



# Soviet Jewry Movement

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21<sup>st</sup> Century Moments that Mattered

Rabbi Efrem Goldberg

# Leaving Mother Russia - Safam

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# USSR

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- Rise of communism in USSR in the 1920's, the new Soviet regime sought to eliminate Jewish religious identity and deprive ability to practice religion.
- Stalin made a push to move Jews into their own province in Siberia.
- In 1941, the Nazis pushed into the Soviet Union and massacred Jews in the newly conquered territory.
- Babi Yar – 52,000 Jews, including man, women and children, were systematically and methodically put to death in Kiev following the Nazi occupation of the Ukrainian capital.
- By the end of the war, 532 synagogues were destroyed by the Germans in Russia.



# Stalin and the USSR

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- After World War II, Stalin became paranoid about his Jewish population and imagined they were a fifth column that needed to be stopped. (Like Pharaoh)
- This manifested itself in attempts to marginalize Jews in Soviet society by increasingly depicting them as enemies.





# Doctor's Plot



- In 1952–1953, under Stalin, a group of prominent Jewish doctors in Moscow were accused of conspiring to assassinate Soviet leaders.
- This was later accompanied by publications of anti-Semitic character in the media, which talked about the threats of Zionism and condemned people with Jewish names.
- Many doctors, officials and others, both Jews and non-Jews, were promptly dismissed from their jobs and arrested.
- A few weeks after Stalin's death, the new Soviet leadership stated a lack of evidence and the case was dropped. Soon after, the case was declared to have been fabricated.
- By the 1950's Jews in the USSR were being forced to assimilate and suffered what many called, a "spiritual strangulation."



## Refuseniks



- A large number of Soviet Jews applied for exit visas to leave the Soviet Union, especially in the period following the 1967 Six-Day war. While some were allowed to leave, many were refused permission to emigrate.
- During the Cold War, Soviet Jews were thought to be a security liability or possible traitors. To apply for an exit visa, the applicants and often their entire families would have to quit their jobs.
- In the years 1960 through 1970, only 4,000 people legally emigrated from the USSR. In the 1970s, 163,000 Jews were allowed to emigrate.



# Grassroots Movement

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- In 1964, reports of 15,000 Moscow Jews, dancing and singing in front of the city's Great Choral Synagogue on Simchas Torah made it to the West.
- On May 1, 1964, the Student Struggle for Soviet Jewry (SSSJ), one of the first grassroots groups protesting on behalf of Soviet Jewry held its founding demonstration.
- Through the 60's, these grassroots movements in the West and in the USSR remained small.
- The event that transformed the movement into a global cause was the Leningrad Hijacking.

# Leningrad Hijacking

- Jews from Riga and Leningrad were refused exist visas. They were among early refuseniks. They hijacked a small, 12-seater plane in an attempt to fly it out of the USSR.
- The KGB was monitoring them from the beginning and on June 15, 1970 arrested them on the tarmac.
- That December, the Soviets organized a very public trial and in the end, the two leaders of the plot were sentenced to death.





# Leningrad Hijacking

- Meir Kahane said he would kill “two Russians for every Jew.”
- 400 Jewish leaders converge on the State Department, Capitol Hill, the Department of Justice, several foreign embassies and the White House to urge President Richard Nixon to press the Soviets.
- After a week and a half, the Soviet relented and commuted the death sentences.



# Organizations Formed

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- In the 1970's the movement grew and became a feature of American Jewish life. Two national organizations were founded solely to work on this issue:
  - The National Conference on Soviet Jewry
  - Union of Councils for Soviet Jewry





## SSSJ

- In 1964, the Student Struggle for Soviet Jewry (SSSJ) was founded in New York by Jacob Birnbaum.
- Sir Martin Gilbert, the Oxford historian who has published extensively on Soviet Jewry, wrote: “Asa cautious, pedantic historian, I am naturally reluctant to call anyone the ‘Father’ of anything . . . but I have no hesitation whatever in describing Jacob Birnbaum as the Father of the Soviet Jewry movement.”
- Birnbaum sent a letter saying:

“Just as we, as human beings and as Jews, are conscious of the wrongs suffered by the Negro and we fight for his betterment, so must we come to feel in ourselves the silent, strangulated pain of so many of our Russian brethren. We who condemn silence and inaction during the Nazi Holocaust, dare we keep silent now? The time has come for a mass grass-roots movement—spearheaded by the student youth. A ferment is indeed at work at this time. There is a time to be passive and a time to act. We believe most emphatically that this is not a time for quietism. We believe that a bold, well-planned campaign, to include some very active measures, can create a climate of opinion, a moral power, which will become a force to be reckoned with.”
- On April 27, 1964, 250 Jewish students joined together at Columbia University for the first official gathering of the SSSJ. Within four days, a rally was held at the Soviet Mission in Manhattan and was attended by 1,100 people.

# Jewish Defense League – Meir Kahane

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- In its early years, the Jewish Defense League, headed by Meir Kahane, used to follow and harass Soviet diplomats stationed in the United States.
- When Soviet performers visited the United States, whether they were a small string quartet or the world renowned Bolshoi Ballet, they were greeted by Jewish pickets demanding rights for Soviet Jews.



# USSR Hope and Expectation



- The Soviet leadership made no concessions, presumably hoping that the Jewish community would grow discouraged and give up.
- After the Six-Day War, however, the mood of Soviet Jewry changed markedly. Thousands, and then tens of thousands, of Russian Jews began to study Jewish history and texts, attend Simchas Torah celebrations, and apply for emigration visas to Israel. By the early 1970s, many were receiving such permission.

# Jackson-Vanik Amendment



- Legislation that would make any trade relationship with the Soviet Union contingent on a freeing up of emigration.
- In 2010, tapes were released in which Henry Kissinger is heard telling Nixon in 1973 that helping Soviet Jews emigrate and thus escape oppression by a totalitarian regime — a huge issue at the time — was “not an objective of American foreign policy.”
- “And if they put Jews into gas chambers in the Soviet Union,” he added, “it is not an American concern. Maybe a humanitarian concern.”
- Eventually at the beginning of 1975, after a two-and-a-half-year battle, it was signed into law.



# Natan Sharansky

- Many prominent refuseniks but none more well known than Natan Sharansky.
- He was arrested in 1977 and put on trial in the summer of 1978. He was sentenced to 13 years in prison.
- In 1986 Sharansky was let go it was one of the first signs that the Soviet Union was changing its attitude about its Jews. Mikhail Gorbachev was looking for rapprochement with the West and Ronald Reagan had made it clear – as had the American Jewish community – that freeing up emigration would be the price.
- That year, only 914 Soviet Jews were permitted to leave.



Natan Sharansky

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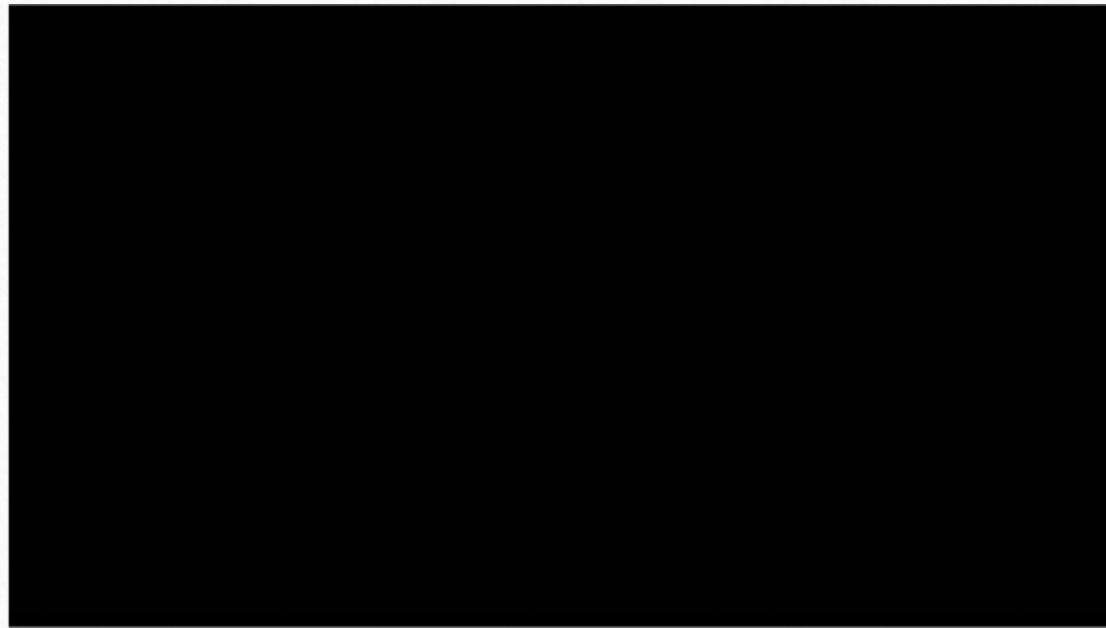


## Massive Rally

- On December 6, 1987, Gorbachev came on his first visit to Washington and a massive demonstration was scheduled.
- Eventually a quarter of a million showed up, sending a strong message to the Soviets. It wasn't long before the exodus began. By the end of the 1980's the large majority of Soviet Jews applying to emigrate were being permitted to do so.

# Massive Rally

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# Yossi Klein Ha'Levi



“By the mid-’70s, a transformed Jewish establishment was leading the movement. Thanks to Jackson-Vanik, a new generation of Jewish leaders learned how to lobby Congress and, no less important, how to resist White House pressure. Jackson-Vanik was the moment that American Jewry repudiated the legacy of Rabbi Stephen S. Wise, the pre-eminent American Jewish leader during the Holocaust, who failed to challenge President Roosevelt on Jewish rescue. Through the Soviet Jewry movement, moreover, a beautiful symbiotic relationship emerged between the freest Jews in the Diaspora and the most oppressed. By publicly expressing their solidarity with Soviet Jews, American Jews overcame their inhibitions and assumed their place within American society as a self-confident community. The courage shown today by American Jewish leaders in standing with Israel against the growing effort to delegitimize it, and to stand against an administration intent on weakening the American-Israeli relationship, is a legacy of the Soviet Jewry movement.”

# Famous Activists

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- Members and leaders of SSSJ:

- Malcolm Hoenlein
- R' Aharon Lichtenstein
- R' Norman Lamm
- R' Avi Weiss
- R' Shlomo Riskin
- R' Abraham Joshua Heschel



# Lubavitcher Rebbe



- From the inception of the communist oppression of Jews, it was Chabad Lubavitch that kept the flame of Jewish life alive. As former Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir, who for years was in the Mossad, said in 1994, “in the fifties when we began to send our agents to Russia we discovered a secret network that reached into every Jewish community operated by the Lubavitcher Rebbe”
- When *Lishkat Hakesher*, the secret arm of the Israeli prime minister’s office, began to orchestrate public confrontation in the West, the Rebbe demanded they be restrained. Based on his intimate knowledge of Russia, he felt that this would endanger Jews in the Soviet Union. Prime Minister Levi Eshkol was considering accepting the Rebbe’s view but he died in office and the new Prime Minister Golda Meir was not receptive to the idea.

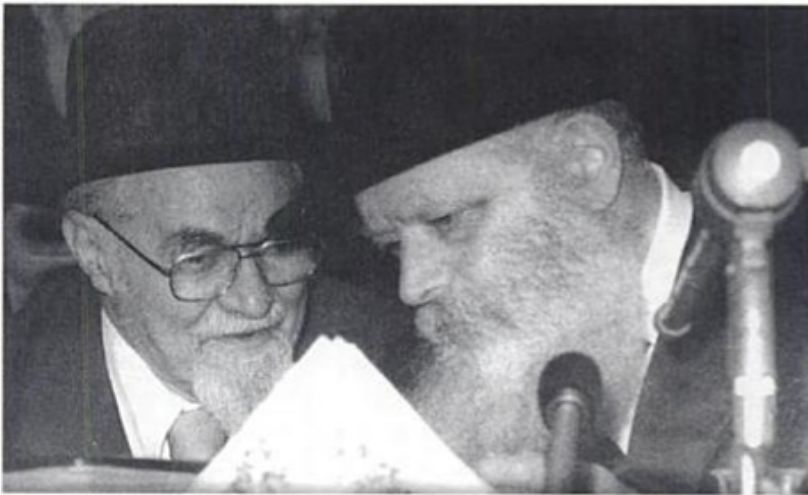
# Lubavitcher Rebbe

- The Rebbe was not against activism, and he stated time and again that the movement in the US was bolstering Jewish identity there. But in his view, the road to freedom was through quiet diplomacy. The Rebbe was deeply involved in behind-the-scenes dealings with Ronald Reagan and Michael Gorbachev in an effort that is thought by some to have paved the way for Jews to leave Russia.
- The Rebbe expressed his sharp opposition to mass protests in a major address from 1971: “May the one who sits upon high protect Russian Jewry from those who cause disruptions in order to supposedly help them, but whose hearts are oblivious to what constitutes real help and what causes the opposite effect. . . . It is imperative, instead, to advance secret initiatives like those that until now have brought substantive results.”





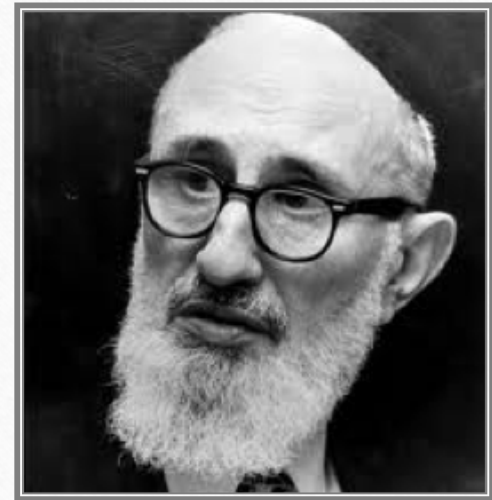
# Rabbi Pinchas Teitz



- Rabbi Pinchas Teitz (1908–1995) of Elizabeth, New Jersey, had been making efforts since the 1950s to maintain a connection with Soviet Jewry. From 1965, he traveled regularly to the Soviet Union, teaching classes to local Jews and distributing Jewish religious books. He also cultivated relationships with Russian officials—an issue that was subsequently criticized severely by the activists.
- Jacob Birnbaum comments that “R. Pinchas Teitz was a thorn in our side for many years.”

# Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik

- Rabbi Soloveitchik never came out publicly as a supporter of public demonstrations.
- It is notable that his brother, Rabbi Ahron Soloveitchik (1917–2001), did take an open stand in favor of public activism in regard to Soviet Jewry, civil rights, and the Vietnam War.





# Demonstrations or Diplomacy?

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- See source sheets

- R' Simcha Elberg
- Rav Moshe
- Agudas Ha'Rabbonim
- R' Henkin

- R' Riskin
- R' Henkin
- Rebbe
- R' Teitz
- Dr. Adam Ferziger