

# REBUILDING JEWISH LIFE IN THE FORMER SOVIET UNION (FSU) A Communal and Professional Challenge

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*Editor's Note: The historic task of reconnecting Jews in the FSU to their tradition and to the Jewish people is so significant and complex that many organizations have become involved. The major instrument for renewal and relief is the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC). The following assessment of problems and prospects was made by JDC staff for internal review of programs and strategies. We felt that other professionals would be interested in gaining an inside view of how an organization grapples with the enormous challenge of Jewish renewal in the FSU.*

In 1989, when the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) re-entered the FSU, it sought to help Jews restore their traditions. By the winter of 1991, however, the deteriorating economic conditions caused a shift in priorities to meeting more basic and pressing needs. Since then, JDC has maintained an approach that promotes community building, with the goal of assisting local Jews to meet cultural and welfare needs.

This article identifies developments in JDC's programs since 1991 and presents its priorities for future activities:

- the continued development of local welfare services with a Jewish character that move toward the attainment of independence and professional standards and norms
- expansion of Jewish Renewal work, capitalizing both on the creativity of the FSU population and available cutting-edge "Jewish technology" to create high-quality, compelling materials
- mobilization and direction of supporters to fund the most important needs

## THE HERITAGE OF THE FSU

The opening of the Soviet Union and the subsequent fall of Communism presented world Jewry with the unprecedented opportunity, as expressed by Director of JDC-FSU Asher Ostrin, "to reclaim the Jews for the

Jewish people." At the time, the scope of this challenge was unclear and possibly underestimated. The excitement and commitment represented by the *refusenik* movement—the only contact that the majority of Western Jews had had with this population—were not relevant to the present FSU Jewish population. The majority of strongly identified Jews had gone when the gates opened, accompanied by thousands more who sought stable economic conditions.

The remaining Jews of the FSU today number at least 1 million and are spread across 11 time zones. They are the products of a society that hampered the development of non-Soviet identities: "The immediate connection of Power and Truth [in the FSU was] fundamentally at odds with the notion of civil society, which presupposes the coexistence and mutual recognition of different positions (Van Zwerde, p. 199). The large number of Jews who remained had a tenuous, if any, commitment to being Jewish, although certain populations—for example, Georgian Jews—exhibit a higher level of traditional observance. JDC's memory of what existed in these lands seventy years ago is often more vivid than the memories of local Jews.

FSU Jews also have no tradition of grassroots collective action, cooperation, or self-help. Communism left "fragmented, mutually suspicious communities with little cultural support for tolerant and individually

self-reliant behavior" (Blom et al., 1996, p. 119). Soviet power structures subordinated the citizen to the state: "Soviet ideology and the Soviet legal system were 'material' in nature: They told people *what* to think and *what* to do. The ideology and legal system of a civil society, by contrast... tell people *how* to deal with conflicting ideas and interests, and *how* to behave" (VanZweerde, p. 119). At the time of the fall of the Soviet Union, citizens were not equipped with the tools to fill the void. Grassroots movements did not easily develop as the Soviet system had perverted such values as voluntarism and welfare.

The majority of these Jews live at economic risk. The fall of the Soviet Union struck the final blow to most of the country's economic and weak social security and health systems. Large numbers of the population became newly poor with great physical needs and no social safety net. Approximately 40 percent of the FSU Jewish population are elderly, possibly numbering 500,000 people. The question of survival is often more pressing to families than that of Jewish identity.

### JEWISH WELFARE

Targeted assistance programs to FSU Jewish elderly grew from JDC's traditional focus on the elderly and their needs, which were first observed through an experimental food distribution program and later confirmed in a 1995 study. JDC research found that over 50 percent of Jewish elderly have no children or other relatives nearby if at all, that their pensions hardly meet their most basic needs, and that their health is deteriorating (Avgar et al., 1997). The FSU team responded to these needs by empowering the elderly through a two-fold strategy: developing the comprehensive *Hesed* model and structuring the JDC welfare team to reflect needs in the field.

#### The *Hesed* Comprehensive Service and Training Model

The *Hesed* model mobilizes communities to provide direct social services, such as food, medical equipment lending, opportunities for socialization and cultural enrichment, and

home care to Jewish elderly who meet approved criteria. The centers are governed by local boards of directors, which serve as mechanisms for transferring ownership and responsibility to local communities. *Hesed* centers offer a mix of services to increase clients' spheres of activity and standards of living while using volunteers to provide service, promoting Jewish traditions and connections to Israel, and facilitating ties to other communal organizations.

A survey of the 1997 year-end *Hesed* network report shows impressive service results, especially considering that little Jewish infrastructure existed five years ago. There are now 63 *Hesed* Centers. With the assistance of over 4,500 volunteers, these centers and other JDC local partners provided more than 120,000 Jewish elderly in 651 locations with 575,300 food packages, 884,100 meals in 162 communal dining rooms, 600,000 Meals on Wheels, 905,300 home care visits, and 12,000 pieces of medical equipment.

These numbers represent the beginning of a continuum of services that addresses the needs of elderly with different levels of impairments. Elderly with minimal impairments, for example, can participate in cultural programs at the central *Hesed* center and eat at communal dining programs. Elderly who suffer from moderate impairments may receive Meals on Wheels, medications, and home repairs. Finally, elderly with more severe impairments may receive home care services, Meals on Wheels, and medical equipment and participate in day center programs.

The *Hesed* formula goes well beyond the delivery of welfare services. Its uniqueness is its *Jewish* welfare approach. JDC employs "Yiddishkeit" as a tool to combat the isolation that large numbers of FSU Jewish elderly feel. Receiving services from Jewish volunteers shows clients that they are part of a caring Jewish community. All services also reflect and incorporate Jewish tradition. Food packages at Rosh Hashanah, for example, include apples and honey, calendars, and beautifully illustrated pamphlets with explanations of practices and even recipes. At Pesach, centers run communal seders both on

site and, with the help of youth organizations, in homes. Year-round, *Hesed* clubs host lectures on Jewish topics, Hebrew lessons, and other cultural programs.

The *Hesed* model ensures that community development becomes a natural byproduct of service delivery. Centers are outlets for community involvement and often serve as an entrance to the community. A few cases illustrate this. An elder in Kiev who approached *Hesed* for home repair learned of the club and now attends regularly. An adult volunteer in Odessa's *Hesed* heard about Odessa's Jewish early child development program from a *Hesed* staff member and now sends her child there. In Kirovograd, 112 local Jews volunteered to clean and restore their recently returned synagogue building and designated it to be used as a *Hesed* center. As a result, they have all made a commitment to be active in the Jewish community.

In facilitating community development, *Hesed* also sets the tone of what kind of community it will be: "To feel the obligation of *tzedakah* is to experience the emotion of communal identity" (Hartman & Marx, 1993). In Kishinev, for example, the community established a board with the mandate of involving community groups in intergenerational projects. In one of these programs, children from the two Jewish day schools visit elderly in their homes and interview them about their pasts. These interviews help formulate a collective memory in the Jewish community and preserve the past. They also build a community in which members feel responsible for one another.

JDC developed a training structure as a component of the *Hesed* model. After establishing the centers, JDC continues to intervene to develop their professionalism and organizational capacity and ensure that they adhere to accepted standards, both programmatically and administratively. Training is coordinated by the FSU-based Institutes for Welfare Workers. Through a combination of classroom and practical work and on-site supervision and follow-up, JDC has provided this training to 4,100 professionals, paraprofessionals, lay leaders, and volunteers. In

addition, the Institute monitors the availability of social services from the state and non-state sectors, price fluctuations of basic commodities, and pension levels, thus ensuring that programs reflect current needs.

#### **Organizational Structure**

JDC has developed its own welfare organizational structure to respond effectively to the needs in the field by complementing its existing system of geographically based representatives. Both Israel-based and local welfare coordinators track welfare organizational needs in the field and work with JDC's training and technical assistance staff to coordinate interventions. JDC has developed and institutionalized expertise in feeding, home care, medical equipment, and winter relief programs. The welfare operations team also has the technical capability to establish the necessary infrastructure including building and warehouse design.

#### **Priorities in Future Welfare Activities**

Past achievement in assisting local Jews to deliver welfare services and laying infrastructure do not obviate the need to increase the scope of intervention in the future. Specific priorities include building evaluative measures, continuing to develop training that responds to the changing needs of local personnel and facilitates empowerment, exploring the needs of populations other than the elderly, and institutionalizing methods to effectively service communities in the periphery of larger urban areas.

The first of JDC's challenges and main priorities in the future is to provide advanced training to local personnel. In many areas, JDC has actively been working with the same people for more than five years. Local personnel have gained management, professional, and organizational skills. Training and technical assistance must reflect this advancement and focus on developing their capacity to plan and raise funds locally. JDC also must further refine its partnership with local boards of directors as more policy decisions are left to these boards. The challenge

is how to maintain and expand the provision of services to the needy when local empowerment—in the short-term, at least—seems antithetical to this objective.

Second, JDC needs to ensure that Jews in remote areas receive services. Central *Hesed* centers should provide resources and training to centers located in their periphery, which in turn should provide assistance to even smaller communities. Belarus represents JDC's most comprehensive and successful experience. The central *Hesed* in Minsk organizes training for the smaller *Hesed* centers in the region. JDC has purchased vans for this *Hesed*, which go from Minsk to the periphery, delivering food, medicines, medical equipment, and even reading materials to needy elderly Jews. In the upcoming year, JDC will move further to institutionalize this framework throughout the FSU.

Next, while the welfare service numbers presented above represent important assistance, they do not reveal health outcomes. JDC needs to further develop goals and mechanisms to evaluate the impact of services in terms of performance, cost, and effectiveness. This evaluation will also provide information to help JDC allocate its own resources more effectively and better focus interventions in terms of geography and new program development. This information will assist in answering important operational questions: How many more new *Hesed* centers need to be developed? What is the appropriate mix of assistance in terms of funding food, home care, medical equipment, and other programs? Are there other new programs that JDC should develop based on needs in the field?

Finally, although the needs of the elderly are great, it has become clear that other populations too have great welfare needs. These findings have been confirmed by other organizations. An outside study on poverty and inequality, for example, found that "[w]ith a poverty incidence about one and one-half times higher than the country average, children are the most vulnerable group" (Milanovic, 1996, p. 199). Notwithstanding limited resources, should JDC consider ex-

tending assistance to other populations affected by the transition?

### JEWISH RENEWAL

Dr. Seymour Epstein, the Director of JDC's Educational Programs, has noted, "A mass thirst for Jewish knowledge and identity in the FSU, the likes of which we have not seen before in Jewish history." For many, the end of Communism began a search for meaning and identity. While local Jews lack organizational tools and Jewish knowledge, many see the Jewish community as presenting the opportunity "to associate, that is, not to feel lost among adversaries, to have the pleasure of communing, to make one out of many, which is to say, finally, to lead the same moral life together" (Emile Durkheim as quoted in Knoke, 1990, p. 11).

JDC's non-welfare assistance targets this thirst through Jewish Renewal, the combined efforts of educational, community center, cultural, and religious programming. The importance and significance of this opportunity are unprecedented, and it is unclear how long the window of opportunity will remain open. When the Iron Curtain was drawn and two million Jews appeared, the Jewish world was given the chance to make them active participants in the Jewish endeavor. The scope of Renewal programs is great: All FSU Jews are the object of JDC's efforts even if they are not "aware" of their needs.

JDC's Renewal work differs from that of other local and international organizations working in the FSU. JDC's strategy is to provide the resources—funds, materials, and tools—that will facilitate the building of a creative Jewish future and empower FSU Jews to make Jewish choices. JDC's Jewish Renewal is pluralistic, has a multidimensional programmatic approach, and does not market one "product."

In 1998, the Jewish population looks vastly different than it did five years ago. Over 20,000 children learn in Jewish schools. Jewish researchers actively pursue serious academic study in the five Jewish universities

and the more than 50 academic Jewish studies programs at state and private universities. Hillel student groups and other Jewish student organizational frameworks operate in large and small cities. Hundreds of Jewish professionals have taken part in training programs concentrating on Jewish education and community activism. Approximately 40 community centers are now operational, and close to 150 libraries have been established and supplied with books and other materials. Thousands of Jews have participated in communal Jewish rituals like seders and own such ritual items as Hanukah menorahs. Jewish tycoons have amassed vast fortunes, wield political influence, and have begun to support Jewish causes. Many FSU Jews have even visited Israel as tourists. This is not the FSU that Gorbachev left.

These successes are meaningful, but they represent only the beginning. Area Director and Director of JDC's Community Center Programs Sara Bogen recently mapped out all Jewish organizations of St. Petersburg, pinpointing spheres of operation, target groups, interorganizational contacts and cooperation, and funding sources. She found that, notwithstanding the "high culture" of St. Petersburg, there is a great lack of Jewish cultural programming there. In addition, JDC's existing programs reach less than 10 percent of the Jewish population. Few programs, moreover, target non-elderly adults and young families. JDC accordingly developed a Jewish Renewal strategy based on the following points: create fewer but higher-quality products in the face of a lack of funds, rise to and utilize the very high academic and cultural standards of the local population, and reach out to the largely indifferent or "otherwise engaged" population.

#### **Create Fewer Materials but of High Quality**

First, the poor economic conditions that characterize most of the FSU detract from Jewish Renewal programming. These conditions necessitate JDC to direct the majority of its funds to welfare activities. Even so, JDC has

produced a number of excellent Jewish publications. For example, the beautifully illustrated *Megillat Ester* on glossy paper presents the holiday of Purim understandably and teaches about basic Jewish concepts. Another book—*The Jewish Year*—leads children and their families through the Jewish calendar, presenting comprehensive information in an accessible manner for all ages. These books are not only informative but they are also enticing, a source of pride, and an act of Jewish rescue. They are also expensive, both in terms of staff and printing. Limited resources have meant limited products.

#### **Rise To and Utilize the Population's High Standards**

Second, the FSU population is used to very high cultural and academic achievements. This presents an opportunity, challenge, and resource. When creating cultural programming, JDC must aim at a certain level of sophistication in both form and content. The Soviets had a highly developed system of higher education and held academic achievement, especially in the sciences, as an important value. In addition, this is a population that knows what good theater is, is very well read in Russian literature, and is talented in the arts. In Israel, the following joke is often told: "How do you tell the piano player among arriving *olim* from the FSU? He's the one getting off the plane without the violin case." The challenge for JDC thus is to show the benefits of belonging to the Jewish people.

JDC's own staff must be knowledgeable and have access to advanced materials in Russian. Hanukah must be more than just candle lighting, Purim more than just *hamentashen* and costumes. Jewish music must go past *Shalom Aleichem*. A few examples show JDC's efforts. JDC established a cultural training and resource center that has amassed a collection of more than 3,500 hours of recordings of Jewish music. The *Sefer* organization provides a centralized address for Jewish academic activities. JDC supports periodicals that explore Jewish educational issues. Regional Hillel seminars are

held to discuss such issues as how to believe in God in the post-Holocaust era.

JDC must also use the population as a resource. Continued support of local efforts, such as the Association of Jewish Librarians, *Sefer* Academic Programs, the "New Life" Jewish Arts and Crafts Center, and 16 professional local performance groups, will keep local people involved and enable them to make their own unique contributions to the Jewish people. These represent the professionalism and creativity of local Jews.

#### **Attracting the "Otherwise Engaged" or Indifferent**

The third issue is the most difficult one. JDC and local community activists have no contact with much of the Jewish population, as most remain detached and uninterested in communal activity. Some have to spend the majority of their efforts trying to make ends meet. Others may have found different answers. Many are simply not looking for anything or have decided that Judaism has nothing to offer them. These issues are the same ones with which Jewish federations in the United States attempt to grapple.

JDC continues to explore the use of different media to reach out to the unaffiliated. Having both vast geographical and ideological distances to cross, JDC has developed an Internet site. The Internet is an effective way to disseminate information, create forums of community leaders, conduct distance learning, and promote community initiatives through the creation of local web pages. The Internet also offers the possibilities of interactive, multimedia technology.

#### **Priorities in Future Jewish Renewal Activities**

JDC must continue to develop the following areas it has already identified and begun working in to reach out to the population: textbooks and in-service instruction on how to use them; early childhood education; university-level Jewish studies and teacher training; adult education; student programs; fam-

ily camps; technology programs; libraries and associated programs; and Jewish programs in schools, community centers, and welfare institutions. JDC must expand these programs and reinvigorate those that can draw in community members. In developing preschool programs, for example, special efforts should be directed at attracting parents and teaching them, not simply using them as "free labor" for the children's programs. Since the FSU Jews are a reading population, library programs can serve as entrances. Finally, family camps can be used to provide more than just a one-time wonderful Jewish experience. They can lead to the founding of Jewish family clubs that provide the foundation for year-round activities.

#### **EDUCATING JDC'S LAY SUPPORTERS AND OURSELVES**

Images of Jews in the FSU have become ubiquitous in Jewish news sources, through personal accounts of mission participants, and in the appeals of Jewish federation fund raisers. For JDC, this attention ensures continued funding for programs, an especially poignant issue given the downward trends in Jewish philanthropy. Far from depicting a coherent picture of the character of the "new Jews" and funding priorities, however, these various accounts conflict when viewed in the aggregate. JDC needs to clearly communicate what is important, even if the message is difficult to market.

JDC's challenge is not only focusing the attention of funders. The organization must ensure that its own staff who operate in the field represent the organization and not their own personal preferences. JDC does not have one recipe for communal development, and programs must be responsive to local conditions. The style of representatives, however, plays a large role in how effective the work is. JDC needs thus to focus some of its organizational energy on staff development and training. Staff must both communicate and act in accordance with JDC's principles of empowerment and pluralism.

### FINAL THOUGHTS

Honorary Executive Vice President of JDC Ralph Goldman has said that JDC's most important contribution is assisting in the reconstruction of viable communities. To achieve this reconstruction in the FSU, JDC in partnership with local communities must reach and activate more Jews. Only 10 percent of FSU Jews have been involved in JDC programs, many of those only being the recipients of welfare services. If JDC's vision is that FSU Jews feel a part of the Jewish people and contribute to it, future programs must reach out to involve more Jews.

JDC's programs supporting local *Hesed* centers will continue to capture much of the attention and funds of the FSU team. Without this support, thousands of vulnerable elderly would suffer. JDC's priority is to ensure that more people can be reached more comprehensively by local services. Specifically, JDC's efforts must ensure that local professionals have the capacity to operate services effectively and respond to the most pressing needs as revealed in the field.

JDC must reinvigorate and expand Jewish Renewal programming. The Jews of the FSU have much to offer in creating exciting and original programming. For them to take pride in what it means to be Jewish, they must first understand what it means and where the beauty is. JDC must find ways to communicate the importance of these programs both to FSU Jews and to funders.

The creation of communities in the FSU is not the final goal; communities serve as a means to an end. JDC wants to facilitate the development of structures that both can assist the needy and provide local Jews with the tools to make Jewish choices. A. P. Cohen (1985, p. 118) unknowingly posed a challenge to JDC when asserting that "[p]eople construct community symbolically, making it a resource and repository of meaning, and a referent of their identity."

Executive Vice President of JDC, Michael Schneider, writes that, "Transferring knowledge and experience among Jewish communities in different areas of the world is... one

of JDC's most important present-day functions." Transferring differs from implanting a foreign definition of what the community should be. JDC does not necessarily know better what to do; it works in partnership with local communities.

JDC is a facilitator and while it brings specific Jewish values, its partnership with local communities should empower Jews to create their own identity. JDC's role is to build local capacity and find common language. Nothing can happen without community ties. The elderly would be forgotten and the youth would feel no push to take their place among world Jewry. The words of Eli Wiesel (1977) reveal the importance of the entire endeavor: "What would the Jew be without his community?... By linking his own memory to that of his people, a Jew lives not outside time... but more deeply at a level where all threads are woven together... The more the community renews itself, the closer it comes to its roots."

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