

LOSS AND THE EMIGRATION EXPERIENCE OF JEWS FROM THE FORMER SOVIET UNION

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Most Jewish emigres from the former Soviet Union experience significant losses that can greatly affect their ability to make a successful adjustment to their new country. Losses experienced in emigration can be categorized as environmental, those dealing with the changes around the individual, and internal, those dealing with the individual's psychological response to that which has been left behind.

Emigration, a process of separation and departure, is the initial phase of the refugee experience, and it begins long before the emigre family arrives in this country. For the contemporary Jewish family from the former Soviet Union, it begins with the decision to risk all and make a permanent change from one culture to another. Emotional responses to losses incurred through emigration, as well as the ultimate acceptance of those losses, significantly affect the immigration experience. Initial enthusiasm and optimism about future success in this country can be offset by a difficult period of mourning for tangible items and altered roles, perceptions, and ideals that do not fit into American society. An emotional attachment to past life experiences can hamper the emigre's capacity to deal with the initial disorganization and instability that characterize the transition to a new society.

This article explores areas of loss that are experienced by most Jewish New Americans from the former Soviet Union and how the losses of emigration affect refugee resettlement and acculturation. Identifying significant life experiences, attitudes, and expectations influenced by emigration can

highlight areas of extreme stress and vulnerability for refugee families. It also serves as a reminder of the courage, fortitude, and resilience that many families demonstrate through their successful emigration, resettlement, and acculturation.

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ENVIRONMENTAL LOSSES

The experience of moving from one location to another requires separation from tangible elements of one's life, as well as the disorganization of lifestyles and daily patterns. These changes have a dramatic effect on the individual and the family.

Loss of Connection to Family and Friends

The contemporary American family readily accepts national and even global dispersion as normal, with parents, siblings, and children often residing thousands of miles from one another. Americans consider freedom of travel and freedom to choose one's location of residence to be guaranteed rights. U.S. residents confidently assume that, no matter where family or friends

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may be located, the individual maintains the right and the freedom to be able to go to them at will. Yet, those who have lived in the Soviet Union understand the risk of separation very differently. They recognize that emigration policies can rapidly disintegrate and that separation entails a serious risk of losing access to family remaining in the former Soviet Union. Not every Jew in the former Soviet Union will emigrate, and not every significant person in an emigre's life currently has the option to leave. The uncertain political and social atmosphere presently existing in what was the Soviet Union only intensifies the risk of separation.

Loss of Material Possessions

All New American families resettling in communities across the country have left behind material possessions, such as money, household goods, heirlooms, books, pets, and jewelry. Soviet limitations on what can and cannot be taken from that country, as well as the prohibitive cost of shipping items overseas, obligates the family to take stock of what will accompany them to their new land and what can be sold, given away, or simply abandoned.

The loss of material possessions affects refugees at every stage of life. How hard it must be for a child to leave a favorite toy or pet behind, and how painful it must be for a person who has found comfort in visiting the gravesite of a deceased loved one to know that this solace will be lost. The significance of the material loss carries over to resettlement, as many Jewish New Americans, who had lived comfortably in their homeland, enter this country in an impoverished condition. Though most do not regret their decision to leave, many are ashamed of their sparse living conditions and limited finances, especially in this consumer-oriented economy. The new home environment becomes a constant reminder of the material losses of emigration. Many are impatient, dissatisfied, and angry with their lowered standard of living.

Loss of Value of Education and Professional Experience

The emigration process involves much more than the individual's loss of employment and income. Many Jewish New Americans have invested years developing expertise in a specific career or profession. However, as soon as they enter this country, the degrees awarded from prestigious institutions of higher education and the years of work experience in the Soviet Union become less valuable, since those institutes and employment situations are unfamiliar, unverifiable, and potentially suspect to most Americans. The emigre is often surprised, angered, and deeply disappointed by an unimpressed American who does not accept or significantly value his or her past achievements. The time and energy devoted to a chosen career or profession can lose much of its significance as the emigre begins life in a new society. Sometimes, the profession does not even exist in this country, and the New American must abandon that career path. Other individuals must accept an arduous retraining and relicensing process in order to, once again, become a practicing professional. For still others, it is necessary to accept a significantly lower position or one outside their chosen field as a first step toward re-establishing a career. For emigres, each of these options is a clear reminder of the risk and loss they have assumed in emigrating to this country.

Loss of Roots and Connection to Cultural and Social Traditions

Many Jewish New Americans from the former Soviet Union have a sophisticated appreciation of art, literature, theater, music, and dance and consider these elements of life to be very important for themselves and their children. As emigration and resettlement priorities take precedence, many of these New American families experience a cultural void. For most families, resettlement priorities, time constraints, and insufficient financial re-

sources preclude pursuit of cultural interests for an extended period of time.

The decision to emigrate is not synonymous with the rejection of every experience and tradition from life in the former Soviet Union. Although the legacy of Jews in the former Soviet Union is fraught with struggle, persecution, and pain, it is the history and tradition to which the Jewish New American families are connected. In leaving their homeland, emigres are making a break from the past and proactively creating change for the future. The refugees will carry memories, traditions, attitudes, and cultural values to their new home.

Jewish New Americans may encounter American ethnocentrism and the expectation that any newcomer to this country would want to sever ties with their Soviet past, an attitude that may seem extremely naive and insensitive to them. Jewish emigres from the former Soviet Union, having lost the connection to their prior social network, look forward to becoming a part of the society that they risked so much to find. However, this is not an immediate process, as it takes time to understand and adjust to cross-cultural differences.

Emigres from the former Soviet Union struggle with the loss of a paternalistic society, which provided for their basic needs quite differently from American society. At times, New American Jews find the responsibility of decision making to be overwhelming. Not only must they make choices, which is an unfamiliar process, but they also must make decisions about areas of their lives that they assumed would always be guaranteed. In the Soviet Union, jobs were assigned, health care and education were provided by the state, and teachers were responsible not only for presenting the curriculum but also for the required learning that each student would achieve. It is often difficult for New American Jews to accept changes in the role of government in their lives.

INTERNAL LOSSES

Internal losses—those of status, security and stability, independence, and self-suf-

ficiency, and ease of communication—contribute to the undermining of the individual's self-esteem and personal identity. The losses experienced in emigration and the realities of resettlement create deep emotional and psychological stress for the New American.

Loss of Status

Status, one's comparative social standing vis-a-vis a particular population, is altered temporarily, if not permanently, by the emigration process. The underpinnings of an individual's social standing are eliminated when he or she enters a new culture. Regarded by family, friends, colleagues, and peers as a person of stature and prestige, the emigre suddenly loses that authoritative posture by becoming a newcomer in a different social order. The altered perception of one's image pressures the emigre to quickly re-establish his or her prior social standing within the family and the existing emigre community. The emigre also looks to achieve social standing and acceptance from the existing American community. However, at times, the criteria used to determine status within the Soviet Jewish emigre community conflict with traditional American standards and priorities, creating confusion and ambivalence for the newcomer. Status within the Soviet society is defined far more by one's education and academic achievement, profession, and employment than by personal wealth and accumulated possessions. At times, cross-cultural differences in values and expectations, coupled with a generalized American suspicion of rapid achievement by immigrants to this society, affect the emigre's ability to gain community acceptance *as equals*.

Loss of Security and Stability

Despite the day-to-day hardships of life in the Soviet society, as well as the negative stigma of Jewish identity in the former Soviet Union, life followed a predictable pattern, as individuals expertly maneuvered to obtain what they needed. Most knew what was expected of them and what to

expect from those around them. Entering a new society disrupts the sense of security. Leaving the former Soviet Union as an expert, the emigre arrives in this country a novice at social survival and achievement. Many routine experiences now become risky tasks requiring serious concentration. Emigres who had successfully and confidently provided for their families in the Soviet Union are initially unable to reassume that role, finding themselves dependent on others for the completion of the most simple chores. The parent who enters a store to purchase candy for a child and walks out having mistakenly purchased cough drops experiences personal embarrassment and the anguish of losing status and authority within the family.

Loss of Independence and Self-Sufficiency

New American Jews are often ambivalent about their initial dependence on relatives, friends, and community for their basic needs and understanding of their new environment. The current relative reunification policy in refugee resettlement has assured stateside family contact for almost every incoming refugee from the Soviet Union. Initial emotional and, often, financial dependence on relatives and friends adds to the pressure of resettlement for newly arrived emigres. Though appreciative of the help, they are often frustrated by their inability to be self-reliant and independent. Good intentions, family love, and loyalty do not prepare stateside relatives and newcomer families for the emotional impact and strain of role changes, unfulfilled and unrealistic expectations, and altered interdependency. Stateside relatives, who themselves may have recently emigrated, can only empathize and imagine the experience of living through the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the tensions present in the emerging states.

Loss of Ease of Communication

Newcomers to this country for whom English is a second language experience a loss in the comfort of communicating outside their indigenous community. Language

is the medium through which people are able to project an internal self-image and identity to those around them. In coming to this country, New Americans face the difficult task of learning to live in a society where their native language is no longer primary. Most make the personal commitment to learning English, but language acquisition is a difficult process that takes time, patience, and practice. One cannot become verbally fluent in a foreign language in isolation. Individuals, especially those who have successfully tackled prior intellectual challenges with study and self-discipline, have been able to improve their passive vocabulary, their knowledge of grammar, and their writing and translation skills on their own. Yet, most have been frustrated by the limited improvement in their verbal aptitude. Communication in a foreign language requires the student to relinquish inhibition and take the risk of making mistakes and being imprecise. It is often uncomfortable for emigres to accept imperfections in their English verbal skills and the inaccurate and unsophisticated image of self that they feel they project to their English-speaking listeners. At times, newcomers to this country feel that they are judged by Americans as unintelligent and unsophisticated because of the level of their English.

Emigres tend to be highly critical of their English skills by focusing on all that they cannot say as perfectly as they could in their native language. The emigre, struggling to express an idea in English, is thinking clearly in his or her native tongue. The frustration of not being able to express oneself precisely has been compared to the physical state of paralysis—the experience of having had innate mastery, control, and competence and of having lost that capability. The emigre may be haunted by the image of never achieving mastery of English communication and always living with the frustration of inadequately expressing thoughts, ideas, concerns, feelings, and personal identity. At times, the feelings of inadequacy are themselves barriers to language acquisition.

Loss of Self-Esteem and Personal Identity

All of the losses described above contribute to the emigre's ultimate struggle with the loss of self-esteem and personal identity. Many try to prepare themselves for changes in their lives by focusing their attention on environmental or concrete changes. Yet, in thinking about a new life in this society, most emigres cannot imagine the internal changes that resettlement and acculturation would initiate. The intensity of the pain associated with the mourning of the losses caused by emigration often takes the emigre by surprise. Feelings of confusion, apprehension, inadequacy, insecurity, and helplessness can contribute to the weakening of the individual's self-esteem. It takes time for the New American to relinquish pieces of a past identity, to accept the reality of a new situation, and to begin to find personal satisfaction with a changing identity. Though some changes in identity were anticipated, many aspects of this loss involve facets of the emigre's self-definition and self-worth that he or she always assumed were steadfast and never expected to alter.

LOSS AND THE RESETTLEMENT PROCESS

For refugees, the forces pushing them to permanently leave their homeland are distinct from those drawing them to their new country of residence. Though emigration is the process of leaving and immigration the process of entry, the pressures and issues faced by the migrating family meld together. All Jewish refugees who are leaving the former Soviet Union have made a deliberate and onerous decision to embark on probably the most significant change of their lives. Many had hoped that conditions for Jews in the former Soviet Union would have improved, enabling them to remain in their country of origin. The decision to emigrate commits the family not only to relinquish personal dreams of a better future in their homeland but also to the consequences of the

losses associated with the transition to a new culture. Although many try to prepare themselves for the losses in an attempt to minimize their impact, they may find it overwhelming to deal with the emotional turmoil caused by these losses as they strive to resettle and become acculturated to a new society.

This list of losses paints a very stressful and discouraging picture for the refugee, and yet most New Americans from the former Soviet Union do succeed and in time find satisfaction in their resettlement. Several general conclusions can be drawn about the loss experience.

As in any mourning process, the newly arrived emigre needs time to accept and integrate the changes in his or her life created by the losses experienced through emigration. Initially, the emigre may deny and repress the need to mourn, as its timing coincides with the expectations of initial resettlement, which are most often given precedence. Time limitations associated with federal funding regulations, as well as caseload demands, can limit the professional's ability to help the family cope with the mourning of these losses.

In attempting to deal with the losses, the emigre confronts expectations from various forces. On one level, the *individual* establishes personal expectations. Most New Americans have spent much time fantasizing about their new life in America, creating images and dreams from information and impressions gathered from any and all available sources. Though this information about adjustment to life in America may be accurate, it can often be incomplete and may be interpreted within a different cultural frame of reference. Relatives and friends may have minimized the hardships and frustrations of their personal resettlement in their communications to the former Soviet Union in order to lessen nonproductive concern and anxiety in family members living far away. Moreover, the conclusions and interpretations drawn by the soon-to-be emigre often reflect cultural values and assumptions from their Soviet

life experience and eventually may prove to be inaccurate. Yet, the individual's images and dreams of a future in America, nurtured throughout the turmoil of emigration, often provide an emotional anchor and can be difficult for the New American to relinquish.

The *family*, both nuclear and extended, also sets standards of achievement for the individual newcomer. It is difficult for the entire family to accept the losses and necessary changes created by the emigration experience. Expectations entail not only levels of achievement but also the anticipated pace at which success should occur.

Third, there is the need for the newcomer to find a niche in the *existing emigre community*. New Jewish Americans initially rely on this community to fill the social and communal void created by the emigration process. Yet, New Americans often enter a community of emigres from the former Soviet Union that is very different from the Jewish social circle they left in their homeland. The community of New Jewish Americans from the former Soviet Union is complex, made up of people from diverse cultural backgrounds who have come to this country over the course of many years. In addition, the deteriorating social and political climate in what was the Soviet Union, coupled with changes in emigration policy and procedures, has altered the refugee experience for the current arrivals from that of emigres of even several years ago. The individual newcomer is anxious to prove him- or herself within the emigre community, as it is this community that best understands the past accomplishments and prior status of a refugee. Success, as defined by the indigenous community, may be evaluated in relation to the newcomers' accomplishments from their Soviet past, as well as in comparison to resettlement experiences of earlier arrivals who came to this country with similar educational and professional backgrounds.

Finally, the *American society and the established American Jewish community* set expectations, which, at times, are the most

misunderstood and difficult to meet. Cultural biases and assumptions can become barriers, if they are not identified. Emigres can face conflict, as the expectations of their indigenous community, which has been an invaluable support and resource during this initial phase of resettlement, may not coincide with those of the established community that is providing resettlement and acculturation services.

New Jewish Americans benefit from emotional support and assistance that goes beyond the concrete and task-oriented details of adapting to a new American lifestyle. Support and empathy for the emigre experiencing the internal turmoil and pain associated with the entire emigration and resettlement process, when provided by professionals, volunteers, and community members who recognize the losses associated with the emigration process, can enable the New American to better accept and implement necessary changes required for adaptation to a new culture. A greater understanding of the losses faced in emigrating to this country helps identify areas of cross-cultural contrasts, enabling professionals and volunteers to address more sensitively the resettlement and acculturation needs of the New American Jew. Attention to these cultural issues can also help clarify some initial emigre reactions to and interpretations of resettlement policies and practices, which are often established in American terms and steeped in traditional American values. For instance, many Americans negatively value the acceptance of financial support from the government as a sign of character weakness and laziness, especially for a highly educated and healthy young adult. In general, Americans tend to highly value the romanticized immigrant story that starts with abject poverty, portrays a visible struggle and sacrifice, and ends with financial success. In contrast, emigres may view government entitlement as an opportunity to make themselves more marketable in what they consider to be an acceptable field as quickly as possible by enabling them to pursue further education

and retraining. By accepting government aid, they may be able to start their professional lives here at a level more commensurate with their prior experience.

CONCLUSION

This article explores the losses associated with the emigration of Jews from the for-

mer Soviet Union. Attention to the subtleties of cultural influence for both the New American, as well as the established American community, is critical to successfully assisting New Americans as they contend with the losses of emigration and adaptation to their new society.