

Soviet Jewry: Perspectives on the "Dropout" Issue*

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While world Jewish concern for Soviet Jews mounts in reaction to what has been termed "the smell of pogrom" in the USSR, one visible end result to which the worldwide Soviet Jewry movement has contributed signally is the mini-exodus of more than 150,000 Jews in the ten years between 1968 and 1977. 123,180 found new homes in Israel. The remaining 28,332 were assisted by HIAS to resettle in the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Latin America and Western Europe. Of the latter, the preponderant number (23,582) were assisted to the United States.

For a better understanding of these figures, one must also perceive the process by which Soviet Jews receive permission to emigrate. A very small number, ranging between 500 and 700, is given permission to leave with U.S. end-destination visas. Most are permitted to leave the Soviet Union with Israel end-destination visas.

In this context, Dr. Maurice Friedberg, a widely respected Kremlinologist and Head of the Department of Slavic Languages at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, points out that

The distinction between 'Russian' and 'Jewish' is of some importance here, if only because Soviet authorities insist on maintaining the fiction that anyone who chooses to leave the USSR must be both a Zionist and a Jew. Only a Jewish Zionist, they seem to be

saying, would openly declare his preference for a life of exile and uncertainty over the happy existence of a Soviet intellectual. This pretense was observed even in the case of several Russian Orthodox leaders who were forced to leave Russia a few years ago, in effect, deported abroad, as Solzhenitsyn was in 1974. Needless to say, these Russian priests did not regard themselves as Jews and had no intention of settling in the Jewish Homeland, anymore than did a number of other de facto deportees I was to meet later on in Paris, some of whom came from very old Russian families, and bore names that had been made famous in the novels of Tolstoy . . .

Exit visas are occasionally issued to non-Jews as well as to Jews . . . The submission of a *vyzov* (an invitation from a relative of the applicant) is of course no guarantee that the applicant will get his visa; it merely sets in motion certain bureaucratic processes that may, if he is lucky, ultimately bring about that result. If he is not lucky, it may lead to a Kafkaesque situation wherein the applicant's request is turned down—say, on grounds of his having had access to "classified" information while serving in the army years ago—while the "crime" of having applied brings about a series of retributions—loss of job, expulsion from school, etc.

Nevertheless, in spite of the risks involved, the number of applications for exit visas continues to grow. For some, the reasons for wishing to leave are "positive"—bona-fide Zionism, or a genuine desire to join relatives in other countries. Others entertain rather unrealistic notions about the economic opportunities awaiting them in the West, and

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still others wish to pursue academic or literary careers in countries where there is no anti-Semitism and no government censorship. Finally, there are those who are driven by a purely "negative" impulse, the desire to leave the USSR at all costs, whatever the ultimate destination or the ultimate consequences. In all cases, some form of bureaucratically acceptable documentary evidence of Jewish origins—a parody, as it were, of the Nazi Nuremberg laws—is said to be helpful in winning permission to leave.¹

The varied motivations for leaving noted by Prof. Friedberg are important factors causing many Soviet Jews who leave with Israeli visas to change their destinations upon reaching Vienna, their initial contact with the free world. These are the *noshrim*, or "dropouts," or to use a more appropriate state department term, "breakoffs."

The proportion of these has been rising steadily from less than one percent in 1971 to a little over 50 percent in 1977. The increasing percentages of "breakoffs" have generated considerable concern both in the United States and in Israel. To consider the situation, a "Committee of Eight," later increased to a "Committee of Ten," comprising the leadership of the Jewish Agency, the Israel government, the Prime Minister's office, the Council of Jewish Federations and Welfare Funds, HIAS, the National Conference on Soviet Jewry, the United Jewish Appeal, the Joint Distribution Committee, the National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council, and the United Israel Appeal, was designated to study the issue and to make appropriate recommendations.

One of these recommendations was to attempt to arrange, insofar as possible, that Soviet Jews in the USSR desiring to go to Israel should seek Israeli visas, i.e. to arrange to receive letters of invitation from relatives in Israel. Those wishing to go to destinations other than Israel should seek letters of invitation from relatives in the United States,

¹ Maurice Friedberg, "From Moscow to Jerusalem—and Points West," *Commentary*, Volume 65, Number 5 (1978), p. 63.

Australia, and other western countries.

To facilitate this objective, HIAS established a special "letter of invitation unit" which assisted American relatives in the preparation of such documents and in sending them to their relatives in the USSR. In 1976 some 1,000 such letters of invitation were sent. In that year 713 Soviet Jews were given exit permits with U.S. visas. In 1977 some 3,000 such letters of invitation were sent. However, only 518 Soviet Jews received permission to leave with U.S. visas. Apparently the number of letters of invitation has little bearing upon the seemingly fixed annual quota of 500-700 exit permits with U.S. visas.

Further complicating the situation is a report of a HIAS representative who was invited to participate in a meeting of the U.S. consuls from Eastern Europe this past April. Among other things, he stated that the U.S. consular representative stationed in the USSR had pointed out that the OVIR, the office in Soviet communities to which letters of invitation or *vzyovs* were presented by applicants for permission to leave the USSR, is:

refusing exit to two categories of people. The first are those who present a letter of invitation from a relative in the United States, who upon examination in their own files, turns out to be someone who left the Soviet Union for Israel and dropped out in Vienna. This obviously applies to a larger and larger number of applicants. This also means that such people will eventually seek and receive a visa to Israel. The second category in trouble are Jews who, a long time ago and in a different political climate, were designated on their internal documents as "Russians." Such people are having great trouble in trying to establish that they are Jews and are not being given exit until they succeed first in making this change.

I should like to underscore that, as indicated above, the bulk of HIAS assisted Soviet migrants to the U.S. are the *noshrim* or "breakoffs." Whether we approve of their having changed destination or not, the fact is that, for whatever reasons, be they good, bad,

or indifferent from our point of view, they are human beings and fellow Jews who have exercised their right to determine their own destiny and to select a destination where they wish to fashion their own future. We feel that they must continue to have their freedom to choose their destination, even though many of us would prefer that practically all Soviet Jews should choose to go to Israel.

It should be noted that more than 80 percent of the Soviet Jews who choose to go to destinations other than Israel do so in order to be reunited with their families; others believe that they will have greater opportunity to work in their areas of expertise. Aside from HIAS, there are also non-Jewish migration agencies providing services to refugees. Were HIAS not to offer assistance, the latter would, and it is questionable whether such action would be deemed advantageous to the refugees, Israel, and the World Jewish community. I also wish to call attention to the fact that the HIAS board, after careful and extensive consideration of this very complex issue, has taken a position that HIAS will continue to offer assistance to Soviet Jews in furtherance of their right to choose their destination. Moreover, the HIAS position is supported by Jewish organizations in the United States and Canada.

However, some voices have been raised accusing HIAS of encouraging Soviet Jews to change destination in Vienna. Illustrative of this position is a press release issued by the Israel Knesset Committee on Immigration and Absorption on April 3, 1978. This committee pointed out, *inter alia*, that

The Factors for the Great Extent of Dropping Out in Vienna (are)

A. Historical circumstances created the fact that a substantial part of the Jews who leave the U.S.S.R. lack Jewish consciousness and many of them even deny their Jewishness. The anti-Semitism in the U.S.S.R. pushes such Jews to leave Russia, but even from the start they have no intention of immigrating to Israel and leading a Jewish life.

B. Another part, though it does not deny its Jewishness, lacks the Zionist motivation to help it face the temptations of a rich and comfortable life which, as it seems, awaits it in the West, and similarly, not to be influenced by messages and letters describing the social, economic and security situation in Israel in a negative light.

The above two groups, if immigration possibilities to the West were not opened up for them, and if they had to choose between staying in the U.S.S.R. or coming to Israel, one can assume they would prefer the latter. This does not include, however, those whose families are already in a Western country and who want to join them.

In my judgment, the Knesset Committee has not sufficiently appraised their own cogent analysis, and the ineluctable consequences which may be expected to follow such analysis, namely the increase of *noshrim*. Thus they point to the realities of Soviet anti-Semitism pushing some Jews to leave the USSR, and they state that "even from the start they have no intention of immigrating to Israel and leading a Jewish life."

They also indicate the lack of Zionist and Jewish motivations on the part of others. Indeed, most of the committed Zionists have already left. Many of the others are, perforce, so unequipped with the Jewish background and heritage that they do not have the Jewish spiritual capacity to perceive the negative stereotypes and, strengthened by the Jewish perspective, to counter them.

As the mini-exodus grows there are indeed increasing numbers of Soviet Jews who do have relatives in Western countries. In addition to the very cogent reasons listed by the committee, several other reasons for the growing number of breakoffs in Vienna should be noted. The preponderant number of Soviet Jews who break off in Vienna are from the heartland of the Soviet Union, which includes such cities as Leningrad, Moscow and Odessa. Particularly from the last-named over 90 percent change destination.

Moreover, the Soviet authorities appear to be fully aware that Soviet Jews from certain geographic areas, e.g. large cities such as Moscow, Leningrad and Odessa, will more likely end up in countries other than Israel than from cities such as Tbilisi in the Georgian SSR, most of whom would probably go to Israel. Thus they tend to issue more exit permits to the former than to the latter. Many of the Jews in the large urban centers are often assimilated into the secular Soviet culture. They tend to be urbane, non-ideological, career-oriented, and interested in earning a good living. Their ethnic and religious memories are not strong or fresh, and they feel little cultural or emotional attachment to the Jewish State. They leave the Soviet Union not out of love for Israel, but because life in the Soviet Union has become too difficult. Such a selective visa policy enables the Soviet authorities to accomplish several objectives. By manipulating such issuance they demonstrate to the world that they are humanitarian in permitting numbers of Soviet Jews to leave. Concurrently, they indicate to the Arabs that by their selective visa policy they are not helping to increase Israel's military potential or to strengthen its economy.

While many Soviet Jews who have in the past continued on to Israel—mostly from Georgia, the Baltic Republics, and the mountain areas—the number of Jews in these have been decreasing. Consequently the likelihood is that the continuing movement of the Soviet Jews from the heartland of the Soviet Union, and the drying up of numbers from areas where Jews were largely committed to Israel, will probably result in substantially increased numbers assisted by HIAS in the future.

However, there are additional important factors to be considered in the complex situation of the *noshrim*. Among these are the perceptions of many Soviet Jews themselves.

It must be borne in mind that they live in the matrix of a rigidly controlled society whose governmental arms continue to disseminate vituperation and vilification of Israel through

the press, radio, television, public meetings and other media. This calculated assault has continued for some 60 years.

Soviet Jews are bombarded with the hostile image of Israel as an aggressor nation whose inhabitants are conscripted for military service, a nation beset by terrorism, riven by internal conflict, plagued with economic, security and social problems. When presented on a daily basis, these notions cumulatively and insidiously tend to generate negative perceptions of Israel, particularly since there are no Jewish schools or teachers or other Jewish instrumentalities to counter such distorted presentations and outright lies. For some 60 years, as is known, Soviet Jews have been deprived of institutions that provide the Jewish spiritual nourishment necessary for the continuance of the Jewish heritage.

Within this ambience, Soviet Jews receive negative letters from relatives and friends in Israel, especially in their first year or two in the Jewish Homeland. These early periods are generally years of struggle in which they have to learn a new and difficult language, enter a new culture radically different from that in which they had lived, and adjust their lives to a totally different lifestyle. Understandably, there are complaints about the difficulties of adjustment, the bureaucracy, the hostility on the part of some elements of the population, employment problems, housing, etc.

It is this larger picture which tends to shape certain perceptions of Israel which cause some to decide to go to countries other than Israel—especially the United States. While there are adjustment problems here also, the Soviet media generate the perception that America is a superpower, that although it is afflicted with the "evils of capitalism," nevertheless it is desirable for the USSR, because of the economic, industrial and military power of the U.S., to seek detente with it, to establish trade relations, etc. Thus the ambience of this country is presented as different from that of Israel.

Further, many are aware that more Soviet Jews receive exit visas to Israel than to the

United States. Consequently, they seek Israeli letters of invitation, not to go to the Jewish State but rather as a lifeline to help them leave the USSR.

When considering the situation of *noshrim*, it is important to bear these elements in mind as well. But to return to the press release cited earlier, it stresses that:

The committee is convinced that the activities of the HIAS and ADJC offices in Vienna which deal with the drop-outs are a direct factor encouraging dropping-out. The committee thinks that it is extremely vital to terminate, as soon as possible, the discussions of the 'Committee of Eight' which was appointed to decide on the way to deal with the drop-outs. The immigration and absorption committee recommends that the decision to be made should clearly be in the direction that Soviet Jews leaving the U.S.S.R. on the strength of affidavits sent from Israel should be sent to Israel only.

There have also been other voices insisting that *all* Soviet Jews should go to Israel only, regardless of their personal wishes to go to other destinations. Should some later decide to leave Israel, the argument continues, then they could do so. However, should such a situation actually eventuate, then Israel would in effect become a place to which Jews would be forced to go—and might be regarded by some unwilling arrivals as a virtual prison. Imagine the protests and demonstrations which some Soviet Jews, experienced in such open protests in the USSR, might hold—and the negative public image which would be created for Israel. Indeed, central to the Zionist dream was the attraction of Zion. Israel was built and will continue to be built by those who go there voluntarily with commitment and devotion.

Moreover, those Jews who would refuse to leave the Soviet Union rather than go to Israel would constitute a very serious onus upon Israel since it would be responsible for their fate.

Consider further that Dr. Kreisky, the Chancellor of Austria, has categorically stated that he would not permit Soviet Jews to transit Austria unless they have the full freedom to

choose their destinations.

Question: What are the facts relating to the accusation that "the committee is convinced that the activities of the HIAS and AJDC offices in Vienna which deal with the drop-outs are a direct factor encouraging dropping-out?"

Quite coincidentally, about a month before the Israeli committee issued its press release, an investigation of this very issue, i.e., the relationship of HIAS and the "breakoffs" was made by Congressman Joshua Eilberg's Committee on Immigration, Citizenship and International Law.

Deserving of special note is the fact that this was a U.S. government investigation and had no input procedurally or otherwise from any Jewish organizational sources. Among other things, this government study indicates the important series of steps which finally lead Soviet Jewish arrivals to HIAS. The investigation clearly establishes that:

1) Soviet Jews made up their minds as to their end-destination while still in the USSR and long before they arrive in Vienna.

2) Jewish Agency representatives are *the only ones* who meet arriving Soviet Jews in Vienna. No other organizations, including HIAS, has information about whether any Soviet Jews have arrived, the number who arrived, or their names.

3) Those who wish to continue to Israel are flown there within 36 to 72 hours, depending upon availability of plane space.

4) Those who insist upon destinations other than Israel are taken to a small hotel in Vienna where Jewish Agency representatives explain in some detail the benefits awaiting them in Israel, including housing, job assistance, language training, etc. Since as indicated, most have already opted for destinations other than Israel, the Jewish Agency representatives refer them to the office of HIAS and to the American Joint Distribution Committee, both located at the same address in Vienna.

5) In the HIAS office in Vienna, a staff member of the Jewish Agency makes yet another attempt to persuade the newcomers to

reconsider and to take advantage of the benefits of going to Israel. When this effort is unsuccessful, the Soviet Jews are referred in writing to HIAS and the American Joint Distribution Committee. It should be noted that this is *the first time* that HIAS sees the new arrival and learns of his desired end-destination. Incidentally, it should also be noted that until this time the Jewish Agency is in possession of all documents which the Soviet Jew has upon arrival in Vienna, a responsibility the Jewish Agency has taken in agreement with Austrian authorities as a means of controlling transit through Austria. Upon referral to HIAS these documents are returned to him.

Not part of the report, but to round out the picture, there are the additional facts that:

6) To avoid development of possible undesirable international problems which might eventuate with an extended stay in Austria of those opting for destinations other than Israel, an agreement was reached among the Jewish Agency, the Israel Government and HIAS to move these refugees to Italy as quickly as possible. A maximum stay of 72 hours in Austria was agreed upon.

7) Thus, within three days after the referral to HIAS/ADJC, following upon interviews with representatives of these two organizations, almost all Soviet Jews opting for the United States, Canada, Australia and other Western Countries, are sent to Rome, the central HIAS processing area for Jews from Eastern Europe. There, further interviews are conducted by HIAS regarding the refugees' educational and occupational backgrounds; arrivals undergo medical examinations; and, for those opting for the United States, there are also interviews and security screening by U.S. immigration authorities. Further, while in Rome the community of settlement is determined, based upon a number of factors, mainly family reunion, but also including the desire of the Soviet refugee, greater likelihood of securing employment in one's particular field of expertise or in a closely related field, religious, medical, and other considerations

such as the readiness of a particular community to receive the family, and other elements. This processing may last from two to four months, depending upon a complex of factors. While waiting, most heads of families attend ORT classes where they learn English. In addition, special programs are conducted by JDC, the Jewish Agency and the Rome representatives of the Lubavitcher movement to further Yiddishkeit of the waiting refugees.

8) It should be stressed that the costs of the care and maintenance of Soviet refugees in Austria and Italy are mainly borne by the United States government, which makes the funds available to the JDC, HIAS, and other refugee help organizations.

I have dwelt at some length upon the various steps in this process because they indicate that, despite assertions of some people, HIAS cannot possibly contact any of the arrivals or influence them in any way (and I add parenthetically that practically the entire HIAS official and unofficial family hopes that most, if not all, Soviet Jews would go to Israel) prior to their referral by the Jewish Agency.

I noted previously that there are a number of refugee help organizations in Vienna other than HIAS. These include:

CARITAS—the Catholic refugee help organization

Church World Service—the Protestant refugee help organization

Tolstoy—a Russian refugee help organization

International Rescue Committee—funded by the Philanthropic Fund of the American Council for Judaism

Rav Tov—the refugee help organization of the Satmar chassidim

Should HIAS be unavailable for any reason, these organizations would be of service to refugees seeking assistance.

Regarding the recent spate of public pronouncements about the breakoffs, I recall a statement by Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin who pointed out that there are good and reasonable people on both sides of the issue and that it is important to take a

longer look at the situation. In this context, I think it is important that the parties involved "cool it" rather than heat up differences to a confrontation level which would be a disservice to objectives we all hold in common, the welfare and well-being of Soviet Jews, Israel and the American and World Jewish Community.

One hopes that ways will be found to further their Yiddishkeit and Jewish identification within the USSR which, among other things, will help counter the hostile image of Israel. Hopefully, also, the quality of life in Israel will be improved, and further measures will be taken to further the successful absorption of Soviet Jews there, so that the negative image of Israel promulgated by hostile forces will be countered with a more positive one, which will attract increasing numbers of Jews to the Jewish State.

It is patent that the *noshrim* issue is very complex and not subject to simplistic solutions. Moreover, it is important to stress that, regardless of some publicly expressed opinions by obviously well-meaning and dedicated sources, Soviet Jews must not be regarded as pawns on an international chessboard to be

moved in accordance with someone's strategy. Rather, we must be mindful of the fact that as responsible Jewish communal workers we must perceive Soviet Jews as fellow Jews and human beings endowed with hopes, dreams, aspirations as to their future and desires to shape their destinies in accordance with their own unique visions and goals, whether these coincide with ours or not. To exercise these human attributes they must have freedom of choice as to destination, lifestyle and means to achieve it. Thereby they also must assume responsibility for the consequences of their choices. However, we must do whatever possible to make this freedom of choice available to them.

This is in accordance with our Jewish tradition. Indeed, as the Talmud tells us, each Jew is responsible for the other. One of the consequences of this Jewish imperative is that Jews have always helped one another without conditioning such assistance upon choice of destination or other factors. As responsible human beings and Jewish communal workers, we can do no less. This traditional Jewish imperative must continue to guide our actions vis-a-vis the *noshrim*.