

# CULTURAL ADAPTATION IN SOVIET JEWISH RESETTLEMENT:

## A Reciprocal Adjustment Process

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*Cultural adaptation in resettlement is a two-way process. Soviet Jewish emigres have had a positive impact on the New York Jewish community, which now has more realistic perceptions of their "cousins" from the FSU. However, both the emigre and host communities must continue to struggle with the mutual task of cultural adaptation.*

### A HISTORY OF SOVIET-JEWISH RESETTLEMENT

The rescue of Jews from the Soviet Union was initiated in the early 1970s through the joint efforts of the Soviet Jewry advocacy movement in the United States, the Israeli government, and the government of the United States. At that time, the Soviet Union did not have an emigration policy, since it was unthinkable that any rational citizen would want to leave the utopian Soviet society. However, in order to relieve pressure from the West and obtain certain concessions, the Communist government adopted a policy of Jewish "reunification." Under this policy, Soviet Jews were allowed to accept formal, written invitations from relatives in Israel to leave the Soviet Union for purposes of reunification with family and the Jewish homeland.

Thousands of invitations were delivered from both Israel and the United States to Soviet Jews. Invitations from "relatives" in Israel were the only ones deemed eligible for consideration by the Soviet authorities, despite the fact that the origins of these documents were somewhat questionable. An elaborate system of movement of the Jews who were granted exit visas for reunification was developed with the cooperation of the Dutch, Austrian, and Italian governments.

Jews issued exit visas by the "OVIR," the Soviet exit authorities, were transported by air or rail to Vienna, Austria, under the auspices of the government of the Netherlands. In Vienna, the refugees were greeted by the Jewish Agency, which arranged for care and maintenance, as well as transport to Israel. Those who chose to come to the United States were transported by the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS) to Italy, where they waited to be processed by the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service. The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (AJDC) provided care and maintenance to thousands of Soviet Jews in Rome, Ladispoli, Santa Marinella, Ostia, and other communities, while HIAS helped the refugees to prepare applications for admission to the United States with refugee status.<sup>1</sup>

Despite their cooperation in winning freedom for Soviet Jews, a major controversy raged between the American Jewish community on one side, and the Israeli government and American advocates for the Jewish Agency on the other: freedom of choice for Soviet-Jewish refugees—a right to immigrate to any part of the free world—versus an obligation to make *aliyah* to Israel.

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<sup>1</sup>In the 1990s, after the fall of Communism, it became possible to process Jewish refugees coming to the United States from the former Soviet Union directly out of Moscow, thus eliminating the extraordinary expense of care and maintenance in Italy that had been incurred by both the Jewish community and the U.S. government.

This controversy was further fueled by the erratic flow of Jewish refugees from the Soviet Union. In the 1970s only a trickle of emigration was permitted by the Communist government. In 1979, however, a huge number of Jews were allowed to emigrate, with almost 25,000 refugees—presumably the largest group of Jewish refugees the American Jewish community would ever have to resettle—entering the United States. Then suddenly in the early 1980s the doors of the Soviet Union slammed shut, with less than two thousand people a year getting out. In 1986 emigration out of the Soviet Union again began to escalate. The late 1980s and early 1990s saw almost 40,000 Jews from the former Soviet Union (FSU) immigrate to the United States, with almost 20,000 per year coming to New York.<sup>2</sup>

### **SOVIET JEWISH IMMIGRATION TO NEW YORK CITY**

Jewish immigration into New York in the 1980s and 1990s has dramatically altered the face of the city's Jewish community. Over 200,000 Jewish refugees from the former Soviet Union have settled in New York City.

Arrival rates of Jews from the FSU into New York are projected to continue at levels of approximately 12,000 per year, although this could change due to possible cuts in the overall number of refugees admitted by the U.S. government and/or the loss of refugee status for Jews from the former Soviet republics. Even if the inflow of Jews from Russia, Ukraine, the Baltic, and Central Asian states decreases, by the year 2000 this population will constitute close to 25 percent of all Jews living in New York City.

The movement of over 200,000 Jews from the FSU into the New York Jewish community during the past 25 years has presented an

enormous challenge for both the emigres and the host community. Millions of dollars and unquantifiable hours of work have been devoted to the task of resettling this population in New York and assisting the newcomers in their efforts to achieve self-sufficiency and social adaptation.

### **THE MYTH OF ACCULTURATION**

The organized Jewish community in New York has viewed the process of cultural adaptation, or "acculturation," as an unidirectional rather than a reciprocal process. While the established community understands that it has had varied degrees of success in its attempt to integrate and indoctrinate the emigres, it has little insight into the impact of Jews from the FSU on Jewish New York. Cultural adaptation in resettlement is in fact a two-way process, and massive reciprocal adaptation has been underway in New York since the mid-1970s as this large group of newcomers from the FSU has steadily engaged with the host Jewish community.

### **RESTORING JUDAISM TO JEWS FROM THE FSU**

One of the most significant thrusts of the American Jewish community's early resettlement programs for Jews from the FSU was in the area of promoting Jewish acculturation. During the first wave of migration from the Soviet Union in the 1980s, the organized Jewish community in New York and throughout the country invested heavily in "Judaizing the Russians." Ironically, this was the reverse of the strategy employed by the host New York's German-Jewish community in the resettlement of Eastern European immigrants during the 1800s, when the newcomers were thought to be too Jewish and were encouraged to assimilate into mainstream American culture.

Under the Communist regime in the Soviet Union, Jews could not study and practice Judaism for over 60 years. With the exception of the Georgian and Bukharian Jews, most of the immigrants from the FSU came to

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<sup>2</sup>HIAS referred 50 percent of the Soviet Jewish refugees coming to the United States to Jewish communities throughout the country, while approximately 50 percent of the caseload was referred to the New York Association for New American (NYANA) for resettlement in New York City.

the United States with little knowledge of Jewish ritual and history. And while many may have intuitively held a positive sense of Jewish identity as individuals, most did not identify with any organized or communal expression of being Jewish.

American-born Jews were surprised and somewhat upset when the emigres did not immediately exhibit a strong impulse to connect with Judaism and/or to seek affiliation with Jewish institutions. The concern over this population's Jewish identity was exacerbated by recent studies on intermarriage and assimilation by American Jews. Fearful that the rescue of Soviet Jewry from the threat of assimilation in the Soviet Union would simply translate into assimilation in the United States, the host community in New York committed itself to ensuring that Soviet Jews would be resettled "Jewishly."

During the 1980s, new arrivals into New York were offered free synagogue and Jewish community center (JCC) memberships, as well as day-school and camp scholarships. The UJA-Federation agencies in New York received priority funding to provide Jewish acculturation programming. A great effort and large sums of philanthropic dollars were expended in order to bring these unaffiliated Jewish immigrants "into the fold."

Concern began to grow as many newcomers terminated relationships with Jewish centers, camps, and synagogues after the subsidies expired. The onset of activities by missionaries and cults in the large emigre communities in Brooklyn and Queens prompted the Jewish community to establish antimissionary educational programs, outreach campaigns, and a "cult clinic." However, it soon became clear that a more sophisticated and less paternalistic approach would be necessary if these new Jewish Americans were to make positive connections to Jewish life in New York.

In the past decade, both host and newcomer communities have made efforts to adjust their norms and move toward each other. The host community began to understand that the emigres tended to identify Jewishly in

terms of individual rather than communal or organizational relationships. A series of dinner dialogues, sponsored by the New York chapter of the American Jewish Committee, for leaders of the emigre and host communities did a great deal to promote mutual understanding and insight. Implementation of programs staffed by Jewish volunteers that clearly demonstrated the extension of a "communal helping hand"—such as Passover food package distributions, English-language acquisition discussion groups, and orientations to New York—were well received by many of the newcomers and helped connect them to the Jewish community.

NYANA, the agencies of the UJA-Federation network, synagogues and other Jewish organizations, and institutions in New York offered the emigre population hundreds of specially designed Jewish cultural programs. The Wexner Heritage Foundation developed a seminar for Jewish emigres from the FSU who held promise as future Jewish communal leaders in New York. Classes, workshops, and dialogues on Jewish history and literature were held, bilingual publications with Jewish cultural and issue-oriented themes were printed and distributed, and newcomer families were adopted by Jewish families from the host community. The perceptions and behaviors of the host community were reoriented to the cultural context from which the newcomers came, while the emigres moved toward the host community.

#### **PERCEPTIONS OF THE RESETTLEMENT SYSTEM**

At the outset, Jewish immigrants from the FSU coming into New York tended to see the agencies of the New York Jewish community as extensions of the U.S. government. Jews from the FSU had no experience with voluntary human service organizations funded by philanthropic contributions. The staffs of NYANA and the UJA-Federation communal agencies were viewed as government bureaucrats, who were to be dealt with as one dealt with Soviet authorities—always placating but never really trusting. The service providers

at the agencies, on the other hand, viewed the emigres as manipulative and unappreciative of their assistance.

Over time, both providers and consumers have developed better understanding and respect for their respective values and frames of reference. Agency staff have had to modify their resettlement practice to accommodate the cultural context from which their clients have come. Resettlement workers have discarded the notion of the melting pot and have embraced the concept of cultural pluralism. Cultural adaptation rather than assimilation to the host culture has become the goal of resettlement. The emigres, for their part, have begun to realize that the help they receive is extended through the philanthropy of the organized Jewish community and its concern for the welfare of fellow Jews.

"Professional social workers are significant in facilitating the acculturation process and are usually the most available societal role models for immigrants during the initial stage of resettlement" (Handelman, 1983). In an innovative approach to the promotion of cross-cultural understanding and adjustment, NYANA, the Jewish Board of Family and Children's Services, and the Wurzweiler School of Social Work of Yeshiva University have jointly developed subsidized programs of graduate education in social work for Jewish immigrants from the FSU.

Bicultural social workers who can encourage bilingualism, model culturally appropriate behaviors, provide corrective feedback, and help newcomers develop analytic problem-solving skills can be of great value in helping immigrants move into the mainstream (Longres, 1991). The development of a cadre of professionally trained, bilingual social workers also created another bridge between the emigre and established communities. These bilingual, bicultural service providers have been valuable communicators and interpreters of the expectations and normative patterns of the newcomers to both professionals and lay members of the organized Jewish community, while helping newcomers adjust to the mainstream culture.

Another valuable mediating force has been a networking project developed by NYANA and UJA-Federation known as ACE, the Advisory Committee for Emigres. Members of the emigre community and New York-born Jews who have achieved success in such fields as science and engineering help recent arrivals from the former Soviet Union prepare for the American job market and find employment. ACE volunteers mentor newly arrived engineers, mathematicians, and scientists; help them prepare resumes and conduct job searches; and offer networking through referrals. The ACE program has provided established emigres with an opportunity to experience an important Jewish value of the host community—to engage in one of the highest forms of *tzedakah* by helping others earn their own living. It has also helped to better acquaint native-born volunteers with emigres in the context of a joint endeavor to resettle newcomers, thus helping both communities view each other as equal and essential partners.

#### **EMIGRE COMMUNAL ORGANIZATIONS**

During the past few years yet another normative pattern on the part of the emigre community in New York appears to have been significantly modified. Emigres from the FSU have until recently displayed a distrust of formal organizations—and thus the organized Jewish community—due to the negative experiences they were subjected to under the Soviet Communist regime. A dozen formal organizations have now emerged in the emigre community based on either professional, geographic, or cultural themes. These groups have almost simultaneously reached out to the agencies of the New York and national Jewish communities for both technical assistance and funding. In New York, the ACE program has been expanded to provide these groups with technical assistance in organizational development. NYANA has also extended its resource-development staff and physical facilities to these newly emerging organizations.

These fledgling organizations have had somewhat unrealistic expectations of the host community. Their frame of reference may be based to a certain degree on a sense of entitlement, emanating from the experience of having lived in a welfare state, which was both totalitarian and paternalistic. In any case, the leaders of these groups have periodically criticized the host community for being less than forthcoming, particularly in providing funds. There is an evolving understanding on the part of these groups, however, of how fund raising and distribution of philanthropic funds are carried out in the New York Jewish communal system. The UJA-Federation network, at the same time, has been responding to pressure from the emigre organizations and has directed more staff resources toward these groups.

Many Jewish communal agencies have made a special effort to recruit leaders of the emigre community to their boards of directors. While this effort is in its infancy, those emigres who have accepted board positions have seriously committed themselves to this responsibility. Emigre board members, however, have showed little patience for the process-oriented discussions and deliberations of many Jewish organizations. They tend to prefer concise and "to-the-point" decision making. Organizations desiring emigre leadership participation have had to take this fact into consideration in terms of the existing Jewish corporate culture. Where this has not happened, many emigre members have excused themselves from board membership.

#### **EMERGING SELF-RELIANCE**

In the 1990s, NYANA for the first time instituted a Relative Assistance program in order to help underwrite the resettlement of Jews emigrating from Russia, Ukraine, and the other former Soviet republics. Stateside relatives in the emigre community were asked to contribute cash on a per capita basis or to assume some of the costs for services provided to their arriving families through an interest-free loan made available by the Hebrew Free Loan Society of New York.

Stateside relatives in the emigre community were extremely forthcoming and responsive to this program. The repayment rate on loans has been over 85 percent, indicating a shift in the norms of a population that entered the United States only a few years ago with an entitlement perspective regarding what the host community "owed" immigrants.

As a result of the success of the loan program under Relative Assistance, the perception of the emigre community by the host community has been altered. The Hebrew Free Loan Society, for example, considers emigres from the FSU as good credit risks and has enthusiastically developed other interest-free loan programs—for example, small business loans—for this population.

Stateside relatives have also been asked to provide interim housing for arriving relatives. The total value of this in-kind contribution is equal to approximately \$10 million per year. Between housing and Relative Assistance funding, the emigre community is thus contributing close to \$15 million per year to refugee resettlement in New York. This is an indication that the emigre community has begun to assume responsibility for a major Jewish communal effort.

#### **AN UNEXPECTED PHILANTHROPIC ASSET**

After years of supposition that a philanthropic campaign in the emigre community would yield little, the host community created the Russian Division of UJA-Federation of New York. This division has not only raised significant funds to help pay for Jewish communal services in New York and Israel but has also encouraged both the newcomer and the host communities to generalize their identities and to move toward a new Jewish communal collective conscience. The establishment of a formal institution of philanthropic giving in the emigre community clearly indicates a change in the values of a population that had no previous experience with volunteerism or Jewish communal responsibility. The belief held by American-born Jews that this population of immigrants had

no inclination to affiliate with the organized Jewish community has also been altered as a result of the involvement of the emigre community in the UJA-Federation campaign.

The new fund-raising structure began its activities by emulating the programs of other established fund-raising divisions, but with a decidedly "home-country" frame of reference. Its first fund-raising dinner was held at a Russian restaurant in Brighton Beach, with typical Russian and Ukrainian fare and speakers from the emigre community. Recent fund-raising events, however, display clear evidence of cultural adaptation: They have become gala affairs, held at major hotels in Manhattan, requiring black-tie attire, and featuring keynotes from major politicians in state and federal offices.

#### THE CHANGED FACE OF RESETTLEMENT

Many immigrants from the former Soviet Union experience adjustment difficulties that stem from cultural disorientation. "Culture shock" is often the result of a lack of validation of the newcomer by the host culture. The immigrant feels uprooted and adrift emotionally, and "predictability and familiarity in life may be replaced by a sense of chaos and perceptual disorganization, resulting in extreme emotional stress" (Westwood & Ishiyama, 1991).

Although new arrivals experience the same challenges of cultural adaptation as their predecessors, the host environment has changed dramatically. Emigres from earlier waves have had a positive impact on the New York Jewish community, which now has more realistic perceptions and greater understanding of their "cousins" from the FSU.

The emigre community has also changed since the early years of migration to New York. Many of those who arrived in the 1980s have achieved a great deal and have become successful in their professions or in business. Those who arrived in their teens

have been especially successful in developing careers, in fields as diverse as law, computer science, publishing, and financial markets. In addition to financial success, many of the 200,000 Russian-speaking Jews living in New York have taken on leadership roles in both the emigre and larger Jewish communities. Their insight and guidance in helping shape and improve the cultural adaptation process of the newcomers and the host community on a continuing basis make "starting over" a smoother, less-daunting task for the present wave of immigrants from the former Soviet Union.

#### CONCLUSIONS

Cultural adaptation is a reciprocal process. Newcomers adapt to the mainstream host society and, at the same time, affect the established culture. A new, generalized collective conscience results. However, it is often surprising to find that Jewish immigrants who have been in the United States for some time still are unclear about the structure and dynamics of the established Jewish community, and that many American-born Jews in New York still stereotype newcomers from the FSU. The cultural adaptation process is developmental, and although significant movement along the cultural-adaptation continuum has occurred in New York, both the emigre and host communities must continue to struggle with this mutual task.

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