

THE CHALLENGE OF ACCULTURATING SOVIET JEWS

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The decision to do a "better" job of acculturating the current wave of Soviet emigres than was done for the wave who arrived in the early 1980s poses a great challenge for the Jewish community. Almost every Jewish community and every communal agency and institution is currently involved in some way with the current wave of Soviet newcomers. These communities and agencies are currently struggling with how to deploy most effectively their human and financial resources to meet the challenge of acculturation.

The current wave of Jewish emigration from the Soviet Union is creating many challenges for the American Jewish community. Among them is the decision to do a "better" job of Jewish acculturation of Soviet newcomers this time around than appeared to have been done for the last wave who arrived in the early 1980s. However, the enormity of this challenge was only partially understood when that decision was made and may not yet be fully understood in all quarters. Now, in the midst of the second full year of the current wave, some reflection on the ways in which the community is attempting successful Jewish acculturation may be helpful in identifying issues and determining strategies for the immediate future. As one surveys the current Jewish communal landscape in terms of the absorption and acculturation of Soviet Jews, several significant elements emerge:

- A steady stream of arrivals, dispersing throughout North America
- Involvement of almost every communal agency and institution with Soviet Jews
- Need for more information about every aspect of resettlement and acculturation
- A quandary as to how best to deploy limited human and financial resources in meeting the challenge of resettlement and acculturation

EVERY COMMUNITY IS RECEIVING NEWCOMERS

If any community has not yet resettled Soviet Jews, it soon will! More than 40,000 Jews have arrived in the United States since October 1988, and similar numbers are likely to continue to arrive annually for the foreseeable future. According to the National Conference on Soviet Jewry, as many as 1,000,000 Jews may want to leave the Soviet Union. At present rates of emigration, it will be five or six years until all those who wish to emigrate are able to go to Israel or the United States. Although as much as 80 % of the American arrivals will probably resettle in six large cities, some Soviet Jews are coming to communities as distant from the large Jewish centers as Greensboro, North Carolina and Des Moines, Iowa. Virtually every federation community has accepted new Americans from the Soviet Union in the past year. Although some arrivals have family members already living in the community from the last wave to assist them in resettlements, others have no relatives in the United States. Yet, these "unanchored" immigrants require the same basic services of housing, medical evaluation, English language acquisition, job placement, and schooling for children, as well as services and programming for acculturation.

To meet the needs of a steady, sustained stream of annual arrivals requires that every community not only provide services for new arrivals, but must also at the same time maintain services for those who have already settled there. This challenge transcends community size. For Greensboro to resettle and acculturate 20 people annually may be as much of a task as Chicago accommodating 2,500! Finding ways to absorb and acculturate its arrivals is a challenge each community must face and meet until the process is completed for every new American.

EVERY JEWISH COMMUNAL AGENCY AND INSTITUTION IS INVOLVED

Jewish acculturation includes a wide range of services and programs provided by many agencies and institutions. The auspices under which acculturation programs are delivered differ from community to community. In addition to basic resettlement services, including referral to Jewish education, some family service agencies conduct various acculturation programs. In many communities, English language classes for adults, which are provided by family service agencies, vocational service agencies, and Jewish Community Centers, include some Jewish content. In some communities, synagogues provide acculturation services and assist with such traditional resettlement services as securing housing and job placement. Soviet children are attending classes in day schools, community schools, congregational schools to some extent, and, in a few cities, special programs developed by JCCs. Soviet preschoolers are found in JCC day care and nursery school programs. Jewish-sponsored residential summer camps and day camps are called upon to accommodate school-aged children, as well as teens and young adults in counselor roles. Family-to-family programs, welcome baskets, holiday celebrations, and Jewish community tours are provided by federations, family service agencies, bureaus of Jewish education, JCCs, and synagogues.

Coordinating acculturation activities is a task assigned by some communities to the family service agency (see article by Kahan in this issue), JCC, bureau of Jewish education, or to the federation itself. Other communities have not yet identified Jewish acculturation as a function in addition to resettlement. National organizations are attempting to assist local affiliates with resources, program models, and information. The National Council of Jewish Women has published a guidebook on family-to-family programs, the Union of American Hebrew Congregations offers its "Am Echad" kit to member and nonmember congregations, and Hadassah is encouraging the establishment of local chapters for Soviet Jews in certain communities based on a successful experience in San Francisco.

With the involvement of so many agencies and institutions in acculturation efforts, each community must give serious consideration to the coordination of these efforts.

MORE INFORMATION IS NEEDED

As the numbers of immigrants grow, as more communities are faced with the challenges of Jewish acculturation, as more programs are developed, more information is being requested from any likely source by local communities, agencies, organizations, and workers. They are requesting information about policy issues, funding, successful programs, staffing, models, and available materials in Russian. In response to these requests, both the Association of Jewish Family and Children's Agencies (AJFCA) and the Council of Jewish Federations (CJF) have resumed publication of their resettlement bulletins. Over 600 people receive the AJFCA bulletin alone! The professional and lay leadership of AJFCA, CJF, the Jewish Education Service of North America, and the Jewish Community Center Association of North America have been meeting regularly to share information and coordinate activities. More than 100 professionals employed in virtually every

Jewish communal setting, who have major responsibility for Jewish acculturation activities, programs, and services, have been identified. Some of these workers were involved in 1978-1982 when the last wave of Soviet Jews, some 100,000, were resettled, absorbed, and acculturated. They, and Soviet emigres from the first wave, are a valuable source of information and perspective.

Another welcome source of information regarding the first wave is the CJF report, "The Class of '79," which assesses the Jewishness today of those who arrived in the last wave. This report raises as many questions as it answers. How long does it take for Soviet newcomers to be sufficiently absorbed and acculturated so that the ongoing services of the community are adequate for meeting their needs? What are the stages that newcomers pass through in becoming fully acculturated? What effect does the point of origin in the Soviet Union have on the readiness and willingness of newcomers to participate in American Jewish life? To these general questions are added the particular questions of communities and workers relating to their different circumstances. Perhaps, in contrast to the earlier experience, answers to these questions and others will be found in time for the information to be of use in developing programs and services.

HOW TO DEPLOY LIMITED FINANCIAL AND HUMAN RESOURCES

The foregoing discussion begins to clarify the magnitude of the challenge facing communities, agencies and organizations in absorbing and acculturating Soviet Jews. In addition, the task of securing adequate funding to operate existing services and develop needed new approaches surely must seem overwhelming. It is not merely rhetoric to aver that resettlement and Jewish acculturation are the natural fulfillment of years of demonstrations and protests on behalf of Soviet Jews. If funds are limited, then new resources and approaches must

be developed, as many communities have already discovered. Some are involving synagogues in as many services, programs, and activities as possible. Others are providing funding for day schools, JCCs, and other agencies only for incremental costs and additional specialized support services, rather than paying for full tuition and full fees. Still other communities, particularly smaller ones, are using volunteers instead of paid staff wherever possible. Some of these approaches challenge the long-standing principles and practices of the community and the professionalization of services so strongly advocated for so many years. Re-examining the patterns of service development and delivery developed over the years may become very necessary as the number of Soviet Jews in our communities increases, assuming that fund raising increases only marginally. Perhaps professionals, in the not too distant future, will be involved in service development and in supervising volunteers who will deliver the services. Should a trend in this direction begin to emerge, thoughtful deliberation by professionals will be necessary to consider its possible consequences. In any event, the American Jewish community, for the present, appears determined to accomplish the task of resettlement and acculturation without mortgaging the future, either here or in Israel.

CONCLUSION

Soviet Jews are arriving in unprecedented numbers and will do so for several years. It will take all our devotion, creativity, perseverance, and energy to fulfill our collective responsibility effectively, efficiently, and with good humor and graciousness. Then, the task of resettlement and Jewish acculturation, rather than overwhelming us, will result in new partnerships, new approaches, and new methods. Just as our ancestors created the contemporary Jewish communal agency framework and system in response to monumental immigration,

resettlement, and acculturation needs, so too, our generation will refashion the communal enterprise as we respond to the needs of our day. The task of resettling

and acculturating Soviet Jews will be done; in what way, how well, and with what results is for us to determine.