

THE IMMIGRATION OF SYRIAN JEWS TO NEW YORK 1992–1994

An Agency's Adaptation to a Different Culture

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From 1992 to 1994, virtually the entire Syrian Jewish community emigrated to New York City. To facilitate their smooth adjustment, resettlement workers employed a culturally sensitive approach, modifying policies and procedures to accommodate the needs of the Syrian Jews. This experience confirmed the importance of providing resettlement experiences that are congruent with emigres' culture.

Jews have lived in Syria since Old Testament times, but, beginning in 1992, only two years were required for the ancient Jewish communities of that nation to virtually disappear through immigration to America. For thousands of years Syria's Jews had lived under various rulers, suffering through times of intense persecution relieved by intermittent periods of relative tolerance. At times, the Jews of Syria numbered over 40,000. By the beginning of 1992, when the Assad regime lifted sanctions on travel, their numbers had already shrunk to little over 4,000, and by most estimates, only 250 Jews remain in Syria today.

Although Syrian Jews were not cut off from modern Western societies, the culture that they carried to America during the twentieth century was one entirely their own, requiring the social agencies that resettled them to adapt in many different ways. In order to establish a successful resettlement program, Jewish agencies had to understand the history of Syrian Jews and to exercise deep sensitivity to the norms, values, and customs of their culture.

HISTORY OF SYRIA'S JEWS

Jewish communities have been found in Middle Eastern countries since the time of the Second Temple. According to a present-day historian, "The Syrian Jewish community was one of exiles, living in a state originally under Christian rule, often knowing suffering and persecution"

(Cohen, 1973, p. 1). When the states of the region came under Islamic rule in the seventh century, the political status of the Jews changed for the better. Under the Muslims they were entitled to the protection of the state and granted freedom of worship. However, they were not considered equals but were viewed as strangers, permitted to live under Muslim rule with payment of a poll tax. (This tax was abolished in 1909.) A succession of nineteenth-century Muslim rulers tried to enforce humiliating conditions upon the Jews—at various times they were forbidden to ride on horses and to build high houses—but they were generally protected against grave injury. In cities located along international trade routes, such as Damascus and Aleppo, Jews lived for a while under fairly good conditions. Yeshivas were founded where famous rabbis wrote important works, and under Ottoman rule rabbinic courts flourished. All such stability was tenuous, however, as proven by episodes of persecution in the nineteenth century.

In 1840, the Jews of Damascus were charged with the ritual murder of a Capuchin friar, and the Damascus ghetto was ravaged by a mob. In the 1860s, Druze warriors again attacked the ghetto. In the 20th century, Syrian Jews became scapegoats for nationalists in a series of smaller attacks and anti-Zionist riots.

After World War I, the French Mandate assumed rule over Syria, which it held until

Syrian independence in 1945. As Israel pursued and gained independence, anti-Jewish propaganda became more influential in Syria. Jews were considered Zionists and, as such, traitors to Arab ideals. In 1947, a riot erupted in the Jewish quarter of Aleppo, destroying a majority of the synagogues, and in 1948 and 1949, bombs exploded in the Jewish quarter of Damascus. Over 15,000 Jews fled Syria during those times, and many more followed between 1948 and 1960, when restrictions upon emigration were periodically lifted. Through most of these years, however, the Syrian regime withheld passports, and those caught trying to escape to Israel were shot. Jewish identification certificates were stamped "Musawi" (of Moses). Jews were not allowed to leave their cities, could not work in the civil service or trade with the military, and were closely monitored by the special police, the feared Muhabaret. Prayer books were censored, cars and telephones forbidden. The few Jews admitted to universities were prohibited from studying sensitive subjects such as electronics and engineering, and in Qamishli there were occasional public burnings of religious articles (Friedman, 1989).

The assumption of power by King Assad in 1970 ushered in a period of greater freedom and calm for Syria's Jews. The new sovereign withdrew most travel restrictions, except for the right to leave the country. He allowed Jews to own cars and telephones, opened up opportunities to work, and eased public harassment. It appeared to those in Syria that additional restrictions were removed after each high-level American diplomatic visit.

After the 1970s, Syrian Jews were permitted to engage in an active Jewish communal life, free from harassment. Although problems existed with the Palestinians with whom they lived cheek by jowl, they got along well with most Muslims. There were dozens of active synagogues, a *mikvah* in every community, and readily available kosher food, and matzot were baked and wine

was made. The Muhabaret, however, was always watching through its stations in the ghettos, and Jews were not free to travel outside the country without leaving close family members behind as hostages. Any sign of Zionist activity resulted in arrest, and after each war with Israel, young men were rounded up, imprisoned, and tortured. Modern-day Syrian Jews never lost their apprehension when speaking with non-Jews and feared the establishment of a fundamentalist regime upon the death of Assad. This fear of the future served as a powerful impetus in the decisions of thousands to finally quit the ancient homeland when the opportunity arose.

NORMS, VALUES, AND CUSTOMS OF SYRIAN JEWISH CULTURE

Living for centuries as a persecuted or "tolerated" minority, Syrian Jews developed a self-contained community, characterized by social homogeneity and religious insularity (Su Hon, 1988). Restrictions that separated this community from the rest of Syrian society intensified the bonds among them. They felt and reacted as one community, with strongly held attitudes regarding mutual responsibility. Privacy was not a valued concept, information was shared, and it was common for everyone to know how much each community member earned. The community took care of its most vulnerable members who could not function independently, and fragile families in Syria turned to the community with an expectation of help. For example, a man unable to hold a job might be given minimal tasks in a store near his home for a few hours a day while the family's income was supplemented by the community. This sense of community expectation would stand in stark contrast to the American ideal of personal responsibility and create unrealistic expectations of the American Jewish community when the Syrians arrived.

In Syria, rabbis generally made major decisions around religious and social life, and most Jews were accustomed to adhering

to a rabbi's instructions. The Syrian community is a highly religious one, although few judgments or distinctions are made about how people practice. Jews observe Shabbat and keep kosher homes, and all children are expected to attend the free religious schools, which are separate for boys and girls. Education typically went through the eighth grade, though a handful of young people became professionals (doctors, dentists, pharmacists). It was highly unusual for a girl to pursue education, and there are few female professionals.

With many occupations historically closed to them, Syrian Jews traditionally practiced business and trade. Most of this class operated import-export businesses, primarily in textiles, or managed their own shops or factories. Others were craftsmen in silver and gold jewelry making. While in Damascus most Jews tended to be craftsmen, weavers, upholsterers, barbers, tailors, engravers, merchants or artisans, in Aleppo more bankers, merchants, brokers, grocers and goldsmiths were found (Dresher & Zenner, 1982).

Traditionally, women did not work outside the home. They were raised to marry young, often as teenagers, and to take care of large families, typically of four to five children. Divorce was considered shameful, intermarriage was unknown, and women were taught to defer to their husbands and fathers. Spousal abuse was frowned upon and, when it occurred, was usually handled by the rabbi with community pressure, while the wife was counseled to remain in the marriage.

Like many other Middle Eastern societies, Syrian Jews defined social relationships by kinship. Personal interactions, expectations, and responsibilities were influenced by whether or how one was related to the other. Elders were accorded great respect, and adult male children carried the burden of family support. Couples were accustomed to living close to one set of parents and were expected to visit frequently. Geography was an especially important issue

for women who relied upon the families' intervention if trouble arose within the marriage.

Syrian Jews tend to view the world as in flux, with constantly changing rules, and therefore do not see a direct cause-and-effect relationship between action and consequences. They distrust any authority outside the community and hold a generally fatalistic view of the world. Syrians are often heard to remark "in Sh'Allah," if God wills.

THE RESETTLEMENT PROGRAM

Since 1949, the New York Association for New Americans (NYANA) has resettled more than 400,000 refugees from over 39 countries. Employing a culturally sensitive approach, the agency has developed strategies for the adaptation to American society of people from many cultures. The Syrian immigration of 1992 to 1994 presented NYANA's most recent challenge.

By 1992 NYANA already possessed some understanding of Syrian Jews, since many had immigrated previously, but it quickly became obvious that much more remained to be learned and that local leadership would be important in facilitating the adaptation of the new emigres. NYANA entered, therefore, into a working partnership with the Sephardic Bikhur Holim, a local social service agency that had served many Syrians. This partnership proved to be critically important in meeting the needs of the new emigres and in providing NYANA with a sounding board for cultural assumptions utilized in its decision making.

Housing

Housing presented the first challenge of institutional adaptation. In dealing with successive waves of refugees over several decades, NYANA has maintained a network of landlord contacts through which it obtains low-income housing for emigres. This housing, however, is scattered throughout the city, and almost none exists in the major Syrian neighborhood in Brooklyn where

rents tend to be somewhat higher. Furthermore, the new arrivals' reliance on the community demanded serious attention, and a decision was reached to do everything possible to preserve this valuable support structure. With the help of the Bikhur Holim staff who searched for and found apartments, NYANA provided resources enabling all 3,000 new arrivals to be housed within the Syrian community's boundaries. A distance of a few blocks meant a great deal to the newcomers, whose sense of distance proved to be very different from that of Americans. One client remarked, "I feel more comfortable seeing my people on the street." For a community whose sense of safety and rules of social interaction depend upon their close proximity to one another, community boundaries are crucial.

Schooling

Schooling was another area in which cultural understanding helped NYANA avoid the pitfalls of cultural conflict. With so many school-aged children arriving in so short a time, it was not always possible to have yeshivah placements waiting. While the Bikhur Holim worked tirelessly to secure these school enrollments, NYANA caseworkers monitored outcomes and waited patiently for each child to be placed. In cases requiring special education services that could not be provided by the yeshivahs, families were repeatedly counseled by their NYANA caseworkers, which enabled them to accept necessary public school services.

Education in Syria often terminated at the end of the eighth grade, as opposed to the American norm of twelve grades. Among NYANA's new arrivals were boys between the ages of 14 and 17 who had finished school by that age and had already begun working. Taking into account American law on this subject, attention was focused upon the 14- and 15-year-olds whose families were given long explanations of American law and custom; the 16-year-olds were advised on the advantages of having an education in the United States, but were

allowed to choose between school and work. With patience and understanding no family ever had to be reported for keeping a child out of school.

Gender Roles

The role that women play in Syrian families required agency staff to make changes in thinking and methodology. Whereas caseworkers might have wanted both husband and wife to work to ensure economic independence, staff realized that they could not expect to counteract an entrenched cultural norm. Wives were expected to stay at home, cook, and care for the children and household; husbands were expected to provide income. The men did not see their wives as extra breadwinners, even though most were obtaining entry-level jobs and had large families to support. NYANA therefore developed a supplementary income schedule administered as a loan program, to bridge the resettlement period until income had stabilized at a higher level.

Loan Program

The issuance of a means-tested loan, based on assessment of a family's resources, is a very American concept and unavoidably caused conflict with the newcomer community because it stood in opposition to that community's sense of oneness. Whereas the agency needed to make distinctions between families in order to allocate its resources efficiently, the community would have preferred that each family, according to its size, receive the same allotment, regardless of family resources. "We are all Jews" was a phrase commonly heard by agency caseworkers.

The loan checks themselves became a source of confusion, as heads of households, accustomed to participating in commercial transactions by relationship, failed to understand why their cousins could not endorse and cash checks made out to them.

Loan check issuance became similarly problematic. When the agency realized that

the men were taking off from work in order to pick up their checks, rather than have their wives perform this task, scheduling around work hours had to be arranged.

Medical Problems

Caseworkers and other agency staff became acutely attuned to the special needs of the Syrian population and made the necessary accommodations. The medical staff realized that this was a population accustomed to taking medications easily and in larger amounts than other ethnic groups. Whereas refugees from the former Soviet Union, with whom NYANA staff had much experience, tend to take medications episodically, the Syrians tended to take too much for too long and required much health education.

Many of the medical problems with which the Syrians arrived were similar to those observed in other populations (hypertension, diabetes, heart disease), but the Syrians tended to suffer from fewer systemic diseases (lungs, rheumatoid arthritis, leukemia, muscular sclerosis), and obesity was rare, undoubtedly a function of a predominantly vegetarian diet. Infant mortality was quite low.

Psychiatric problems presented NYANA staff with the most intense frustration and sense of helplessness. In any population of significant numbers there will be cases of depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation, and the Syrians were certainly not different in this respect. Some people arrived with psychiatric problems of long duration for which medication had been the sole treatment in Syria. Now, however, it was necessary to assess and diagnose before treatment could be planned, which then might or might not involve medication. The community was wary of outsiders, men had difficulty confiding in women, and the lack of privacy in the community caused suspicion of the principle of confidentiality. In addition, effective treatment methods were difficult to find. Attempts at utilizing bilingual professionals failed as they were considered

to be part of the community. NYANA's on-site mental health unit, operated by the Jewish Board of Family and Childrens Services, finally decided to use its own staff in conjunction with Arabic interpreters. Although this presented problems of confidentiality, impartiality, neutrality, and accuracy, it was felt that with ongoing interpreter training, an acceptable level of communication could and did occur.

Treatment modalities necessarily changed in serving this population, as the culture exerted strong influences on possible effective methodologies. Syrian clients were not open to introspection and the self-knowledge to be gained through psychodynamic exploration. This is hardly surprising given the cultural emphasis upon community as opposed to the individual.

In Syria, psychological problems were treated with medication, which was an expectation brought with them. Syrian clients with psychological problems were interested solely in immediate symptom relief and tended to displace emotional distress onto external causes, such as the lack of funds to provide sufficiently for their families. This was clearly illustrated by the case of Jamila K.

Jamila was a 17-year-old Syrian woman who married shortly after her arrival in the United States. Her young husband soon lost his job, and she felt humiliated at not being adequately supported. She slashed her wrists in a suicidal gesture that was not intended to kill herself, but to focus attention upon her problem. Jamila's sense of shame was not purely of internal origins; she knew that on Friday nights, when the entire Syrian community came together in the synagogue, each family's material well-being was obvious to all. While Jamila was hospitalized, her caseworker met with the entire family and sympathetically portrayed Jamila's plight. As a result, the in-laws agreed to substantially contribute to the couple until they were more on their feet. Jamila recovered and displayed no subsequent problems.

Psychological counseling was seldom accepted by Syrian clients, although they requested help from their caseworkers. They did not want to be identified as psychiatric patients, which would have interfered with their own or their children's chances for marriage, and they did not understand or believe in talking as a means of therapy.

Jack M., a young man in his twenties, was identified at intake as someone with a severe anxiety disorder. He had phobic symptoms and insomnia, had lost weight, and could not concentrate. Jack had undergone serious surgery before emigrating and arrived feeling less than adequate. It was apparent that he felt he could never marry. Although Jack focused only on medication for his symptoms, arrangements were made for him to consult a doctor who clearly explained what his limitations were and all that was possible for him. His family was counseled to help him to marry, and soon a wife and a job were found; Jack's symptoms disappeared.

The short-term nature of treatment, the therapist's reliance on family and community, and the use of concrete forms of help as opposed to psychotherapy distinguished treatment for this population.

COMPARING TWO POPULATIONS

It is interesting to contrast the general adaptation to this country of emigres from the former Soviet Union and those from Syria who arrived during the same time period and were resettled by the same agency (NYANA).

Government-accorded immigration status often drives an adaptation process. Soviet Jews entered the country as refugees, a government status bestowed on those who have fled their native country due to a fear of persecution based upon race, ethnicity, political or religious beliefs, or membership in a political or social group. They were therefore eligible for a variety of government entitlement programs, such as Medicaid, food stamps, and public assistance.

The Syrians, on the other hand, by necessity arrived on tourist visas and applied for political asylum through the help of the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS). As asylum applicants, they were accorded the right to work, but were barred from all government benefit programs pending the resolution of their asylum applications, a process that was to take over a year. Without the help of any government programs, the Syrian asylum group was totally dependent on NYANA for financial support and subject to its policies regarding early employment. They took jobs far quicker than the Soviets, who as a more educated, more professionally trained group had higher expectations of the job market. The Syrian group was one primarily of shopkeepers and tradesmen, with little formal education beyond the eighth or tenth grade. Entry-level jobs, those that are found most readily for immigrants who do not have a full command of English, were within their expectations, although the wages were disappointing. For large Syrian families, NYANA had to supplement those wages to keep them above the poverty level. Over 95 percent of the work-eligible Syrian men (those who were 18 to 65 years old and not disabled) were working by the end of their first year in the country.

The Syrians integrated quickly into their new community, but remained isolated from the rest of the city. There was little contact with those outside the Syrian neighborhood. The older established Syrian community was active in welcoming the newcomers, particularly in ensuring that Jewish day schools were available for the children. However, the earlier wave of Syrians (who were primarily from Aleppo, while the new group came from Damascus) prayed in their own synagogues and tended to socialize within their own group. It is unclear whether this pattern will change with time.

The Soviet refugees, by contrast, fanned out throughout the city. Although they are heavily concentrated in several neighborhoods in Brooklyn, one can find newcomers

from the former Soviet Union in all the other boroughs, and they tend to take advantage of the cultural life of the city by traveling to museums, parks, and concert halls. The majority of their children attend public schools.

Both groups faced the problem of children acculturating faster than their parents, which inevitably caused a modicum of family conflict. The Syrian youngsters held more steadfastly onto their cultural norms, as can be witnessed by the number of extremely early marriages among the girls. Soviet children, especially adolescents, were more likely to test the waters of independence, in spite of parental opposition.

The Soviet group learned English faster. They were more familiar with being students, having been in an educational system for much longer, and were less ghettoized than the Syrians, necessitating use of the language.

Both groups tended to have a great distrust of government, having come from societies in which the government oppressed their brethren. The Soviet group, however, saw all agencies and institutions as part of the government, whereas the Syrians, from their experience, were able to distinguish between a private philanthropic agency and the government. Caseworkers working with both groups saw a major difference in the manner in which each group handled a negative decision by the agency. The Syrian group brought negotiation to a high art form, a familiar process in many Middle eastern societies. The Soviet group, although argumentative, perceived a decision as such, rather than as a move in a verbal chess game.

Will the new emigres become U.S. citizens? This citizenship application process is a lengthy one. To be eligible, the emigre must live in the country for five continuous years after status has been adjudicated. It is thus too early to tell what percentage of the Syrians who arrived between 1992 and

1994 will take advantage of this opportunity. To judge by the former Syrian group, a large number will do so, anxious to be citizens of a country that allows them to work, to live together, and to maintain their cultural uniqueness.

CONCLUSION

Over 3,700 Syrian Jews immigrated to New York between 1992 and 1994. They came from an intact and homogeneous community, with norms and customs different from and, at times in opposition to, those of their host country. At this time, almost all working-aged men of the community are employed, some have opened stores, children are in schools, marriages have taken place, and over 300 babies have been born.

The potential for cultural conflict, the clash of one culture bumping against another, is ever present when a new group arrives. Cultural sensitivity on the part of resettlement workers, as demonstrated by NYANA's Syrian resettlement, is the crucial ingredient in providing for a smooth and successful adjustment. This experience confirmed the importance of understanding the diverse cultures of newcomers and providing resettlement experiences that are congruent with those cultures.

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