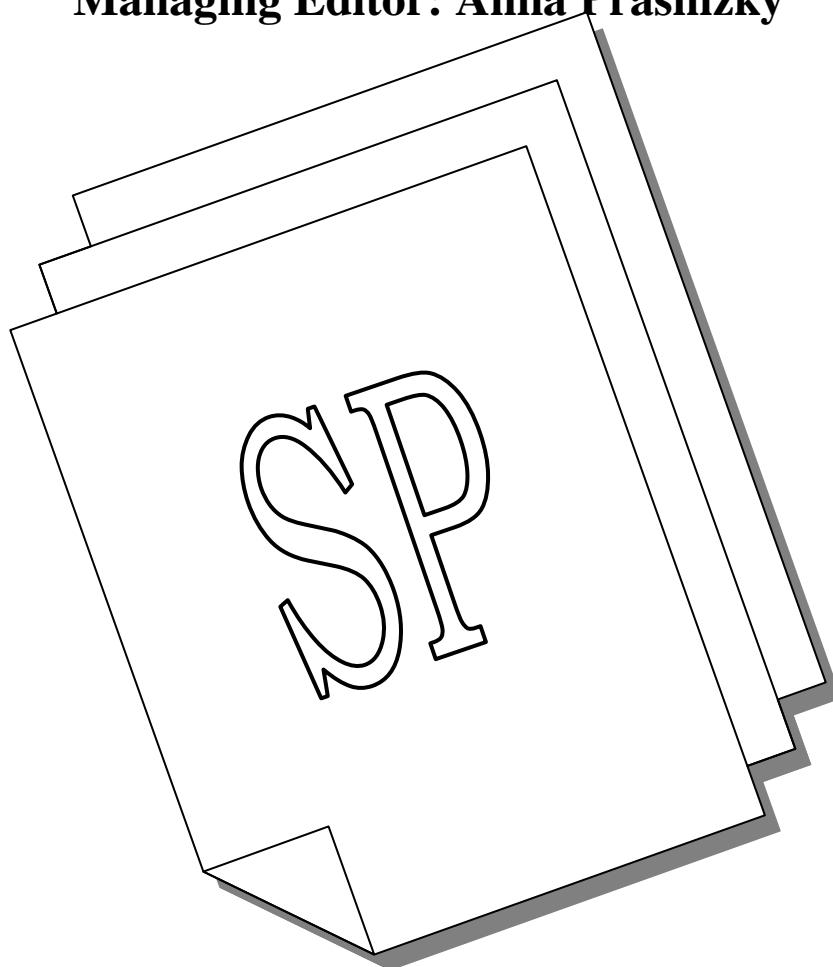


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All is not in the Family: Thoughts on ‘Integration’ of Russian Jews and Other Jewish Ethnic Groups in the US¹

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Abstract

This article analyzes active sources of continuing misalignment between the Jewish mainstream and the Israeli, Iranian and Russian-speaking Jewish colonies in America. These demographics maintain and enlarge their linguistic, cultural, religious and social autonomy away from the organized Jewish life in North America. To overcome this gap of irrelevance, the Jewish mainstream promotes 'Jewish education' and 'leadership development' programs directed at the second and third generations of 'ethnic' Jews. Such *pull* efforts require significant resources but are not likely to overcome the *push away* forces. Focusing on Russian-speaking Jews (RSJs) in the US, the article identifies major stumbling blocks of engagement, such as incorrect assumptions about the content of RSJs 'Jewishness', the unaddressed negative stereotypes, the asymmetry of 'needs', and the terms of joining the mainstream, whose worldviews and policies are often not shared by the 1st and 2nd generations of RSJs. The main obstacle to engagement by leadership development lies in the absence within these communities of trusted organizational structures necessary to establish 'parity' with the mainstream. To address disparity between the mainstream and its target populations, the article sketches an '*enabling model*' of mutual engagement. A consistent and minimally intrusive investment into grass-root organizations and institutions within the ethnic Jewish communities is needed to produce truly effective leadership responsible to its constituency, capable of shaping the mainstream agenda and thus building a sense of mutual ownership of Jewish future in the United States.

Introduction

In the span of several decades three distinct Jewish populations have emerged in North America (the US and Canada): Russian-speaking Jews (RSJs), Iranian Jews, and American-Israelis.² Linguistically and culturally different from the aboriginal Jewish population in the US³, these ethno-religious groups are growing fast but did

¹ This is an expanded version of presentation at the 'The Contemporary Russian-Speaking Jewish Diaspora' conference at the Davis Center, Harvard University, November 13-15, 2011. Hereafter, the '*Harvard Conference*'.

² I am indebted to Prof. Larissa Remennick for her inspired comments and suggestions. I am grateful to Dr. Steven Bayme for suggested inclusion of the Orthodox and especially Modern Orthodox communities on this list of emerging groups. However this cohort and its integration should be considered separately by more knowledgeable people.

³ The term '*aborigines*' as applied to American Jews was first suggested by Misha Galperin.

not attain significance as an integral part of North-American Jewry. What seems to be the problem?

There is an uneasy consensus that a '*disconnect*' exists between these populations and the organized Jewish mainstream. This intuitively understood diagnosis needs definition. A '*disconnect*' exists when *Russian, Iranian, and Israel-born Jews* define patterns of their communal behavior and engagement with Jewish life and Israel independently of the mainstream. The sources of this phenomenon may be different for each group, but their histories and world-views quite different from the *aboriginal* and the *organized* Jewish world remain a common factor.⁴

The side-by-side existence of Israeli, Russian-speaking, and Iranian-Jewish enclaves with American Jews shows a remarkable consistency of internal cohesion, mutually negative perceptions, and areas of disconnect. Iranian Jews (Persians) in America keep "low profile" when it comes to Iran and Israel, so as not to jeopardize the 20,000 Jewish community, their relatives, and own economic interests in Iran.⁵ Thus, most Iranian Jews and their leadership voice opposition to a military strike on Iranian nuclear facilities. Described as "*torn between homelands*"⁶ and dispersed between the US, Canada and Europe, the Iranian-Jewish diaspora is unified by language, observance, traditions, food-culture, and music but, most importantly, by the sense of '*shared reality*' much different from that of their 'aboriginal' cousins. They develop cohesiveness through maintaining strong family ties, settling in dense geographical enclaves, and by collaboration and consultation between leaders on both coasts on domestic and Israeli political issues.⁷

More observant than American Jews and better organized than Russian-speaking Jews, more charitable than Israeli diaspora, Iranian Jews would seem to fit perfectly the American-Jewish mainstream ideal, but in reality they do not. Just as the other ethno-Jewish groups they remain outsiders sharing well entrenched sense of mainstream '*irrelevancy*'⁸. Thus, Gold (2002) and Gold and Veinstein (2009) report on Israeli diaspora's limited engagement with the Jewish communal life. Kliger (2001, 2004) makes similar observations about RSJs. There is a striking similarity of issues that separate RSJs, the Israeli 'diaspora,' and (to a lesser degree) the Iranian Jews from the organized Jewish life across North America.

Among many factors involved in this mutual disengagement, there is a shamefully persistent demonization of *ethnic* Jewish groups still unaddressed by sociologists and the Jewish establishment. All three '*communities*' are subjects and targets of wide-

⁴ See a comprehensive REUT Institute Report "Engaging the Israeli Diaspora: Toronto as a Case Study" (June 2013) that identifies opportunities and challenges in the relationship between Israelis abroad and local Jewish communities. It describes the challenges as follows: "*The approximately 50,000 Israelis (about one-quarter of Toronto's Jewish community), do not "mix" with the greater Jewish community despite living side-by-side along Bathurst street. This is partly because the mainstream Jewish community sees in the Israelis both a burden and an ideological liability, while most Israeli-Canadians perceive the connection with the Jewish community as irrelevant.*"

⁵ Karmel Melamed, "Iranian Jews in New York still keep a low profile" [Jewish Journal.com](http://JewishJournal.com), February 3, 2008

⁶ Elizabeth Weingarten, "Iranian Jews in America: Torn Between Homelands" *The Atlantic*, August 26, 2010.

⁷ Karmel Melamed, *ibid*.

⁸ Reut Institute Report, *ibid*, "*Most Israeli-Canadians still perceive the connection with the Jewish community as not relevant, not important, not a badge of pride and certainly not a duty.... Among Israelis we met there is a strong suspicion toward the Jewish communal establishment...*" Executive Summary, p. 7.

spread ethnic profiling and stereotyping. All three are perceived and portrayed as *"selfish, self-absorbed, materialistic, shallow, money hungry, sex-addicted, unattractive and uneducated buffoons"*⁹ These portraits of Iranian Jews in a *"Shahs of Sunset"* TV program are easily applicable to the gallery of Russian Jewish women in a 'reality' TV series *"Russian Dolls"* that ran on A&E network in 2011. The promotional materials claimed that the show is: *"a look at Brighton Beach's multi-generational families whose dramas and dreams contend with their Russian heritage"*. But this 'reality' was a deception. In fact, *"the dominant themes of the show were clubbing, young women clad in lingerie, brawls, and plentiful shots of vodka."*¹⁰ The uproar within the Russian community over the linkage of all Jewish immigrants with criminality¹¹ was great, but no criticism or objections came from the Jewish establishment so keen on battling anti-Semitism. Possibly because many purveyors of the *Red Mafia* threat were Jews¹², the mainstream organizations did nothing to counter media linkage of criminal activities with the entirety of Jewish immigrant groups felt all across America. Headlines of *'Russian mafia', 'Ponzi schemers', 'Ecstasy Dealers,'* and *'Medicaid Fraudsters'* became primary tags identifying the RSJs and Israeli immigrants¹³ and invariably contributing to the spread of anti-semitic fodder.¹⁴ This phenomenon shows no sign of subsiding.

Given past and present realities of irrelevance, disrespect and disengagement, the repeated calls for *"integration"* of the *'Russian'* and other ethnic communities into the Jewish mainstream fold are met with formidable challenges. Some effort to address them has been made; notably in the context of support for Israel. While the disproportionately massive participation of RSJs in many crisis-related events went largely unnoticed by the media, it caught the attention of JAFI. Under the stewardship of such prominent leaders of Russian descent as Natan Sharansky and Misha Galperin, the Jewish Agency embarked on a systemic effort to harness this émigré fidelity by creating a network of 'messengers' working almost exclusively with

⁹ Karmel Melamed "My Beef with Ryan Seacrest." Jewish Journal.com. April 1, 2013.

¹⁰ Marlon Bishop "Brighton Beach Leaders Want Lifetime to Pull the Plug on 'Russian Dolls'," July 28, 2011. *"The entire point of this show is to ridicule our community - to make us look like stupid, sex-crazed partiers,"* said Ari Kagan, a journalist..." who joined other Russian-Jewish leaders protesting the show.

¹¹ See, for example, statements in *"Russian Mafia in America: Immigration, Culture and Crime"* by Finckenauser and Waring (1998) that: *"For all Russians, being especially adaptive and innovative often meant putting aside morality and legality, and this outlook-- characterized by rationalization, hypocrisy, and a double standard of morality-- to varying degrees shapes the thinking and behavior of almost all Soviet Russians who have come to America."* (p, 37). The authors then go on questioning the existence of the organized crime of Russian Jews in America arguing that it is just in the blood of opportunistic émigrés.

¹² See e.g. Friedman's *"Red Mafia: How the Russian Mob Has Invaded America"*, Seno's *"The Russian Mafia,"* and scores of others.

¹³ Not that Israelis were treated much better than the Russian Jews. Wikipedia devotes several entries to the *"Israeli mafia"*. The newspaper headlines scream *"The Israeli mafia is heavily involved in Ecstasy."* *"Israeli Mafia Returns to LA? Did It Ever Leave?"* *"Los Angeles is Ground Zero of Israeli organized crime in America"*, *"Mob brothers recruited members of a Los Angeles street gang to distribute Ecstasy"*, *"Israeli mafia trying to take over Vegas"*. Even WikiLeaks entered the fray with its *"WikiLeaks Exposes Israeli Mafia's Presence in US"*.

¹⁴ Laura Radanko's book: *"The Russian Mafia in America"* (2011) inspired the following claims in *"The Judeo-Russian Mafia And The Bloodbath To Come"*, by Dr Lasha Darkmoon: *"The Russian mafia, known also as the Red Mafiya or the "Red Octopus", is really the Jewish mafia in disguise. It has secret links to Mossad, the Rothschild family, the Federal Reserve Bank, and to powerful Jewish organizations such as AIPAC and the ADL. Laura Radanko, herself Jewish, ...lifted the lid on some of their most grisly secrets."* posted on March 4, 2013 (!)

'Russian speaking young Jewish adults (ages 25-40)'. This focus on only the 'young' met with some criticism (Glinsky, 2011) but still remains the main direction of RSJs engagement programs. The goal of this discussion is to advance the need for critically testing assumptions about RSJs underlying current 'engagement' efforts.

While there is a plethora of materials *on* RSJs in the US, a comprehensive analysis of *their reality* in the North American sojourn is yet to emerge. The REUT Institute Report is an example of such analysis, providing realistic insights into many divisions between Israelis and Canadian Jews. The analysis of ethnic Jewish colonies in North America incorporating their own perspectives must continue and expand. Before major resources are committed, we need to reassess the nature and direction of the future integrative processes based on recognition of 'facts on the ground' mostly ignored by prior acculturation and engagement programs. These issues deserve an open discussion which this paper hopes to provoke, as we focus on RSJs, the Russian-speaking Jews of America.¹⁵

In comparison to Israelis and Iranians, RSJs attracted lion's share of American Jewish resources and attention. Although many strategies to bring 'Russians' into a communal tent were tried; none worked well enough. "*The Russians are everywhere and nowhere!*" lamented one critic.¹⁶ While RSJs have resided in North America for over three decades, their alienation is still seen (rather simplistically) in the light of their history and experiences in the USSR/Russia. These popular views hold that Russian-Jewish psyche warped by anti-Semitism, atheism, and entrenched anti-collectivist attitudes has been all but lost to the organized Jewish world. Some progress in overcoming these outdated views has occurred as Russian-speaking professionals advance through the ranks of federations and national agencies. A few of the Russian-born Jews are taking leadership positions in the Jewish world in the US and in Israel. RSJ visibility in 'Support for Israel' galas and rallies has earned some recognition and praise.

Still, the vast majority of RSJs do not see themselves as participants in the organized Jewish life in the US.¹⁷ Citing the results of a *Limmud* poll released in March 2013, which showed that 57 percent of the Russian-speaking Jews in the US "*do not feel that they are part of the American Jewish community*,"¹⁸ Sam Sokol quotes Natalie Shnaiderman, a Jewish Agency Director. Her cautionary comments on the survey sent to over 2,000 names in the US *Limmud* database (to which only 10% (218) responded) are instructive. She points out that many respondents in the poll (as opposed to 80% non-respondents) were already "*proactive*" and "*affiliated with various communal organizations*," while "*most of the Russian-speaking Jews are not affiliated with any agency or organization at all. They are not involved in anything.*"

It is now claimed that we should wait for one or two generations of immigrants to fade away before their descendants join the organized Jewish community. This analogy with the 'slave mentality' disappearing in the course of the biblical Exodus may well reflect emotional disappointment with outcomes of 'acculturation' and

¹⁵ This writer arrived from Odessa, USSR over 38 years ago and is honored to share his insight into both sides of the divide. The author is solely responsible for all generalizations derived from his research, private conversations, meetings, and observations.

¹⁶ Private conversation with a local (LA) Jewish professional.

¹⁷ The ambiguous 'Jerusalem Post' headline by Sam Sokol from March 20, 2013 sounds as a lament or a surprise: "*US Russian Jews don't feel connected to community*." Retrieved from <http://www.jpost.com> on July 28, 2013.

¹⁸ Quoted from Sam Sokol "*US Russian Jews don't feel connected to community*", *ibid*.

‘leadership development’ programs.¹⁹ Many sociologists and professionals see parallels with assimilation dynamics of the earlier waves of Jewish immigration, when the second generation joins the Jewish mainstream and becomes truly Americanized. This view is supported by such an authority as Prof. Zvi Gitelman, who thinks that RSJs as a separate group has a ‘*short shelf life*’ of one to three generations at the most.²⁰ This may not turn out as predicted. Indeed, evidence is mounting that it may well go in the opposite direction. The above mentioned 2013 *Limmud* poll of younger RSJs (most born in the US) still showed a 57 percent of disengagement, even among the supposedly more-active respondents.

One important aspect is missing from the re-focus upon the young generations: the unprecedented success of "Americanization" the first generation as well as their Russian-born children attained without much (or any) connectivity to the American Jewish life.²¹ One of the factors, if not the main one, is the lack of recognition, even rejection, of the uniqueness of spiritual-religious experience of RSJs *as Jews*. The issue was outlined in the form of a question by Abby Knopp, the Associate Director of the Foundation of Summer Camps: *"If we are honest with ourselves, we must admit that North American Jewish educational and spiritual frameworks — the places where Jews live and learn Jewishly — have yet to be profoundly influenced by Russian-speaking Jews who arrived in the immigration of the second half of the 20th century. Why?"*

She proceeds with an answer previously unheard of from the mainstream. *"It's because too many American-born Jews continue to view them as either charity cases or in need of our brand of Jewish wisdom. We still have not figured out how to listen and really hear what Russian Jews are saying about Jewish identity, peoplehood and education, and the Jewish community is suffering and continuing to pay the price of disengagement."*²²

Aside from eternal old-timers vs. newcomers divisions, or the imperative to recognize the RSJs unique Jewish identity, it just seems imprudent to write off a large portion of our human inventory, considering that RSJs comprise over 15% of the US Jewry. Maybe we should instead re-examine our supplies and manufacturing practices? No one questions the *existence* of this valuable resource,²³ but should we ignore it only

¹⁹ This approach is by no means limited to the RSJ community. One of the central findings of the REUT Institute study is that: "any attempt to fully integrate Israeli-Canadians into the community fails due to the lack of trust of first-generation Israelis in Jewish organizations..." (emphasis added). The conclusion reached by the Report is that: "the gap between first generation Israelis and the Jewish community is too wide to close..." Consequently, (and paradoxically) the offered solution is: "facilitating the integration of second- and third- generation Israelis into the Jewish community." The REUT Institute Report, Executive Summary, p. 8.

²⁰ Quoted from Prof. Gittelman's closing address at the 2011 Harvard Conference.

²¹ This did not impede success and assertion of Jewishness by constitutional law professors Ilya Somin and Eugene Volokh, by pop singer Regina Spector, by Lisa Korbatov, President of the Beverly Hills School Board, or *Eduard Schmieder*, founder of the iPalpiti Festival of International Laureates, now in its 16th year, or by Sergei Brin's founder of Google, and accomplishments of scores of other RSJs in America.

²² Abby Knopp, Op-Ed: "Engage Russian-speaking Jews on their own terms", JTA February 28, 2013.

²³ Twenty years ago, none other than Zvi Gitelman, noted that "since the 1880s, no group of Jews has migrated as often, in as great numbers, and with such important consequences as the Jews of Russia and the FSU. The mass immigration of Russian/Soviet Jews played a great role in shaping the character of the two largest Jewish communities in the world, those of the United States and Israel. American Jewish and Israeli politics, religion, culture, and economics have been, and are still, profoundly

because we have no clear idea of how to *appropriate* and *use* it? Can we focus on fruits while disregarding the tree?

As agents of the largest Jewish exodus of the late 20th Century, RSJs are carriers of a historical mission (Gorbis, 2011). They brought a treasure-chest of uniquely Jewish values, knowledge, experiences, and ideas, but the notion that American Jews have anything to learn from their émigré brethren is not yet credible. However, it may only be a matter of time before RSJs have a collective impact on the Jewish world. It is still up to the Jewish world to enable this enormous potential to reveal itself sooner.

It is well established that RSJs have successfully integrated into economic, social, and cultural life in America. Their income equals and exceeds that of the Jewish middle class. Their observance levels are at least as high, or even higher, than those of their American peers.²⁴ Why then RSJs' guided entry into the organized Jewish life did not occur as hoped for? Did something obstruct this development? Are these reasons still there, and if so, what should be done to negate or damper their effects?

Mutual Disengagement

Let's take a quick account of the past. Some 40 years ago there was a vision that RSJ newcomers (processed mostly through federations) will become grateful contributors to Jewish institutions. What happened? Most immigrants have upgraded their starting positions and entered American middle class, but after this move few re-established ties with the federations. Today, the federation system itself is under pressure of self-directing philanthropy, rifts on national and international issues, loss of member support, decline in Jewish education, etc; it faces challenges other than tracking down and wooing its former clients. There are other reasons: some personal, quite a few - ideological, but mostly financial; RSJs are just not seen as a worthy investment.²⁵ The levels of RSJs philanthropic engagement have never been measured over the 40 years, but the '*feeling*' persists that this community is not contributing its share.

From their perspective, the RSJs see a fractured Jewish life. They do not join the Orthodox community due to its religious requirements, although in their political outlook the RSJs are very close to modern Orthodox. They do not embrace the Reform movement - repelled by its alleged "lack of authenticity" and revolted by its leftist and liberal agenda. Their resources are not sufficient to compete in the "pay-to-play" environment of some institutions. In their own info-sphere, RSJs express views starkly opposite to those espoused by many mainstream Jewish organizations and construed by the latter as conservative and hawkish. It is often ignored that neither Orthodox, Reform, nor Conservative movements paid much attention to the spiritual needs of RSJs, hoping (against evidence) that the warm welcome extended to émigrés upon arrival was all that mattered.

Perhaps the truest impact upon RSJs inner lives came from Chabad Lubavitcher movement. From the early 1970's, Chabad relied on RSJ Hasidim clandestinely nurtured in the USSR to build a network of Chabad centers in America. These

influenced by those who came and are coming from the FSU." quoted from Abby Knopp's op-ed, see above.

²⁴ NJPS 200-2001, Report No 7.

²⁵ Citing economic reasons, the Jewish Federation of Greater Los Angeles eliminated the only position of Program Director for RSJs outreach in 2010. That same year the Federation decided not to partner with RSJs in their Annual 'Saving Lives' Gala. Kansas City with a much smaller émigré population ended its RSJ programs in 2004.

synagogues became centers of cultural and social hubs of émigré coagulation.²⁶ Chabad introduced RSJs to the fundamentals of Jewish life, promoted Shabbat observance, performed thousands of Halahic circumcisions, subsidized tuition in its schools, facilitated life-cycle events, and ran huge summer camps for 'Russian' kids. Federations did the same, but Chabad still plays a significant role in RSJs' life and federations do not.

While Chabad pivotal role often met with highly critical or dismissive attitude from the Jewish establishment, the movement itself lost some of its appeal with the split over the Rebbe's post-mortem status. Regardless of how much Chabad strives to do for Russian Jews, the urbanized, intellectually sophisticated RSJs maintain what Dr. Sam Kliger calls "*detached affiliation*" to religious institutions in the US (Kliger, 2004). Chasidism did not (and probably could not) satisfy the intellectually-grounded spiritual needs of many educated Russian Jews.

There is still the unmet demand for a more sophisticated joinder of Judaism and Jewish life. It should merge the uniquely Jewish worldview of the 'Russians' and the spirituality of classical Judaism with intellectualism and science, thus building power to respond to resurgence of Islamism, creeping anti-Zionism, and other current threats. Together this approach should enable alertness and effective security response in Israel and the global Jewish Diaspora. This underlying need is not going to disappear with the first generation of RSJs. It cannot be ignored, and if disregarded the price might be too high.

The current efforts to attract young RSJs with "Jewish education" and "leadership development" thus raise a number of questions. Which brand of Judaism will inform these efforts? What is their objective and criteria of success? Specifically, what is the added value of the *Russian-Jewishness* in the outcome, if any? Are we trying to integrate young RSJs into mainstream organizations or train them to raise donations among other RSJs? Are we educating Jewish '*missionaries*' to promote specific ideas among their own or are we creating mostly secular leaders to work independently elsewhere and only marginally within their own community?

Few of these questions can be answered unless we recognize that the smartest émigrés and their successful children cannot become effective leaders in the RSJs population unless they have *something* to lead. The title of a *leader* presupposes a *constituency* to which the leader owes a duty to represent its interests before a larger body. Within a federation or an organization, this means the duty to articulate RSJ position, to place RSJ issues on the agenda and to advocate for proper resolutions. This entails the power to convince the organization/agency to adopt or change its stand and to act on it. A leader unable or prevented from so performing for his group is seen as ineffective, suspected of having a self-serving agenda and spurned.²⁷

Presently, no national RSJs constituency exists that can be led by leaders educated by the mainstream. The preferred model of celebrating achievements or resolving differences with RSJs *on an individual level* will not become effective in the absence of strong and vibrant émigré organizations. With notable exceptions (such as Boston

²⁶ Chabad Centers still attracting large numbers of RSJs are found in New York, Los Angeles, New Jersey, Toronto, Philadelphia, and many other places.

²⁷ One of the findings of the REUT report on Toronto-based Israelis is the existence of "*strong suspicion not only towards the Jewish communal establishment but towards those Israelis who were co-opted by the establishment into "Israel Activities*".

and New York), RSJs still form *colonies* with an outer shell, like crustaceans, but no internal skeletal structure (Gorbis, 2004).

Formal social groupings of the RSJs have short life, small or declining membership and lack regular funding. They do not own physical premises for assembly and rent small offices or operate out of private residences. They rarely have any legal status. They do not follow the Rules of Order and have no plans for succession. Most have no paid executive or secretarial staff, and their existence depends on activism of only a few members. First brought to mainstream's attention some two decades ago (Gorbis, 1992, Gold 1994) these problems still remain unresolved²⁸. As a result, RSJs colony failed to develop and accumulate social capital needed for negotiated entry into the Jewish mainstream. This *absence of parity* on an organized level is one of the biggest obstacles to greater connectivity between ethnic enclaves and the mainstream.

Still, competition for RSJs as an asset is growing. Aside from JAFI, EZRA, and Limmud, a number of secular Jewish organizations with little investment in RSJ life, such as the numerous 'Friends of...' are trying to establish direct links with American RSJs. The typical process involves an organization that attracted one or few active Russian-speaking members mostly through a personal connection. The neophytes are expected to serve as a liaison with the '*Russian community*'. It is assumed that other 'Russians' a) will also want to join, and b) will accept the organization's objectives and policies. Because the '*community*' is mostly a label, these assumptions often fail. Individual outreach is effective when there is a communal approbation of the Jewish organization's goals, policies and activities, thus allowing neophytes to act as representatives. In other words, to attract individuals with leadership potential, we need to be attractive to their functioning *community*. But are we ready to deal with the RSJs as a 'community' on its own terms?

Let us review the statement that "*integration remains an unfulfilled objective*" made by Mr. Shrage²⁹ at the 2011 Harvard Conference and turn it into a question. How accurate is this admission, when for over 40 years so many resources were dedicated to the resettlement, acculturation, and leadership development of RSJs in the Greater Boston area? After all, Boston-area RSJs have organized a highly functional, and self-funded, communal structure – Russian-Jewish Community Foundation (RJCF) that stands tall in the field of RSJ community building in America.

Operating independently of the Boston Federation, RJCF runs summer camps in Sderot and supports local émigré organizations projects ranging from math education and chess clubs to Jewish identity development. While many of its leaders are AJC Russian Leadership Program graduates, RJCF unabashedly articulates its contrarian worldview, and the resulting conflicts of RSJs with Jewish organizations in Massachusetts are well known. In fact, the more Boston RSJs feel shunned and ignored the more they strengthen their voice.³⁰

²⁸ The "Russian Community Center", a service organization run in Los Angeles by the Association of Soviet Jewish Émigrés (ASJE) since 1984 closed its doors in 2011.

²⁹ Since 1987 Mr. Shrage is the President of Combined Jewish Philanthropies of Boston (CJPoB), the oldest federated charity in USA.

³⁰ RSJs claim that their opposition to various developments, such as Jewish dialogue with controversial Muslim participants, the building of a Boston Mosque, to issues "that do not directly affect Jews" was routinely ignored. Feeling that "*Russian Jews of Boston become invisible due to ideological preferences*," Russian Bostonians created Russian Jewish Telegraph, the first English media online service, headed by Greg Margolin, an Orthodox Jew and one of RCJF founders.

Barriers to Inclusion

The situation in Boston reflects *structural* and *dynamic* paradoxes inherent in 'integrating' RSJs and Jewish mainstream in Massachusetts and elsewhere. From a dynamic point of view, there exists a proverbial Catch 22 situation: any organization attracts members that share its *worldview* (*мировоззрение* in Russian), but RSJs hold dear and advocate many positions contrary to those of the largely liberal American Jewry.³¹ Let us be frank: no organization can tolerate an influx of people that have a worldview different from that of its base contributors. However, without opportunities for a minority to influence the organization's policy, people will not join or leave convinced (as émigrés often do) that "*establishment loves our money but not our views*"³². On the other hand, Boston exemplifies what a large and frustrated minority can do when it sets an independent course and produces its own leaders.

Group behavior is a reflection of the *actual needs* of its constituent members and a source of in-group consolidation, as well as an outreach to out-groups. If some vision, threat or objective is relevant, a group is likely to band together and seek allies to share resources, concerns and strategies. The interaction between RSJs and American Jews is no exception, and this is where we have run into roadblocks. The gap of *irrelevance* between Jewish mainstream and RSJs (or Canadian Jewry and the Israelis) is a multi-layered phenomenon, and in order to deal with it we need to understand its pervasive nature.

Absence of Need. Today, most *individual* needs of RSJs are served by self-reliance and a variety of federal and state social programs. There is no problem of orphans and widows, no issues of indigent burial, of brides without dowry, health care for the poor or similar problems that require communal banding for support or protection. The functioning of the Jewish community (that was in many ways responsible for eliminating these needs) is irrelevant to the RSJs *need for security*.

Absence of a Role. Due to American openness to economic and professional advancement, educated RSJs have no need for American Jews to mediate between them and the non-Jewish world or US labor market. The RSJs do not need the mainstream to act as an interpreter and marketer of RSJs usefulness as good citizens. Indeed, the successful Soviet Jewry struggle positioned them as a valuable asset

³¹ For example, RSJs prefer the values of *Liberty* and *Safety* to *Equality*, which they see as an instrument of demagoguery, populism and ultimately injustice. American Jews have traditionally fought anti-Semitism demanding equal treatment and seeing danger from the Christian right. RSJs are more tolerant of the Christians (Zanemonets, 2004) and see danger elsewhere, asserting that the mainstream's universalist 'human rights' agenda violates common sense. The RSJs, who lived under conditions of declared and forced 'equality', criticize American Jews for their myopia and wishful thinking and oppose most policies of 'tolerance' and support towards Muslims, BDS movement, gay marriage, and lenient migration regime, to name a few.

³² Last heard when a synagogue in Los Angeles struggling to attract Russian Jews asked that *Havinu Malkein* not be read in Russian on Yom Kippur because... "*it irritates and displeases non-Russian attendees.*" Many 'drop-outs' cite cultural issues, such as 'wrong' Russian food brought to a potluck, some personal, such as insults or prejudice towards the "*Russkies*" "*Israelis*" or "*Iranians*", some refer to ideological differences such as attitudes towards Israel, and the current administration. Absence of cultural communality, such as common allusions, knowledge of sports events, name associations, similarity of humor, familiarity with songs and performers, is a powerful factor in dropping out, but the main reason mentioned most frequently is frustration with the haughty perception that RSJs "are not Jewish enough".

outside the Jewish community. On the other hand, American media and Jewish writers are among major peddlers of the myth of RSJ inbred criminality.

Failure of Communication. The need of RSJs to express their experiences and thoughts to the American Jews was not adequately received. The two-way communication did not materialize; the 'Russians' were mostly '*talked to*' but not '*listened to*'. Paternalism did not sit well with RSJs and repelled many. Jewish media did not enable much communication by RSJs to their English-speaking peers. There are no Russian-speaking reporters dedicated to or committed to the task of covering the life of RSJs for American Jews and little if any coverage is given to RSJ life outside of New York

Failure of Belonging. The *need to belong* is one of the greatest human motivations fueled by desire for '*normalcy*' – the drive to be like the others. Here American Jewry met with an enigma of émigré Jewishness: RSJs failed to satisfy the main criteria of belonging: *social activism*, *synagogue/secular affiliation*, and *philanthropic giving*. Consequently, many American Jews do not trust the 1st and even the 2nd generation of immigrants to be sufficiently 'Jewish'. There is a troubling consensus that, as products of anti-Semitic and totalitarian forces, RSJs have no *positive* Jewish identity. This helps explain why RSJs exclude themselves from religious participation, philanthropy, and social activism. Because these '*explanations*' energize current drive for 'integration' they deserve a brief review.

Misperception of Religion. According to Kliger (2004), RSJs take from the abundance of Jewish religious life only those features that they want and only when they want them. This is also true of the majority of American Jews, but for a variety of reasons, including nostalgic myths, RSJs were expected to aspire to a higher standard.

Ignorance of Spiritual Reality. In reality, RSJs lifestyle does not include formal religious observance but exhibits many signs of vibrant personal worship (Gold, 1994). Even though Kliger (2001, 2006) defines RSJs as "*contemplators*" in contrast to American Jews who are "*doers*," the Russian media and Internet present an amazingly abundant volume of Jewish and Judaic content. What escapes the critical view is this: in spite of being deprived of their Jewish childhood, most RSJs hold *G-d* as the core of their spiritual life. Although their 'private' faith is usually detached from the formal rites and commitments of organized Judaism, they share the Ten Commandments as their chief moral compass. After decades spent in the US, even those proclaiming their atheism have bar-mitzvahed their sons, wed their sons and daughters, and buried their parents in accordance with Jewish laws, often insisting on strict compliance with at least a classical tradition.³³

Absence of Home-Center Considering religiously-structured life, we cannot ignore the need for a dedicated physical infrastructure. Construction of 'homes' under guidance of Chabad was a magnet for many RSJs and facilitated expanding

³³ One émigré professional who openly displayed his anti-religious feelings is an iconic example of this paradox. His son, a successful banker (who considers himself a Jew though his mother is Russian) married a Chinese girl. After the bride underwent a brief conversion, they had a Jewish wedding. In due course, the couple produced a boy and arranged to have a *moel* for *brit milah* at a local Chabad. Grandfather objected to the ceremony... because his grandson was not a Jew and it would be hypocritical to claim him as such.

observance.³⁴ The ongoing development of synagogue-based communities among Georgian and Bukharan Jews is often relegated to a footnote in research on RSJs in America, but it is much more than that. On the other hand, having produced thousands of doctors, lawyers, scientists, IT specialists, and other professionals, RSJs (with some exceptions) did not produce enough rabbis servicing their spiritual needs.³⁵ Where Chabad sowed, it now reaps the harvest.

Failure of Recognition. Here we face the noxious myth of RSJs negative Jewish identity. The identity of Russian-speaking Jews, a vibrant and exceptionally strong part of their personalities, values and culture, is different from American-Jewish identity; it is neither all-ethnic, nor all-ritual but *spiritual*. Without recounting numerous studies and laments of secularization of the American Jewry,³⁶ one should consider the last National Jewish Population Survey data showing that RSJs are ahead of their American cousins in many manifestations of their *non-ethnic* Jewish identity: *"Jews from the former Soviet Union perform some Jewish rituals just as often as non-immigrant Jews do, if not more so. For example, 61% of FSU Jews fasted all or part of the day during the Yom Kippur before their NJPS interview, slightly higher than the rate for non-immigrants (59%). And although FSU Jews do not join synagogues as often as other Jews, they are more likely to attend; 71% of FSU Jews attended synagogue or temple at least once during the year before their NJPS interview, a higher rate than that of non-immigrants (60%)."*

Absence of Common Vision. RSJs disapprove of many social policies and actions of American Jewry. They take no part in the communal outreach and dislike inclusivity extending to sexual minorities. They do not mind being politically incorrect. Their views range from centrist to conservative to far right. Their vision of current administration is often apocalyptic. They not only mistrust the Jewish liberals, they accuse them of self-hatred and sell-out. Russian-language Internet is red-hot with criticism of the direction in which America is headed, retransmitted to other national branches of Russian-speaking Jewry by numerous user-clusters.

Divided on Israel. Israel is said to be the major area of mutually connected activities of the RSJs and American Jewry. This may be a desirable goal, but reality shows something different. RSJs connection to Israel comes from many sources, such as a biblical vision of Greater Israel or belief that 'Palestinian people' as an entity were conceived in the KGB lab. Many RSJs advocate tough actions against Israeli 'fifth column'. Unlike many American Jews, most RSJs (80% by one study) have relatives

³⁴ The author's uncle, a former senior staffer in the local Party newspaper, a long-term loyal and trusted Party member, spent the last years of his life as *shames* in a San Francisco Chabad synagogue.

³⁵ A most notable example is Rabbi Leonid Feldman, beloved by and occasionally appearing before the RSJs audiences in the US, but leading a congregation not specifically catering to RSJs. St. Petersburg born and highly sophisticated Rabbi Mordecai Tokarsky, who leads RAJE ('Russian American Jewish Experience') serves as another exception. Under his tutelage, thousands of Russian-Jewish young adults reclaimed ownership of Jewish life while creating *their own* communal structures. Rabbi Eliber Kantrowitz, a Russian-Jewish educator at Congregation Beth Solomon in Philadelphia, reflected that: *"Many Russian Jews come to this country with a desire to explore Judaism, but feel unable to connect with American-born rabbis. Yet when they meet Russian-born rabbis, they feel immediately that we came from the same circumstances as they did, and lived part of our own lives as non-religious Jews.... They might not be ready to go as far as I have, but they nevertheless feel a personal connection with me."* (Ruby, 2005)

³⁶ Barry Kosmin found the numbers of Americans who say that their religion is Judaism, declined from 3.54 million in 1990 to 2.93 in 2001, to 2.7 million in 2008. (Kosmin, 2009)

and friends in Israel who 'live in the territories'. American Jewish public opinion is not kind to 'settlers' and believes them to be an obstacle to peace. Most 'Russians' believe the opposite. The Jewish media's negative treatment of Likud and Netanyahu, the demonization of Avigdor Lieberman and his *Israel Beiteinu* party (whom most RSJs in America support) is an indication that there are different visions of Israel at work. The 40,000 item strong America-Israel Museum in Beverly Hills celebrating the many connections between Eretz Israel and the US was privately built by Russian Jews as an educational resource to develop greater ownership of our past. It is not supported by a single Jewish organization, and the Federation leaders are yet to pay it a visit.

Absence of Trust. Unlike their RSJ counterparts, many American Jews have no concept of the 'common enemy' or a sense of 'existential threat'. It is hard for non-immigrants to imagine the atrocities and physical threat directed against their children or parents. Even if they could, American Jews act as if this cannot happen in America. RSJs, born in greater proximity to WWII, anti-Jewish violence, and deeply-entrenched antisemitism, have a different sense of 'the possible'.³⁷ Many saw yesterday's neighbors, colleagues and even teachers morph into robbers, executioners, and just plain supporters of the Jew-killing machines. RSJs do not trust organized Jewish community to ensure the safety of Jews in this country. They do not trust their American cousins to ensure the safety of Israel either. Contrary to American-Jewish ideology, RSJs believe that the greatest threat to America and Israel comes from the complacent Left and not from the 'hawkish' Right.

All of these observations and comments do not mean that we should lower our expectations of mutual engagement. The opposite is necessarily true. We should work harder to develop greater *relevance* and greater *affinity* between the Jewish mainstream and the RSJs in America. But to engineer bridges we need to know the true relief of the divide.

The Young Generation of Russian-Jewish Americans

The current mainstream strategy born out of expectations of generational changes is understandable but unwise. The sphere of *Russianness* is growing, not shrinking, while the influence and involvement of RSJs in many aspects of American life (as opposed to Jewish life) is increasing. "*Russianness*" does not appear to be a first-generation survival strategy but a trans-generational source of RSJs strength (Gorbis, 2006). An extensive study of the 1.5 and 2nd generation of young RSJs (i.e. those who immigrated as older children and those born in the US) showed an interesting correlation between pride in their Jewish identity (83%) and "*remarkable close(ness) to their family of origin*" including "*strong preference for living with their parents as young adults*" (Zeltzer-Zubida & Kasinitz, 2005). While more socially mobile than their parents and even non-immigrant peers (Kasinitz, 2008), the young RSJ generation fits and exceeds the pattern of 71 % of American teens who overwhelmingly follow the social and political ideology of their parents (Lyons,

³⁷ One on-line comment to the Sokol's *Jerusalem Post* article sums it up: " ... I am not a religious Russian Jew in the slightest but regardless I feel very connected to Israel and would never sacrifice this commitment. I doubt most American Jews feel the same way, they simply fail to see that at the end of the day America and everyone else labels them as Jews first... "No, no, I'm an American," they would probably say. "But I'm a German..." You get what I'm saying. I hope the Russian Jewish community remains as it is."

2005). Direct perception, not external persuasion, is what dominates child's political socialization (Westholm, 1999). The strength of conservative pro-Israeli and anti-Islamist views that challenge 'Liberal Orthodoxy' of American Jewry, so typical of the first generation of RSJs, has been unambiguously perceived and largely adopted by the next.³⁸

If there is any difference between Russian-speaking teens raised on Benjamin Spock 'bible'³⁹ and their American Jewish peers, it is counter-intuitive. Young RSJs claim greater centrality of Israel in their lives (Kasinitz, 2001; Zeltzer-Zubida, 2005) and are less likely to be critical of Israel and sympathetic to Arabs⁴⁰. Russian-speaking Americans are more likely to marry a Jew than a non-Jew (UJC Report, 2004) and have a greater preference for Jewish friends than do American Jewish teens (Zeltzer-Zubida, 2005). There are multiple subtler differences between the two cohorts. Young RSJs associate WWII with victory over Nazis, in which their veteran relatives took part. In contrast to the trauma of the Holocaust, young RSJs perceive WWII as a source of pride for their medal-adorned grandparents on May 9 of each year.⁴¹

This brief review confirms that integration of émigré children into American-Jewish mainstream meets with what Cornell and Hartmann (2007) describe as "*the unexpected persistence and power*" of ethnicity, religion, and culture. The young generations inherit the value of educational and social capital that the first generation brought to the US. Well marked consequences of economic success likewise point to RSJ children following in their parental footsteps. Remennick (2012) makes it clear: "*high positive correlations between parental social mobility and children's trajectories are causal rather than random... not only the first generation's human capital but also the returns on their skills and social mobility in the host country are important in the successful integration of the second generation.*"

This should be a cautionary sign for those who write off the first generation of immigrants to bridge the gap with the help of the 2nd generation. Similarly to the Persian-Iranian Jews, young RSJs span their connections across all continents, from Russia to Israel to Canada and, of course, the US. In exploring and expanding their Jewishness they will incorporate experiences, values and other inheritance from their parents (Glinsky, 2011).⁴² Not surprisingly, there is a plethora of articles 'marveling'

³⁸ The emphasis on Russian language in RSJs homes stands in counterpoint to jettisoning Yiddish by the earlier immigrants from the Russian empire. (Laitin, 2004)

³⁹ Dr. Spock's book [Baby and Child Care] "*Ребенок и уход за ним*" first published in the USSR in late 60's was since reproduced in millions of copies in 10 editions.

⁴⁰ Goldstein (2011) reports in *Times Magazine* that 70 % of young rabbinical students surveyed at Hebrew Union College (the flagship educational institution of US Reform Judaism) claim being 'disturbed' by treatment of Arab Israelis and Palestinians. She also reported that according to a 2007 poll by Steven Cohen of HUC and Ari Kelman of UC Davis, over 40% of American Jews under 35 believe that "*Israel occupies land belonging to someone else.*"

⁴¹ Victory Day celebrated by Russian Jews is untraceable in the American Jewish tradition.

⁴² Echoing many themes raised here, Mr. Glinsky, Executive Director of the "American Association of Jews from FSU", cautions against the prevailing focus on the 'young' RSJs. He writes: "*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.*"

at the expansion of young RSJs "*Russianness*" as they navigate in and out of the Jewish world. Sales (2011) examines "*Hawkish new generation split on how, or whether, to engage with mainstream community.*" Popper (2004) reports on an RSJ family enrolling their child in a Russian-Jewish school so that: "*he would have a sense of (Russian) identity and belonging*". Fishkoff (2010) claims that: "*for children of Russian immigrants, mainstream Jewish community remains elusive*" and confirms: "*Even those who grew up in the United States talk about 'American Jews' as something apart from themselves*". Fishkoff quotes a JAFI emissary in San Francisco: "*There is something in the Russian mentality that wants to go deeper. They are 'Russian from the inside' even those who don't speak Russian well.*"

This expansion of identity, or rather its *inversion*, means that for RSJs to be '*a good Jew*' in America is...to be a '*good Russian*.' This incorporation of *Jewishness* into *Russianness* (and vice-versa) is fed by pride RSJs take in being different - an aspect often missed as the enigma of Russian-Jewishness is being deciphered. Indeed, a major shortfall of attempts to deconstruct the Russian-Jewish "identity" was to focus on negative effects of *outside* forces on Soviet Jewry, while ignoring the not-so-thin voice of Jewish pride and exclusivity, their spirituality (as opposed to religiosity) inherent in the Russian-Jewish cultural tradition, and other positive factors that continue to shape Russian-speaking Jewish personalities (Remennick, 2007).

What's to Be Done?

Given these considerations, are '*leadership development*' and '*Jewish education*' really our best strategies towards the desired communality? Do they mask an (un)articulated desire to get rid of the '*Russianness*' in the Russian-speaking Jews? That would be a mistake, unless Jewish education includes Russian-Jewish paradigm of values. In his examination of Jewish leadership programs, Hal Lewis admonished that Jewish literacy by itself "*is not sufficient to guarantee effective leadership*" (Lewis, 2004). When Erica Brown called to bring *inspiration* into Jewish leadership, she quoted Harris Collingwood famous statement: "*Leadership is autobiographical; if I don't know your life story, I don't know a thing about you as a leader.*"

And so comes the famous Russian query: "*What's to be done?*"

Of course strategies of meaningful integration exist; but only if both parties are willing to change. The answers come from what David Shneer (2002) called "*transformative integration*". This engages both sides to produce guidelines, suggestions and ideas for future engagement. Only then differences become truly irrelevant, not because they are eliminated, but because they are systemically recognized and respected through outcomes. Our present challenge is that both sides need each other. However, without a mutually-transforming space where RSJs can advance and assert their views of what is *right* and what is *wrong* for them *qua* American Jews, the issue of mutual relevancy of the mainstream and RSJs will not be properly resolved. Developing mutual trust and respect would take courage, and most likely a national policy.

In the meantime, we may consider different forms of relationship with RSJs (and other ethno-cultural communities) in the US. Without abandoning 'leadership education', we may directly invest human and financial resources in RSJs' parallel structures until they become viable. One such format is grants to 'leadership' graduates to take to local émigré groups and help them become self-sustaining without

ideological constraints and much meddling. This format of relationship, *the enabling model*, will not bring results tomorrow. Helping RSJs develop and nurture structures of their own should be done without haste.

Such parallel organizations are already emerging. *"Feeling ignored by the American-Jewish world ... some Russian American Jews are starting to organize things for themselves,"* declares *Haaretz* (Mozgovaya, 2011a). Pomerance (2011) wrote this: *"Russian Jews in America are tired of being perceived by the American community as clients and not as partners....the Russian Jewish community in America now generates its own organizations and philanthropists."* At her presentation at the 2006 AJC Conference, Margo Wolftsun (2006) stated: *"Four years ago, as a Russian speaking Jew who seamlessly and successfully integrated into mainstream Jewish life, I did not understand why the émigrés needed separate schools, community foundations, and advocacy organizations. But then, through much soul searching... I began to understand that, for many, joining mainstream organizations at this time was not an option."*⁴³

The irony is that Jewish mainstream is not always ignored by American RSJs; when a disagreement energizes émigré activists it becomes quite visible. Still, only by investing into structures (not programs or individuals) can we capitalize on the appeal of harmonious communal life with groups such as RCJF, RAJI and *Ezra* in New York, the *Davai* group in Philadelphia, *Mishmash* and *Rabota* groups in San Francisco, the New York-based ASJFSU, and others. The example of the UJA-NY Federation-funded, COJECO-AFRJ, a 'roof' for many groups, which initiates and funds educational-cultural projects for RSJs in New York shows that it can be done.

One thing is obvious -- the temptation to oversee and control such entities, ensuring that they follow mother-ship's policies would be the hardest to overcome. Yet, overcome this we must if we wish to encourage emergence of *responsible partners*, with whom we may not see eye-to-eye on all matters of Jewish life and survival but whose views can no longer be ignored.

The mainstream would only benefit from being provoked and transformed by the Russians, Persians, and Israelis. Federations will only grow by adhering to their role as *trustees of assets and resources* for all segments of local Jewry and becoming more independent from the dictates of its ideologues and major donors. The process of fractionation of the American Jewry along ethnic lines should be countered with the same resolve we display in outreach to gays and lesbians, to inter-faith families, and to non-Jewish communities and causes. *Tikkun Olam* should be first and foremost a commandment to heal our own house before we bring medicine to other huts.

Building a safe and effective exchange of ideas with RSJs and other ethnic Jewish groups remains one of our greatest challenges. To overcome it, all parties must feel the need to change and thus make space for each other. Only when mutually relevant, within our own family, we shall actualize our potential as Americans and as Jews.

⁴³ This is echoed by Mozgovaya (2011b) reporting on a local RSJ organization: *"They don't fully connect with U.S. Jews, but they also don't dream of Mother Russia; young professionals gather via 'Davai' group. 'We love partnerships, but some organizations have their own agenda, and we try to open doors for our members to choose from,' Moverguz (one of the group organizers) says. 'But we wouldn't want to endorse the religious agenda of a sponsoring organization, for instance. So we have to walk a thin line.' "*

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Scene from an 85th Birthday Party for a Jewish pediatrician (West Hollywood, 2012). Since the late 1970's, Russian restaurants remain the main (and often the only) hub of social cohesion and interaction of émigrés.



Author with a group of RSJs from California and New York visiting Ukraine to commemorate the 65th anniversary of the Baby Yar massacre (Kiev, 2006).



Young RSJs at a lecture on Jewish ethics (Los Angeles, 2005).



2d generation learning the mysteries of Matzah and the secrets of baking (Los Angeles, 2008).



Purim Festival is celebrated by the young RSJs at the Orthodox Union facility (Los Angeles, CA, 2007).



Community Seder for RSJs in Los Angeles. An annual event that had a major impact on the émigré community but was discontinued in 2009 after losing financial support of the local agencies.



Russian community Chanukah celebration at the Westside Community Center event for young adults and children (Los Angeles, 2006).



At a "*Schmoozing 20's*" Shabbaton, Misha Zilbermint sings Bulat Okudjava's "*Let's hold hands, my friends...*" The magnet of the 60's still works for émigrés too young to have known the iconic bards of their parents (Beverly Hills, 2007).