

WILL THE REAL IMMIGRANT PLEASE STAND UP? Transferring Models of Jewish Acculturation for Soviet Jews to the Unaffiliated American Jew

LINDA PATTASHNICK KLONSKY

*Planner and Coordinator of Acculturation Services, THE ASSOCIATED: Jewish Community
Federation of Baltimore*

MIRIAM PRUM-HESS

*Resettlement and Acculturation Coordinator, Jewish Federation Council of Greater Los Angeles
and*

RABBI ELLEN BERNHARDT

Principal, Albert Einstein Academy, Wilmington, Delaware

With minimal adjustments, models of Jewish acculturation for new Americans from the former Soviet Union can be applied to reach unaffiliated American Jews. Both groups lack a Jewish education, a positive Jewish identity, and financial commitment to the Jewish community. Acculturation programming, such as welcoming activities, family-to-family matching, and the transitional school, can be used successfully to reach the unaffiliated.

As federation planners and coordinators for system-wide acculturation services in Baltimore, Los Angeles, and Philadelphia, we have seen significant financial resources expended on outreach to new Americans from the former Soviet Union, resulting in a myriad of planning initiatives and programs. The goals of Jewish acculturation programs throughout the country are (1) to help Soviet Jews develop linkages on a personal level with American Jews; (2) to facilitate their active involvement in Jewish institutions, organizations, and groups; and (3) to enhance their understanding and appreciation of Jewish life and thought.

In working with new Americans, Jewish federations, agencies, and institutions have cooperated in unprecedented ways for the sake of *pidyon shevuyim*, rescuing the captives. Yet, as was highlighted in the Council of Jewish Federations' 1990 National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS), an alarming number of American Jews can also be considered *shevuyim*—spiritual captives of ignorance, alienation, misinformation, and negative associations.

Of course, there are significant differences between new Americans and the unaffiliated. However, several areas of similar-

ity make possible the application of models of Jewish acculturation for Soviet Jews to marginally affiliated American Jews. To fully understand this expanded model for Jewish acculturation, four pivotal questions must be explored:

1. What are the similarities between the Soviet Jewish emigre and the marginally affiliated American Jew?
2. What basic premises frame acculturation programmatic initiatives?
3. What acculturation models are applicable for outreach programming to the native-born population?
4. How can we measure our success?

SIMILARITIES BETWEEN THE FORMER SOVIET JEW AND THE marginally AFFILIATED AMERICAN JEW

According to the 1990 NJPS, 35% of American Jews are marginally affiliated or totally unaffiliated. This alienation from the Jewish community results from many factors and bears a startling resemblance to the disenfranchisement of the Soviet Jew.

Although native-born Jews and Soviet Jews come from different cultures, they

share the following characteristics:

- *Lack of a comprehensive Jewish education:* Most Soviet Jewish emigres and unaffiliated Jews do not have an appreciation of their Jewish heritage. They lack knowledge of the spiritual, intellectual, and historic traditions of Judaism. This dearth of knowledge creates feelings of incompetence and estrangement. For example, without a basic Jewish education, participating in a synagogue service or praying in Hebrew can be very foreign experiences.

As noted in the NJPS, a high correlation exists between Jewish identity and Jewish education. Eighty-five percent of Jewish men who identify by religion became a Bar Mitzvah as opposed to 36% of born Jews with no religious affiliation.

- *Lack of a financial commitment:* Without vestment in the Jewish community, the price of Jewish affiliation is a luxury. As reported in several articles in the *Journal of Jewish Communal Service*, income alone does not determine the level of synagogue affiliation or contributions to Jewish charities. Rather, the level of Jewish identity is clearly an important variable in the decision to join a synagogue or contribute to Jewish causes (Winter, 1991, 1993).

Furthermore, real financial constraints limit access to the organized Jewish community. Monson and Feldman (1991/92) report that the costs of living Jewishly in Philadelphia in 1989-1990 for a single adult joining a synagogue and the Jewish Community Center (JCC) range from \$300 to \$1200 annually. For a two-parent family with two school-aged children, the annual cost of joining a synagogue, tuition for formal Jewish education, and membership at the JCC ranged from \$800 to \$12,030.

- *Lack of feeling valued:* Highly successful fund-raising campaigns are based on personal relationships and face-to-face

solicitations. Yet, in campaigns to "raise" Jewish identity and build community, the organized Jewish community has not personally reached out and asked for individual involvement. If they are not asked to become involved, the unaffiliated may feel that their participation is not welcomed or valued.

BASIC PREMISES UNDERLYING ACCULTURATION PROGRAMS

Programmatic models for Jewish acculturation and integration are based on several premises about immigrants from the former Soviet Union that apply as well to the unaffiliated American Jew.

- *Heterogeneous population:* Jews from the former Soviet Union are not a homogeneous group. Like American Jews, they have a wide diversity of cultural and educational backgrounds and areas of origin.
- *Lack of positive Jewish identification:* Although Soviet Jews perceive themselves as Jews, most often this identification is formed without positive connotations. Unaffiliated American Jews may have some Jewish memory; however, many regard their Jewish identity negatively or as irrelevant, or not fashionable.
- *Feeling of disorientation:* Soviet immigrants suffer a sense of loss and become disoriented as they move to a bewildering new culture. This confusion results in feelings of inadequacy and helplessness. Unaffiliated American Jews, with limited Jewish experiences, often feel a similar sense of incompetence and inadequacy toward Jewish ritual or community practice. They can be viewed as *immigrants to Judaism*.

REPLICABLE MODELS OF JEWISH ACCULTURATION

The models for Jewish acculturation created for the Soviet Jewish immigrant can be expanded into a full complement of outreach

services to the marginally affiliated American Jew.

Covering the full spectrum of Jewish life, acculturation programs address seven major areas: welcoming activities, host families, religious life, cultural life, Jewish education, Jewish organizations and institutions, and cultural exchange. Models addressing four of those areas are described below.

Welcoming Programs

In a typical welcoming program, newly arrived Soviet Jewish families are invited to an intensive orientation at which they receive a welcome basket and handbook. Included in the welcome basket is a map of the city; information about bus schedules, schools, and health services; and a Judaic ritual object appropriate for the particular season. For example, a family arriving during December will receive a menorah and Chanukah candles. The handbook contains detailed information about the history and current life of the Jewish community, its agencies, and cultural, educational, and social programs.

This initial welcome into the Jewish community would clearly be of value to unaffiliated Jews as well. They could also benefit from detailed information on the history and current life of the local Jewish community. The Judaica ritual object, with its accompanying explanation, might encourage exploration of their Jewish heritage. The welcoming activities could be centered around pivotal life-cycle events, such as marriage or birth, thereby providing access to Jewish ceremonies and institutions at these critical times.

The key to the success of any welcoming program is that it makes each new family feel valued. In a welcoming program, the Jewish community reaches out and encourages the "newly arrived" family, whether Soviet or unaffiliated, to learn about the resources available for starting a Jewish life. Informal programs are then held on an ongoing basis for the "new" family to answer questions and to maintain

the connection.

Family-to-Family Programs

The family-to-family program matches newly arriving immigrant families with Jewish affiliated American families. Its purpose is to acculturate the newcomers to the American lifestyle, teach them about their Jewish heritage, and strengthen their Jewish identity. The American Jewish family serves as a role model for Jewish affiliation and family life. They invite the newcomers to experience Shabbat, holiday dinners, life-cycle celebrations, and community events sponsored by synagogues and other Jewish organizations.

In this program model, matches are based on the ages of family members, occupations, and interests. Events are held to bring together all the families participating in the Family-to-Family program to celebrate the bond of this special *chavurah*. Shabbat retreats or Lag B'Omer picnics deepen the relationships among the families and build a sense of belonging to the Jewish community.

Expansion of the Family-to-Family program to reach the unaffiliated American Jew is a natural step. The process can begin with the identification of unaffiliated families through notices posted in neighborhood locations, word-of-mouth, and announcements in local newspapers. Matching American families should be easier than with Soviets since differences in culture and language are not a factor.

The Family-to-Family program is a vehicle for social, spiritual, intellectual, and emotional enrichment. In an atmosphere of discovery, new friends learn and explore their shared Jewish ties. They undertake new experiences together, with each encounter weaving the strands of Jewish life within the texture of an evolving friendship. This program model helps Jews develop a history of affiliation, creates a sense of feeling valued, builds vestment in the Jewish community, and provides an experiential Jewish education.

Transitional School

The transitional school for refugees is designed to ease the entry of children into formal Jewish education. In this model, children ages 5 through 12 are enrolled immediately after arrival into a program designed especially for their needs. Bilingual classes in Jewish life, customs, holidays, and Hebrew enable these children to gain the basic knowledge necessary for the transition to other Jewish educational placements. Classes meet on Sundays or during weekday afternoons. Bus transportation is provided from the local elementary schools during the week. This program not only provides Jewish learning but also becomes a day care setting for working parents.

Family involvement is essential for the success of any transitional school program. Parents are invited to attend discussion groups specifically geared for parallel learning. On Sundays, families visit places of interest as part of the program. Jewish holidays are celebrated with family and friends in a festive and educational environment. At the end of one year or when the teacher feels that the child is ready to enter an established synagogue supplemental or day school, the transitional school staff and the parents meet to decide on an appropriate educational setting.

For the unaffiliated American Jew, the transitional school would enable children and their parents to learn jointly about Judaism in a structured and supportive environment. The school population of children, staff, and family members becomes a nurturing Jewish community. An atmosphere exists in which each individual feels valued and families "graduate," feeling excited about their induction into the Jewish community. It is important that, once the transition is made to a new educational setting, the warmth and support needed for success continue.

As the families solidify their connections to the Jewish community through new friendships and a furthering of their Jewish education, their investment in the continu-

ity of the Jewish community will deepen.

Cultural Exchange

America is not a "melting pot" where immigrants leave their cultural baggage at the airport. Rather, they bring with them a rich cultural history and heritage that is a source of pride and identity. Cultural exchange acculturation programming finds ways in which new American Jews can share the richness of their background, enabling them to feel that they are contributing members of our community who are valued and competent.

Cultural exchange programming achieves several goals simultaneously. First, new and innovative programs, attractive to both the native and immigrant population, are offered. The tremendous musical and artistic talent coming to our shores from the former Soviet Union has greatly expanded our arts programming. Through published listings and clearinghouses for refugee artistic talent, Jewish organizations have sponsored a myriad of concerts and art exhibits. Some of these activities have been used as successful fund-raising projects. Second, emigres obtain employment within a Jewish setting and feel valued. JCCs are now offering classes in art, music, and gymnastics taught by recently arrived refugees. Emigre pianists are being trained in synagogue liturgy to become synagogue accompanists and musical directors. The American Jewish community gains new talent, and the entire American Jewish community is enriched.

The cultural exchange model can be applied to the Jewishly unaffiliated. The paternalistic attitude of "we have all the answers and we will teach you" must be replaced with "let us learn from each other." Just because someone lacks a Jewish education and feels like an "immigrant to Judaism" does not mean that he or she has nothing to contribute to the Jewish community. Each person has a unique past to offer. Discovering and valuing that uniqueness may be the first step toward developing a part-

nership between the organized Jewish community and the unaffiliated.

As with the refugees, cultural exchange programs need not be complex nor require funding. On the contrary, they can strengthen our programming at no cost to the community. These programs can range from inviting a teen rock band to perform at a JCC to creating intergenerational programs in Jewish school curricula to asking architects or carpenters to help build a Sukkah or construct booths for a Purim carnival. Respect for each person's uniqueness is an essential Jewish value. Once a person feels valued, dialogue can begin.

MEASURES OF SUCCESS

As we create the settings and structures for outreach programming to the native-born population, there are many ways to determine their success. The simplest way is to count the numbers of attendees at events and the frequency of meetings. However, both the process of acculturation and of connecting to the unaffiliated are long-term endeavors that are not easily quantifiable. The creation of new programming will necessitate the development of new evaluative methods. As a beginning point of reference, the following criteria are suggested means for assessing the progress of our efforts. They are listed developmentally, one building upon the other:

1. *Numbers participating in initial groups:* Do the programs generate enough interest to attract people to their initial events? Has information about the programs been disseminated widely? How many people are in attendance?
2. *Frequency of attendance at ongoing events:* How often are follow-up events scheduled? Do the initial participants continue to attend these programs?
3. *"Exit" surveys — evaluations of programs:* How are the programs rated by the participants? Is the feedback from the surveys used to upgrade the programs to meet the needs of the "clients"?
4. *Planning partners:* Are next steps in programming planned with the assistance and input of the participants?
5. *Leadership groups:* Are the participants taking the initiative to do their own planning and implementation of programs?
6. *Models for expansion:* Are the initial groups replicating themselves and expanding to other interested people?
7. *Affiliation:* Are the groups joining established Jewish communal organizations in order to develop further linkages?
8. *Long-term planning and implementation:* Are processes in place for long-term planning and implementation? Has the emerging leadership established resources for information, planning, and community-building?
9. *Impact on the established community:* Have the participants moved beyond their own groups and into leadership positions within the broader Jewish community? Are they assisting in fund-raising for the community?

CONCLUSION

Chaim Weizmann, the first president of Israel, once said, "Miracles sometimes happen but we have to work terribly hard for them." The freedom of Jews from the Soviet Union is one of these miracles. Active involvement in Judaism by people whose government had for 75 years denied their positive Jewish connections is another such miracle.

From the earliest days of the Jewish settlement in this country to the present, Jews from abroad have been integrated into the American Jewish community. However, we have come to realize that "success should be measured not only by resettlement results but also by the results of acculturation and integration" (Council of Jewish Federations, 1991). As a result, communities throughout North America have begun

to focus on the quality of acculturation programming. The miracle of Jewish acculturation is occurring because of sound planning and programming and unprecedented cooperation by all aspects of the organized Jewish community. Today we have the opportunity to expand on that miracle by using the success of refugee acculturation to reach the Jewishly unaffiliated, the other "immigrants to Judaism."

The 1990 NJPS findings underline the fact that we can no longer ignore the unaffiliated. The American Jewish community must respond quickly to the tremendous challenge of ensuring our Jewish future. We are fortunate to have in place proven models for connecting refugees to Judaism. In cities throughout North America, we are seeing significant increases in the number of Soviet Jews who are participating in Jewish life, joining Jewish organizations, and taking leadership role in the broader Jewish community. With minimal adjustments, the successful models described above can provide low-cost approaches for reaching the unaffiliated, thereby strengthening our Jewish future.

REFERENCES

- Council of Jewish Federations. (1991, May). *Principles and guidelines for the acculturation and integration of Jews from the Soviet Union into the American Jewish community*. New York: CJF Task Force on Acculturation and Integration.
- Monson, Rela Geffen, & Feldman, Ruth Pinkenson. (1991/92, Winter). The cost of living Jewishly in Philadelphia. *Journal of Jewish Communal Service*, 68, 148-159.
- Kosmin, Barry A., Goldstein, Sidney, Waksbert, Joseph, Lerer, Nava, Keysar, Ariella, & Schenckner, Jeffrey. (1991). *Highlights of the CJF 1990 National Jewish Population Survey*. New York: Council of Jewish Federations.
- Winter, J. Alan. (1991, Fall). Income and involvement in the Jewish community: Do identity, marital status, or a child in the house matter? *Journal of Jewish Communal Service*, 68, 17-23.
- Winter, J. Alan. (1993, Winter/Spring). Not by bread alone: A national replication and refinement of a study of income, identity, household composition, and Jewish involvement. *Journal of Jewish Communal Service*, 69, 73-81.