

JEWISH IDENTITY AND THE SOVIET EMIGRE NEWCOMER

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The problem is not "how to make Jews" of newly arrived Soviet emigres but rather how to enable them to realize their strong desire to feel part of the American Jewish community. Jewish identity has many facets, and programs should be designed to address all of these dimensions. Equally important are efforts to enable American Jews and communal agencies to understand the population of Soviet emigres and how best to reach out to them.

The current wave of Jewish men, women, and children arriving in the United States from the Soviet Union represent an extraordinary human resource that can greatly enrich the American Jewish community. Strengthening their Jewish identities and their connection to the local Jewish community and communal institutions is one of the most important challenges facing the American Jewish community today. By meeting this challenge, we will be helping those Soviet Jews who choose to come to the United States to not only reap the benefits of freedom and a better way of life but also to contribute actively to Jewish communal life and continuity.

Too often, the issue of strengthening the newcomers' Jewish identities is framed incorrectly. The problem is not "how to make Jews out of these people." In fact, the majority of Soviet emigre newcomers feel a very strong identification as Jews—a sense of Jewish peoplehood—and a strong desire to feel a part of American Jewish life. Rather, the problem is how can they realize that desire, given their lack of familiarity with American Jewish cultural traditions and religious practices and the concept and operation of Jewish voluntary

agencies. Unfortunately, despite their good will and intentions, many American Jews have not understood how best to reach out to the newcomers to help them reconnect with their Jewish heritage and to make them feel welcome and a part of the Jewish community.

Therefore, in San Francisco, we have focused our efforts on two equally important areas: (1) providing opportunities for Soviet Jews to strengthen their Jewish identities and (2) helping members of the American Jewish community and communal institutions understand this population and how best to reach out to them. This article describes the process by which these efforts were planned and implemented and their outcomes.

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY 'STRENGTHENING JEWISH IDENTITY'?

No outreach effort can be successful without a clearly articulated set of goals. Such goals are particularly necessary in any effort focusing on Jewish identity, a value-laden concept that can be operationalized in multiple ways. If these goals are unclear, the program planners may fall into the trap of demanding of others a level of commitment and practice that they are not willing to meet themselves.

Our planning effort began with the assumption that, in the contemporary

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American Jewish community, a strong and positive Jewish identity cannot be measured in terms of only one behavior, such as synagogue membership or attendance. Rather, Jewish identity is complex and should be measured along several dimensions. The American Jewish community provides numerous and varied opportunities for expression of one's Jewishness, and most American Jews do not express their Jewish identities primarily in religious terms. As the first step in the planning process, we identified these six dimensions of Jewish identity:

1. **Knowledge of Jewish history and a sense of one's own place within that history** (Klein, 1980). Soviet Jews have had little or no opportunity to study Jewish history. They do, however, have a keen interest in history and a sense of its importance that far outweighs our own. They are very eager to learn about Judaism from a historical perspective.
2. **A sense of belonging to a group with specific beliefs, values, and practices that distinguish it from others and a sense of pride in those distinctions** (Klein, 1980). Certainly, Soviet Jews have a keen sense of belonging to a minority group, but unfortunately one that has been stigmatized and seen as inferior by those in power. Their identity as Jews is conflicted in part because they have internalized some of the anti-Semitism of their surroundings. Despite this, most have maintained a sense of pride in being Jewish. Yet, it is a pride that is rooted primarily in defiance of the Soviet system. In the United States, this sense of pride must be transformed into pride based on knowledge and a sense of belonging.
3. **An understanding that the fate of the Jewish people affects one's life and that one's own life may have an impact on the fate of the group** (Klein, 1980). Soviet emigres understand that their fate has been shaped by their Jewishness. However, they tend to view themselves rather passively in this regard. In many ways, Soviet society foster a fatalistic world view that further encourages a sense of oneself as a passive victim. Soviet Jews need to be educated and encouraged to see themselves as potentially active and influential members of the Jewish community and important players in the future of the Jewish people.
4. **Experiences of shared family and communal religious and cultural traditions, such as Pesach Seders, Shabbat observances, and life-cycle rituals and traditions** (Klein, 1980). Most Soviet Jews younger than age 50 have had little or no direct exposure to these traditions. However, almost every young emigre has a parent or grandparent whom they fondly remember as being Jewishly observant. Observance of Jewish traditions is part of a "collective memory" upon which a stronger Jewish identity can be built.
5. **Participation in Jewish communal institutions.** Soviet emigres have had no experience with voluntary institutions of any sort, let alone American Jewish voluntary agencies. The purpose and functioning of these agencies are totally alien to the emigres. When they arrive in this country, Soviet Jews are barraged with information about the vast array of Jewish agencies. They are completely puzzled about what each of them represents, who participates in them, why they exist, and who pays for them.
6. **A belief in the importance of continuity of the Jewish people, which is usually expressed through the Jewish education of children.** Given the opportunity, most Soviet Jewish emigres choose Jewish day school over public school for their children in part because they want them to have a Jewish education that they themselves are unable to provide. Another important opportunity for building Jewish identity is summer camp. Subsidies during the first years of resettlement, which require a sizable financial

commitment from the local community, are needed to make day school and summer camp participation possible.

Based on these six dimensions of Jewish identity, we then developed programs that would strengthen the emigres' knowledge of Jewish history, increase their sense of belonging and understanding that their fate and that of the Jewish people are intertwined, introduce them to experiences of shared family and communal religious traditions, increase their participation in Jewish communal institutions, and enhance their feelings of the importance of continuity of the Jewish people. Not every program related to all six dimensions, but the spectrum of programs did address them all.

LESSONS LEARNED FROM EARLIER INTEGRATION EFFORTS

Our outreach efforts to the current wave of emigres have been guided and shaped by our experience with their predecessors who came to our country over the past decade. Our work with this earlier group of emigres taught us several important lessons that we have put into practice with today's newcomers.

It is important to resist the temptation to treat Soviet emigres as members of a monolithic group. Individual Soviet Jews differ greatly from each other, despite the traits that they hold in common. Some are heroic; most are quite ordinary. Some feel very deeply about Judaism and others do not. Programs that reach out to interested individuals or are targeted to small groups will be most successful in providing meaningful experiences with a long-lasting impact.

In the past, often our expectations of what made a program successful were unrealistic. For example, designing large-scale programs with the goal of integrating Soviet Jews with members of the local Jewish community proved to be very unsuccessful for several reasons. The language barrier is an obvious obstacle to

social interaction. In addition, people tend to socialize with others who are most like them, particularly when they are going through the difficult process of acculturation. At such a stressful time, it is normal to seek the comfort and familiarity of people who share one's language, history, and experience. Too, American Jews and Soviet Jews have very different lifestyles. These differences cannot easily be transcended in a large group setting. Social integration can be most effectively achieved on a more personal, one-to-one level.

The timing of efforts to strengthen Jewish identity is critical. Such efforts will be most successful if they are made early in the resettlement process when the emigres' lives are in flux and they have not yet established set routines or developed fixed ideas about their new environment. Although this is a time when they are preoccupied with concrete survival needs, such as learning English and finding work, it is also a time when they are most receptive to new ideas.

However, during this difficult time of adjustment, such new ideas and experiences must be presented within the context of a safe and familiar environment. Group experiences for Soviet emigres are valuable tools for providing education about Jewish history and traditions. In addition, they can provide an experience in communal celebration in an atmosphere in which newcomers can feel comfortable and safe.

Involving Soviet emigres in synagogue life, particularly those younger than age 50, is one of the most difficult programming challenges faced by Jewish communal workers. Soviet Jews have had only limited experience with the synagogue and have a very narrow understanding of its function. They see it as a place for only one activity—prayer. Having lived in the rigidly atheistic Soviet society all their lives, most Soviet emigres feel uncomfortable with the concept of prayer.

To involve the emigres in synagogue life means providing opportunities for them to understand more fully the variety of functions that American Jewish synagogues perform. Doing so can only be accom-

plished in an intimate and personalized setting. It cannot be done by merely sending out a letter inviting all newcomers to become members of the synagogue for free.

HAVURAH STUDY GROUPS FOR NEWCOMERS

The centerpiece of our integration effort is the Havurah study group, a synagogue outreach program established with the funding of the Koret Foundation. This program targets adults in their twenties to forties, the most difficult group to involve Jewishly because, unlike their parents or grandparents, most have had no direct experience with Jewish observance and tradition.

Because of the importance of reaching newcomers early in the resettlement process, a discussion of the role of the synagogue and the differences between Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox Judaism is included in the initial orientation for all newcomers. Each family is given a copy of the *Gates of the Mitzvah*, a guide to the Jewish life cycle prepared by the Reform movement and translated into Russian by a local member of the emigre community. The initial orientation also provides detailed information on Jewish educational options. Every newcomer is then invited to participate in an emigre Havurah study group.

When the Jewish Family and Children's Services (JFCS) received the Koret Foundation grant to establish a synagogue outreach program in the summer of 1988, JFCS staff solicited the involvement of local synagogues in the project. Two synagogues expressed a particular interest in working with emigres, and their rabbis were willing to take leadership roles in running the outreach groups. We felt that offering the emigres a chance to develop a direct relationship with a rabbi in a synagogue setting would facilitate the strengthening of their Jewish identity.

Having identified the two synagogue sites, our first task was to reach out to the emigre population to encourage their in-

volvement. Outreach took several forms. An article about the Havurah groups appeared in our local Russian-language Jewish newspaper. A bilingual flyer describing the groups was sent to over 100 households (families who had arrived in the past 2 years). Most importantly, the caseworkers at JFCS who worked directly with each family compiled a list of those families whom they thought would be particularly interested in the groups. The caseworkers personally contacted each of these families to discuss the Havurah groups and to encourage them to participate.

When beginning an outreach program of this kind, the importance of personal outreach cannot be overstated. Newcomer families do not usually respond to flyers alone, even if they are bilingual. Furthermore, these families have no relationship to the synagogues. It is therefore important that the person who has the closest relationship to them in the Jewish community act as a bridge between the newcomer and the synagogue.

The first Havurah group sessions, which were held in September 1988, were co-led by the rabbis and a JFCS worker. When asked what they wanted to learn about in the groups, the members identified these topics: Jewish history, the philosophy of the Jewish religion, Jewish life-cycle and holiday celebrations, Jewish communal organizations, and Israel.

The decision was made to begin the groups with a survey of Jewish history taught by the rabbis and translated into Russian. The historical perspective was chosen because it was a comfortable and familiar approach for the emigres.

After the overview of Jewish history, the groups then discussed Jewish life-cycle traditions using the translated version of the *Gates of the Mitzvah* as a basis for discussion. The history of the Jewish state and the Arab-Israeli conflict was presented by the director of the San Francisco Jewish Community Relations Council.

In addition to these discussion groups, the Havurah groups have met on several Friday evenings to attend services and

share a traditional Shabbat dinner. The emigres themselves provide the food in a potluck fashion, with the synagogues providing the challah and wine. A bimonthly Jewish film series is now part of the Havurah groups. Such films as "Exodus," "The Ten Commandments," "Judgment at Nuremberg," and "Operation Thunderbolt" have been viewed and discussed together with the rabbis.

All of the Havurah group meetings have been held in the synagogue to enable the emigres to have the experience of comfort and intimacy in a synagogue setting. At first, the group expressed some hesitation about meeting in the synagogue, feeling that more people would attend if the meetings were held in someone's home. However, initial feelings of unfamiliarity and awkwardness soon disappeared, to be replaced by a genuine bond.

Some form of translation is provided at each meeting so that Soviet Jews with poorer English can participate. In the first several meetings, translation was provided word for word as the rabbi alternated with the translator during the entire sessions. As the group members became more comfortable with English, summary translations were provided at a few points in the discussion. Currently, most of the group members are fluent enough to make even such summary translations unnecessary. At the beginning of each meeting, the social worker asks that members of the group with strong English skills sit with those who have problems understanding the discussion and to provide translation when needed. In addition, the social worker leads a discussion before and after the presentation by the rabbi or guest speaker, soliciting the members' feedback, concerns, and interest in further topics.

Working with these Havurah groups has been one of the most personally rewarding experiences in my tenure at JFCS. With each month, the group has grown both in numbers (from an initial 8-10 people to an average of 20 to 30 per session) and in the members' openness to raise questions,

participate in discussions, and to learn more about their Jewishness. Group members have expressed a strong desire to continue meeting monthly. Several emigres are considering a Bar/Bat Mitzvah for their children, and many held Pesach Seders in their own homes for the first time in their lives.

These groups will continue to meet monthly to explore aspects of Judaism and Jewish history in greater depth. In the coming year, more joint programming with non-emigre members of the synagogue will be planned. To accommodate the large numbers of emigres who will be arriving shortly, new Havurah groups will be started in two additional synagogues.

OTHER OUTREACH PROGRAMMING

Whereas the Havurah study groups address the dimensions of Jewish identity relating to knowledge of Jewish history, a sense of belonging and pride, and an understanding of linkage with the fate of the Jewish people, other programming was needed to give emigres the hands-on experiences of Jewish life-cycle and holiday observances.

Such programming is provided on a large scale to Soviet emigres alone. Beginning with a Model Seder run jointly by the emigre departments of JFCS, the Jewish Community Center, and a local synagogue, these efforts have now expanded to include large group programming for all major Jewish holidays, including the High Holidays, Chanukah, Purim, and Sukkot.

Most of these programs take place in a local synagogue and are structured similarly. At each, handouts in Russian and English explaining the holiday and its meaning to the Jewish people are distributed, a rabbi leads a discussion on how the holiday is celebrated by American Jews, traditional foods are served, and the emigres are taught traditional songs, so that they can be active participants in the program. About 250 emigres, most of whom arrived in the past year, attend each program.

These large group programs have been extremely successful, judging by the attendance, enthusiasm, and positive comments of the participants. However, they should not be seen as substitutes for more individualized programs, but rather as a supplement to them.

So that the emigres can support the concept of Jewish continuity by providing a Jewish education for their children, the San Francisco federation provides subsidies for day school education and Jewish summer camps. All emigre children are eligible to receive camperships to attend Jewish day and overnight camps. After these families have achieved financial stability, the majority are willing to assume the costs of sending their children to these camps for many years.

DEVELOPMENT OF NEW EMIGRE LEADERSHIP

A final dimension of Jewish identity addressed by our integration programming is encouraging emigre participation in Jewish communal institutions. The development of lay leaders among the emigre population is a long-term goal of such participation. Achieving this goal has been made easier because the Jewish agencies involved in resettlement—the JFCS, JCC, and Jewish Vocational Service—never lost contact with the emigres who arrived in the last major wave of Soviet Jewish emigration in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

This contact was maintained in a number of ways. The federation subsidizes a Russian-language newspaper, "New Life," which is distributed to over 3000 emigre families; the mailing list is continually updated. During the mid-1980s when immigration slowed and Soviet Jewish resettlement was not a major issue on many local community agendas, cultural and religious programming continued to be held for emigres. A third means of contact were the Emigre Advisory Committees to each of the Jewish agencies involved in resettlement.

In addition, professionals and volunteers who are close to the emigre population have played an active, ongoing role in educating members of boards and particularly of their nominating committees to encourage their involvement of newcomers with leadership potential.

As a result of these efforts, almost every board of a local Jewish agency in San Francisco has at least one Soviet emigre among its members. In addition, the federation has an active New Americans division, which has raised approximately \$100,000 to date.

EDUCATION AND OUTREACH TO AMERICAN JEWS

No matter how successful our efforts to strengthen the Jewish identity of Soviet emigres along the six dimensions described above, their effectiveness would be hampered if the American Jewish community was not prepared to welcome the emigres into their midst. Whenever any established community encounters a large influx of newcomers from another culture who speak a different language, have lived through a different history, and practice different cultural norms, tensions between the groups are inevitable. This phenomenon occurred when the established German Jewish community was confronted with the massive waves of Eastern European immigration in the first part of this century. An important responsibility of professionals involved in resettlement efforts is to ease these tensions by providing education and opportunities for interaction between the local community and the newcomers.

To increase the receptivity of the local community to the vibrant resource represented by the newcomers, we initiated a bicultural community education program. A cornerstone of this effort is the Emigre Speakers Bureau, which is made up of teen-aged and adult emigres who have arrived within the last 2 years, as well as those who came in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

Training is provided to the members of the Speakers Bureau to enable them to speak effectively to organizations in the community about their journey to this country, their reasons for leaving the Soviet Union, what beginning a new life in the United States has been like, and their hopes and dreams for the future.

Emigre speakers from the Speakers Bureau have addressed Jewish groups in numerous settings in the past year. Hearing a personal story from the emigre him- or herself can be the most powerful and effective means of educating the local Jewish population about the needs, concerns, and potential contributions of the emigres.

Another element of our resettlement program is matching newcomer families with local Jewish families for the purpose of learning English. Making the goal of this interaction very specific—learning English—provides a good structure upon which to build a meaningful relationship. As the relationship develops, volunteers are encouraged to include the emigre families in their Jewish holiday celebrations, when they attend synagogue, or when they participate in a Jewish communal event. In this way, the volunteer acts as a personal bridge between the newcomer and the Jewish community. This personal bridge is the key to involvement of the emigres in the community.

Before volunteers meet the emigre families in this One-to-One Volunteer Program, they are given an extensive orientation about the background of Soviet Jews, their cultural traits, and the normal process of adjustment made by immigrants to a new land. Similarly, the emigre families are given an orientation

about the background and cultural traits of American Jews and what to expect when meeting them. Such a bicultural orientation is an essential element of any successful matching program.

In addition to the One-to-One program, the JFCS staff also matches families to celebrate Jewish holidays together. Particular effort is made to give as many emigre families as possible the opportunity to experience a Pesach Seder in a Jewish home. Participants in this matching program are also given a bicultural orientation.

CONCLUSION

The current group of Soviet emigres represent an extraordinary human resource that can provide new talent and leadership for the American Jewish community. These are Jews who have been torn from our heritage and traditions for more than three generations. Reconnecting them with our heritage and people, strengthening their Jewish identities, and involving them in our organizations are goals that can be achieved. They can be achieved with persistent *commitment, effort, and time*. They can be achieved with clear and realistic goals. And they can be achieved with lay leadership and professional staff who understand the emigre population in all its diversity and who are committed themselves to helping American Jewish communities open up to the newcomers.

REFERENCES

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