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CROSSROADS AT VIENNA: Olim and Noshrim

Introduction: Dreams and Realities

A radical shift in the ground rules for Jewish ethical and religious action has taken place in our times. The Holocaust and the rebirth of the State of Israel have combined to force the Jewish people to assume full responsibility for its own fate.

In the period of Exilic existence Jewish religion created idealized images of a perfect Jewish society in which evil and shortcoming will be overcome. Once the Jewish people returned to actual history and the state was established, there was bound to be a gap between the dream and the reality. As the Bible had already portrayed, only human beings moved by conflicting hopes and needs can begin to build Paradise on earth. The results are bound to be flawed, ambiguous, full of unexpected ironies and new difficulties. American Jewry may be more prone to seek idealized solutions because it is not a sovereign group while Israeli Jewry feels the very real responsibility for maintaining a functioning state. Thus there is a potential for division among Jews.

In the crucible of history, the great test of Judaism's credibility and Jewry's moral viability is the ability to maintain the tension of ideals and realities without surrendering the grip on either. The test of the maturity and interdependence of the Jewish people will be the ability to take responsibility jointly for the hard decisions and limited solutions which reality allows. Such a test is at hand on the vital question of policy vis-a-vis Russian Jewry.

Dreams and Realities: The Case of Soviet Jewry

Soviet Jewry itself is a living illustration of the gap between dream and reality. In the initial phase of the movement attention was fixed on the romantic vision of the self-regeneration of Soviet Jews and the demand for the right to leave Russia and rejoin the Jewish

people. In a spectacular breakthrough, over 120,000 Jews were allowed to emigrate in the post-1970, Leningrad trials period. In a fantasy world, such a triumph is followed by "they lived happily ever after" . . . In reality, the emigrants had to undergo the terribly painful process of uprooting, had to suffer the loss of language, culture and friends as well as the frustrating process of learning new skills to cope with new conditions.

Being an immigrant always means devaluation, anxiety and aggravation—being permanently out of sorts with 'a world I never made.' In the case of Russian Jewry, the problem was deepened by the great gap between life in a closed society with bureaucratically managed lives and careers and the relatively autonomous conditions of a free Western society.

Unfortunately, the absorption of Soviet Jews in Israel was not handled well. Israel's bureaucracy, except in the army, has a poor reputation for effectiveness and even civil discourse in the public services. There were many complaints that party hacks staffed the absorption agencies rather than people sensitive to the problems of olim (immigrants); Israeli society itself was not fully prepared for the needs of this aliya. Earlier olim living in relative deprivation and Israeli newly marrieds expressed some resentment of the special housing and provisions for Russian olim. The net result was a spate of complaints back to Russia about Israel. Of course, to some extent this is natural and, all in all, Russian Jews do accommodate successfully to life in Israel.

However, in the first two years when adjustment problems are at a peak, contact with Russia is strongest. By the time the Russian Jew is settled and happier, the links to home are much weaker and the image of Israel that is communicated back to Jews in Russia is the more negative one. The early Russian Jewish emigrants were more Zionist because they were turned on by Israel and were more motivated Jewishly. They had to be in order to brave the wrath of the Soviet system and win the right to leave. Contrary to the popular image of a totally assimilated Russian Jewry regenerating itself, the olim came overwhelmingly from places like Vilna, Riga, Georgia—places where Jews were less acculturated, had richer Jewish backgrounds, or had spent less time under Soviet rule. As that group left, a new type of applicant emerged; more repelled by

anti-semitism, more motivated to get out of Russia rather than to go to Israel. The shift in the type of oleh combined with the reports and complaints about Israeli realities led to a change in direction. Although Russia acknowledged only the right to reunify families and portrayed these Jews as going to Israel, a growing percentage arrived in Vienna (on the way to Israel) and announced their desire to go to America or to other countries.

The Soviet Union was perceptive enough to recognize that whatever its short term difficulties, Israel still is the most dynamic Jewish reality and is the most likely magnet for Jews around the world.

It is probable that the Soviet government made a deliberate decision to embarrass Israel and undercut its appeal to Soviet Jews and so the Russians began a policy of letting out more and more Jews who would choose not to go to Israel. When all these factors came together, the 'dropout rate' of Russian Jews in Vienna, who opted not to go to Israel went over 50%—as high as 60% on occasion. It might be added that the charge has been made that HIAS which handles Soviet Jews going to America has 'recruited' them and sold them on America. The charge has been vigorously denied. HIAS has made clear that it urges these Jews to go to Israel and that only when a firm decision against going to Israel has been made does it help them get to America.

The Problem

The fact that Russian Jewish emigrants do not go to Israel is bad for the Jewish people. Israel is the key center of Jewish life and strength and it needs as many Jews as it can get. The choice not to go to Israel is embarrassing and undercuts the credibility and magnetism of Jewish activity around the world. There is a real possibility that Russian Jews who go to America or elsewhere because they are uncommitted Jewishly will assimilate and be lost entirely to the Jewish people. (There is very limited spiritual outreach to Soviet Jews in America).

There is another risk in this situation. The Russian Government may seize upon the dropout rate as proof that the entire concept under which Jews leave the country is a 'fraud.' The Soviet government has not granted the right of emigration. It claims to be pursuing a humanitarian policy of family reunion in which Jews leave

to rejoin their family. The Soviet government even can allow Jews to go to their homeland Israel. If Jews are allowed to go anywhere they choose, this could be the wedge for other dissident minorities to demand the right of free emigration—a demand which would threaten the structure and self-image of the present Russian regime.

There is concern then that the Soviet government may react by cutting off the entire emigration. Those who fear this policy change argue that the Jews who want and need to go to Israel should not have this right endangered because of other Jews who want an easier life.

Finally: The State of Israel is led by a functioning government with relationships to other governments and principles of its own. It must authorize the Dutch Embassy in Moscow to issue visas to Israel. It must certify to the Austrian and Italian governments that these Jews are going to Israel in order to get transit rights for them. Its visas are being misused and its vouchers turned into lies by the majority of emigrants who elect not to go to Israel. There have been persistent rumors that those governments have complained about the situation and even that sanctions and cut-offs have been threatened. On the other hand, there have been published reports of the opposite—that the Austrian government insists that the freedom of Russian Jews to go anywhere they choose must be preserved. Since American Jews are not privy to such inside information about Israeli foreign policy, these stories cannot be confirmed or denied.

On balance, for the greater good of the entire Jewish people, it is highly desirable that Soviet Jews go to Israel. The question is: how can they be moved to go there?

Some American Jews have argued that the question is an invalid one. The principle of freedom of choice for Jews fleeing oppression is a sacred one. Moreover, how can American Jews insist that Russian Jews go to Israel when so few Americans are going on aliya? A smaller group has argued that Israel should not lie or endanger its credibility for the sake of Jews who are so marginally Jewish and should withhold visas and certifications from such Jews if it can. However, as sacred as the principles of freedom of choice and credibility are, in the real world both must be relative to the overall survival and welfare of the Jewish people. Living after the Holocaust, struggling to reestablish and maintain itself, Jewry must live by

morally realistic standards which include the right and necessity to reconcile ideals and needs. An appropriate policy solution would appear to fall between these two poles and should be arrived at by joint decisions and policy of the major Jewish communities.

Solutions

A number of approaches to the problem have been proposed. The first, a proposal to fly the Jews directly to Israel (they are then likely to try living there) has not proved feasible.

The Russian government has found this too embarrassing, too offensive to its Arab allies—or it simply wishes to maintain conditions under which fewer Jews go to Israel. Soviet Jews can only obtain exit rights upon receipt of an invitation to reunite with their family. These letters have come mostly from relatives in Israel. Some have suggested that a drive to send invitations only to confirmed Zionist Jews should be launched. However, the main discussion has focused on cutting off aid to Soviet Jews with Israeli visas who do not choose to go to Israel, and whether this can be reconciled with freedom of choice and maximum help to all Jews in need. Feelings have run high. Noted Soviet Jewish activists who have settled in Israel have come down on both sides of the question.

The Committee of Eight

After a great deal of concern and discussion in government circles in the Jewish agency and in American Jewish community leadership, an interorganizational Committee was set up to cope with the problem. Its membership included JDC, HIAS, CJFWF, UJA and Israeli counterparts. In turn, it charged a Committee of Eight to develop proposals to deal with the misuse of Israeli visas. The Committee of Eight consists of leading civil servants in Jewish life including Philip Bernstein of the CJFWF, Gaynor Jacobson of HIAS, Irving Kessler of United Israel Appeal and Ralph Goldman of JDC and Israeli counterparts.

The Committee worked on the assumption that it is to the benefit of world Jewry that Russian Jews go to Israel. It defined as its three guiding principles that:

- 1.) the maximum number of Jews be allowed to emigrate from Russia
- 2.) freedom of choice by the immigrants be respected

3.) the misuse of Israel's visas to get out of Russia and go elsewhere should be checked.

Applying these principles to policy, the Committee urged that going to Israel be made as advantageous and attractive as possible to Russian Jews. To this end, they urged that Israeli absorption processes and departments should be reorganized to make them more responsive and efficient to olim. Unintentional 'rewards' for immigrating to America should be eliminated. For example Russian Jews going to Israel had been granted financial help in the form of loans which they had to repay whereas those going to America sometimes got outright cash grants or other help which they did not need to repay. The housing offered in Israel was often less centrally located or attractive than that which was provided in America. Better housing and outright grants were recommended for Israel. (Despite the sacrifice involved at a time of social strain in Israel, the government has pledged to act on these recommendations.)

The committee then bit the bullet on policy vis-a-vis help to Soviet Jews in Vienna. It urged that Jews who apply to go to Israel be helped to go to Israel. Those who wished to go to America should apply directly to the American Embassy for permission. This would check misuse of Israeli visas and avoid the risk of hurting the chances of Israel-bound Jews of receiving their visas. There was some indication that the United States would make visas available. Those Jews who applied to go to Israel and switched in Vienna should be allowed to do so but *they should get no help from the Jewish community* to reach their destination. This meant that HIAS offices in Vienna would have to be closed sooner or later. The committee majority felt that freedom of choice would thus be respected but the 'penalty' of no help was designed to stop the abuse. It was hoped this would tilt the balance toward aliyah to Israel although there was no guarantee of that. In order to show Soviet Jews that this policy decision was a firm one and to give them a chance to make plans based on this new policy, a public announcement of the new policy and an effective date of February was to be set. The Committee felt that this policy met the test of Jewish need and was the lesser evil of all the options available. These recommendations were a serious attempt to arrive at a mature, post-Holocaust morally realistic policy. In addition, they had the added value of being formulated by a joint committee of Israeli and American Jews.

Objections

Despite the consultation which accompanied its work, the Committee of Eight's recommendations ran into sufficient opposition to delay their adoption. The primary objection was that forcing Soviet Jews to apply directly to go to America would likely cause a drop in emigration. It was argued that Soviet Jews would be afraid to apply to America for fear that they would not get exit rights, for fear of approaching the Embassy and because they could not get family reunion requests from America. The response to this objection was twofold: that some had already applied and been given visas to come here and that there is now a significant number of Russian Jewish immigrant families in America who could invite their relatives to reunite with them.

Supporters of the Committee of Eight's approach argued that Soviet Jews determined to get out would not be deterred. If they feared being turned down by America, they would more likely lie and apply to Israel than not apply at all.

Opponents stressed the historic Jewish commitment to help any Jews fleeing oppression to go anywhere they chose to go. To many, this was a fundamental Jewish value; the expression of the unity and responsibility of Jews for one another. Proponents of the plan replied that they were equally concerned for fellow Jews. The issue was not general Jewish principles but how to reconcile them with the dangers to Jews caused by the present situation.

Opponents to the plan have offered the alternative approach of encouraging rather than 'forcing' Soviet Jews to apply to Israel or to apply openly to go elsewhere. To which the reply has been that unless the policy is firmly set, it will not be taken seriously by the Russian Jews. The path of least resistance for Soviet Jews would continue to be to apply to Israel and switch in Vienna with all the risks that this entailed to other potential olim.

Other tactical objections to the Committee of Eight approach have been raised. The announcement of the policy would appear to be cruel and unfeeling to Soviet Jewish refugees who would undoubtedly demonstrate in Vienna and Rome when they were denied help.

This would hurt the Jewish community's image. Furthermore, the money used for 'resettlement' is in good measure made available

by the United States government. If HIAS and the Joint Distribution Committee did not take advantage of these funds, Caritas (a Catholic organization) and existing groups sponsored by the American Council for Judaism and/or Satmar Hasidim would get the money and use it to bring the Jews to America. One can picture the anti-Zionist windfall such groups would reap. The counter argument was that if the policy is morally correct it should be upheld even if it causes temporary embarrassment.

Supporters feel that the recognition that this switch was needed to protect the right of other Jews to leave the Soviet Union for Israel would undercut support and recognition for such demonstrations.

Another objection raised was that such a policy could weaken support for the Soviet Jewry movement. It ran the risk of losing the well nigh universal support the movement now receives as a humanitarian issue. It might now be perceived solely as a 'Zionist' issue or an attempt to get olim for Israel. A loss of support in America might be most damaging of all to the chances of Russian Jews going to Israel. The main reason the Russians have allowed emigration at all has been American pressure and the needs of detente and trade rather than because of Jewish pressure or sentiment for family reunion. Opponents felt that public announcements of policy would be particularly damaging. Anything done should be done quietly.

Finally, the issue of timing is a critical one. Proponents argue that every day which passes with the present dropout rate raises the risk of the Soviets choking off the flow and arouses the ire of the other governments involved.

Since advance notice is needed, the policy should be decided and publicly announced at once. The alternative argument is that a period of testing should be undertaken in which the new approaches will narrow the differential and encourage the choice of Israel. Direct applications to go to the United States by those who prefer America should be encouraged and monitored. If Soviet Jews are willing to apply and if exit permissions are granted, then much of the opposition to the new policy would evaporate. The gain in Jewish community unity in itself would be worth the delay. The gain in moral stature that would accrue if the new policy were shown not to hurt Soviet Jewish emigration is also of great importance. It should

be added that due to the desire to maintain the unity of the Jewish community and to allow time for further deliberation, a compromise was adopted. The recommendation not to help Soviet Jews who switch destination from Israel to America when they come to Vienna has not been put into effect at this time. The other recommendations are in process of being implemented.

Conclusions and Recommendations

It seems clear that it is in the best interest of Jewry that Soviet Jews emigrate to Israel. Some of the recommendations of the Committee of Eight are reasonable attempts which will strengthen aliya. Some raise serious problems.

The most problematic of the recommended policies is of course that of getting Soviet Jews to apply directly for American visas if they want to go to America and refusal of aid to the Soviet Jews who come out on Israeli visas and shift destinations. It should be noted that leading Russian Jewish activists who have settled in Israel such as Alexander Voronel, Lunts and Vitaly Rubin maintain strongly that attempts to pressure Soviet Jews in this matter will likely have a negative effect on Soviet Jews and their attitudes toward Israel. Further, unless there is more clear evidence that direct American applications will be positively handled by the Russian authorities, this policy may well lead to a drop in Russian Jewish applications to leave Russia.

Many recent visitors to Russia have returned convinced that Russian Jews are sitting on a powder keg of Soviet anti-Semitism. Should the Soviet government weaken—or turn Stalinist—this could endanger the lives and security of Russian Jews. Then there is serious moral objection to any policy which may cause a Russian Jew to stay in Russia—even if the alternative is coming to America and assimilating. Of course, the Committee of Eight does not want to hurt the emigration flow of Russian Jews. But this policy may have just that result.

After the Holocaust, policy must lean over backwards to avoid such an outcome. Much dynamic is given to the love and support for Israel by the feeling that had Israel existed millions might have left the danger zone and been saved. Any situation which has the unintentional result of appearing to strengthen aliya but in reality thwarts the efforts of refugees must be avoided at all costs.

In addition, such a policy raises a real risk of turning the Soviet Jewry issue into a political gambit for Israel instead of the universally supported humanitarian concern that it is. Such a turn could erode the support of many non-Jewish political figures who have given this cause devoted service beyond any political advantage. It would weaken the single strongest outside levers for Soviet Jewish emigration—the expectation and pressure of the American government and public opinion on the Russian government.

Policy Alternatives

In what other ways can policy encourage aliya and cut down the misuse of Israeli visas?

A. Close the gap

We must concentrate on closing the gap between Israel and the United States for potential olim from Russia. This would mean drastic reorganization and improvement of the Israeli absorption machinery; as well as sweetening the economic package for those who choose Israel.

HIAS should continue to make every attempt to persuade people to go to Israel. In addition, Soviet Jewish activists have urged that an intensive seminar on Israel, Zionism and Jewish identity be given to Russian emigrants in Vienna and Rome to strengthen desire to go to Israel.

American Jewish communities should review their own gifts, grants and services to Russian Jewish immigrants. Care should be taken that we not compete with Israel by providing economic gifts that befit a rich, indulgent uncle rather than a sober, responsible concerned partner. Israel need not be ashamed that America is so much richer or easier to live in and that some choose to come here. American Jews, however, should avoid aggravating the situation.

B. Improve the Image of Israel

The main source of the negative image of Israel which causes many Russian Jews to opt to go elsewhere are — a) letters and reports from Russian immigrants in Israel complaining about absorption and life in Israel and b) Voice of America and BBC broadcasts.

Hand in hand with improving social and economic absorption of Russians, Israel should undertake a drive to make Russian Jewish

olim aware of the power of their letters. Those settled more than two years should be encouraged to write of their achievements. Others should be enlisted in the challenge of communicating a better perspective on Israel: not just the aggravation of adjustment—which could happen anywhere, but the freedom, progress and heroism, of this great Jewish adventure.

Many Russian Jews have reported on the effect of VOA and BBC broadcasts which constantly focus on internal Arab riots, Israel's economic difficulties and the outside hostility. VOA supplements this description with a succession of glowing success stories of Russian Jews in America. VOA and BBC should be monitored. If their portraits of Israel are distorted and unfair, pressure should be brought to correct this. The pressure should ask not for propaganda but for a fair, balanced portrait. Soviet Jews also urge that articles about Israel should be published in a range of publications (including trade and professional journals) to which they have access in order to offset the negative images.

C. Development of Soviet Jewish Identity

There is a growing movement within Soviet Jewry asking for access to Jewish culture. This may well be the most significant new development within Soviet Jewry (although there is controversy about it. Some have opposed it for fear it will undercut the focus on aliya). It seems clear that there is no long term future for Soviet Jewish culture because of government pressure. However, Soviet Jews—including many who have applied for emigration and many who have not—are asking for a chance to learn about their heritage. Through Jewish culture they seek to turn the negative experience of anti-semitic discrimination into a meaningful assertion of Jewish identity. This issue of culture is independent of aliya and should be made available to those who elect to stay in Russia. However, the deepening of identity and pride in those Jews who have chosen to emigrate will lead many more to choose Israel.

Israel can never compete with the United States in wealth or ease of living. Those Russian Jews who care deeply about being Jewish are most likely to go to Israel. An ambitious program of making culture and study material available in Russian should be fought for and created by the American Jewish community.

Similarly, for those Jews who opt to come to America, an ambitious spiritual outreach program should be developed. This calls for bold new planning and financing. It would be tragic that Soviet Jews be freed only to disappear into American open society.

These policies can be tried and monitored for effectiveness. If they do not work, further proposals must be developed. Ultimately upgrading the inner quality and dynamism of Israeli society and of American Jewish community is the key to attracting and holding the commitment not only of Soviet Jews but of native Israeli and American Jews. This remains a central challenge in the life of both communities.

The controversy over what is to be done to stimulate Soviet Jews to choose Israel when they emigrate can be a blessing in disguise. The above summary is offered in the hope that it will articulate the dilemmas of policy and lead to a more rational and intelligent decision on the issue. It also reflects the conviction that Jewry must learn to live in its new moral universe. Jews now have power—mainly in Israel. Although Jewish power is limited, it is present. It must be used with great awareness of responsibilities and danger of its exercise. Jews must draw upon Jewish traditions and ideals in this exercise but halachic-type thinking is necessary—to judge specific situations, to reconcile conflicting claims and shifting facts. Prophets—and the powerless—can make absolute demands for righteousness. Governments have obligations to protect people and to judge realities. Morally realistic policies often involve partial failures, guilt and 'lesser of two evils' policies. One of the dangers is that this issue be portrayed as an 'Israeli' issue with the Israelis set up as the 'bad guys' and the Americans as the ones concerned for human rights. This is wrong.

For more than three decades, Israelis have carried the brunt of the actual rescue work as well as the enormous effort and sacrifice of absorbing refugee Jews. Therefore, it ill behooves American Jews to turn self-righteous vis-a-vis Israel on this current issue.

It is important that the decision be a joint one and that American Jews take full responsibility for it. If a language of dialogue and disagreement can be evolved that does not lead to righteous condemnations and/or bitterness, this will be a real step toward maturation of the American Jewish community and its partnership with Israel.

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