

The Changing Russian-Jewish Community and the American-Jewish Response

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by *Dmitri Glinski*

The transformation of the Jewish Agency for Israel since the ascent of Natan Sharansky to its helm has inadvertently generated discussions in American-Jewish media on the Russian-speaking Jews, their perspectives and visions of the global Jewish communal enterprise, and their evolving place in the concept of Jewish peoplehood. This should be welcomed as a healthy, much-needed dialogue between U.S.-born Jews (80% of whom today have Russian-speaking ancestors) and the Russian-speaking minority (the largest in our communal world, making up to 20 percent of all Jews in New York and 15 percent around the country), a dialogue that should help promote a truly inclusive Jewish identity, fully representative of its constituent parts. This is particularly so since most of Russian-Jewish communal and organizational life, full of discussions that are often as rich in content and meaning as those in the Manhattan-based synagogues and agencies, goes unnoticed or is treated as irrelevant by many of the American-Jewish world.

It is worth reconsidering this attitude. With New York Jewish population and voting power in decline and an American Jewish community that is confronted with manifold challenges testing the limits of our internal solidarity, the central communal institutions simply cannot afford to minimize the significance of 15 to 20 percent of the overall Jewish population. Nor can they afford to keep managing their relations with Russian Jews solely through American-owned programs and personnel that follow a top-down, paternalistic approach and are frequently impervious to feedback from immigrant community. These may have served reasonably well in different, more stable and predictable times, when immigrant organizational life was in its infancy and Russian Jews had not yet developed their ethnic elite that is now fluent in English, conscious of the needs of its constituency and aware of the issues and developments in the wider Jewish world.

Thus, it is time for both US-born Jews and the Russian-speaking minority to face the changes that have occurred over the past decade and help each other to readjust accordingly. Let me suggest seven points that may be desirable elements of such a readjustment:

1. We should reconsider the notion that the Russian-Jewish immigration has ceased after the wave of “organized” resettlement in the 1980s-early 1990s. It is true that the size of this immigration has declined significantly, perhaps not so much due to the lack of demand (many polls show that demand for emigration from the FSU remains very high) but rather due to the

more restrictive immigration rules and other barriers. But Jews keep coming – through academic, employment, and other channels, often spending many years in a legal limbo while fighting for a permanent status, just as immigrants from many Asian or African countries. The annual American Community Survey conducted by the U.S. Census has shown a 27% increase in the number of Russian-speaking households around the country between 2000 and 2009, and anecdotal evidence suggests that many if not most of those households are Jewish or have a Jewish connection. These newer immigrants want and deserve a voice in our communal affairs.

2. We should revisit the idea that all or almost all Russian-Jewish community life is based in South Brooklyn. This may be true for the Soviet and early post-Soviet immigrants. But the current Russian-Jewish population is much more widely dispersed. According to the Census, in my own Washington Heights Russian is the second foreign language after Spanish. There are clusters of Russian-Jewish population in all of the five boroughs and beyond. And, again, whether in Co-op City or in Staten Island, they need a voice in Jewish communal agencies.

3. The prevailing trend in Russian-Jewish programming by the central Jewish institutions is to focus almost entirely on the younger generation – those who grew up already in the States or in Israel. We need to revisit the assumptions behind this generational bias. Lavishing attention on the children while neglecting and alienating their parents is hardly a recipe for successful education, let alone Jewish education, that is supposedly premised on the idea of *le dor va dor*. An immigrant youth who has seen her parents treated as “lesser” Jews, denied employment or recognition for their skills and accomplishments, may grow up with a traumatic and conflict-ridden sense of her own Jewishness, no matter how rich and rewarding her experience with Birthright, MASA, Limmud or another one-time encounter with Jewish life outside of her home.

4. We need to acknowledge the extent of chronic economic challenges faced not just by the most recent immigrants, but by the majority of Russian-speaking Jews who came here as adults – and particularly by many of the well-educated and experienced immigrant professionals who arrived in the last decade. The latest available data from the National Jewish Population Survey (2000-2001) show that while 43 percent of Soviet Jews who immigrated since 1980 had a college degree, as compared to 31% of US-born Jews, only 45% of them were employed, in contrast to US-born Jews, 62% of whom were employed; and that 38% of immigrants lived below the federal poverty threshold, as compared to 5% of US-born Jews. Meanwhile in New York, according to the UJA-Federation’s 2002 Jewish Community Survey, 66 percent of Russian-speaking Jews had annual incomes below \$30,000, while 69 percent of US-born Jews had incomes above that figure; and among the victims of Nazism residing in New York, 81 percent of those in Russian-speaking households – the “triple victims” of Nazism, Soviet oppression and the misfortunes of their initial immigrant experience – lived below the 150% of the federal poverty threshold, while among all other victims of Nazism only 21% fell under that category. Finally, the thorough and informative Report on Jewish Poverty, published in 2004 by the UJA-Federation and MetCouncil, indirectly admitted the dire situation of immigrant professionals in particular, by noting the paradoxical rise in the educational level of the Jewish poor in New York and stating that it was likely that “this group of well-educated poor people includes many of the high number of Russian-speaking refugees.” These findings attest to the extent of the challenge involved in absorbing some of the most valuable human capital that on the face of it should have been an asset to the wider Jewish community. This challenge has only become more daunting in

the present economic climate. And yet it has to be addressed, with creative solutions that take into account not just the economic value of the education and intellect of these “overqualified” immigrants, but also the value of their distinctive Jewishness for the representation of a diverse and inclusive Jewish identity in our communal service.

5. The present economic climate is a litmus test of our commitment to fairness in the distribution of communal resources – the fairness that many of us so justifiably insist should be applied to the distribution of resources between the haves and the have-nots at the national level. The cuts in programming and personnel in Jewish institutions that affect immigrant Jews should be more proportionate to their share of the Jewish population and the extent of economic need as compared to the U.S.-born Jews. This is particularly so given the relatively large reserve of under-utilized nonprofit leadership talent among Russian-speaking immigrants, and given that even before the recession Russian Jews were under-represented on the staff and on the boards of central Jewish agencies, while those of them that were employed in communal jobs were typically paid much lower salaries and faced more obstacles to recognition and promotion than the US-born Jews. Meanwhile, over the past few years we have seen cuts and closings of programs and entire agencies that have disproportionately affected the Russian-speaking community – both in terms of the services provided and in terms of the professional job slots for Russian speakers. There should be an effort to provide a fairer share of opportunities to immigrant nonprofit talents, while also making sure that the unavoidable cuts and downsizing do not inflict a disproportionate pain to the already disadvantaged immigrant community.

6. On the positive side, we need to pay increased attention to a very special sub-group of immigrant Jews: those who took part in the movements and events of the 1960s to 1990s in the former Soviet Union that helped win the freedom of immigration and the freedom of religion and thus ultimately contributed to the end of the ideological Cold War between the US and Russia. These are the former *refuseniks* and Jewish activists that participated in the “Let My People Go” movement on the Soviet side of the Iron Curtain, as well as those who took part in the revival of Judaism and secular Jewish culture, and, finally, those who helped achieve the same goals by their advocacy for human rights and democratic change in the USSR, as participants of non-Jewish movements that made the freedom of emigration and religion a central part of their agenda. 20 years after the fall of the system that they had been struggling against removed the major security threat to America and Israel and opened new vistas for these countries and the world, almost all of these Soviet Jewish activists live in relative oblivion – and many in dire need. Their struggle, suffering and occasional heroism should be integrated into our collective sense of pride over our historic accomplishments – if we want to see their children and grandchildren integrated into the Jewish community rather than alienated by the sense of futility and lack of recognition of their parents’ and grandparents’ efforts to repair the world.

7. Finally, addressing the issues of unfinished integration requires less of a top-down approach and more collaboration with immigrants themselves, including their grassroots organizations and initiatives. The indications from the top of our major communal institutions suggest that their senior leadership wisely sees authentic Russian-Jewish organizing as a communal asset. The challenge is to make this understanding a part of the daily practices at the lower levels of agencies working with the Russian-Jewish population. This also requires enabling authentic grassroots organizations to grow and helping them to become more sustainable. There is plenty

of evidence of ongoing growth and expansion of some of these grassroots organizations – from my very own American Association of Jews from the Former USSR (AAJFSU), the oldest Russian-Jewish advocacy organization with several chapters from New Jersey to California, to local initiatives, such as the Brooklyn-based Nash Jew. Evidence shows that this growth may not be fully accommodated within the framework of the umbrella institutions designed 10 years ago at the time when the initial goals of the resettlement of the late Soviet and early post-Soviet wave were achieved, the Russian-Jewish ethnic elite was still in embryonic stage, and the economic environment was more favorable to immigrant integration into the professions and into the corporate world. And the situation where grassroots Russian-Jewish immigrant advocacy gets five or ten times less support from established Jewish institutions than similar Latino, Arab or South Asian organizations get from their sponsors in the US, while some Jewish funders actually support exclusively non-Jewish immigrant advocacy groups, does not seem quite right. The changes of the past decade and the new economic situation need to be addressed in part by increased Jewish support for authentic grassroots Jewish immigrant organizing and the crafting of nonprofit opportunities for the highly skilled and experienced immigrant professionals through Russian-Jewish communal organizations – opportunities that would be modestly paid but put their talents, energy and commitment to good use, thus preventing the irreparable loss of this human capital to the American economy and to the Jewish communal enterprise.

The proposals offered here do not claim to be a panacea for the dilemmas and the struggle created by the ongoing change both in the Russian-Jewish community and in the wider environment. It is my hope that they will serve as an opening to further debate.

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