Lessons Learned: The Soviet Jewry Movement

PHILIP SPIEGEL

m Yisrael chai! The people of Israel live! These words were joyously chanted by Jews in Moscow when they witnessed the Israeli flag flying in 1948.

Almost 20 years later, Shlomo Carlebach composed a melody for those words. Inspired by Jacob Birnbaum, who founded the Student Struggle for Soviet Jewry, Carlebach put to music three essential words of hope, and at a 1965 rally in New York, thousands of supporters joined him in singing what became the movement's "We Shall Overcome." Having an anthem was one of the principles of activism the Soviet Jewry movement learned from the civil rights movement.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel and the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. were kindred spirits, and both urged nonviolence as a method for political struggle. Addressing the American Jewish Conference on Soviet Jewry in 1966, King described the oppression of Soviet Jews as "a kind of spiritual and cultural genocide." On the other hand, the Jewish Defense League and its leader, Rabbi Meir Kahane, supported violence as an action against oppression (they perpetrated bombings of offices of companies doing business with the Soviet Union). Ultimately, the leaders of the Union of Councils for Jews in the Former Soviet Union (UCSJ) - an umbrella group formed in 1979 of grassroots activists from Cleveland, Los Angeles, and San Francisco — prevailed as its president, Harold Light, declared, "Confrontation? Yes. Violence? No."

Like the civil rights movement, the Soviet Jewry movement had plenty of opportunities to make headlines through nonviolent confrontation and civil disobedience. In 1985, 25 rabbis and a Lutheran minister were arrested after demonstrating with Torah scrolls and shofars within 500 feet of the Soviet embassy in Washington, D.C. After refusing to promise that they would not return to the scene of their crime, Rabbi David Oler and four other rabbis were sentenced to fifteen days in the Federal Correctional Institution in Petersburg, Va.

The movement quickly learned essential publicity tactics. For example, naming the prisoners, offering a human face and story — plastering a "Free Boris Kochubievsky" poster

around a rally or in a newspaper — would get more attention than mind-numbing statistics, such as, "Some 3 million Jews are trapped in the Soviet Union" or "Only 100 Jews got exit visas last year."

The Soviet Jewry movement did not remain parochial; it gained valuable support from Christian clergy who were moved by the Holocaust-inflected slogan, "Never Again." The work of Christian clergy — particularly of Sister Ann Gillen, executive director of the national Interreligious Task Force on Soviet Jewry, and Father Robert Drinan, the first Catholic priest to serve in Congress — was essential. In 1973, Drinan and 318 other members of the House voted for the Jackson-Vanik Amendment that made favorable trade conditions with the Soviet Union contingent on free emigration. Support for passage of the Jackson-Vanik Amendment was vehemently opposed by the Nixon administration, which wanted no impediments to détente. Yet support for the bill came not only from activists, but also from Jews and dissidents like Nobel Peace Prize-winner Andrei Sakharov in the Soviet Union.

In the early years of the movement, some of the Jewish communal leadership cautioned Jewish activists to keep quiet — to not even send greeting cards to Soviet Jews. But when leaders of the UCSJ consulted with their contacts in Russia, they were emboldened by the reply, "Please send cards; we're not afraid."

The UCSJ encountered other issues with established Jewish organizations. They were criticized for having ties to human rights groups rather than focusing solely on support of free emigration. And Israelis were critical of the UCSJ advocacy for allowing émigrés to choose whether to go to Israel or America.

The courage of Soviet Jews, some of them who waited nearly two decades for an exit visa, combined with the perseverance of their supporters in the West, culminated in a massive rally in Washington on December 6, 1987 on the eve of the Gorbachev-Reagan Summit. Out of that summit came the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan, increased bilateral trade, and a 150-percent increase in the emigration of Soviet Jews over the previous continued on next page

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year. With the demise of the Soviet Union, 2 million Soviet Jews emigrated, the greatest Jewish exodus in history.

According to former Secretary of State George Shultz, who was a key player in that summit and a strong advocate for Soviet Jews, "The best reason to record and remember how Soviet Jews were saved is to be prepared to act again when the need arises...We must not only preach the doctrine of human rights, we must learn how actually to be our brother's keeper."

Keeping the Personal Political

JUDITH ROSENBAUM

Though "the personal is political" did not become a slogan of the women's movement until feminism's "second wave" in the 1960s, the slogan aptly describes the continuous impulse of feminism from its origins more than 100 years earlier. Even the first women's rights campaigners, who fought primarily for political and civil rights, understood that the personal circumstances of women's lives were shaped by larger social and political structures and therefore provided conditions around which to organize a movement. Though their focus was on suffrage, they addressed a broad range of concerns, from the property rights of married women to the constraints of women's fashion.

Second-wave feminists were mostly ignorant of their movement's history and certainly of the ongoing strands of women's activism between the passage of the suffrage amendment in 1920 and the re-emergence of a vital women's movement amid the social revolutions of the 1960s. They were also far from a unified movement. Activists like Betty Friedan (author of the landmark *The Feminine Mystique*)

and her compatriots in the National Organization for Women focused on rights for women in the workplace and the public sphere, aiming for equal access. The younger, countercultural women's liberationists sought more radical social and cultural changes rather than access to the mainstream institutions. These feminists challenged society's understanding of nearly all gender relations — including sexuality, marriage, violence against women, domesticity, and reproductive rights — and built new institutions, such as rape crisis centers, women's centers, women's music festivals, and women's health clinics.

The second-wave feminists' slogan, "Sisterhood is powerful," was an aspirational goal if not always true in practice. While some women experienced gender as their primary identity, other women — particularly those who experienced oppression along other axes, such as race or class — pointed out that sisterhood had often failed them (for example, in the racist appeals made by suffragists, or in the blindness of white feminists to the experiences of women of color). Though sometimes perceived as a failure of the women's movement, this painful and often angry conversation — present in every phase of the movement — has sparked feminism's continued evolution. Beginning as a movement devoted to the analysis and redefinition of power structures, with an initial focus on gender, feminism has developed an everbroadening perspective that recognizes the intersection of power and identities and rejects an analysis of power along one axis only.

Reports of feminism's death, heralded in nearly every decade, have been (to paraphrase Mark Twain) greatly exaggerated. Yet feminism has also suffered from its own success; the remarkable changes in women's opportunities in the past 40 years have sapped some of its urgency. Many young women today take for granted their access to education, careers, sports, and financial independence, and — ignorant of the role of feminism in achieving these gains —

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The Jewish Feminist Movement: A Few Highlights

The insights of feminism have transformed the Jewish community:

- Creating access to public roles as rabbis, prayer leaders, and participants in a minyan; Ezrat Nashim's "Jewish Women Call For Change" (jwa.org)
- Bringing women's experiences and perspectives into Jewish practice through ritual and liturgical innovation; Marcia Falk's "A Blessing for this Day" (jwa.org)
- Generating new interpretations of Jewish texts through feminist midrash; Merle Feld's "We All Stood Together" (jwa.org)
- Expanding Jewish conceptions of spirituality and the Divine through feminist theology and spirituality; B'not Esh Jewish Feminist Spirituality Collective (jwa.org)
- · Challenging the injustice of women's powerlessness in Jewish divorce; "Freedom for Agunot Now" (jwa.org)