emigrate will find their way to Israel.

Those Eastern European Jews who cannot get out will remain the responsibility of Diaspora Jewry and Israel. Already, there are training programs in place for Israeli *schlichim* to serve in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. These *schlichim*, as well as professionals from the Diaspora under the aegis of the Joint Distribution Committee, will help develop a leadership infrastructure to serve those communities in need.

Israel is opening its doors not only to Soviet and Eastern European Jews but to those in other parts of the globe as well. The current economic situation in South America is very unstable, and 5,000 to 10,000 South Americans, primarily Argentines, may emigrate to Israel in the coming months. Argentina has the largest number of working-class Jews in South America, working people who are seriously affected by the economic conditions in that country.

In addition, between 400 and 600 Ethiopians are being reunited with their families in Israel each month. Ethiopia's new government, at least for the present, has been more amenable to this reunification process. The government of Israel, in cooperation with the Joint Distribution Committee, is able to facilitate this special work because there is now an Israeli Embassy in Addis

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In the months since this presentation, the estimates and projections have become a reality. The projection for the last months of 1990 indicated that approximately 20,000 Soviet Jews would arrive in Israel each month.

Ababa. The deteriorating political and military situation in Ethiopia has resulted in the movement of large numbers of Jews to the capital. Over 16,000 Ethiopian Jews are now crowded in Addis Ababa. What will happen in the coming months is unknown.

SOVIET IMMIGRATION TO ISRAEL

A comparison of Soviet Jewish immigration statistics in the months of May, June, and July 1990 to the same months in 1988 and 1989 provides a graphic illustration of the exponential increase in immigration. In May of 1988, 117 Soviet Jews emigrated to Israel compared to 613 in May 1989 and 8,838 in May 1990. In June of 1988, 613 emigrated; in June of 1989, 622; in June of 1990, over 10,000. July 1988 saw 147 new immigrants compared to 801 in July 1989. The July 1990 figure—15,500.

Consider these immigration statistics in yet another way. Every 5 days in May 1990, the number of Soviet Jews coming to Israel was equivalent to the total number of Soviet Jews who made aliyah in the 5-year period from 1982 to 1986. And, as of August, Israel had issued almost one million invitations to Soviet Jewish families; multiply that figure by 2.5, the average family size, to arrive at a projected immigration of 2,500,000 people.

Over the next 3 to 4 years, if the expected numbers do indeed immigrate to Israel, more than 400,000 to 500,000 Soviet Jews will be entering the State of Israel. That represents a 10% population increase; for an equivalent population increase to occur in the United States, it would have to bring in 22 million refugees. Imagine the burden that such a large refugee influx would impose on the United States. It is not difficult to foresee the challenges posed by the wave of Soviet immigration to Israel.

These new immigrants possess skills that should enable them to make a most rapid and successful adjustment to a new life in Israel. Sixty percent of the *olim* have tech-

nical training and possess either a secondary, college, or technical education. Although many may not readily fit into the needs of Israel's economic system, they are highly trained and motivated to work and will have a tremendous impact on Israel's human resource reservoir.

For example, the number of trained musicians and music teachers in Israel now has increased so greatly that Israel could easily create 12 symphony orchestras. Necessarily, some of these musicians will have to be retrained. The arrival of large numbers of Soviet-trained nurses has ended a nursing shortage in Israel. Engineers, physicians, dentists, and academics are also arriving in great numbers. However, because Soviet professional training is extraordinarily uneven, some of these professionals are not qualified to perform in accordance with their job titles. To remedy this situation, the Jewish Agency has recently completed arrangements to provide courses in Soviet hospitals to 450 Soviet Jewish physicians still living in the USSR to help them meet Israeli testing standards and licensure requirements. In addition, the Jewish Agency is developing training programs in Israel for other technical groups, such as engineers and computer specialists.

The resettlement of this aliyah differs greatly from that of earlier waves of immigrants. Eighty-five percent of all Soviet Jews coming into Israel today are being handled by a direct absorption process. Generally, only single individuals or those with special needs, such as the elderly with no extended family, are being referred to the traditional absorption centers. The great majority, however, after being processed at Ben Gurion Airport, go directly to housing that has been arranged for them by family, friends, the Jewish Agency, or local municipalities. The Jewish Agency provides them an initial "basket" payment subsidy for basic needs, such as food, clothing, and shelter. Help during their first few months in Israel is provided by family, friends, or volunteers and in many instances is coordinated by the local municipality.

Shifting some of the basic responsibilities for resettlement from the Jewish Agency to the municipal level has resulted in a more efficient absorption process. Raanana, Rishon LeTzion, and other cities are taking the leadership in local resettlement efforts.

Initial indications are that the "privatization" of the absorption process will result in a more efficient and effective resettlement process. In addition to the involvement of the municipalities, volunteers are offering their services in record numbers. Volunteerism for the first time is blossoming in Israel. Many of the volunteer efforts are being facilitated by the *olim* associations, such as the Association of Americans and Canadians in Israel, the British Olim Society, several South African organizations, and six associations of Soviet *olim*. Last Pesach, over 18,000 Israeli families invited Soviet Jewish families to their seders. In fact, in one community so many people invited a Soviet family to their seder that the mayor arranged for some Soviet families to go to two seders!

The Israeli government is taking a number of steps to plan, fund, and streamline the absorption process, as well. Recently, \$1.2 billion was added to the budget for aliyah and absorption, and a plan for financing these costs is being developed. The Jewish Agency and the government have reached agreement on the cost of resettling a family—about \$10,000 a year as of July; half was to be paid by the government and half by the Jewish Agency. If the number of immigrants increases substantially, this formula will be subject to renegotiation, with an increased proportion of fiscal responsibility to be assumed by the government.

In addition, recent legislation provides an incentive payment system for contractors to build new apartments. An additional stimulus is the provision of a bonus for early completion of construction. Training grants are being provided to builders to hire *olim* in the construction industry. Financing arrangements involving land owned by the Israel Land Authority are

being put into place, which will make land for development more readily available.

Although the suddenness of this aliyah has affected housing planning, politics and inertia have also played a role in delaying solutions to the housing problem. It should, however, become easier for foreign builders to bid on projects in Israel, which will enable American know-how and Western technology to have an impact on Israel's housing shortage. Israel has also lifted import duties on cement, steel, and other building materials, thereby reducing the costs of construction. Plans are being developed to ensure an adequate infrastructure of sewage, electricity, telephones, and roads required for new housing. New housing is being planned on plots of land that are large enough to permit future expansion so that families, who are initially crowded, can add on to their houses in several years when they can afford to do so.

Although it may seem paradoxical, the great influx of new refugees will actually have a favorable impact on Israel's 9.5% unemployment rate. For every 100,000 Soviets, 10,000 jobs will be created just from the impact of their immigration. Some 25,000 jobs will be created in the construction industry alone for each 100,000 new arrivals. In the long run, this aliyah will have an extraordinary impact on Israel's economy, demography, and politics.

In terms of their political impact, the addition of 300,000 to 400,000 new voters will be concentrated in the municipalities. With their high level of education, one would expect these new arrivals to harbor a very strong desire to exercise their voting franchise. Some guess that this new aliyah will not vote on the left, but will tend to be centrist to right of center.

In order for Israel to absorb this aliyah successfully, it must be able to develop its resources to its fullest, and for that, peace is needed. Only a strong, politically secure, and economically viable Israel can meet the challenge posed by this aliyah.

The Diaspora can play a crucial role in helping Israel meet that challenge. The

budget of the Jewish Agency is a "Zionist" budget. Fifty-four percent of the 1990/1991 budget is earmarked for aliyah and absorption in contrast to just 20% in the prior fiscal year's budget. This financial commitment is an expression of our concern for serving Jews and helping build a strong Israel. Kafka once wrote, "Man's weakness does not lie in his inability to obtain vic-

tories, but in his inability to make use of them." We have achieved a victory in bringing the Jews out of the Soviet Union. We must now use that victory to create effective and meaningful new lives for Soviet Jews in the State of Israel. With our help and the help of everyone in Israel, we can meet that challenge.