

## Language, Culture and the Jewish Acculturation of Soviet Jewish Emigres\*

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*A vital objective of bilingual-bicultural education for Soviet Jews is to foster a positive Jewish self-concept while developing Jewish cognition, Jewish language expression and Jewish life skills. People who view themselves as being accepted, respected and loved are prone to develop a positive self-concept. Providing a receptive, respectful and loving environment must be the first goal of Judaic instruction.*

### The Challenge

The American Jewish community is called upon from time to time to develop response mechanisms to meet new needs. These mechanisms often require massive funding, significant restructuring of programs and the development of new major services.

The recent influx of Soviet-Jewish immigrants to the U.S. necessitates such a response. During the last five years 66,480 Russian Jews migrated to this country. Of these, almost half (28,277) have settled in New York. Other relatively large concentrations of Russian Jews have settled in Chicago (4,895), Los Angeles (4,260), and Philadelphia (3,016). One hundred and fifty-four other Jewish communities each have received between a handful and several hundred immigrants. The largest annual influx occurred in 1979 when almost 29,000 Russian immigrants were resettled in the United States and Canada.

The challenge that these immigrants hold out for the American Jewish community is obvious. Denied their right to practice the Jewish religion, the immigrants have ostensibly left the Soviet Union to be able to live freely as Jews and pursue Jewish interests without being oppressed.

This means that Russian-Jewish immigrants have to make multiple adjustments. In the first place, they have to be socialized

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into the American society with all that this process implies. They must learn to communicate in English, they must find housing, make vocational readjustments and obtain suitable jobs.

For the immigrants being Jewish means learning to live as Jews. This requires that they be socialized into the Jewish way of life. They must acquire the skills of Jewish living—learn about the Jewish community, become familiar with the Jewish calendar, develop a sense of Jewish identity, and learn to participate in Jewish religious and Jewish communal activities.

To accomplish all this simultaneously in a relatively short period of time is a tall order. Here is where the American Jewish community has a unique opportunity to demonstrate its resourcefulness. Unfortunately, we did not prepare adequately for this large task. Nevertheless, several significant efforts have been made in various communities to acculturate the new immigrants. It is too early, yet, to assess the long-range effect of these efforts.

The Jewish responses must be provided in different ways for different age groups and different types of Jews. The Jewish attitudes and Jewish backgrounds of the immigrants will vary, sometimes greatly, according to their family history and areas of residence. The responses necessarily embrace a variety of cognitive and affective activities: Judaic instruction and informal education for children and adults, Russian-

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Jewish socialization activities in a Jewish setting, home visitations, arrangements for *brit milah*, *bar* and *bat mitzvah* preparations, distribution of an experience with Jewish ritual objects and Jewish religious and cultural materials, individual tutelage in home observance of Shabbat and Jewish holidays, and participation in Jewish communal programs.

The single most important task for all Jewish immigrants, regardless of age and background, is to learn the English language. Teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) can also be a useful strategy for acculturating Russian Jews to Jewishness and Jewish living. This is especially important since all Russian immigrants, young and old, participate in ESL programs shortly after arrival, either as part of their elementary or high school curriculum or as part of their adult orientation program.

For adults the ESL time frame is crucial. As long as the Soviet emigres are financially dependent upon the Jewish community, they participate regularly in ESL classes. During this time, they are actually a captive audience. Once they find a job and permanent housing, there is no guarantee that the Jewish community will be able to gain their attention for any length of time. Experience has shown that attrition in ESL programs occurs after families are settled and are no longer financially dependent upon the organized Jewish community. It is for this reason that I feel it absolutely essential to exploit ESL for inculcating Jewish attitudes and values from the very beginning of the ESL acculturation process.

### Multilingualism and the Jews

In addressing this challenge, it seems appropriate, at first, to provide an historical frame of reference for our discussion. Bilingualism and multilingualism are synonymous with Jewish tradition. The "wandering Jew" syndrome has made it imperative for

Jews to make multiple lingual adjustments throughout their history. To begin with, the Aramaic vernacular was known to Jews in Babylonian exile over 2,500 years ago. The Biblical books of Daniel and Ezra contain an admixture of Hebrew and Aramaic text. By the fourth century BCE, the Jews had, in fact, become bilingual.

The Aramaic language has had a profound influence on Hebrew. The word, *ulpan*, the method for teaching Hebrew as a second language, is an Aramaic word. The term, *shiddur*, radio broadcast, also derives from an Aramaic root. The extent of the use of Aramaic is demonstrated by the fact that the *Gemara (Talmud)*, the post-Biblical magnum opus of Jewish life, is written largely in this medium. The Hebrew manuscript letter was also substantially influenced by Aramaic.

Since the initial Babylonian exilic experience, new language shock and new culture shock requiring multiple lingual and multiple cultural adjustments became a part of Jewish diasporic existence. The Jews were at home in Arabic, for example, before the rise of Islam. In the eighth century many Jews in Moslem countries adopted Arabic as their mother tongue. The timeless contributions of Maimonides were written in both Arabic and Hebrew. *Moreh Nevukhim (Guide to the Perplexed)* was penned in Arabic so that all Jews could readily understand it. His voluminous compendium of Jewish law, the *Mishneh Torah*, was written in Hebrew. Yehudah Halevi's philosophical treatise, *Kuzari*, is in Arabic. On the other hand, his poetry was written in Hebrew.

In addition to Arabic, the wandering Jews in the Middle Ages, post-medieval and contemporary periods, have been at home in Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch, Greek, Italian, French, German, Hungarian, Polish, Russian, and English.

How did Jews make linguistic and cultural adjustments to the various lands of their dispersion? One method of adjustment

has been the co-opting of other languages into Jewish culture. Judeo-Arabic, is a prime example of this type of adjustment. During the 9th, 10th and 11th centuries, the Jews in North Africa, the Near East and Spain spoke Arabic, but did not read this language. As time wore on, they added a goodly number of Hebrew words and expressions to the Arabic dialect and began to write it in Hebrew script. Thus, Judeo-Arabic was born. Judeo-Arabic was popular among Jews until the end of the 13th century.

Ladino is another example of co-opting a foreign language into Jewish culture. This Spanish-Jewish language, written in Hebrew characters, was developed after the Spanish expulsion by Spanish and Portuguese exiles who spread to various Balkan, European, North African and Asian cities and took with them the knowledge of 15th century Castilian Spanish. Once these emigres were severed from this linguistic source, they added to it a mixture of biblical Hebrew and Talmudic Aramaic terms. Several important works were produced in Ladino, chief among them, the *Meam Loez* commentary on the Bible. Today, there are about 200,000 Jews in Israel who still speak Ladino.

Finally, as we are well aware, Yiddish is a prime example of co-opting another language into Jewish culture. Starting approximately in 1350, Jews from France and Italy settled in Germany and began speaking high German. From there, during the next several centuries, Jews migrated to Eastern Europe, where the source of their mother German was cut off. Gradually, Hebraic, Aramaic and Slavic words entered the German dialect spoken by Jews who began writing it in Hebrew characters. Thus, Yiddish evolved, and became the mother tongue of millions of Jews throughout Eastern Europe.

The second mode of linguistic adjustment, sometimes limited to a minority of a given Jewish immigrant population, was

acquisition of the ability to speak in the *lingua franca* of the adopted country. This was motivated by the immigrants' need to use the new language in pursuit of a livelihood. They learned to speak the language by using it, without any formal training. Some emigres learned to read the new language. Fewer still learned to write in it.

In medieval and contemporary times, Jews were generally trilingual. They used Ladino or Yiddish to converse among themselves and to communicate in writing. They used the *lingua franca* to do business with their non-Jewish neighbors. Hebrew was their language of study and prayer. The learned Jews also wrote in Hebrew. Those knowledgeable in the *Talmud* were quadra-lingual as they mastered the Aramaic legal discussions and rabbinic narratives in Talmudic and Midrashic literature.

#### Linguistic Adjustment

Viewed against this historical background of acculturation to new lands, the linguistic adjustment of modern Russian-Jewish immigrants is significantly different from that of the Jewish emigres of earlier periods of Jewish history. Given the size of the Jewish immigration from the Soviet Union (over 200,000 Jews have left the Soviet Union since 1970), a new Jewish jargon could be produced as the Russian Jews settle in America. This jargon would be rooted naturally in the Russian language. Had the Russian-Jewish immigrants been steeped in Jewish tradition, this jargon would incorporate Hebraic, Aramaic, and Yiddish expressions, and would be written in Hebrew characters like the other jargons used by Jews.

However, developing a Russian-based Jewish jargon is virtually impossible. Almost none of them speaks, reads or writes Hebrew. Almost none of them brings any substantial "Jewish baggage" with them. Their life-style is basically *Judenrein*. More-

over, almost all of them have no knowledge of a Jewish language. Some of the elderly immigrants understand Yiddish but seem ashamed to use it. The openness of U.S. society, on the other hand, is significantly different than the social milieu of the other countries of Jewish dispersions. Moreover, the previous 19th and 20th century Jewish immigrant experiences in America established patterns for new immigrant Americanization not conducive to the development of a new Jewish jargon.

The Jewish languages or jargons of previous eras—Judeo-Arabic, Ladino and Yiddish—helped the Jewish immigrants maintain their Jewish connection in the new countries of residence via their rootedness in Jewish literature, Jewish tradition and Jewish memories. The current Russian immigrant experience provides no such potential for the transplanting of the Russian language to the American shores. Russian Jews must make separate Jewish and general societal adjustments simultaneously, a situation much different from and more challenging than any Jewish immigrant group adjustment before.

The first and most important order of business for all Russians is to learn to communicate in English. Learning a second language is most readily achieved through a combination of immersion in an English speaking environment and bilingual-bicultural education. This teaching strategy asserts that instruction in the mother tongue of the learners should not be discontinued during the process of learning English. Bilingual-bicultural education of children uses the native language and culture for learning most subjects, until the second language skills have been developed sufficiently to use it for general instruction.

Basically, there are two bilingual approaches: *maintenance* and *transition*. In the maintenance approach, instruction in the mother tongue and the native culture continues indefinitely. The transitional approach posits that children and adults

should be weaned from use of the mother language as the learners become adept in English. However, even the transitionists agree that instruction in the mother tongue and culture should not be totally discontinued. In addition to the maintenance and transition approaches, the practice of enrichment introduces new cultural and educational elements in the native language of the learners.

In this context, Russian-Jewish immigrants pose a special challenge. Cultural linguistic education of Russian-Jewish immigrants in the United States must accomplish two separate goals—acculturation to the American society and the development of a sub-group cultural identity. In the process of acculturation, the Russian immigrants need to divorce themselves from the values and belief system of a totalitarian society which they either consciously or subconsciously may have absorbed during the past five decades. They must free themselves also from the feelings of stigmatized Jewishness often punctuated by denial of Jewish roots, self-contempt and self-ridicule, and even by attitudes of anti-Semitism. To quote one Russian-Jewish emigre; they must lose mother Russia while they search for father Abraham.

The acculturation dimension of the bilingual-bicultural adjustment of Soviet Jews in America makes the ESL component of their bilingual education different from ESL for all other immigrants.

In addition to the American acculturation and Russian deculturation processes, the Russian-Jewish immigrant must make Jewish cultural and Hebraic language adjustments. Restated in other terms, Jewish education (broadly defined) is an intrinsic part of the acculturation process to the American way of life.

#### ESL and Jewish Acculturation

In order to effectuate a Jewish education experience for Russian immigrants several

curricular imperatives loom large. First, Judaic concepts and Jewish values should be introduced in the Russian language at the very onset of the ESL acculturation process. This instruction must be additive to the basic ESL program. To maximize the potential of this instruction, relevant Judaic realia in modern Russian must be provided to the immigrant. The recent bibliography of Russian language print materials published jointly by the Council of Jewish Federations and the World Zionist Organization is a step in the right direction. In connection with this additional component of ESL, opportunities for participation in Jewish life experiences should be made easily available. Where appropriate and possible, these experiences would include activities like the fixing of a *mezzuzah*, making *tzizit* for a *tallit*, baking *hallah*, involvement in Jewish calendar events, and weekly participation as guests of Jewish families for Friday evening meals and Sabbath services. In this regard, establishing one-to-one relationships with immigrants is important.

Secondly, the English language content of the ESL program must be Judaically oriented. This requires the development of special Jewish curricular materials in English, the engagement of Jewishly knowledgeable teachers and Judaic training of ESL teachers without Jewish backgrounds.

Utilizing cultural content in teaching a second language is fundamental to the philosophy of bilingual-bicultural education which stresses historical, literary and cultural traditions for the purpose of strengthening identity and sense of belonging. ESL for Russian immigrants should maximize the use of Jewish content. Since the Russian immigrants do not have Jewish cultural traditions which can be reinforced, these traditions must be introduced through various confluent strategies.

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veloping Jewish cognition, Jewish language expression and Jewish life skills. People who view themselves as being accepted, respected and loved are prone to develop a positive self-concept. Providing a receptive, respectful and loving environment must be the first goal of Judaic instruction.

A positive Jewish self-concept, no matter how fledgling, will motivate Jewish learning. The immigrants will approach their learning with optimism and with confidence in their ability to exercise their new roles as Jews. They will view their new life situation with openness and will be able to make the fullest possible use of their new Jewish experiences.

The ability to identify with others is an important factor in developing self-concept. The socialization process for new immigrants must, therefore, facilitate identification with new Jewish people models.

Identifying positively with Israel is related to this challenge. Israel can serve as a major source for the development of positive self-concept. Witness the pride engendered in so many Soviet Jews by the Six-Day War. For obvious reasons, this challenge needs to be addressed with much understanding and sensitivity.

While the controversy between transitional and maintenance approaches in bilingual education is strong, our goal in ESL is clearly to mainstream children and adults into the general and Jewish societies. For children, this means mainstreaming them into their general and Jewish studies classrooms and into their English language classes and Hebrew language studies as soon as possible. For adults this means mainstreaming them into active Jewish life as quickly as possible.

To achieve these purposes, there are several methodological considerations we must keep in mind. There is no single best method for teaching English as a Second Language. It is up to the teacher to choose the most suitable approach. There is much we can adopt and learn from the various

schools of language teaching, each of which has much to contribute to our understanding of how best to teach language to Russian-Jewish immigrants.

A question is currently asked by teachers of English to those who speak other languages: "What makes teaching English as a Second Language unique from teaching English per se, or teaching life skills, or teaching other foreign languages?" To this, those of us involved in ESL for Russian-Jewish immigrants must add still another question: "What makes teaching English as a Second Language to Russian-Jewish immigrants unique from teaching English to speakers of other languages?" The transformational grammarians posit that there are many similarities in learning all languages, and similarities between learning a first native language and a second language. Therefore, for second language learning, we need not put great emphasis on structured pattern practice and careful grading according to linguistic difficulty. Rather "we need to be more concerned with exposing learners to natural communication situations, since this is sufficient to activate their language learning processes." This school of thought underscores the importance of concentration on content and message in second language instruction. I believe that this is the key to effective ESL teaching for Russian immigrants. The Jewish content and the Jewish message are crucial to the achievement of the Jewish

objective via ESL.

Achieving the Jewish objective requires the extension of the theory and practice of ESP (English for Special Purposes) for teaching Russian-Jewish emigres. ESP is basically the development of special categories of language nuance. This approach has had a significant effect upon developing materials for the ESL classroom. For example, there now exist materials called "English for Science and Technology," "English for Business," even "English for Custodians." The ESP concept must be extended to include "English for Living in a Sub-Culture." In our terms, this would be "English for American Jews."

This means developing special vocabularies, terminologies and learning materials about the Jewish community and about Jewish heritage.

To sum up, this paper has attempted to demonstrate in a historical, cultural perspective the role of ESL in Judaizing Russian immigrants. This process requires the introduction of Jewish content in ESL instruction and additive teaching about Jewish life. The initial Jewish orientation through ESL must be reinforced by simultaneous group and individualized Jewish life experiences and by subsequent Jewish learning and living.

These are large challenges for the Jewish community. Insuring the continuity of Soviet Jews in America is well worth all the investment of time, effort and money.