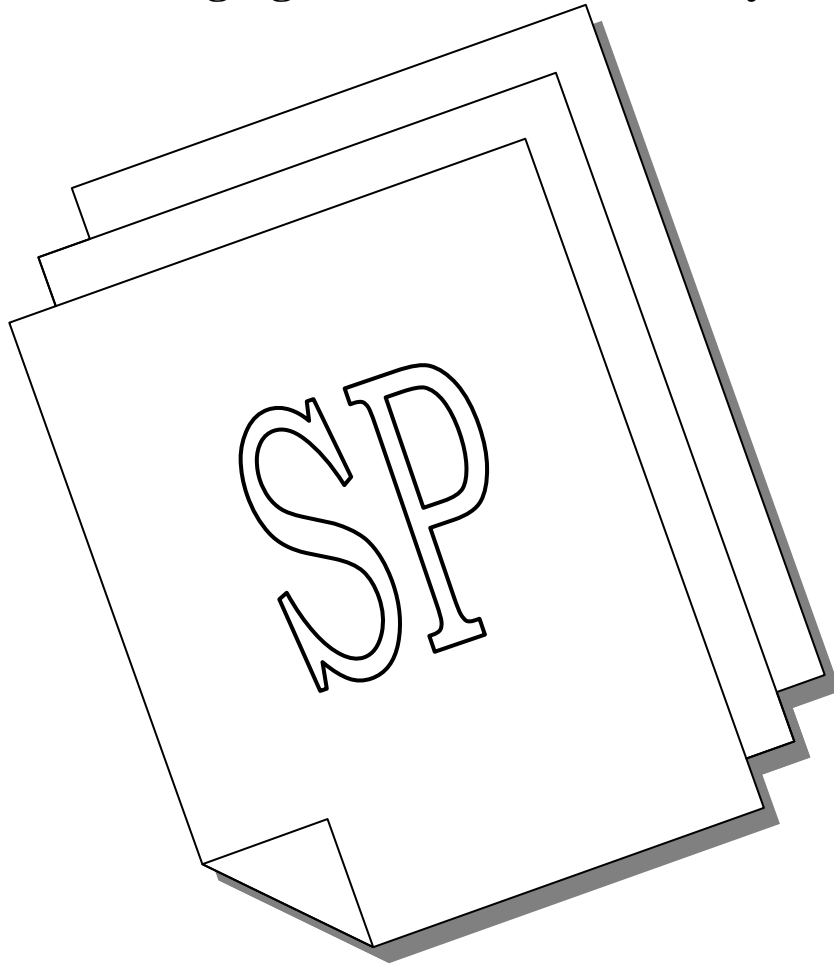


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Russian-Jewish Americans and American Jewry: Encounter, Identity, and Integration¹

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Abstract

This paper discusses the process and dynamics of integration of Russian-American Jewish immigrants into American society and into the broader American Jewish community. In search of their distinct and multi-faceted identity, Russian Jews in America encounter numerous well-organized and established American Jewish groups and institutions with their own identity quest. On the one hand, Russian Jews integrate and cooperate with their American counterparts; on the other hand, the barriers of misunderstanding and mistrust still exist on institutional, community, and personal levels. The paper describes Russian-American Jews as a social immigrant group, mostly in New York, in terms of their socio-economic status, ideological and political views, religion, and social engagement. The data used was obtained and interpreted by the author as principal investigator of the Research Institute for New Americans (RINA) in its 1998-2004 studies sponsored by the American Jewish Committee.²

Russian-Jewish immigration to the United States

According to a 2003 population survey conducted by UJA-Federation of New York, 19 percent (or about 220,000) of Jews in the five boroughs of New York City were Russian-speaking (The Jewish Community Study 2002). However, there are many indicators suggesting that the actual figure is significantly higher (Ruby, July 2003). Though the exact number of Russian Jewish immigrants living in the country and in New York is unknown and probably could never be obtained, it is estimated that, because of almost 40 years of immigration of Soviet Jews (and non-Jewish family members), some 700,000 Russian-speaking immigrants now live in the U.S. About half of them, or 350,000, have chosen New York City and its vicinity as their permanent home in the new country. By any account, the number of Russian-speaking Jews in the United States now probably exceeds those of Russia and Ukraine combined, and New York today is the most Russian-Jewish populated city in the world. Soviet authorities' anti-Semitism, as well as political and economic turmoil in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union, caused millions of Soviet Jews to leave their homeland and to seek refuge in many countries worldwide. Over a million of

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them settled in Israel, hundreds of thousands emigrated to Germany and other European countries, many landed in Canada, Australia, and even New Zealand. The process of integration in their new host communities is different in each country of their resettlement; however, there are some similarities (Remennick, 2007; Ben Rafael et al., 2006)

The Russian-speaking community in the U.S. got a fresh start in the early 1970s. The Soviet government seeking détente with the West, began to allow some of Soviet Jews to leave for Israel on the grounds of humanitarian reasons (for family reunification). It was during this period that many Soviet Jews who received invitations (*vysov*) from real or fictional relatives in Israel and managed to exit the USSR, ‘dropped out’ along the way to Israel in Vienna and instead applied for the U.S. visa as political refugees. Though the Israeli government objected strongly to the dropout phenomenon and chastised those who decided to go to the West, the U.S. Jewish community leadership upheld the principle of freedom of choice and by the late 1970s as many or more Soviet Jews were coming to the U.S. as to Israel (Harris 1976, 2000).

In 1974, the U.S. Congress passed the Jackson-Vanik Amendment, a law that linked the Soviet Union’s desire to get a preferential trade status with the right of Soviet Jews to emigrate. In response, Soviet regime slipped back into full-blown repression and cut back sharply on Jewish emigration. Many Soviet Jews, who applied for exit visas, lost their jobs; their requests were denied, and they became *refuseniks*. Nevertheless, the flow of Soviet Jews who got permission to leave continued, especially after 1975 Helsinki Accord, signed by 35 European nations including the U.S., Canada, and the Soviet Union. About a third of the Russian-speaking Jewish population now living in America arrived during the 1970s (*Election 2000*). After the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, the subsequent U.S. boycott of the Moscow Olympics and the return to an overtly hostile U.S.-- Soviet relationship, the Soviet authorities almost ceased to grant exit visas to the Jews, and the flow of emigration dried up for nearly a decade. It started slowly again in 1987 during Gorbachev’s *Perestroika* and gradually increased, especially after Gorbachev strengthened contacts with President Reagan and European leaders, who pushed him to liberalize Soviet emigration policy.

In 1989, the U.S. Congress passed the Lautenberg Amendment, which stipulated that Soviet Jews, along with some other religious categories, were a persecuted group, which automatically qualified for refugee status. Over the next decade, a huge wave of new Russian-Jewish immigrants headed to the U.S. shores. This wave, which sometimes brought as many as 25,000 new émigrés a year to New York (Ain, 1993; Gold, 1994), began to recede in the late 1990s. In the aftermath of 9/11, when the United States toughened its immigration policy, the number of Jewish refugees from the FSU dropped even more sharply. During the past several years, Jewish emigration to New York from the FSU stands at less than 1000 a year (Statistics, 2003).

Socio-economic characteristics

The emigration of the 1990s to New York also included large numbers of non-Western Jews, such as the Bukharian, Georgian and Mountain Jews (Strizhevskaya and Knopp, 2004; Mountain Jews, 2002). In the last few years, a noticeable number of Russian Jews who initially immigrated to Israel, have chosen “second emigration” and arrived in the U.S. The Russian-speaking Jews who arrived during the 1990s differed from their predecessors in many respects. The refugees of the 1970s tended

as a group to be ideologically deeply anti-Communist and anti-Soviet, ready to risk everything, including a term in prison, for a chance to get to freedom. The refugees of the 90s came at a time of virtually free emigration after Communism had collapsed, and were more inclined to come in pursuit of a better life, rather than in desperate search for political freedom.

Today, according to Research Institute for New Americans (RINA), 35 percent of Russian-speaking Jews still have first-degree relatives (spouses, children, brothers/sisters) in the former Soviet Union. However, they retain an even stronger link with the loved ones who have moved to Israel. Over 60 percent of Russian-speaking Jews have first-degree relatives in Israel and another 20 percent have relatives that are more distant. (*Presidential Election 2004*). This reality has had a large political impact, tying the Russian-Jewish community closely to Israel emotionally and leading to an outburst of pro-Israel activism by Russian Jews. Russian-American Jews are also well-connected with their brethren, who immigrated to other Diaspora countries. Some 45 percent of them have relatives or close friends in Germany and 29 percent in Australia (*ibid.*).

Since education had been a primary social value for Jews in the FSU, Russian Jewish immigrants come with high levels of educational attainment. Their striving for education as a chief vehicle of social mobility continues in the United States. Though it is hard to compare educational systems in the U. S. and FSU, there is little doubt that Russian immigrants comprise the best-educated group in U.S. immigration history (*Election 2000*). Virtually all younger Russian Jews proceed from high school to college, and New York city, state, and private colleges of the area are overcrowded with the Russian-speaking students (Kliger & Ruby 2006, 231). In November 2004, two Russian-Jewish students – Lev Sviridov from the City College and Eugene Shenderov from Brooklyn College – won the highly competitive and prestigious Rhodes scholarship for graduate education in Oxford, as was reported in the New York Times (Arenson, 2004).

A noticeable portion of the Russian-Jewish employed population (according to 2000-2004 RINA surveys) has made its way to the middle class, with 23 percent reporting their annual household income to exceed \$60,000, and with a smaller but significant percentage making \$100,000 or more (10% of the employed population). Many among the younger generation that was either born in the United States or came here as children or teenagers and went through the higher education system, have succeeded in large numbers in financial services, as engineers, and as computer programmers. Many other Russian-speaking Jews have succeeded in the highest-paying professions as doctors, dentists, lawyers and accountants. A handful of businessmen and Wall Street tycoons have become multi-millionaires. Today, one would hardly find a major professional or occupational group in New York in which Russian Jews do not have a significant representation.

Despite the challenges facing many elderly Russian-speaking Jews, social service professionals in the Russian community affirm that there has so far been little evidence of hunger or homelessness among this population. It is rare to hear elderly Russian Jews speak negatively of the United States; almost uniformly, they bless the country for allowing them to live as free and proud Jews. Across the board, there is a high level of overall satisfaction with life: 64 percent of those who live in America for 9 years or more, say they are completely or mostly satisfied with life (*Election*

2000, , 23). Evidently, the life-satisfaction rate is lower among those who live in America for less than 3 years.

Different cultural traditions: Protestantism versus Eastern Orthodoxy

From the very beginning, there has been a clash of mutual perceptions between American-born Jews and the Russian-speaking Jews, who arrived here over the past 35 years. American Jews, including many Jewish community professionals, expected that Russian Jewish immigrants, having been cut off from Jewish religious and cultural life in the USSR for decades, would have a strong desire to actively participate in Jewish religious and communal life in America. The newcomers were expected to bring "fresh blood" to the established American Jewish communities. From the point of view of the organized American Jewish community, this has not happened. Mainstream American Jews see most Russian Jews in America as indifferent to Jewish heritage and Jewish communal life as they were while living in the Soviet Union (Kliger 2001, 152).

On the other hand, Russian Jews, while paying tribute to the American Jewish community for helping them to come to this country, expected assistance from their American hosts, which many actually received in the practical and material aspects of everyday life, such as English courses, jobs, education, various training programs, health care, and security. Dependent as they were upon the government in the FSU, many were stunned by the sometimes 'tough love' attitude of the American Jewish organizational world, which helped to support the newly arrived for several months and then expected them to stand on their own. Emotionally, Russian Jews craved love and friendship from their American cousins. Instead, many felt that American Jews were inclined to impose on them the meaningless ideological cant of 'We are One,' with the expectation that they should involve themselves in Jewish communal life, rather than really reaching out to them as equal partners. This makes Russian newcomers continue to ask questions. Do American Jews sincerely want us, as Russian Jews, to join the American Jewish community while retaining elements of our distinguished culture? Or do they intend to keep us as "second class" Jews? Should we participate in their odd organizations, or do they merely want us, Russian Jews, to be a new source of revenues for their bureaucracies?

These perceptions led to creation of multiple myths, which even today continue to circulate throughout the American Jewish mainstream about Russian Jews and in the Russian-speaking community about American Jews. Poverty, laziness, dependency, and involvement with organized crime are only some of these stigmas circulating about the Russians. One obviously bogus anecdote was recently published in the *New York Jewish Week* editorial. *Jewish Week* editor, reporting from a meeting of Russian Jewish leaders under the auspices of UJA-Federation, wrote of an older Russian Jewish man complaining to an American Jewish communal professional that Jewish museums in New York are closed on Yom Kippur, "a day, on which many Jews in the former Soviet Union expressed their Jewishness by taking a day off from work and visiting a Jewish cultural institutions" (Kliger, 2005). This interchange, continues the reporter, amounted to an 'aha' moment, a prism through which American Jews can comprehend the cultural gap between themselves and Russian Jews. The whole story is in fact a misnomer. Firstly, there were no "Jewish cultural institutions" in the former Soviet Union. I, for one, did not know of any such "institution" in Moscow except for the Central Synagogue. It is true that some elderly people attended services

there on Yom Kippur, though not many. Secondly, taking a day off from work on Yom Kippur was not only an uncommon practice; it was unimaginable, even dangerous due to the high levels of anti-Semitism and official atheist ideology of the state. Thirdly, Russian Jews in Brooklyn, especially the elderly, do come to synagogue on Yom Kippur in great numbers (most do not come on any other day of the year) for the explicit purpose of saying Yitzkor. This kind of complete misunderstanding is symbolic: it depicts Russian Jews not only as ignorant in Jewish religion and tradition, which may be correct to a certain extent, but as insensitive to the American Jewish culture.

Russian Jews, in turn, have created their own stereotypes about Americans in general and American Jews in particular. One such myth is that American Jews are only interested in money and self-promotion; such exalted elements of high culture as literature, poetry, dance, music, and theater are unreachable for their narrow minds. Another generalization suggests that American Jews are rich, stupid, spoiled, uneducated, and hypocritical. Russian Jews still have trouble understanding American Jewish religious and communal life (which is indeed complex).

This gap has its profound roots in different world cultures these two parts of once united tribe have internalized over the past century. The organized American Jewish community has developed and matured under the influence of Protestant culture, with its emphasis on communal religious practice, individual responsibility, rule of law, voluntarism, charity and connection to a synagogue and denominational movement, rather than ideology and theology. Like the pastor, the rabbi has a public role as the spiritual leader of the community and gives a sermon at the Sabbath services. The members of the synagogue come to hear the sermon and to socialize with each other rather than mainly pray, read, and study Torah as in the Russian synagogues in the “good old days”. Faith for them is less about contemplating G-d’s image; it is more about acting in a way they think is appropriate for a Jewish community within mostly Protestant cultural and social environment.

Thus, while American Jews are a product of Protestant culture and American lifestyle, Russian Jews have formed their lifestyle, their values, and mentality under two dominions: a Russian culture that is deeply rooted in Russian Orthodoxy, and the Soviet communist regime with its emphasis on atheism, political ideology, communist eschatology and the state. To Russian Jews, faith is something very private and intimate, having more to do with personal feelings and thoughts rather than action. Any explicit form of personal religious practice or communal identification (like wearing a yarmulke) and a separate Jewish communal life is unfamiliar for them and difficult to accept. It is less about acting Jewish and communal; it is more about resting on a couch contemplating G-d or talking with friends about Israel and its flaws.

These cultural differences result in different understandings of what it means to be a Jew. For most Russian Jews, being a Jew is not a matter of choice or religion, but rather a bio-social fact, prescribed at birth and known to the individual, his/her family, rather than to everyone who wants to know (Markowitz, 1993). Thus, for Russian Jews, their Jewish identity does not mean religious ritual practice. Rather, being a “Jew” means to belong, to know, to have, to be proud of, to feel, to think, to be, even to believe, but not to act. Russian Jews identify themselves through the notion of belonging, reference to the state of Israel (88 percent agree that caring about Israel is a very important part of a person being a Jew), and connection with Jewish history and

culture. Russian Jews are less likely than their American counterparts to identify their sense of Jewishness in connection to anti-Semitism, hostility, and separation from other nations (*Presidential Election 2004*). Largely, Russian-speaking Jews identify themselves along five basic categories: Generally Jewish (“just a Jew”), Ethnic Jewish (“Soviet Jew”, “Russian Jew”, “Bukharian Jew”, etc.), immigrant identification, American identification, and cosmopolitan identification. In any individual case, these five identities may be present in the same individual in different intensities, making Russian-speaking Jews a specific cocktail of mixed identities (Russian Jewish Immigrants, 2000: 5).

Religious life: In G-d we trust

Generally, the attitude of Russian Jews toward organized religion and organized community may be characterized by the term “estrangement.” I would, however, identify it as “detached affiliation.” Detached affiliation means establishing and maintaining a comfortable distance from any organized religious group (synagogue) while participating in some activities and/or services (like Yizkor on Yom Kippur) and/or marking some social events, related to various stages of life, such as Brit Mila, bar/bat mitzvah, weddings, or funerals. This kind of affiliation is a comfortable position for many Jewish families: they may come to a synagogue on a holiday, but are reluctant to volunteer; they would arrange for a bar mitzvah and pay for it, but refrain from donating to a synagogue; they would say they believe in G-d, but would prefer not to observe commandments related to ritual practice.

The Reform and Conservative movements, the largest denominations of American Jewry, have done a poor job of reaching out to the Russian-speaking Jews in the United States. For a variety of reasons, the Reform and Conservative movements have simply failed to connect with the Russian Jews in the openhearted way that some segments of the Orthodox movement have. Partly because of this failure, the majority of Russian Jews tend to see three options concerning religious observance: Full-scale Orthodoxy, nothing at all, or “detached affiliation.”

Jewish education for children remains a very serious concern for many Russian-Jewish families. On the one hand, they despise the public school system (at least in New York City) for its low level of math and science education, poor discipline, crime, and drug proliferation in some schools. On the other hand, they do not much like sending their children to Orthodox yeshivas, ironically, for many of the same reasons they abhor the public schools: too much religion, too little science. In addition, there is also a fear that their child becoming a fully observant Jew might challenge their comfortable lifestyle of detached affiliation. Most importantly, many Russian families, which would be interested in sending their children to Yeshivas or private Jewish Day schools, simply do not have the means to pay the tuition. Some Russian Jewish leaders believe the remedy to this problem will eventually come from school vouchers; others advocate building a Jewish school system that will be inexpensive, while providing basic Jewish and strong secular education. Still others believe that Jewish education for children should be a communal responsibility and every Jewish child should be eligible for a certain number of Jewish school years paid mostly by the community.

Despite all of this activity, data compiled by the Research Institute for New Americans (RINA) suggests that, overall, the role of religion in the life of Russian-speaking Jews is limited. Only 12 percent of the Russian-speaking population considers religion “very important,” while 32 percent says religion is of “some

importance” for them. For the remaining 56 percent of the population, religion is either “not important” in their lives or has “no meaning at all” (*Presidential Election 2004*). Slowly but surely, synagogue attendance in areas heavily populated by Russian-Jewish immigrants is growing, especially on holidays, foremost of which is Yom Kippur. People attend synagogue regardless of how important a role religion plays in their lives. For many, including very secular people, the focus of the Yom Kippur service is the Yizkor, when people remember their parents, grandparents and other loved ones, who perished in the Holocaust, in Stalin’s GULAG, and later. For secular Russian Jews, attending Yizkor services is a way of paying tribute to their parents in a specifically Jewish way.

Intermarriage

For many intermarried families, a “dual religious loyalty” is a characteristic of their real behavior. The entire family will happily celebrate Purim and Hanukah, while party on Christmas and New Year, go to a Russian Church on Easter, and rejoice on Halloween. According to RINA surveys, about 24 percent of Russian-Jewish marriages in New York involve a Jewish individual and a non-Jewish spouse (*ibid.*). Interestingly, this data appears to support the premise that the intermarriage rate among Russian-speakers in America under 35 years of age is less than in the middle generation (35-54 years and older), which itself is higher than in the older generation (55 years and older).

One can observe a sharp ‘return to the Russian roots’ movement among Russian-American Jews in their 20s and 30s in recent years, and with it, an instinct for a marital partner who is *svoi* (one of us), i.e. a fellow member of the Russian Jewish community. Many of these individuals grew up in Russian enclaves in New York, Boston, or L.A., attended top universities, and began building promising careers. Now, having largely put aside their Russian-Jewish identities to become successful in the larger American world, many of these people are ‘coming home’. They are striving to build a secure home and family with a Russian-Jewish partner – someone who has shared with them the experience of being an immigrant child and who feels culturally and psychologically closer to them than would even an American-born Jew.

Political participation and ideology

While many American Jews perceive Russian Jews as mainly conservative and Republican, this assumption is incorrect. As for the Russian Jews’ overall voting philosophy, they, unlike their strongly Democrat American Jews, have emerged as a classic swing constituency between Democrats and Republicans on the national, state and local levels. Their swing nature is reflected through the fact that more than a third consider themselves to be independents and every year a significant number of first-time voters is added, as immigrants become citizens and gain the right to vote. The community swung strongly Republican during the 1980s, mainly out of affection for Ronald Reagan who called the detested Soviet Union an “evil empire” and because many staunchly anti-Communist Russians felt that liberals tended to sympathize with the Soviets. Then the community swung toward the center-left during the 1990s, voting for Bill Clinton in 1996 and Al Gore (with Joseph Lieberman) in 2000 because the earlier anti-Communism seemed less relevant after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Yet, if the Russians voted mostly for Gore in 2000, they turned out even more strongly for George W. Bush in 2004, when according to exit surveys conducted by

RINA, Russian Jews in New York voted 77 percent for the Republican incumbent over his Democratic challenger John Kerry (this despite the fact that 51 percent of Russian Jews are registered as Democrats versus 25 percent registered as Republicans) (Lefkowitz, 2005). The huge vote for Bush seemed to be mainly in response to his strong support for Israel, his muscular position against terrorism, and even his tax initiative that gave the Russian families, most of whom depend on earned income, a few hundred more dollars to spend. Many Russians perceive Bush as a bearer of Reagan's legacy and are grateful to him for that.

Eighteen percent of Russian Jews in New York position themselves on the "liberal" side of the spectrum, 24 percent identify themselves as conservatives and 22 percent call themselves "moderate". On many domestic and international issues, they express strongly conservative positions. For example, 84 percent approved of the way that the United States government was handling the campaign against terrorism. The approval rate of the war in Iraq was also high; 55 percent expressed approval, 27 percent disapproved, and 18 percent were not sure, although it is likely that level of support has declined somewhat since. Seventy-three percent of Russian American Jews in New York City said they were willing to give up some of their personal freedoms in order to make the country safe from possible terrorist attacks (*ibid.*). Russian Jews were also on the conservative side on some social issues with 77 percent favoring the death penalty for persons convicted of murder, and 81 percent in favor of an amendment to the United States Constitution that defines marriage as a union only between a man and a woman and makes same-sex marriages unconstitutional. Yet, on some domestic issues, Russian Jews expressed liberal views: 66 percent think that abortions should be legal under all circumstances.

For a great majority of Russian-Jewish immigrants, anti-Semitism remains a very serious concern. They consider anti-Semitism to be a very serious problem in the Muslim world (85 percent) and in Europe (83 percent), whereas their concern about anti-Semitism on American college campuses and in America in general is much weaker. Among the various ethnic and religious groups, Russian Jews see Muslims as having the most stridently anti-Semitic views, while believing that the least anti-Semitic group are Evangelical Protestants.

With respect to Israeli politics and the situation in the Middle East, Russian Jewish Americans share views that in many aspects distinguish them from the American Jews. About 83 percent agree with the statement that the goal of the Arabs is the destruction of Israel, not merely the return of occupied territories, while 51 percent oppose and only 26 percent favor the establishment of a Palestinian state. Eighty percent are against, and only 7 percent are for, any compromise on the status of Jerusalem allowing Palestinian sovereignty in any part of the city, even within the framework of a permanent peace agreement with the Palestinians (*ibid.*). By comparison, in 2004, although 84 percent of American Jews, agreed that the goal of the Arabs is the destruction of Israel, 63 percent agreed with the way the Israeli government was handling the relations with the Palestinian Authority and 57 percent favoring the establishment of a Palestinian state (American Jewish Committee 2004). About 90 percent of Russian-speaking Jews in New York supported the building of Israel's security fence, while only 5 percent oppose it. In the survey, carried out less than a year before the government of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon carried out its decision to unilaterally withdraw the IDF and Jewish settlers from the Gaza Strip, more Russians opposed the withdrawal (36 percent) than supported it (34 percent) with 30 percent undecided. Regardless of their individual views, Russian Americans

respect the decisions made by duly elected government of Israel and mostly agree (79 percent) that they should support these decisions.

Communal and cultural engagement

First, there is general notion of integration in American life, adopting the language, American life style and standards of living, and participating in American educational, cultural, political, and business institutions. It is fair to say that many Russian Jews, especially those working, are integrating well. The second dimension has to do with participating in specifically American Jewish activities - religious, communal, organizational, charitable, and educational. By and large, the American-Jewish concepts of activism and voluntarism are mostly unfamiliar to many Russian Jews, simply because there was no such activism possible in the Former Soviet Union; it was dangerous to engage in any Jewish forms of communal life. I would again characterize current Russian-Jewish engagement as *detached affiliation* – establishing and maintaining a comfortable distance from major American Jewish organizations and their activities. In other words, Russians would rather found a new small advocacy or social services group of their own than can join an established American-Jewish organization or an existing Russian grassroots movement. They would rather give a small gift to the synagogue (once or twice a year) than serve on its board; they would rather volunteer for a one-shot-deal than commit themselves to a lengthy project or educational program. Furthermore, they would rather openly demand that an established American Jewish organization must radically change its course according to their interpretation of what the needs and interests of the Jewish people are, rather than work on a day-to-day basis with the board to convince the board that the changes are necessary.

Will Russian Jews eventually assimilate fully into the mainstream American culture or American Jewry? The ‘Russian revival’ among the young shows that the process of Americanization will take longer than many might have expected a decade ago when full-blown assimilation was the order of the day. The main trend appears to be preserving Russian identity within a Jewish context (Liakhovitski 2005; Kasinitz et al., 2001; Ruby, 2003). If American Jewish life is to thrive in the coming decades, it desperately needs Russian Jewry as part of the mix, both due to its demographic and socio-economic weight. If the Jewish establishment is to be more effective in getting Russian Jews to play a fuller role in communal life, it needs to reach out to them in an open-hearted, embracing manner, as opposed to either a patronizing or hectoring one, while always acknowledging their right to cultural distinctiveness. Ultimately, a person can have both a Russian-Jewish identity and an American-Jewish one, with one identity informing and enriching the other. Russian Jews taught their American counterparts a great deal about Jewish pride and persistence during the era of the Soviet Jewry movement. One may assert that they still have as much to teach American-born Jews as to learn from them, so that the ongoing interaction will be a greatly enriching experience for both sides.

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