

ABSORBING JEWS JEWISHLY

Professional Responsibility for Jewishly Absorbing New Immigrants in Their New Communities

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Achieving the long-term goal of Jewish community linkage and participation by Soviet Jews is a difficult but doable task, requiring the development and implementation of sensitively designed Jewish acculturation programs. Yet, many studies reveal that Soviet Jews who come to the United States are receptive to Jewish identity-enhancing experiences, and this receptivity should be even more evident among the current wave of emigres who have been exposed to the Jewish cultural movement in the Soviet Union. Principles around which acculturation programs should be designed can be derived both from research studies on acculturation and our experiences in resettling the first wave of emigres.

Jewish acculturation of Soviet Jewish emigres is clearly a complex, long-term process. American Jewish communities must be prepared to invest seriously in the development and implementation of sensitively designed Jewish acculturation programs. It makes little sense to expend tens of millions of communal dollars in resettlement without also committing the requisite resources to ensure that our long-term goal of Jewish community linkage and participation by Soviet Jews is accomplished.

This article first describes the responsibilities of the Jewish communal professional in working toward this goal. It then examines the Jewish cultural movement in the Soviet Union, which will influence the receptivity of those in the current wave of emigration to Jewish acculturation experiences. Finally, the article describes the nature of the acculturation process and

offers guidelines for the development of successful acculturation programs.

RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE PROFESSIONAL

In Jewish communal service, values are presumed to be the foundation from which all professional behavior emanates. For the professional, they are the very source from which our motivation to serve others is derived. The actualization of these values, however, must be addressed in behavioral terms for, in our profession, goals are achieved as a consequence of action. The importance of this idea can be grasped in a central social work practice concept formulated by William Schwartz, who wrote that "skill is function in action" (Schwartz, 1967, p. 44). The skill of the professional can be observed as he or she contributes data, ideas, facts, value concepts; seeks clarification; questions; and points out consequences of proposed action or inaction. Such information is often not easily available to those with whom we work because of the nature of their personal or emotional stake as participants in the communal process. The skill of the professional can also be observed in the act of lending a vision to the problem-solving

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process, which ties the work at hand to the aspirations and values of the community (Schwartz, 1961). The professional also performs the roles of gatekeeper and expert. These two functions can either enlarge the arena in which creative problem solving or conflict resolution takes place, or they can be used to restrict the horizon severely, producing a stagnant environment with predictably unsatisfactory results (Carp, 1988). Ralph Goldman described other critical functions of the professional as well.

The professional must be a diplomat, a persuader, a negotiator of coalitions, an influencer of institutions and people who have the power to allocate resources. There are those who would decry those political skills as in some way diluting professionalism. To the contrary, it is difficult to see how planning can be made effective without recognition of the functions of power in making decisions that involve different interests and values (Goldman, 1981, p. 16).

In developing Jewish acculturation programs for Soviet Jews the professional will be called upon to use all these skills.

JEWISH LIFE IN THE SOVIET UNION TODAY

In April 1989, a week before Pesach, I visited the Soviet Union with a group of 30 of Chicago's key lay leaders and two colleagues. We spent a week visiting activists and refuseniks in Leningrad and Moscow, learning about the nature of Jewish communal life in these two cities, the efforts of the Jewish activists to expand the Jewish cultural movement, and the impact of recent changes in the Soviet Union upon the Jewish community.

The increasing access to Jewish experiences and to information about Israel stemming from Gorbachev's policies was already having a positive impact on Soviet Jewish life. There were Jewish cultural groups in at least 9 of the 15 Soviet republics at the time of our visit. At least 45

Jewish Cultural Centers were recognized by the authorities in 27 cities and there were 114 recognized synagogues. A two-day conference held shortly before our visit brought together representatives of 50 cultural groups from 34 cities. A leadership committee was formed to guide the future work of the Jewish Independent Movement, participants laid the groundwork for a federation of Jewish cultural groups (subsequently formed in December 1989), and a decision was made to apply for membership in the World Jewish Congress. The Hebrew Teachers Association in the Soviet Union announced the formation of yet another national Jewish organization with a more explicitly Zionist orientation. The impact of the visits to Israel by about 20,000 Soviet Jews during the last 2 years; the Voice of Israel broadcasts that are no longer jammed; the visits by Israeli artists, lecturers, Jewish Agency representatives, and governmental officials; and the great quantity of Jewish literature translated into Russian that is being shipped into the Soviet Union are all having a positive impact on the Jewish identity of many Soviet Jews.

Our group was able to bring a massive amount of Jewish material into the Soviet Union without any problems whatsoever. We held a banquet in a hall rented by the Jewish activists in Leningrad at a hotel in the center of the city. In Moscow, the Jewish Cooperative Restaurant was closed by the Jewish activist community for a dinner in our honor. In each instance our group of 30 Chicago Jews was matched by 30 to 40 Soviet activists and refuseniks.

The seeds planted years ago in the underground Jewish movement are now flowering. Because the Jewish cultural movement is now receiving a growing volume of Jewish resources, there is evidence of its ever-widening impact on Jewish children, adolescents, and adults under 50 years of age. Every activist we met confirmed this new phenomenon. Many of the emigres arriving now in the second wave have been directly

or indirectly affected by the Jewish cultural movement, further heightening their receptivity to Jewish acculturation experiences.

JEWISH ACCULTURATION OF SOVIET JEWS IN THE UNITED STATES

Acculturation may be conceived of as "one aspect of culture change. It involves the process through which some of [the] beliefs, customs, values and habits of an individual or group of individuals change or adapt to accommodate a significant shift in the social and cultural fabric of their environment" (Koosed, 1981, pp. 5-7).

Changes that often go unnoticed are produced when two different cultures experience ongoing contact. The implications of these changes go beyond the popular notion that the dominant group absorbs the new subgroup. The reality is that the subgroup also changes the dominant group's culture. Further, a review of the literature and research on this subject reveals that acculturation takes place over time, is not primarily a conscious process, and should not be equated with either resettlement, personal adjustment, or assimilation. Indeed, there is evidence that successful acculturation may, in some cases, even contribute to severe personality disorganization. The refugee families who seemed to be "solid" on arrival, only to later exhibit severe pathology without any apparent reason, are illustrative of this phenomenon. Resettlement involves the external care and maintenance provided by voluntary social services agencies. Personal adjustment deals with learning the rules of the new culture in order to become fully functional in the new society, and assimilation refers to the immersion of the subgroup into the culture of the dominant group (Koosed, 1981).

In contrast to the past when we expected newcomers to shed their old ways and assimilate, today our expectations are both more realistic and healthier, for them as well as us. We expect acculturation, but we also now hope that newcomers will keep

the essence of the culture they brought with them, even as they take on and incorporate the ways to the new society they have come to join.

This enlightened position did not come easily, nor has the battle over the substance behind this critical distinction ended. Consider this example from the Chicago Jewish community's experience in 1980:

We were laboring under the fantasy that we were saving Jewish souls, only to find ourselves making harsh judgments over the apparent lack of Jewishness or lack of appreciation for our efforts on their behalf. While we were proud of the speed with which the overwhelming majority of them became part of the economic mainstream, we also responded in ways that were reminiscent of the reactions of American Jews of German descent to the arrival of the Jews from Eastern Europe. Their clumsy attempts to dress and act like Americans without fully being able to understand the context . . . often produced an uncomfortable reaction in us.

When the first plan for our Jewish Acculturation Program was presented to a planning committee [of lay leaders], a central component of that plan was a proposal designed to enable the Russian newcomers to experience and enjoy Russian literature, music and other dimensions of Russian culture [some of which they had been denied access to]. Voices were raised in protest by a surprising number of Chicago Jews that such a program would ghettoize and insulate, rather than help the newcomers to assimilate into our world (Carp, 1988).

Nora Levin (1989), in a recent article, articulated the problems that must be resolved if Jewish acculturation efforts are to be successful:

- Can we cast off our American or Israeli Jewish way of thinking about Jewishness, i.e., attending and belonging to a synagogue?
- Can we accept the fact that Soviet Jews can be Jewish someplace other than only in Israel, especially if it is believed that Jews in the Diaspora cannot be?

- Can we help Soviet Jews move into Jewish life in ways that are comfortable and stimulating for them, rather than demanding that they conform to *our* images of what a Jew ought to be?
- Can we understand the consequences of the fact that most often they lack a connection to the Jewish past and other Jews and that their self-image as Jews has been deformed through decades of negative imagery?
- Can we grapple with the reality that participation in the network of voluntary, self-help organizations that constitute Jewish life and are bound up with a requirement of significant contributions of one's resources is a construct that, until very recently, has had no place in their life experience or ideology?
- Can we acknowledge that our highly idealized image of suffering, struggling refuseniks who desired only to go to Israel because of their strong convictions about being Jewish neglects to include the fact that they too not very long ago were as Jewishly disconnected and ignorant as most Soviet Jews still are?

One of the earliest research projects on Jewish identity among Soviet Jews was a study conducted secretly inside the Soviet Union in 1976 by Benjamin Fain and several others. When the initial results of the survey were announced at a press conference in Moscow as part of a symposium on Jewish culture, the authorities searched the flats of some of the people doing the survey and confiscated some of the information. One set of responses from the 1,216 participants was hidden successfully from the authorities and smuggled to Israel. The data revealed a much deeper interest in Jewish life and Jewish knowledge among Soviet Jews, contrary to the beliefs of many Jewish leaders at the time (Fain et al., 1981).

A national study conducted in the United States in 1981 surveyed 900 Soviet Jews who arrived between 1972 and 1980 and who were living in 14 cities (Simon & Simon,

1981). Several findings yield vital guidelines for the development of meaningful opportunities for Soviet Jews to become involved in Jewish life. First, 90% of the Soviet Jews said that if they could be born over again they would choose to be Jewish. Thus, there is strong evidence of an attachment to Jewish traditions and beliefs. Second, although the large majority do not observe traditional Jewish religious practices, the overwhelming majority light Chanukah candles and avoid eating bread on Passover, half fast on Yom Kippur, three-quarters said all their close friends are Jewish, and the majority clearly want their children to have the opportunity to be Jewish. The respondents also overwhelmingly replied that "Jewish" is the label that best describes them, and nearly 90% said that life as a Jew is much better than in the USSR. In the larger cities in the study—Los Angeles, Chicago, and Philadelphia—50 to 65% reported that they lived in mostly Jewish neighborhoods, and 79% reported they want their children to receive a good Jewish education (Simon, 1985).

An oral history project conducted by Zvi Gitelman (1974) involving 473 Soviet Jews who emigrated to the United States that was completed about the same time as the Simons' study for CJF came to most of the same major conclusions about the existence of considerable positive Jewish identification among refugees who left the Soviet Union between 1977–1981.

In another research project Gitelman (1989) compared the Jewish identity of Soviet Jews in Israel (590 respondents) and the United States (471 respondents) who emigrated between 1977–1980 and found nearly the same proportions of religiosity among respondents in both places, except for the proportion of the more religious. In that category, although not statistically significant, a higher proportion was found among Soviet Jews living in the United States (Table 1).

In a study done by Fran Markowitz (1985) for the UJA/Federation of Jewish Philanthropies of New York, once again

Table 1.
RELIGIOSITY OF SOVIET JEWS LIVING IN
ISRAEL AND THE UNITED STATES

Religiosity	Israel (Percentage)	United States (Percentage)
Religious	8.3	13.6
Traditional	37.9	34.8
Not religious or traditional	51.0	46.7
Antireligious	2.0	0.2
Don't know/not applicable	0.0	4.7

the same general findings emerge: Soviet immigrants identify strongly and positively as Jews, and they want their children to be Jewish. However, an important new dimension was identified in the New York project.

The strength of the Soviet Jewish family must not be overlooked in an evaluation of the Jewish identity of Russian Jews. Long after religious and secular Jewish schools were shut, Jewish traditions were informally passed on in the family. Composed of three generations, more often than not, the family was the only milieu—private, trustworthy and beyond the arm of government control—in which Soviet citizens could proudly express their Jewish heritage without negative repercussions (Markowitz, 1985, pp. v-vi.).

The Jewish Family and Children's Services agency in San Francisco conducted a follow-up survey of Soviet Jewish families resettled by them between 1979 and 1984. The agency was able to contact 146 of 161 families involving 380 individuals (JFCS, 1986). A majority of the respondents evaluated their resettlement experience with the community's Jewish agencies positively, and a majority (79%) reported current involvement with Jewish community institutions. The institutions with which they reported most involvement were the Jewish Community Center and the synagogues.

The findings of these studies reveal that Soviet Jews who come to the United States are clearly receptive to Jewish identity-enhancing experiences. They also paint a

picture of a deeper and more complex sense of Jewish identity, albeit one that is different in many important ways from that with which most of us are familiar or accept. Perhaps this explains why many Jewish communal workers and lay leaders have tended erroneously to disavow the existence of Jewish identity among Soviet Jews.

PRINCIPLES TO PRACTICE

Those studies described above provide valuable insights for Jewish professionals with responsibility for Jewish acculturation services. Among the more important programmatic guidelines that can be derived from this data are the following:

- Acculturation is a process that takes place over time and has a cumulative effect. It cannot be produced instantly. Its results are not perceivable over the short term. We need to be patient.
- If we do not understand and believe that the process is a two-way street, Jewish acculturation will fail. If we believe it, but do not, in fact, keep ourselves open to learn from Soviet Jews, then acculturation programs will fail.
- Acculturation and resettlement are not only parallel processes, they are one! If we are to succeed, we must work consciously to ensure their integration, and we must work against our tendency to compartmentalize services and people's needs. An anecdote: Four years ago, during a meeting with the leadership of our Soviet Jewish community in Chicago, we asked them to tell us what we should do differently the next time when the doors of emigration reopened. They said that our community did a magnificent job at meeting their needs for food and shelter during a time of great stress and uncertainty. They also said that we failed in a very basic way because we did not tell them they had to be Jewish and a part of our Jewish community the minute they stepped off the airplane.

- The old social work adage—Start where the client is—is of great utility. In this case, that means beginning with the stated Jewish interests of Soviet Jews—Jewish history, culture, information about Israel, Jewish ritual and ritual objects, and the Jewish life cycle. It also means that Soviet Jews must be seriously involved in the decision making and planning for their acculturation programs.
- Staff must be employed who are able to be nonjudgmental and who are more interested in the process of how people learn than the act of teaching. For example, Soviet Jews have been socialized into learning through lectures and reading. Thus, lectures are a good way to start. Since admitting their ignorance is painful, using material that can be read and studied in the privacy of one's own home is an important approach. Naturally, they should also be exposed to other learning modalities over time.
- Since family and the welfare of their children are so central to their lives, Jewish life-cycle events, the home, and the cycle of the Jewish calendar are primary vehicles for the engagement of Soviet Jews in Jewish experiences. Programs involving the entire family are the best vehicle for engagement. Jewish acculturation and education experiences must be designed as intergenerational activities, not just for children.
- Most Soviet Jewish parents are quite concerned that their children have the opportunity to become positive, knowledgeable members of the Jewish community. This suggests that the initial engagement of parents can be achieved by relating directly to this prime area of self-interest.
- Jewish experiences must be strategically designed so that they are offered in a developmental progression. The Jewish past and the Soviet Jewish past are inextricably connected to their Jewish future. Jewish experiences in day camp lead to after-school Jewish experiences during the school year—not only afternoon Hebrew school, but afternoon or Sunday activities in a Jewish environment and with both a Jewish context and content.
- Acculturation must include the opportunity to sustain the Soviet culture that Jews bring with them from the USSR and to gain access to parts of their national culture and history to which they have been denied access. One of the very first programs we offered was the "Forbidden Books Club," an opportunity to read the works of all the great Soviet writers, many of which they were not permitted to read in the USSR. We recently held the first Russian Arts Festival, a weekend of art, poetry, and music by Soviet Jews.
- We live in a pluralistic Jewish society, and Soviet Jews are entitled to the same rights as American Jews in this regard. American Jews and American Jewish organizations have no right to hold a set of Jewish expectations for Soviet Jews that we are not prepared to meet ourselves. As in the experience of our last several American Jewish generations, a deepening of Jewish experience will take several generations. The children of the present adult refugees are quite likely to be more Jewish than their parents.
- Learning how to be Jewish and a part of the Jewish community is also accomplished through living near and with other Jews. Our Family-to-Family program (the domestic version of the "Adopt-A-Family" program we used in our Soviet Jewry advocacy work) is a good example. Linking American Jewish families to Soviet Jewish newcomer families produces some wonderful results. We now have several hundred such pairs in Chicago. A large number of the newcomers in this program have been helped to find jobs by their American counterparts as a part of this process.
- Special care must be taken to develop programmatic experiences that will also attract native-born Jews and Jews who have been citizens in the community for

many years, although they may not be native-born. A lack of opportunity to develop friendships with American Jews, for example, is a major complaint of many first-wave Soviet Jews.

- The tone of acculturation services must be one of welcoming the newcomer. Combined with an absence of judgmental behavior by staff, this will eventually result in the development of a high trust level, which is absolutely essential.
- Given that Soviet Jews have experienced such negative and hostile responses to their being Jewish, programs must be designed carefully to instill pride in being Jewish.
- Acculturation programs must be structured so as to provide opportunity for acting on one's Jewishness. That is, they should lead to ongoing opportunities to behave in Jewish ways that are valued by the community. The lack of such opportunities is a central phenomenon in the experience of most Soviet Jews.
- Most Soviet Jews consider themselves to be "cultural" Jews, as opposed to religiously identified. This is not merely a matter of semantics, but a reflection of the way in which Soviet Jews approach the question of nationality. In the Soviet Union, Jewishness is a nationality, and all Soviet citizens are required to belong to a nation.
- The emergence from the underground of the Jewish Cultural Movement in the Soviet Union has created a somewhat different set of experiences for many in the current, second wave. More of them know people who were actively Jewish and people who "became" Jewish, even religiously Jewish. Many more now have had some direct personal Jewish involvement than was the case with the first wave of emigrants, for whom such activity was illegal and often dangerous. They have also had a great deal of contact with family and friends who emigrated and who have told them about their Jewish experiences in Israel and the United States.

EXAMPLES OF JEWISH ACCUULTURATION PROGRAMS

When the last wave of Soviet Jews came to the United States we knew very little about their psychological make-up or how they viewed being Jewish. We also knew little about how to structure Jewish acculturation services, and in most instances Jewish communities were so involved in the tasks of resettlement that little attention was devoted to Jewish acculturation.

This time, however, the American Jewish community is much better prepared to fulfill this responsibility because we have learned a great deal about the psyche of Soviet Jews. There is no excuse this time should we fail to do this job the way we now know it can be done.

A large number of Jewish communities are extensively involved in the provision of Jewish acculturation programs incorporating these important elements:

- Aggressive and early outreach to newcomers for the express purpose of involving them in Jewish experiences—Shabbat Welcome Baskets, welcoming visits by American Jewish families, Shabbat family dinners
- Shabbat weekend retreats for families at Jewish communal camps or conference facilities
- Jewish educational programs emphasizing sensory experiences (touch, taste, smell), experiences involving Jewish ritual, Jewish life-cycle events, and provision of ritual objects for the home
- Emphasis upon nationalism—the Jewish people, the State of Israel; use of trips to Israel as a means of reinforcing these concepts *and* as a means of demonstrating that Jews are a strong people with military and political power and prowess
- Family-centered large group programs at the time of Jewish holidays
- Havurah groups for newcomers incorporating study and fellowship experiences
- Family-to-Family programs matching Soviet and American families with the

goal being the development of ongoing relationships, not just one-time invitations to a Shabbat dinner or a Pesach seder

- Identification of potential Soviet Jewish leadership for participation in Jewish communal decision-making and planning bodies and in leadership development programs
- Bar and Bat Mitzvah programs, including a requirement for parental participation in a parallel Jewish educational program
- The opportunity for Jewish wedding ceremonies for couples
- Opportunities for Jewish naming ceremonies in synagogues and to have a *brit milah*
- Specially designed Jewish educational programs for the majority of Soviet Jewish children who do not attend Jewish day schools
- Special efforts to involve Soviet Jews in participation in community fund-raising campaigns; this year in the Chicago campaign, the Soviet Jewish community held its first formal campaign event in a downtown hotel, and just like the other divisions, they paid to attend the event so they could then make a gift to support both the regular campaign and Passage to Freedom

PARAMETERS OF SUCCESS

It is vital to understand that there is nothing exotic or magical about doing this task of Jewish acculturation. Surrounding the task with these mystical qualities will make us feel as if it is impossible when it is, in reality, an eminently achievable challenge.

Similarly, the criteria for evaluating our experience are relatively simple.

- The extent of participation in Jewish holiday experiences in the home and in the community
- The number of visitors to Israel
- The extent of participation in the community fund-raising campaign
- The nature of parental Jewish choices:

what choices do they make about their children's needs/future, do they select colleges that have a significant Jewish student population, what neighborhoods do Soviet Jewish families choose to live in?

- The emergence of Soviet Jews in the community's leadership system
- The participation of Soviet Jews in the advocacy movement to help those remaining in the Soviet Union
- An evaluation of the proportion of the Soviet Jews reached by acculturation programs

CONCLUSION

We are part of a great moment in Jewish history. We have the opportunity to reclaim hundreds of thousands of Jews who were lost to the Jewish people. How to integrate Jewish newcomers into an existing Jewish community is certainly not a new problem for the Jewish people. What is new, however, is our concern about how to do it Jewishly.

During a debate over new policies at a recent meeting of Chicago's Task Force on Resettlement a member said, "We're not just resettling Soviet Jews here to be warm bodies. We want them to be a part of the Jewish community." What is significant about the statement is that it was made by one of our Chicago Soviet Jewish community members, a former refugee, who now sits on our task force as a Jewish community leader. To be sure, the task is complex, sometimes overwhelming, and requires substantial human and financial resources. Yet, it is clearly possible to accomplish our long-term goal of Jewish communal integration.

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