

College Outreach: The Integration of Russian, Sephardic and Israeli Immigrant Groups

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Organization of student groups to enable adaptation to the college of the several ethnically different and potentially frictional ethnicities. Group processes differed by ethnicity.

THE Jewish Student Federation of York University is the campus organization for Jewish activities. Its function is similar to that of Hillel, however the main funding support comes from our local federation, the Toronto Jewish Congress, and not from B'nai B'rith.

The general goal of the Jewish Student Federation (JSF) is "to provide a Jewish presence on campus". More specifically, our mandate is to provide social, cultural, religious and educational programming for the York community. Programming meets with varying degrees of success—success being based on whether or not the unspoken needs of the students are being met. But before we are able to determine the needs which influence our programming we must find the students.

As we know, many unaffiliated university students refuse to enter their Jewish campus organization offices. This intransigence occurs due to shyness, intimidation, fear of cliques, the "uncoolness" of belonging, and numerous other reasons. The vast majority however, are unclear about their reasons for not getting involved, and thus do not make any effort to do so. This is where outreach becomes imperative.

The job of an executive director of a Jewish campus organization is primarily an administrative one. The authors had

attended undergraduate courses at least eight years ago, and sometimes find it difficult to see into the minds of today's college youth. The student-to-student method of outreach has thus proven the most effective.

This year a dedicated and outgoing student was set up with an information table in the student union concourse and left to recruit other students for our programs. This process of direct outreach is effective, but it is only one of the outreach methods that has worked for us.

Two years ago a student came to the JSF office to inform me that a Sephardic student organization was being formed. Sephardic students were a known population at York. They appeared in numbers at our dances, distinguished by their dark eyes, hair and complexions, as well as by the fact that they "dressed up" more than their Ashkenazi counterparts. However, until this time we had been completely unaware of their need to establish their *own* identity.

The formation of this organization was already underway as a *reaction* to the JSF which was a basically Ashkenazi operation.

Our response was to offer assistance in their formation process. A meeting was arranged with the leaders of their group and budgetary aid was offered to them. It became apparent during the meeting that they were not as organized as we had believed. Thus an application

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was made to the World Heritage Foundation for a grant to fund an outreach worker.

This worker began by contacting the apparent leader of the organization. Because they had felt neglected over the years, the Sephardic students were wary of any Ashkenazi efforts on their behalf. Thus long hours were spent in conversation with the leader in an attempt to establish a trusting relationship between both groups.

As an overview, the Sephardic students we targeted immigrated to Canada when they were very young. They generally appear to be (but are often not) upper middle-class, are traditional in terms of Sephardic culture and some religious observance, have close-knit family structures and speak three or more languages including English, French, Spanish, Arabic and Hebrew. They are argumentative, outspoken and yet very warm and friendly by nature.

Returning to the issue of integration, the Ashkenaz/Sepharad division in the established Toronto Jewish community further complicated campus matters. This division in the adult community exists because the parents of the Sephardic students are not major UJA contributors, nor are they active in the hierarchy of Toronto Jewish Congress. This is largely due to the fact that the Sephardic community in Toronto is relatively young, having settled there within the past 30 years. Establishing their own communal network has been their top priority.

Another complicating factor which had to be dealt with was the fact that there is an internal split in the Sephardic community between the French- and Spanish-speaking factions. There is a minimum of toleration and communication between these two groups. A meeting was arranged by the outreach worker with the heads of the French

and Spanish student factions, which helped to solidify their purpose in forming a united front and to eradicate infighting.

One of the first programs planned by the group was a *Tu B'Shevat* seder, a Sephardic tradition. The seder was conducted by two rabbis, one French, one Spanish, in Spanish, French and English. Eighty of the estimated 150 Sephardic youth of university age attended the program, all as a result of the personal phone calls they had received from group members.

In general, it has been established that for a program to appeal to Sephardic students the requirements are that 1) it be Sephardic in nature, 2) that Sephardim constitute the majority of attendees, 3) that it "look good"; that is, there be an abundance of food, music and people, and 4) all factions must be pleased.

Contact between the outreach worker and the Sephardic rabbis who supported his efforts was the next step. However, contact with the adult Sephardic community in the form of room bookings and other assistance was largely avoided in order not to contribute to the already existing factionalism.

The need to obliterate the students' self-image that "we can't do anything" was the most pressing issue at this point. Organizational skills needed to be imparted. Thus, a Sephardic conference was planned. What began as a weekend in the country for six pre-registered students who wanted to deal with Sephardic issues, turned into a cross-country extravaganza, with 150 participants from Ontario and Quebec. After the major success of that weekend, the Sephardic students believed that most anything could be done, and that they were the ones to do it. From this belief, *Or Hahayim*, the Sephardic student organization, came into existence.

The first meetings of *Or Hahayim* were screaming matches, which scared many

newcomers away; however, soon a level-headed leadership began to emerge. Momentum from the conference carried over to the planning of an Ashkenaz/Sepharad unity dinner. This was the first program which showed that the Sephardic students were finally comfortable enough with their own identity to begin to look outward. As the group grew more cohesive they began to resent the presence of the (Ashkenazic) outreach worker. At that point the worker began to remove himself from the decision-making process, and the leadership which had been cultivated took over. However, because of the rapport that had been built up by the worker, these students finally felt comfortable on the JSF premises.

There were other lessons which were learned from working with Sephardic youth. Firstly, the women are over-protected and are not permitted to spend a weekend away from home without being chaperoned, usually by an older brother. At first many women weren't even able to go out at night alone. Secondly, programs involving ritual and *kashrut* are accepted de facto and understood by all. Lastly, all programs begin up to an hour and a half later than scheduled, and advance registration is an unfamiliar concept. Despite this, group leaders always assure us that all is running smoothly and that people will show up. They are always right. The group is now alive and well and co-ordinating a gala "Evening in Casablanca".

After meeting with such success with the Sephardic students, the same tactics were applied to the Russians. The outreach worker made contact with a Russian student who had been in Canada for six years and who was fairly integrated into Canadian life. A social program was planned, signs were printed in Russian and English, and word of the program was spread from person to

person. This wine and cheese party drew a crowd of thirty-five students, several of whom were members on JSF mailing lists but who had never before attended a program.

During this opening event the outreach worker facilitated discussion with the students in order to find out the interests of the group, if any, and to determine if there was interest in holding another meeting. Despite the fact that most of the group members had attended the program in order to fulfill a personal social need, few were willing to raise their hands and volunteer information and opinions. When asked about their hesitancy, most stated that they were not used to speaking so openly or voicing opinions as to what *they* wanted. Many were wary of the democratic process.

The second program with the Russian group involved screening the film "In Prison Land". This film depicts the political prison camps in Russia. Largely unaware of the penal institutions in the Soviet Union, most of the students were shocked to discover the reality of such things.

Most of the Russian students have come to Canada within the last eight years, and are still making the initial adjustment to North America. The majority are disillusioned about life here based on their expectations. Many of their parents are unemployed. Those who were engineers in the Soviet Union now work in factories. The primary reason for moving to North America rather than Israel was financial stability and the fear of war in Israel.

These Russians were not dissidents. The majority have little or no Jewish education or identity. The first contact with Judaism for most was with the Lubavitch and Chabad movements, both very alien to them. The rest of the Jewish community is just now beginning to open its arms and embrace them.

Only now, after having faced relative failure in assimilating into Canadian life, are the Russians ready to be Jews.

However, many of them are uncomfortable in religious settings. The Russians prefer dealing with Judaism from an historical perspective, focusing on topics such as Russian Jewish history. In general, they are more academically oriented than the Sephardic students and would readily attend a lecture.

There was little of the squabbling that held up the Sephardic process among the Russians. These students are comfortable being a part of the hierarchy and having decisions made for them. During the coming year JSF hopes to sponsor a Russian Jewish conference. A group of twenty (from a total of 120) attended the annual four-day JSF student and young adult retreat this past February. However, they remained a group unto themselves and did not attempt to mix with the population at large. The hope in having a Russian Jewish conference is that they will be given the opportunity for their Russian Jewish identity to emerge, thus making them more secure in sharing it with us.

When the decision to help an Israeli student organization get off the ground was made, the JSF lacked the funds to hire another outreach worker. The program director of the JSF approached several Israeli students to find out if they had any interest in forming such a group. The response was enthusiastic. One student, who said that he had thought about such a group on his own but had no notion of how to go about forming it, took the responsibility of preparing a flyer in Hebrew and English announcing a general meeting.

A similar group had existed in Toronto several years prior to this, but had lapsed for various reasons. Thus, this attempt was being initiated at square one.

Eleven students came to the opening

meeting. Discussion centered on the whys and why-nots of forming a group, the purpose, structure and goals of such a group. The basic need expressed by the students was that of finding a milieu in which there were people whom they could relate to, those who had an "Israeli mentality". Several other meetings were held as the year progressed, and the group organized events such as a Purim party at the home of one of the members. They also sponsored and coordinated a day on Israeli society during JSF's Jewish Experience Week—the main event of the day being a very successful dialogue between Israeli and North American students. Unfortunately, the group established itself late in the school year and, as a result, couldn't develop enough momentum before exams began. But there is a core group ready to begin more programming in September.

In dealing with all three student groups the basic issues were similar. All clamoured for their own space and their own meeting times. All had a need to speak their own language and to meet others with their own "mentality".

The Israelis differ in that they still have one foot in North America and one foot in Israel. Whereas the Russians and Sephardim are here to stay, the Israeli student is living in limbo, still dealing with the issue of where he or she will put down roots.

All of the groups displayed a need for socializing with and supporting the others in their group. The basic need to establish their own identity within the larger Jewish community was another consistent factor among all three groups. Giving the groups their autonomy, their own budget and the "permission" to do their own thing, is slowly leading to their integration within the larger community.

The Canadian view of society is a multicultural one, a "mosaic", as op-