The Absorption of Soviet Jewish Immigrants— Their Impact On Jewish Communal Institutions*

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Though it may appear too soon to assess the long-range effect on the American-Jewish community of the recent wave of Soviet Jewish immigrants, there has been a number of more subtle impacts resulting from the attempts of the Jewish community to respond to the challenge of resettling, absorbing and integrating the newcomers into American-Jewish life.

Considering the fact that the 16,000 Soviet Jewish immigrants who have arrived in the United States have only come into our communities since 1968, and of that number, the largest group has come only in the last four years, it is probably premature to begin to talk about their impact on our community and its institutions. Four years is a short period of time in the life of a community, and certainly not sufficient time for a new group to begin to make any sort of measurable and dramatic impact. We may even ask the question as to whether they will ever exert major influence on the development of the Jewish community in a way that is comparable to the manner in which previous waves of Jewish immigration contributed to the evolution of Jewish community life in the United States.

Long Range Impact Questionable

When one examines the characteristics of the immigrant groups that came in the waves starting in the late 1800's through the 1930's and the characteristics of the Jewish community during those years, we may conclude that the present group will have little lasting effect even though it is having some immediate effects on the American-Jewish community. These earlier groups of immigrants came into a society that was far more fluid and less rigidly institutionalized than the society in which we live today. Indeed, if we face a problem in our community today, it is the often discussed issue of our being overly organized, with insufficient opportunity for adequate response to changing needs and requirements. If one adds to this, that this particular immigrant group is not Jewishly conscious to the extent that previous immigrant groups were, the matter becomes even more complex. We all recall that the former new additions to the Jewish community came from societies which were intensively Jewish and contained a plethora of Jewish institutions. When they came into our communities, they sought to recreate and duplicate their own institutions and when this was not possible, they moved into the existing organized community and began to exercise great influence on its development. It must be stressed, however, that the ability of these groups of Jewish immigrants to accomplish what they did stemmed from the fact that the life they came from was rich in Jewish content and dynamic Jewish institutions.

As we all have become aware, the most recent group of Jewish immigrants, those from the Soviet Union, come from a very different kind of society that is characterized by a lack of Jewish communal life and all that it entails. In a recent article, Zvi Gitelman sums it up:

> All in all, in 1975 and 1976 75% and 85.5% respectively, of the immigrants to America were from the Soviet heartland. What is to be learned from these statistics is that since 1973, there is a new type of Soviet Jew emigrating from the Heartland, highly educated, lacking Jewish consciousness, non-Zionist.[1]

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[1] Zvi Gitelman, "Jews in the USSR: Prospects and Policies," *Report-National Jewish Conference Center,* April, 1977, p. 11.

Given these factors, it will be no surprise if this group simply disappears into those aspects of American life which blend with their secularized stance. For them to enter into our organizations and institutions with significant impact, we must give serious thought to creating and implementing activities designed to heighten their Jewishness. But more of this later.

In addition to these broader issues, we need to consider the following as we examine the current influence of this group. Soviet Jews, newly arrived in this country are faced with the primary task of dealing with their move from one society to another which is fundamentally very different from their own. Richard A. Dublin has stated,

> This transplantation to a new society can be compared to the identity crisis experienced by the adolescent whose identity is fluid, changing and not yet crystalized. It is a potential growth experience to be mastered by the immigrant as well as the adolescent through utilizing relationship with peers rebelling against the domination of the authority and consolidating a sense of new identity and self-worth in the new culture.[2]

As the immigrants devote themselves to these appropriate developmental tasks in this new environment, they are in the position of taking sustenance from the community and its institutions rather than being in a position to give to the community and thereby, impact upon it.

Current Discernible Effects

Nevertheless, it would be incorrect to state that the Soviet Jews have brought about no changes in the Jewish community. There has been a number of more subtle impacts as a result of the attempt of the Jewish community to respond to the challenge of resettling, absorbing and integrating the newcomers into American Jewish life. One need only look at the programs of recent conferences and reams of material recently written about this group to become aware that the Jewish community in America has been struggling in its attempt to effectively deal with them. Our early approaches to resettling this group proved to be less than effective, for we really had no clear understanding of the cultural baggage with which they were traveling, not to speak of, in some cases, the material baggage that accompanied them. In our attempts to evolve new methods of reaching them and helping them come to terms with their new life here and us to come to terms with them, there have occurred discernible changes in our helping agencies.

In the past, and I speak here particularly of the larger communities involved in resettlement, there has always existed some manner of working relationship between the Jewish family service agency and the Jewish vocational service agency. It quickly became apparent that the generally casual nature of that inter-relationship would no longer suffice if we were to effectively grapple with the difficulty these immigrants were having in re-establishing themselves economically. There had to develop closer ties and working relationships between the caseworker and the vocational placement worker if the resettlement process were not to take an inordinate amount of time, thus draining the community of badly needed funds. Implementing a time limit policy in regard to length of community financial support could not be accomplished by merely stating such a policy. It required the active intervention of caseworker and vocational placement worker acting as a team to move the immigrant into the employment market in a reasonable amount of time. In Los Angeles for example, we found that unless the staffs of both agencies met together periodically and interviewed client families jointly, we would continue to have to support this new group for much longer than the three months the community had dictated as the time limit for community financial support. This meant evolving new patterns of relationship between the two agencies in general, and the staffs in particular. One could not separate the social

[2] Richard A. Dublin, "Some Observations on Resettling Soviet Jews," *Journal of Jewish Communal Service,* Vol L-III, No. 3 (1977), p. 281.

adjustment of the immigrant from the employment adjustment. This has led to a growing sensitivity and awareness of both staffs to one another's areas of expertise and skill in a way that did not exist prior to this period. It would be hard to imagine that once having developed such patterns of relating that they would not continue to affect the work of both agencies and their ability to relate to one another in areas other than work with new immigrant groups, per se.

In addition, we found it necessary to evolve new patterns of inter-agency relationships in regard to the emotional health of the immigrant. In a number of situations, where we have encountered severe emotional handicaps requiring treatment in a psychiatric setting, there had to develop methods by which the Jewish family service caseworker could work conjointly with the social worker and psychiatrist in the mental health setting. Whether it is because of the language problem, the family service worker's involvement with the total immigrant family, or our acquired knowledge about the dynamics of the experiences of Soviet Jews prior to their arrival in this country, we have become in a number of situations welcome members of a team designed to deal with the emotional difficulties faced by some of our immigrants.

We can also point to other new patterns of relationship that have developed with such institutions as the Jewish Centers and the Bureau of Jewish Education as we have struggled with designing a comprehensive community approach to the resettlement of this group. Unilateral agency programming designed to meet the needs of this group was not really very effective. What has been emerging is a more determined effort to create programs that mesh with one another so as to achieve maximum effectiveness. These new patterns of relating will undoubtedly result in long-range impacts on the way in which agencies work together, and the skills we have developed will undoubtedly be called upon in new and different situations.

We have also learned that many of the old assumptions about resettling new immigrants were no longer valid for this group, for they emerge from a totally different value system than other immigrant groups with which we dealt in the past. We began to find that in many cases we required special staffing along with special staff development programming so as to enable our agencies to relate to the complexities of the Soviet Jewish immigrant. Time-honored casework and group skills and models needed to be reexamined, reassessed, and at times restructured in order for us to become responsive to the needs this group presents, and for us to begin to achieve some measurable success in assisting them with resettlement.

To illustrate this last point, we need only look at what has happened in one of our institutions. I refer here particularly to the Jewish Centers. Initially, the traditional approach was adopted, in that soon after the arrival of the immigrants they were made aware of the facilities of the Jewish Center in the area. At first, the response of Centers was to provide minimal special programming. Rather, attempts were made to draw this group into the usual social and recreational activities that Centers provide. We found that these kinds of activities did not engage the Soviet Jewish immigrant. Other than to occasionally use the swimming pool, they were not much in evidence in the Center. Yet all were aware that we wished to see them drawn into this aspect of Jewish institutional life. New means had to be developed to attract them to and maintain their involvement in this vital part of our community. What has begun to emerge is a return to programming akin to those of the early settlement houses, in that the Jewish Centers have begun to engage in educational activities along with the social and recreational. In our community, they have become the focus of our attempts to Americanize the immigrant. Vital driving lessons are offered, the Center houses the English classes administered by Jewish Vocational Service, conversational English classes that go beyond the employment-oriented language training are

available and the growth of self-help groups is encouraged. Special staff has been engaged to develop new programs that are specifically responsive to the needs of this group.

And what of the Synagogues and Temples in our community? What role have they begun to play in response to these newcomers? Once again the pattern repeats itself. At first the traditional response of inviting newcomers to attend services and special holiday observances was attempted. But soon we realized that after the initial flush of excitement on the part of the immigrant and Temple member had passed, we were remaining with nothing of substance, and so innovations were attempted. The most successful program has been one that was developed by the Social Action Committee of one of our Temples. A particularly energetic member of the committee recognized correctly that the immigrants were not yet ready for Temple involvement in the traditional manner and so he organized monthly meetings, under the auspices of the Temple, that deal with the concrete issues related to resettlement which the immigrant wishes to explore. Such issues as: the ways in which one may start a small business in the United States; a full discussion and interpretation of the community time limit and loan policy, etc. These meetings have consistently drawn large numbers of participants and out of them there has begun to develop an advocacy group organized by the immigrants themselves. Accompanying this development was the activity of the special staff person engaged by one of our Jewish Centers who was responsive to such a group's needs and after some abortive organizational attempts a viable immigrant's organization has begun to function.

In addition, a number of our synagogues has begun to develop family-to-family programs, that is, programs whereby individual families in the Temple adopt new immigrant families and reach out to them in a manner not only designed to develop new friendships, but with the additional goal of involving the immigrant family in one of the major components of American-Jewish life—the synagogue. It is too early to tell if these attempts will meet with success, though we do have evidence of scattered individual situations where these relationships have led to the desired goals.

The above mentioned changes in approach, it may be said, were almost predictable. However, there remain some new developments that were not and whose long-range effect is as yet unclear. For years there has been discussion in the family service field about the need to involve representatives of our client groups in the policy-making bodies of our agencies. Though long talked about and debated, there was little, if any, movement in the direction of attempting to implement this concept. However, we have begun to see this happen in the area of resettlement of Soviet Jews. In our community, we recently experienced the first such attempt when three members from among those who were resettled in recent years were involved in a subcommittee of the agency's Immigration and Resettlement Committee, whose task it was to develop policy and guidelines around the involvement of local families in the financial resettlement of newly arrived immigrants. The first attempt proved to be highly successful and the policies that emerged reflected the joint thinking of professional staff, lay leadership and the immigrant group it would most directly affect. The insights provided us by the committee members who were new immigrants were invaluable in our deliberations and convinced lay leadership and professional staff that involving a client group in policy-making could, indeed, be a most meaningful undertaking rather than one to be feared as potentially disruptive and non-productive. Future plans in this regard are for representatives from among the immigrant community to be asked to serve on the agency's Committee on Immigration and Resettlement. It is hoped that this may become an avenue for the development of new leadership for the agency and hopefully, in time, for the community at large.

Consider also the following impact. The fact that Soviet Jewish resettlement has received such wide spread publicity has led to greater visibility of the agency and the ramifications of the services it can offer. On the one hand, we have a Resettlement Program which provides extensively and broadly for the needs of this particular client population. On the other hand, we have other activities within the agency, which, though providing many kinds of services to the general Jewish community in no way duplicates the all encompassing aspects of the Resettlement Program. This had led to a situation, whereby, our staff is often faced by the anger of the clients from the general population that many of their perceived needs are being unmet while the needs of the newcomers receive extensive response. Their perception is that the immigrants are getting it all and that they are not getting nearly enough. To be perfectly honest, we should admit that some of these feelings exist in staff, for the current economic and fund raising crunch has resulted in local services no longer developing at the rapid pace with which they were several years ago. Though we know all the reasons for this seeming disparity in service availability, the fact remains that the Soviet Jewish immigrants are getting very special attention with considerable resources being made available to them. It may be that given such feelings in our communities, we will be faced with greater pressure to look carefully at the manner in which dollars are allocated for all needs. Hopefully, this should propel us towards a greater refinement of the methods by which our communities set the priorities for spending monies that are becoming more and more difficult to raise.

Without a doubt, the most dramatic impact that Soviet Jewish immigration to the United States has had has been the recent encounter of the Jewish community with the whole issue of *noshrim*. This issue for awhile, particularly in the winter of 1976, threatened to polarize the Jewish community in a way that it had not been polarized in recent memory. On the surface the issue seemed to be the question of Israel's need for immigration and grave concern regarding the political implications of the movement of Soviet Jews to the United States. But soon new dimensions of the problem began to emerge as we struggled with the right to self-discrimination by the immigrant and our readiness to view ourselves as another center of dynamic Jewish life that may benefit from addition to our numbers. These are complex issues for which there are not always clear answers. But one thing seems clear, a living Jewish community in the Diaspora that has faith in its future should have no problem in responding positively to those who wish to join it while continuing to maintain a strong commitment to the strengthening and continuing viability of the Jewish state.

After Resettlement - What Then?

What of the future of this group, this new group in our midst? Will the fact that they arrive lacking real Jewish consciousness eventually lead to swift assimilation into the general mainstream, swifter than that of the movement in that direction by native American Jews? If this is indeed what will happen, then we can safely say that this group will have no lasting impact on American-Jewish life and its institutions. It is not sufficient for our programs to be responsive only to their need to become Americanized, but we must begin actively to develop programs that will bring to this immigrant group what other immigrant groups brought with them, that is, a strong Jewish consciousness and commitment to Jewish life. If we are told to think of impact on us, we must first begin to devise schemes and direct resources towards impacting Jewishly on them. We must devise the means whereby the children and adults of this immigrant group are involved in intensive programs of Jewish education. We have to examine our priorities and find the means to make available to them what the years of living under Soviet domination have deprived them of, and that is a genuine sense of Jewish identity. It cannot be business as usual with this immigrant group, for if we maintain such a stance, I fear that in twenty years from now we will look back upon our work and find that except for having helped a group make the transition from one culture to another, we have failed. We will have resettled, but not absorbed a potentially vital addition to our dwindling population. The tremendous financial resources and human resources that we are expending in their behalf will most likely have little payoff in terms of Jewish survival and Jewish continuity, unless we embark on a concerted effort to introduce them, in a meaningful way, to our religious and cultural heritage.