Topic: Developing New and Creative Ways of Involvement of the Soviet Jewish Émigrés in American Jewish Communal and Religious Life

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The goal of the thesis was to create an appropriate educational approach that would lead to more active involvement of the Russian-speaking Jewish émigrés in American Jewish communal and religious life.

The thesis consists of two parts – the research and its findings and an education component. The first part is divided into 6 chapters, where I gradually move from a general picture of Jewish immigration into the United States and a brief description of each wave to a deep analysis of the nature of the latest wave of immigration from the Former Soviet Union and its unique Jewish identity patterns. The second part begins with a description of educational approach, which was developed specifically for Russian-speaking Jewish émigrés. Five informal educational sessions reflect specific considerations regarding the needs and abilities of multigenerational Russian Speaking audience. My vision of a successful educational program for this group puts building community and positive relationships among its members as the highest priority. When this goal is achieved, each session gives the learners an opportunity to learn about Judaism in a safe and friendly environment. This educational approach is tested and successfully implemented in the Jewish Community House of Bensonhurst as the Morasha Family Academy.

A variety of scholarly sources, interviews with the Morasha Academy members, and my own experience of being a Jew in the Former Soviet Union and a recent émigré in the United States helped me analyze the topic and develop the Morasha Academy curriculum.

DEVELOPING NEW AND CREATIVE WAYS OF INVOLVEMENT OF THE SOVIET JEWISH ÉMIGRÉS IN AMERICAN JEWISH COMMUNAL AND RELIGIOUS LIFE

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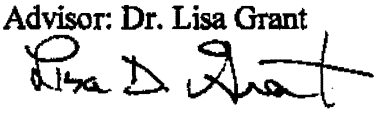

Table of Contents

Part One – Soviet Jewish Émigrés in America

1. Introduction

> Immigration, the movement of people into another nation with the intention of residing there permanently... Most modern immigrants are motivated to relocate far from their original homes by the desire to improve their economic situation. Such people, known as economic immigrants, resettle in other countries in search of jobs, farmland, or business opportunities. Although economic immigration accounts for most of the movements of people between countries, a substantial number of immigrants around the world are refugees. Some refugees relocate to avoid religious or political persecution, suffered on account of their beliefs[1].

Jewish history can be seen as a succession of migrations beginning with the Patriarch Abraham, who was commanded to leave his family and home and go to the land that God had promised him. The Exodus from Egypt, the dispersion to Babylonia after the destruction of the first Temple in 586 BCE, and the expulsion from Spain in 1492 also shaped Jewish history. Jews have lived in many places and, whether they relocated under duress or voluntarily, they carried their traditions, their laws, and their value base with them. The flexible nature of Jewish tradition has ensured its continuity and its capacity to create a vibrant community in whatever new land they journeyed to.

The two waves of Jewish immigration from Czarist Russia and the Former Soviet Union to the United States are quite different, but are also intimately related to one another. Having spent over 70 years living under a dictatorial and anti-religious regime, most of the more recent Soviet Jewish émigrés have only faded and tenuous ties to the Jewish religion. Few but the elderly among them can speak Yiddish or Hebrew, and those old enough to have been raised with those languages had to dust them off here after half a century of disuse. In the main, these Soviet émigrés are highly educated, fairly well

[1] "Immigration," Microsoft® Encarta® Online Encyclopedia 2004

assimilated, and quite a bit more urban than their predecessors. And yet, many of these Soviet Jews are from the same cities and towns in Russia, Lithuania, Belorussia, Moldavia, and the Ukraine that sent earlier waves of Jewish immigrants to the United States. Indeed, some of the recent immigrants come from the very same families. These more recent Soviet Jewish immigrants have too often been treated in American Jewish periodicals in the 1970s and 1980s as though they were fundamentally different and separate from earlier waves of Jewish immigrants from Russia and other parts of Eastern Europe. The discussion varied from seeing Soviet Jewry as "the last reservoir that is likely to supply the numbers of immigrants essential to maintaining and improving Israel's precarious demographic distribution"[2] to the realization that "our greatest challenge as an American Jewish community may be to learn from our own history and apply this lesson to the challenge we face today – the challenge of learning how to be inclusive."[3] My contention is that Soviet Jews share the same culture and historical experiences of earlier 20th-century East European Jewish life and the generations of immigrants to America that preceded them.

When the numerous Jewish immigrants from the Eastern Europe began arriving in the late 19th century, they were viewed as aliens in America. Their life style, religiosity, and language were seen as a threat to the well being of the established German Jewish population that preceded the "Russians" by only a few decades. Nevertheless, when the leaders of the Jewish communities united their vision and forces and created institutions

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[2] Steven Cohen, "Alternative Approaches to Soviet Jewish Emigration. Moral and Practical Dilemmas." *Policy Studies '79* (National Jewish Resource Center, November 1979), p. 3.

[3] Anita Friedman, "Involving Immigrants in Jewish Life Today." *Sh'ma, a Journal of Jewish Responsibility*, Vol. 19/361, 1988, p 6.

of learning, suitable to the needs of Russian immigrants, the situation changed dramatically. The former "aliens" were well on the way of acculturation and Americanization, fostering their connection to Judaism.

The main purpose of this paper is to look to the past and to draw potential lessons from the Russian Jewish immigration experience in order to help the current Jewish émigrés from the Former Soviet Union both become Americans and remain actively engaged in Jewish life.

2. History of American Jewish Immigration

American Jewish history can be characterized by waves of immigration from three different parts of Europe. The economic, social, and religious mores of these groups, as well as reasons that brought them to American shores were distinct from one another.

Following the spread of the Inquisition to the New World, the first Jews in the United States came from Portuguese-ruled Brazil. In 1654, twenty-three adult Spanish-Portuguese (Sephardic) Jews arrived in New Amsterdam. The environment they found there was scarcely hospitable[4]. In 1655, more Jews arrived from Holland. Nine years later, the British took over what would become New York and the situation regarding freedom of worship improved from that time.

In colonial times, Jews settled along the Atlantic coast and in several southern states. During the 17th century, Rhode Island was the only New England colony, which allowed a permanent Jewish community. That settlement was in Newport, where the Touro Synagogue, built in 1773, still stands as a memorial to the patriot and philanthropist Judah Touro[5]. Other early Spanish-Portuguese Jewish communities were established in Charleston, South Carolina, and Savannah, Georgia. The Philadelphia congregation (Congregation Mikveh Israel) was organized about 1745. The Richmond community was established after the Revolution.

German Jewry dominated the second period in American Jewish history. Coming out of an assimilated, emancipated background, German Jews were prompted to emigrate

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[4] Arthur Hertzberg, *The Jews in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), p. 8.

[5] Jacob I Hurtstein, *Jews in America: Heritage and History* (New York: Board of Jewish Education, Inc., 1978), p. 25.

by the scarcity of land, rural poverty and government restrictions on marriage, domicile and employment. Although there were German Jews in America before the early 19th Century, it is after that time that they became the predominant Jewish cultural group. Coming to America in a period of rapid geographic expansion, the German Jews became part of the developing Midwest. They spread west, following the route of the Erie Canal. Communities were established in Chicago, Cincinnati, Indianapolis and St. Paul. Wherever they settled, they formed a congregation and bought land for a cemetery.

The first German Jews to emigrate were mostly young men. They entered thinly scattered networks, which consisted of relatives and neighbors from the same European communities. The second group came after the failed German revolution (1848). They were somewhat older than the first and more educated. These immigrants came to America in search of democracy and economic opportunities. The German Jews often went into peddling and petty trade, endeavors calling for small outlays of capital. From small starts, many went on to build substantial businesses and were absorbed into the American middle class. It was this migration that carried distinctive Jewish social, spiritual, intellectual, and scientific patterns into the American host-culture. This is reflected in their overall concern for Jewish communal conditions. Religious, philanthropic and fraternal organizations were founded during this period. Many German-Jewish immigrants were part of the Reform Movement and the religious life of American Jews was enriched by that connection. Founded in Hamburg, Reform Judaism aimed at winning civic equality and social acceptance in the modern world[6].

[6] Hertzberg, p. 110.

The third wave of Jewish immigrants into the United States was also the largest. Jews fleeing restrictions and extreme persecutions (pogroms) came from Poland and Russia. The Russian pogroms (1881-84 and 1903-06), political instability, and economic pressures resulted in heavy Jewish immigration to Western Europe and the United States. Because of the pogroms, the profile of the Russian Jewish immigrant differed greatly from that of the German Jew. The former came largely as single men; the latter were entire family groups. Within the Russian Jewish masses that came to America were groups of Hasidic Jews. Most Hasidim who immigrated to the United States in this time period maintained a strict, orthodox way of life.

Russian Jews comprised the great wave of immigrants coming to America that can be compared in magnitude to the migrations following the Inquisition and the destruction of the two Temples. They brought with them a rich Yiddish culture expressing itself through journalism, fiction, poetry and the theater. As the Sephardim had once regarded the middle class German Jews as upstarts, the German Jews now felt more "American" than the working class Russian Jews. Class standing was not the only point of difference between the two groups. Accustomed to the insular life of the Pale[7], Russian Jews formed cohesive communities. They strongly upheld a sense of religiosity, which permeated their lifestyle and offended their reformed co-religionists. Their

[7] The **Pale of Settlement** was the border region of Imperial Russia in which Jews were allowed to live. The institution of the Pale became especially important to the Russian authorities following the Second Partition of Poland in 1793. While Russia's Jewish population had, until then, been rather limited, the annexation of Polish territory increased the Jewish population substantially, so that at its heyday, the Pale, which included the new Polish territories, had a Jewish population of over 4 million and constituted the largest concentration of Jews in the world.

development and maintenance of a Yiddish culture (Yiddishkeit) also served to uphold their cultural differences.

Between the two World Wars, Jews continued to join their families in the United States. After the tragic events of the Second World War, thousands of homeless European Jews entered the United States. Since then, American Jewish communities have also been enriched by the diversity of Eastern Jews, particularly from Iran and Syria.

In recent times, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, there has also been another influx of Russian Jews, which is not considered as a short-term episode. The so-called Russians here in America are not ethnic Russians that believed in Judaism, but rather ethnic Jews, whose religious and cultural roots were ripped up by an anti-religious and anti-Semitic empire. They are Jewish refugees from all 15 former Soviet republics, although, reflecting Soviet Jewish demography, most are from the large urban centers of European Russia.

Jewish immigration into New York in the 1980s and 1990s has dramatically altered the face of the city's Jewish community. Over 200,000 Jewish refugees from the former Soviet Union have settled in New York City, which presented an enormous challenge for both the émigrés and the host community. Millions of dollars and unquantifiable hours of work have been devoted to the task of resettling this population in New York and assisting the newcomers in their efforts to achieve self-sufficiency and social adaptation.

American Jewish community has been in the making over nearly four centuries. This experience cannot be seen other than one of success. Poor immigrants and their children turned to be successful members of a modern society, who value their rich

heritage and Jewish identity. Will Soviet Jewish immigrants take advantage of being a free Jewish people in America or limit their success by improving their financial and social status? This question will be discussed in greater detail in the following chapters.

3. Russian and Soviet Jews: Common Backgrounds – Different Outcomes

The arrival of the first wave of the Jews from the Former Soviet Union in the early 1970s caused great happiness and led to an expanded welcoming effort from all segments of the American Jewish community. That happiness soon turned to confusion if not anger because the Jews from the Former Soviet Union did not fit into the mental picture of thankful refugees being saved from the ravages of an anti-Semitic Communist monster, anxious to join the American Jewish community:

> The beginning of the Soviet Jewish immigration in 1973 caused a certain amount of enthusiasm on the part of American Jews, who viewed very positively the prospect of newcomers adding strength and vitality to their community. Americans soon found out, however, that Soviet Jews were not really Jews in the same sense as American Jews perceived themselves. While strong in national identity and possessing a sense of Jewishness arising out of Soviet anti-Semitism and varying levels of oppression, soviet newcomers were rarely concerned with manifestation of Jewishness as a primary goal in their new American homeland[8].

The negative attitude toward participation in American Jewish life among the Soviet émigrés can be viewed as a result of being a victim of the Soviet regime for over 70 years. They simply do not know how to be openly Jewish, how to express their identity in the free country. At the same time, Russian Jews were in the first line, dreaming about and acting toward the creation of new society. Why then, in the 1910s, were Russian Jews so active fighting the Czarist regime and building a new Socialist society?

Soviet Jews believed that the Jewish problem was a product of the inner contradictions of the Capitalist system. It was the rot that forms in a decaying society.

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[8] Stephen C. Feinstein, "Aspects of Integrating Soviet-Jewish Immigrants in America: Attitudes of American Jewry Toward the Recent Immigration" in R. Friedman, ed. *Soviet Jewry in the Decisive Decade, 1971-80,* (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1984), p 99.

The Socialist system was, of course, absolutely devoid of inner contradictions and unsusceptible to degeneration. It was a healthy organism, bursting with constructive energy, full of zest and the joy of living. It needed no scapegoats, and had no heart for hate or ill will. Soviet Jews, therefore, were to become good workers and good socialists, like the rest of the population. And the state would take care of all their wants, individual and national, as it did those of other people.

At the same time, opposition to religious belief, practice, and institution has always been a part of the Communist credo. This opposition was rooted in ideological assumptions common to the offshoots of the Marxist tradition as well as in motivations specific to the Bolshevik movement in Russia. Karl Marx argued that the explanation of historical and social phenomena was to be found in the material realm, not the spiritual or "idealist" one. According to Marx, economic conditions and changes underlay all changes in history and all relations in society. Religious belief and practice were illusions sustained by the ruling classes in order to divert the suffering masses from recognition of their suffering and of the true nature of historical and social causation. Religion, in whatever form, was "the opiate of the masses" which lulled them into false believes and faulty understandings.

Since the elimination of religion as a "survivor" of the Capitalist era was part of the Soviet program for the achievement of full Socialism and the transition to the next historical stage of Communism, religious believers and institutions are seen as reactionary elements impending historical progress. They are living testimony to the fact that some people's consciousness has not yet been revolutionized, and their stubborn

insistence on maintaining anachronistic life styles impedes the progress of the entire society toward the era of Communism.

Such was the theory, and it was promulgated in all sincerity, whatever instinctive misgivings about Jews some of the early Bolsheviks may have had. And they were going to put theory into practice. Anti-Semitic acts were stamped as socially abhorrent, unforgivable for a member of the Communist Party and seriously damaging to one's standing in the community.

Yet future events were to disprove the theory and expose the ineffectiveness in its practice. A few years after October Revolution, there was an outpouring of anti-Semitism that was frightening even to Jews who lived under the Czars. In pre-Revolutionary Russia, it had been the Czarist regime and the hoodlums who persecuted the Jews. The enlightened elements, the decent citizenry, kept away from the anti-Jewish outbreaks, and avoided identification with the anti-Semites. But here were urban, intelligent, presumably decent citizens sniping at Jews in the open.

Jews from the Former Soviet Union had not only become isolated from the world Jewish community but also had virtually no organized Jewish community of their own. The Soviets had discouraged religious affiliation and severely punished anyone who practiced Judaism. Even Jews who accepted Soviet identity and the proscriptions against religious affiliation were stigmatized professionally, socially, and politically on the national basis. Therefore, in order to survive and even flourish, the Jews from the former Soviet Union focused on educational and professional pursuits. The belief was if they could attain excellence, they could be left alone, and their Jewish selves remained dormant.

Especially at the dawn of the Soviet empire the Jews were forcefully put into a certain "system" that suppressed the development of national and religious pride. In most cases, pre-school was the place, where young children encountered this "system" for the first time. The Soviet Union in the seventies and eighties (the period when my generation was growing up) was a "spiritually dead" place. Leonid Brezhnev has been the head of the country since 1964. The sixteen-year period under Brezhnev's rule has been termed 'the era of stagnation' - stagnation of creative thought, stagnation of self-expression, stagnation of the vital energy inside virtually every human being in the country. "The stability of the Party elite, the absence of a critical press and legitimate channels for expressing public opinion, together with the non-existence of an independent legal system created ideal opportunities for corruption, favoritism, and mediocrity"[9].

As conditions for Jews deteriorated in the late 70s and the economic and political climate worsened, more and more Soviet Jews were considering emigration as an opportunity to move on safely. This new immigration was made up of assimilated, successful urban professionals who were interested in escaping the anti-Semitism of the Soviet Union, the limitations placed on their professional development and their children's education, and the increasingly severe food shortages plaguing all Soviet citizens.

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[9] Zhores A Medvedev, *Gorbachev,* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1986), p. 120.

4. Jewishness: Religion or Nationality?

When Soviet or Russian Jews speak about being Jewish they mean something different from what American or Israeli Jews mean by the term. The Soviet type of identity was based upon the notion of "nationality," which was almost totally alienated from Jewish religion. The national or ethnic dominance of Jewish identity in the Former Soviet Union was not only the result of the political discrimination against religious institutions in that country but was also rooted in the social philosophy acquired by Soviet society. The society was considered on all levels, as a set of "Soviet peoples," theoretically equal in rights and status. This system collapsed in the early 1990s, resulting in a number of large or small ethnic conflicts that have been so characteristic of post-Soviet Russian history.

When analyzing Jewish identity in Russia, it is useful to distinguish between two types of identity. One can distinguish between active identity on one hand, and passive identity on the other.[10] Active identity implies a conscious effort to promote oneself as Jewish. It involves a sense of pride in being Jewish, in showing others that you are Jewish. This can include wearing certain clothes and speaking and writing in the ethnic language. Another pattern of ethnic Jewish identity is its passive character. A person was either born within a certain nationality, or if he was an offspring of a nationally mixed marriage, acquired his nationality by choice at the age of 16. He was not supposed to be ideologically oriented to confirm his nationality. He simply belonged to it. It was considered not bad if someone knew the language of his nationality, its habits, history,

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[10] Zvi Gitelman, "The Evolution of Jewish Culture and Identity in the Soviet Union," in Yakov Rol & Avi Becker, eds. *Jewish Culture and Identity in the Soviet Union*, (New York: New York University Press, 1991), p. 4.

etc., but that was not crucial for the identity itself. The identity was fixed, registered, and known to the state and to the non-Jewish environment. One did not need "to be Jewish," he simply was. That also differs in a striking way from the American pattern, although it is quite similar to the Israeli model. When American Jews speak about continuity and ask themselves what would make the next generation of American Jews "be Jewish" in the hospitable and democratic American social environment, they mean not just the existence of the unity called "Jews" but the active participation of the people in some ideologically, or religiously oriented activity. Why should future American Jews attend synagogues and help keep them alive, why should they abstain from intermarriage with non-Jews, why should they prepare their children for the bar/bat mitzvah, etc? In the very question of continuity, we find a hint that Jewishness should be active; it is a kind of social activity aimed at continuation, not a matter of identity or self-consciousness, but an elaborated set of behavioral patterns considered vital for the continuation of the community.

Not so was (and still is) the Soviet pattern. It is passive, because it is ethnic in the very perception of the majority of the ex-Soviet Jews. Passive identity is more an accident of birth; something that person is born with. The person knows that they are born Jewish, but is neutral (and sometimes even hostile) to this identity. Whether one considered himself Jewish or not, in the Soviet case, all of its citizens were required to be ethnically identified. Membership in a nationality was regulated by the state; there was a special registration on the internal IDs of one's nationality (the so-called "paragraph #5"). "State-imposed ethnic identification was probably the most important factor in creating a situation of almost total acculturation with nearly no assimilation among Soviet Jews."[11]

[11] *Ibid*, p. 5

Ironically, Soviet society discouraged Jewish culture, but insisted on maintaining its citizens' Jewish identity. The reason for keeping this identity system was quite simple. It allowed the Soviet government to control the life patterns of the Jewish population by setting discriminatory quota for the admission to institutions of higher education, by eliminating the Jews from positions of responsibility in Soviet society, and, finally, by setting a quota system in many professions. All these measures ensured the full control of Jewish population, similar to that of the tsarist regime when the borders of the Pale of Settlement limited freedom of the Jewish people.

As noted, the majority of Russian Jews view their Jewish identity as a matter of blood, and they *do not* adhere to the equation "Jew by blood = Jew by religion." At the same time, that view is not always shared by other Jews. Traditional Jews continue to equate Jewish birth with Jewish religious identity, and nontraditional and even secular Israeli and American Jews do so, also: while most will say, upon being questioned, that no Jew is necessarily an adherent of Judaism, their unthinking, "subconscious" attitude is different. History abounds in examples of ethnic groups formed out of several originally separate groups that have become united by a common religion (i.e., Jews and Khazars) or of ethnic groups breaking into two different groups due to religious differences (i.e., *Sfaradim* and *Ashkenazim*). Such religious groups, growing into nations, can begin to show all the characteristics of true ethnic entities. When this occurs, traditional segments of their populations (normally older people) may continue to regard themselves as part of a primarily religious entity, while more dynamic segments of the population (often younger people) begin to think of themselves in ethnic terms, and still other people combine the two ideas. In accordance with this pattern, a transformation of this sort (i.e.,

of an originally religious-ethnic entity into an ethnic entity) started in the late 18th century in a part of the Diaspora in Western Europe, and grew stronger as more and more people, undergoing modernization, deviated from traditional religious principles. And that process of transformation (i.e., from Judaism as a religious entity to Judaism as an ethnic entity) is continuing.

Russian Jews - with their strong sense of ethnic as opposed to religious Jewish identity - were leaders in this movement. The Bolshevik-enforced modernization partly accounts for this: that policy aimed at the elimination of religious and national traditions, and in the case of Russian Jews, it seems to have achieved an unqualified success. Both Lenin and Stalin argued that Jews did not constitute a nation. Lenin argued that since the Jews lacked a territory they could not be a nation. Stalin elaborated on this argument by postulating a definition of a nation, which included common language, territory, economy and psychology among its criteria, and showing that the Jews did not meet these criteria.[12]

These factors suggest why Russian Jews feel a decreasing sense of connection to Judaism as a **religious entity**. So a question arises: Is there anything at all that might induce the Jews of Russia to feel kinship in a common unity? A series of historical events and a major shift in the Soviet political system became the stimuli for a growth and sustaining of national consciousness among Soviet Jews and explain how they came to this consciousness:

- World War II was the first great shock for those who were on their way to assimilation in the 1930s. The Jewish tragedy and Soviet attempts to

[12] Joseph Stalin. *Marxism and the National Question*,(New York: International Publishers, 1942), p. 42.

ignore it shocked some into a Jewish consciousness which they could express fully only years later.

- The establishment of the State of Israel in 1948. Coming on the hills of the Holocaust, the establishment of a Jewish state, supported and encouraged by the Soviet Union, fired the imagination of many Jews. It was at that time that some Jews began dreaming of emigrating to Israel, and some even tried to implement plans for emigration, usually paying for their attempts with long terms in jail or in forces labor camps.
- The greatest impact of anti-Semitism during the "black years," 1948-1952, known as Stalin's policy of repression, when the last vestiges of Jewish culture were erased and when an intensive, widespread campaign, climaxed by the "doctor's plot,"[13] threatened the safety of every Jew in the Soviet Union.
- The capture and trial of Adolf Eichmann in 1960 meant becoming aware of the Jewish fate and caused the Soviet Jews to ponder the Jewish future in Europe.
- The Arab-Israeli war of 1967 aroused among many Soviet Jews, first, a realization of how personally catastrophic an Israeli defeat would be, and later, a feeling of relief and pride at the Israeli victory. Most crucial was the realization that the soviet Government unequivocally supported those

[13] Six outstanding doctors, all Jews, were accused of being paid agents of Jewish-Zionists organizations and of planning to poison high Soviet officials.

forces whose declared intention it was to destroy the Jewish state and its inhabitants.[14]

These events greatly affected the lives of virtually every Jew in the Soviet Union, proving the rebirth and evolving nature of centuries old anti-Semitism which was growing through the interaction of events, official policies, and changes within the Jewish population itself. Similarly, the national consciousness among Soviet Jews has developed gradually, growing stronger as a response to new waves of anti-Semitic treatment. It is clear, however, that despite its strength the Jewish identity among Soviet Jews carries mainly nationalistic character, as a result of living many years under the anti-religious Soviet regime.

[14] Zvi Gitelman, *Assimilation, Acculturation and National Consciousness Among Soviet Jews*, (New York: Synagogue Council of America, 1973), p. 41.

5. Jewish Community Center and Soviet Jewish Émigrés.

The Jewish Community Center has developed as an American Jewish institution in answer to expressed needs. Its historical background indicates that at one time the emphasis in the programming was on Americanization. In the process, the Jewish Community Centers have come to recognize more and more their responsibility as indigenous American Jewish agencies to aid in the perpetuation of the Jewish cultural heritage and the development of an American Jewish culture[15].

The Jewish Community Center, being an agency of informal education, emphasizes Jewish learning through Jewish experience in a setting that is part of the American scene and that is related to American life. The Jewish Community center sees no conflict between its goals for the continuity of Jewish group life and culture and the aims related to furtherance of the American democratic ideal. A meaningful Jewish life, as envisioned in the objectives of the Jewish Community Center, includes the imparting of Jewish knowledge as a basis for intelligent understanding of Jewish life, the inculcation of Jewish ideas in order to motivate Jews, especially children and youth, to accept responsibility in the Jewish community and towards Jews the world over and to share fully in the obligations of American citizenship.

The Jewish Community House of Bensonhurst thus becomes, as Barry Chazan puts it "a new neighborhood of Jewish life"[16] for thousands of Jewish émigrés from the Former Soviet Union that settle in Bensonhurst and consider the agency as the only place

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[15] Oscar Janowsky, *The JWB Survey*, (New York: Dial Press, 1948), p.86.

[16] Barry Chazan, "A Late December Day in the JCC" in B. Chazan, ed. *Jewish Education and the Jewish Community Center*, (Jerusalem: JCC Association, 1994), p.3.

where they find answers to all the questions and solutions to all the problems that every new immigrant encounter in the beginning of his American experience.

Historically speaking, Judaism connoted the religion of the Jew, which suffused every thought and action, even into what we now term as secular. Due to profound lack of Jewish experience and knowledge, most Soviet Russian émigrés define Judaism as the widely embracing culture of the Jewish people. This attitude explains their attraction to the Jewish agency that "reaches out to Jews wherever and whoever they are[17]." While using the immigrant services, such as English classes, job placement, social services and counseling new Americans learn about many more Jewish educational and cultural opportunities for all family members according to their interests and availability.

Jewish Holiday Programming for Soviet Jewish Émigrés

For the majority of the Jewish Community House of Bensonhurst clients the Jewish holidays have become the first link to the continuous encounter with our heritage. Jewish calendars in Russian, with marked festivals and their brief descriptions are widely distributed in our neighborhood. In many households these calendars serve as the only source of information about Judaism, educating the Jews about the Jewish year. The Jewish Community House of Bensonhurst has recognized these special days as meaningful educational opportunities in the Jewish year, and their observance has for years been one of the most effective means of developing in the membership an appreciation of things Jewish and a sense of identification with the Jewish group. They have served traditionally as the core around which other Jewish activities in the Center were developed. The Jewish festivals provide opportunities to the center for creative

[17] *Ibid.*, p. 6

development of a large variety of Jewish cultural activities, such as holiday workshops, creative arts and crafts sessions, lectures and concert programs, adult Jewish courses, Shabbat dinners and Seders, educational trips, nature programs and hikes, etc.

The Jewish holidays embrace much that is meaningful and significant in the Jewish way of life. They recall for each generation memorable episodes in the history of our people and help to perpetuate the ideas and teachings of Judaism. Shabbat as a day of rest and relaxation, as a day of worship and joy, and as a day of informal study; The High Holy Days with their ideas of the purposefulness and holiness of life and the yearning for self-renewal; Sukkot with its emphasis on joyous gratitude, faith, and cooperation; Simchat Torah and Shavuot with their emphasis on the place of the Torah in Jewish life and the quest for intellectual pursuits; Passover, as the festival of freedom and of liberation of a people from bondage; Purim, Hanukkah and Tishah B'Av as reminders of the Jewish will to survive as a creative people despite tyranny and oppression – all of these special days are rich in ideas and values that can be made relevant in the life of the Jew today. As significant days in the calendar, these festivals are welcome and opportune break in the routine of day-to-day living.

The atmosphere in the Center building is an effective stimulant for advancing the mission of the agency. Special holiday exhibits are usually featured in the lobby, Jewishly influenced signs and pictures, symbols and music turn a recreational facility into a Jewish neighborhood. Bulletins including brief statements on the significance, history and manner of observance of the festivals are posted on the boards and are available for distribution. Frequent mailings to the members allow the staff to keep the clients aware of featured events and programs. These measures aimed to strengthen the Jewish

consciousness of its members and to inculcate them an attitude of reverence and love for Jewish ideals and traditions.

6. Morasha Academy and Marks JCH in the Lives of Newcomers

Émigrés from the Former Soviet Union have settled in many American cities, both small and large. In virtually all communities they have altered the demographic makeup of the local Jewish community. Such is the case in New York City. Jewish immigration into New York in the 1980s and 1990s has dramatically altered the face of the city's Jewish community. According to a recent study conducted by the UJA-Federation of New York, over 200,000 émigrés from the Former Soviet Union have settled in New York City, and by next year this population is expected to constitute 25% of all Jews living in New York City.[18] This presents challenges and opportunities both for the émigrés themselves as well as the host community. The Jewish Community House of Bensonhurst, being located in the heart of Southern Brooklyn, took up the challenge and continues to this day to work closely with Soviet Jewish émigrés residing in the neighborhood.

How Does it All Start?

Newly arrived Jewish refugees from the Former Soviet Union are entitled to a four-month-long period of guidance from NYANA.[19] During the course of this period, some of the clients are offered English classes and placement assistance. The majority of NYANA's clients do not consider the experience with the agency as positive. Having experienced bureaucracy all their lives, many were shocked to find themselves once again stuck in a system of red tape and inefficiency. Russian speaking NYANA

[18] The Jewish Community Study of New York: 2002. UJA-Federation of New York.

[19] New York Association of New Americans, an agency founded 54 years ago to answer the need of resettlement of the victims of World War II, especially Holocaust survivors.

employees, tend to be members of the early 1970s wave of Soviet Jewish immigration. They work with newly arrived immigrants "without warmth, without caring, in a tone that would be expected from Soviet bureaucrats, but not from fellow Jews."[20] This tension can be observed practically in all immigrant groups. New immigrants in Israel (*olim chadashim*) feel oppression from their countrymen, who arrived there years earlier (*vattikim*), German Jews in New York at the turn of the century, did not welcome Eastern European Jews, etc. Nevertheless, in spite of the "normalcy" of this phenomenon, this experience was and still is quite painful for the thousands of recent refugees. Besides the shock of the bureaucracy and lack of sympathy, even the programs are unsatisfying. The system created to acculturate new immigrants into American and Jewish life by NYANA has been limited to a trip to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, a free Russian copy of Joseph Telushkin's "The Jewish World," and free weekly distribution of the Russian Forward.

At the end of the brief instituted relationship between NYANA and its clients, the latter, as "new Americans," suddenly find themselves on their own. While it may be a relief not to have any more obligations to visit NYANA for useless appointments with caseworkers and job counselors, these new Americans do have piles of correspondence to be answered and applications for various programs and services to be filled out. When they find themselves in this sea of forms and letters that have obvious and direct impact on their lives they turn to an agency where the staff is friendly and understanding and where, through word of mouth, they know they will receive much needed constructive

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[20] Fran Markowitz, *A Community in Spite of Itself,* (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993), p. 229.

help in all aspects of their lives. For many, the agency of choice is the JCH of Bensonhurst.

Establishment of the Connection to the Agency

The primary reason for Soviet Jewish émigrés to choose a Jewish Center over a synagogue is that for the majority of younger immigrants, who grew up after World War II, religious ritual is not the most comfortable activity. As noted above, few of these émigrés see their Jewishness as a matter of religion. A study conducted in the early 1980's uncovered the tendencies in affiliation for Soviet Jewish émigrés with Jewish institutions.[21] The majority (49.2%) of the respondents considered the JCC as the first and only place in which their needs could be met. It is interesting to trace the denominational divisions among those who reported to be affiliated with synagogues. According to this survey, 16.9% affiliated with the Conservative, 16.2% with the Reform and 10.1% with the Orthodox movements. The numbers suggest that liberal congregations attract more émigrés than traditional ones. Soviet Jews lived their pre-emigration life in a both totalitarian and thoroughly modern society. This could be one explanation for their attraction to liberal liturgies, mixed seating, and the inclusion of the vernacular language in the prayerbook. It is simply the possibility of staying as they are when joining a liberal synagogue that makes them more attractive for Russian speaking Jews.

The beginning of active involvement by families with children in JCH programming was marked in the year 2000 by the establishment of the "First Step"

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[21] Ilya Levkov, "Adaptation and Acculturation of Soviet Jews in the United States: A Preliminary Analysis." In Robert O. Friedman, ed. *Soviet Jewry in the Decisive Decade, 1971-80*, (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1984), p. 132.

program aimed at American and Jewish acculturation of newly arrived families. Many families were attracted to the creative programs that included a series of educational trips, holiday workshops and Shabbat dinners.

For most of the families, participation in the program helped them to discover the myriad of Jewish cultural attractions in New York City, and most importantly, to establish relationships with other Jewish families. According to visual and anecdotal evidence, such as ever-growing increase in the membership, the outcome of the program was amazing. More and more families identified themselves with the program and the agency, thus developing a sense of community and a positive attitude toward the agency. Three years in a row, as a culmination of the programming year, the families participated in a three-day long Shabbaton. The number of the Shabbaton participants grew from 40 at the first year to 120 at the third year. These numbers indicate the continuous growth of involvement in JCH activities by families with children.

After the first three years, when the funding for the "First Step" ended, a new initiative was established by the JCH of Bensonhurst, in 2003 – the Morasha Academy – a program for Russian speaking Jewish families with children. Theoretically, the Morasha Academy would bring together all the members of "First Step" to form a community ever more involved and engaged in Jewish religious and cultural activities. In practice, things turned out slightly differently. Some of the former "First Step" members lost interest in the program as soon as they learned that the trips to the Big Apple Circus and Metropolitan Opera were no longer in the schedule. Some became even more disappointed when they found out that the funding for the program made it impossible to accommodate a three-day-long family retreat in Connecticut (Shabbaton).

Others, on the contrary, decided to give it a try and joined the program. These few families formed a *chavurah*-like community, which meets to celebrate Jewish holidays, family celebrations, Shabbat and much more.

The decision to join Morasha is a challenge for many due to several issues. First, the term "academy" is reserved in Russian thought for institutions of formal education of a private character, for instance, "Bambi Academy" – a private secular elementary school or "Sinai Academy" – a private Orthodox High School for boys. When the prospective members read "academy" in the title of the program and in the very next line they discover that this program has something to do with Jewish **education** they lose interest for the program. It has taken a lot of time and effort to break the stereotype of learning as a boring process that demands time and money for the acquisition of knowledge, reserved for future professional or intellectual growth, rather then possibly being enjoyable.

This leads to the second argument against joining the Morasha Academy. What does Jewish education have to do with the process of assimilation into American society and professional growth? My response to this question is rather simple: just give it a try. Those who "try" the Morasha Academy very soon realize that involvement in the program is a fulfilling experience both for adults and children. While visiting liberal congregations throughout New York City and interacting with their members, they discover that Jewishness is, actually, an essential element of their full assimilation into American society. They discover that being a Jew is no longer a burden, but instead, there is more than one way to be Jewish and that Judaism can be both serious and enjoyable.

The Goals of the Morasha Academy

The stress of Morasha is on the whole family not only because of its historical influence since patriarchal times in the community of the Jewish people, but also because, despite all of the faults of the contemporary family and the hardship of the adaptation to new life in America, it has had exemplary and major influence on the personality and behavior of its members and is likely to be the major repository of tradition, growth and emotional well-being for a long time. The tragedy today is that Russian-Jewish parents, despite a high level of secular education, are extremely uninformed, or at best have only vague Jewish knowledge. Therefore, grandparents and parents must be and are engaged simultaneously with their children in programs, which have Jewish content and that influence a Jewish style of life.

The leadership of the Jewish Community House of Bensonhurst has determined the three essential ingredients that underlie the philosophy of both the Agency and the Morasha Academy. The participants must be **knowledgeable**, because ignorance is a contradiction to Jewishness. They must **identify** themselves as active members of a Jewish group, because Jewishness without association (*minyan/chavurah*/community) does not exist. They must be **committed** to the idea/vision of the development of a Jewish future, which can be pursued by the willed effort and not mere accidental fate or blind, unconscious faith. These principles are not seen as prerequisites for participation in Morasha programming but rather as an ideal outcome of the program. Everyone is welcomed and met where he/she is. In contrast, the failure of numerous Orthodox synagogues in Southern Brooklyn to attract Russian-speaking Jews can be explained by the common unwelcoming attitude of their leaders. As one Morasha member puts it:

> My family never felt welcome in the nearest synagogue. When we came there for the first time, the members almost pushed my family from the

> sanctuary. Then, one Russian-speaking member explained to us that women should go up to the balcony and not enter the sanctuary. Afterwards this "guide" gave me a Russian edition of the siddur, saying, "start from here". I was totally lost. All I could do was copy the other members when they stood, sat, and turned the pages. I felt like an alien.

From the point of view of many Orthodox leaders, it is enough to provide émigré communities with a Russian edition of a prayerbook and to tell them were to start reading so that they pray properly and this will make them into "real" Jews.

This is not a very thorough or well thought out strategy. A better way would be to treat the learner according to his ability to participate in the Jewish community. Prior to reading from the prayerbook, the scaffolding must be built, which will help the learners build upon their knowledge about the origin of prayer, about historical facts that influenced the coming into being of certain prayers, and about the development of Jewish thought, which is reflected in modern prayerbooks. Initiatives offering the newcomers mere participation without scaffolding in already established religious communities do not attract significant numbers of Soviet Jewish émigrés. Morasha Academy, on the contrary, offers an opportunity for everyone who is just exploring his/her Jewishness and is not certain about its expression, to experience it in a creative and engaging way.

The development of the three essential elements (knowledge, identity, and commitment) through creative holiday programming, Shabbat dinners, family workshops and educational trips to Jewish attractions of New York City and synagogues of various denominations helps émigrés to find their way up in American society both as citizens and as proud Jews.

Part Two – Five Experiential Programs

7. Curriculum Rationale

Target Audience

The Morasha curriculum is specifically designed and implemented at the Edith and Carl Marks Jewish Community House of Bensonhurst for Jewish families with children between kindergarten and sixth grade, émigrés from the Former Soviet Union. The uniqueness of this audience lies in that they have no Jewish knowledge whatsoever due to the reasons indicated in Chapter 3. Moreover, many of them lack positive associations of "doing things" Jewishly. On the other hand, Soviet Jewish émigrés have a well-developed sense of being part of their own group, commitment to which helped them to survive in the anti-Jewish environment. Therefore, community building, development of a committed group of families was considered as a starting point for creating a successful program. My experience with Russian speaking learners proved that having a Russian speaking leader underlies the success of the program, as we deal with recently arrived émigrés, who have limited English skills and are more comfortable while speaking their native language. Nevertheless, I am sure that this curriculum can be adapted for outreach effort to unaffiliated English speaking audiences with minimal or no Jewish knowledge as it gradually leads the learner through the core concepts of the Jewish holidays and main ideas of Judaism.

Unique Approach

Another point for consideration, while designing the curriculum, was that the Soviet Jewish émigrés do not view the Torah as a source of authority, which would guide them through their lives. Accordingly, the Morasha approach focuses on making Torah

relevant to our modern life. Many activities help the learners to discover that the biblical narrative, if viewed closely and presented appropriately, resembles life situations that they live today. Moreover, modern learners can view biblical personalities as role models as they compare their own life experiences with the biblical narrative. The comparison of biblical narrative and contemporary life situations allows the families both to learn about traditional Jewish literature and to discover that moral and ethical values that constitute our lives today find their origin in the Torah. This discovery makes the learners reconsider their attitude toward the Torah, while gradually developing well-deserved respect of this body of knowledge.

Morasha Curriculum Goals

The Morasha Academy curriculum supports the acquisition of enduring knowledge and the development of the skills of inquiry, analysis, and communication. It reflects an appropriate balance of:

- Reflection and action

Reflection activities are designed to help the families make connections between their experience, the Jewish learning they did, and the action they took. These activities challenge both children and their parents to think in new ways, explore issues deeply within a "safe" environment. Reflection activities are continuous - before, during, and after taking action. Reflection activities are varied: individual and in-groups; structured and free form; using various skills and interests (art projects, writing, acting, etc.).

- Tradition and innovation

The Morasha Academy aims to convey a contemporary approach to Jewish life, which integrates a deep respect for traditional Judaism with the insights and ideas of contemporary social, intellectual and spiritual exploration.

- Individual and community

The experience of each individual and each family as a part of one group is unique because they talk, work, and act together in a way that is different from their ordinary day-to-day life. This leads to a strengthening of each family, an increase in the level of comfort within the Jewish environment, and setting the stage for the building of a Jewish community.

Educational Goals

The Morasha Academy will create a learning community where members:

- Acquire, construct, and apply knowledge

The learners will be able to construct personal meaning from their experience and to apply that meaning to their own lives.

- Identify and explore the connections between past and present

Morasha members will be able to realize that contemporary approaches to Judaism have grown from an ancient tradition due to the influence of modern society. The learners will also recognize that this renewal and its final product is still based on the main principles and values of traditional Judaism, thus creating an ever-lasting link between Jewish past and present.

- Appreciate the significance of both continuity and change

The opportunities of visiting liberal synagogues throughout New York City will help the families cultivate the idea that constant evolvement of Judaism and adaptation of the

Jewish tradition to our modern lives ensures its accessibility by contemporary generations of American Jews.

- Develop and practice positive personal and social responsibilities

A multidimensional phenomenon of the contemporary Jewish identity involves a factor of being capable for certain actions and responsibilities. As noted above, Jewish people tend to seek out other Jews as friends, thus creating a functioning social unit. The committed members of such a unit develop a positive sense of responsibility for the well being of the whole group. The Morasha experience promotes the development of positive personal and social responsibilities that assure the growth of commitment and engagement among its members.

- Build a passion for life-long Jewish learning

The Morasha curriculum encourages Jewish learners to become comfortable in the Jewish environment and makes them excited about their experience. This positive feeling helps the families establish the link between enjoyable involvement in the Morasha Academy and life-long Jewish learning.

Objectives of the Program

- To create a community of families as they share the experience of Jewish study, celebration and fun
- To strengthen each family as they live through the most stressful period of adaptation to new environment
- To encourage and support each family as they explore their Jewishness.

The Structure of the Mifgashim

The Morasha curriculum consists of ten monthly sessions. Most of the programs are conducted on Fridays as the majority of Morasha members work and study late during weekdays and are not off from work on Jewish holidays. A typical mifgash begins with a group building game, which is followed by a "Ma Chadash?" session, an opportunity for families to share good news and major achievements within each family. This is followed by a Shabbat (or holiday) dinner. While parents are still eating, the kids are taken to another room for more games and activities on the theme of the day. The central educational component is conducted when the whole group gets back together. Most of the mifgashim are concluded by an arts and crafts family activity. The fact of having at home a Jewish object, which was made by a joint effort of the whole family at the "J" contributes to both establishment of a link between the home and the agency and making the home to more Jewishly oriented.

Evaluation

Each mifgash is concluded by a brief "L'hitraot" activity – each family has an opportunity to "send" a post card to the agency, indicating their reflection on recent experience. Additionally, continuous, informal communication with Morasha members gives me a clear picture about the progress or shortcomings of the program.

Program 1 (September) – Rosh Hashanah

Goals of the Program

- To familiarize the families within the group
- The learners will understand that all human beings, old and young, have a mission according to Judaism, to help those in need
- The learners will learn some Rosh Hashanah traditions
- The learners will understand that for Judaism the rituals are lacking in value if they are not accompanied by good actions.

Activity 1 – A Jewish Mixer

Materials: Word cards (see below), a large open space with chairs.

Length: 20 minutes.

Preparation: Prepare the cards in advance. The families will need to find the pairs of words that usually go together. Make a required number of copies so that each family has a card with one word. Write on the board a list of suggested questions for the families.

Suggested Questions:

What are your names?

Where are you from?

Where do you live now?

What do you like to do as a family in your free time?

Do you have relatives in Israel?

Procedure: Instruct all the families to stand up and find another family, which has a word that fits theirs. Once they found the pair to their word, the families sit down and spend 3 minutes introducing themselves. Meanwhile, the leader collects the cards, making them ready for another turn.

Repeat the activity 4 times.

Activity 2 – The Shofar Story

Materials: Greetings and Blessings Sampling, Copies of the story: *The sound of the Shofar*[22], small notebook for each person, construction paper, cloth, felt, glue, scissors, tape, white sheets of paper, writing materials, fine and thick color markers, magazines, newspapers.

Length: 60 Minutes

Procedure: The leader will start the activity with a conversation about what a dream is and what is the meaning of dreams. He will ask the families if they have ever had a dream that recurred several times, and if they say yes the leader will ask them what they felt and what they thought about at that moment and why they think that that happens. Then the leader will tell the families that he will read them a story about someone who on Rosh Hashanah had the same dream a few times. The leader will ask them to think about why this happened to the main character while they listen to the story.

Reading or narration, and story analysis:

[22] Pinchas Polonsky, *Osenniye Prazdniki (Fall Holidays)*, (Jerusalem: Machanayim, 1990), p.34, (translation is mine).

The Sound of the Shofar

A man was at home sleeping the very day of Rosh Hashanah, after spending the whole day in the synagogue. All of the sudden, he heard a brilliant and profound sound, it was a strange sound, it was the sound of the Shofar. He got up immediately, got dressed, and ran to the synagogue. He thought that he had fallen asleep, and that he had dreamt what had happened earlier this day in the morning.

When he arrived at the synagogue, he saw that there was no one there; it was empty, only the rabbi was sitting in the corner. The man approached him and said:

-Rabbi, did you blow the Shofar? Did you call me?

-No, my son -responded the Rabbi- you must be confused. We sounded the Shofar a long time ago, in the morning. Why would we sound it now?

And the man went back to sleep. But once again the same sound, the same Shofar woke him up. He got up and ran even further, to another synagogue, to see if that deep sound was coming from there. But the same thing happened, No, you are confused, said the Rabbi. I did not sound the Shofar.

Disappointed, he returned home and went to sleep. But as soon as he was asleep, he heard the sounds of the Shofar, which were getting louder and louder. He went out in desperation; he decided he was going to find out where the sound was coming from. He ran all over the city until he stopped in front of a very poor person who was smiling at him.

-You have come by many times without seeing me, good fellow, he said.

The man realized that the poor man needed to eat, and took him home, gave him clothing, served him food, and they talked for a long while. Then they parted and the man went

back to sleep, but this time he did not hear the penetrating sounds of the Shofar, because his mission, that of the Shofar, had been accomplished. He had understood that the Shofar, with its piercing sounds, wanted to tell him:

- Wake up, there is much you can do to fix the world, there are many people who need your help. Don't fall asleep, listen to their pains and their ills, help them, help them...

And as it was this that he had done, and what he had promised to keep doing, he never again heard the sounds of the Shofar in his dreams.

Adapted and translated from Russian

Ask families the following questions:

1. What did wake the man up?
2. How many times did the man wake up?
3. Why did the Shofar sound?
4. What did the man do each time that the sound of the Shofar woke him up
   The man wanted to go to sleep, but the sound of the Shofar kept waking him up.
5. What did happen finally that allowed the man to sleep without being woken up by the sound of the Shofar in his dreams?
6. What did the man understand?

Optional activities:

Ask the participants to make small groups, 3-4 families each. Explain the instructions:

1. Pretend that the character of the story doesn't know much about why the Shofar sounds on Rosh Hashanah. He arrives at the synagogue, finds the Rabbi and tells him that he woke up because in his dreams he heard the sound of the Shofar. Think of what other responses could have been given by the Rabbi. The families can write them in the form of a dialogue, and act the dialogue in front of the whole group.
2. In the story we read that the main character finally met up with a very poor person who smiled at him and told him: You passed by many times without seeing me, good fellow."
   Each one of us has passed in front of someone without seeing him, or we know something is going on but we ignore it. Write, draw or select from magazines some examples of things and people that we sometimes fail to see or that we ignore. The families can cite examples from their personal or family life, from the community, the country they came from, etc.
3. Everyday we use an alarm clock that wakes us up so that we can fulfill our obligations. Explain why the Shofar is similar to an alarm clock.
   Think and respond: During Rosh Hashanah the Shofar is sounded so we can wake up. What obligations do we have to fulfill?

Conclusion: Family Renewal Journal

Explain that the journal will be used for this activity and also can be used throughout the course of the coming year as a way of constantly reflecting and thinking about one's self and one's actions.

Ask each family to talk about the good and bad things that happened over the past year. Decorate the front of the journals with pictures, colors, and words that are personal and have meaning to the families. After each person shares his/her thoughts for about five

minutes, have each person sit down and write or draw in the journal about the past year and their hopes for the coming year.

Encourage the families to keep this journal and refer back to it over the course of the year to make sure that they are reaching all of its goals and the hopes of its members.

Give each family a copy of Greetings and Blessings sampling.

Evaluation: Ask the families to write their opinion about the program on the index card before they leave. Collect the cards and use them for a program evaluation.

Jewish Mixer Word Cards

Pita	**Falafel**	**JCH**	**Bensonhurst**
Shabbat	**Challah**	**Israel**	**Tel Aviv**
Bar Mitzvah	**Boy**	**Bat Mitzvah**	**Girl**
Seder	**Pesach**	**Morasha**	**Academy**
Head	**Kippah**	**Shoulders**	**Tallit**

Greetings and Blessings for Rosh Hashanah

Jews have blessings for everything from drinking water to witnessing a rainbow after a storm. Around the holidays, there are many more blessings and even a few blessings that are unique to the holiday itself.
Here is a sampling for Rosh Hashanah:

SHOFAR

(Blessing before blowing the shofar)

ברוך אתה יי, אלהינו מלך העולם, אשר קדשנו במצותיו וצונו לשמוע קול שופר

Barukh ata Adonai, eloheinu melekh haolam, asher kideshanu b'mitzvotav v'tzivanu, lishmoah kol shofar.

Blessed art Thou, Lord our God, King of the universe who has sanctified us with His commandments and commanded us to hear the sound of the shofar.

YIHI RATZON

(Introduction to the blessing for eating apple dipped in honey)

יהי רצון מלפניך יי אלהינו ואלהי אבותינו שתחדש עלינו שנה טובה ומתוקה

Yihi ratzon milphanekha adonai eloheinu v'elohei avoteinu, sh'tehadesh aleinu shanah tovah u'metukah.

May it be your will, Lord our God, and God of our ancestors, to renew a good and sweet year for us.

(Blessing for eating apple dipped in honey)

ברוך אתה יי, אלהינו מלך העולם, בורא פרי העץ

Barukh ata Adonai, eloheinu melekh haolam borei pri ha-etz.

Blessed are You, Ruler of the Universe, Creator of the fruit of the tree.

KIDDUSH

(Sanctification of the day on wine)

ברוך אתה יי, אלהינו מלך העולם, בורא פרי הגפן

Barukh ata Adonai eloheinu melekh haolam borei peri hagafen.

Blessed art Thou, Lord our God, King of the universe, Creator of the fruit of the vine.

SHEHECHIYANU

(Blessing on joyous occasion)

ברוך אתה יי, אלהינו מלך העולם, שהחינו וקימנו והגיענו לזמן הזה

Barukh ata Adonai eloheinu melekh HaOlam She-Hechiyanu v'kiyimanu v'higiyanu lazman Ha'zeh.

Blessed art Thou, Lord our God, King of the Universe, who has given us life and sustained us and enabled us to reach this occasion.

GREETINGS

שנה טובה! - *Shanah tova!* - To a good year!

לשנה טובה תכתבו ותחתמו!

L'Shanah tova tikatevu v'tichatemu!

May you be inscribed and sealed for a good year!

Program 2 (October) - Sukkot

Goals of the Program:

- The learners will understand the agricultural aspects of the holiday.
- The learners will understand historical aspects of the holiday.
- The learners will understand religious aspects of the holiday.

Activity 1 – Silent Mixer

Length: 10 minutes

The leader will ask the families to line up in eye color order from the bluest to the brownest, making two lines – adults and children. The participants will have then a chance to talk briefly to their neighbors and to remind their names, the place of origin, family interests, etc.

Repeat the activity two more times lining the participants up in their hair and shoes color order. Allow some time for brief conversation after each activity.

Activity 2 – Ma Chadash?

Length: 5-10 minutes

As the families are seated, the leader will encourage the families to share some good news and accomplishments, accompanying each statement with enthusiastic clapping.

Activity 3 – Learning about Sukkot

Length: 45 minutes

Materials: Reader's Cards[23], construction paper, glue, scissors, tape, white sheets of paper, writing materials, fine and thick color markers.

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[23] *Ibid*, p.46, (translation is mine).

Divide the families into three groups (3-4 families each). Give each group a Readers Card (see bellow). Ask for a volunteer from each group who will read the card to its members. Upon the completion of the reading, ask the families to discuss what they just learned about the holyday of Sukkot and to come up with a way to present the material to the other two groups. They can use their bodies, acting the content out, make a verbal or graphic presentation. They should be able to answer the questions or to explain more in detail what they mean by the presentations.

Conclusion:

Wrap up this activity announcing the Sukkot Trivia Contest for children.

The Trivia consists of ten True/False questions on the theme of Sukkot. Ask the participants to raise the hand as soon as they are ready to answer. A child gets a sticker for the correct answer. By the end, count the stickers and award the winner with a small prize.

Activity 4 – Pilgrimage to Jerusalem

Length: 20 minutes

Materials: Large (15'x10') World Map or large shapes of the continents with a star, marking the location of Jerusalem, taped to the floor, blindfolds.

Procedure: The leader will explain the families that joyous celebration of Sukkot in ancient times was marked by a pilgrimage to Jerusalem Temple to thank God for the food that the Jews had grown. The families are about to experience the pilgrimage to Jerusalem by themselves. The parents will guide their blindfolded child to Jerusalem, giving him/her directions toward it. As soon as the child "arrives" in Jerusalem, he/she will be asked to recall the most memorable family experience from the past year and to

offer his thanks to the parents. Allow enough time for each family to participate in this activity.

Conclusion: As a conclusion of the program, walk all the families to the Sukkah. In the Sukkah, explain the families the significance and symbolism of the ritual of shaking the Lulav. Distribute the Blessings Sheet and offer the families to participate in the ritual of shaking the Lulav. In the Sukkah offer the families light snack.

Evaluation: While still in the Sukkah, ask the families to compose a holiday greeting card to the J, reflecting on their experience at the program. Use these cards for the program evaluation.

Group1

The holiday of Sukkot begins in the middle of the month of Tishrei, during the full moon. It is an agricultural holiday that celebrates the gathering of the harvest. The festive spirit comes from the feeling of happiness the Jews felt when they finished harvesting for the year. Although we no longer live in an agrarian society, Sukkot reminds us of and connects us to the agricultural cycles of the year.

Group2

Sukkot has two main themes: plenty and vulnerability. These themes are seemingly contradictory, but when explored more deeply, it becomes clear that they are in fact complimentary. The fall harvest gives the holiday its sense of rejoicing. Once a nation of farmers, Jews have a strong sense of dependence on the land. This is the time of year when we delight in what the land brings forth. While we celebrate the plenty of the harvest-time, we do not become arrogant, taking the abundance for granted. We instead try to realize how very dependent we are on the land. Sukkot reminds us that we must always appreciate all that we have, and normally take for granted.

Group 3

It is specifically at the moment in which we feel the most full – the moon is full, the harvest complete – that we move from our sturdy homes into flimsy huts (Sukkot). For seven days out of the year, we learn how to empathize with those for whom a roof is not a certainty. According to Jewish law, one must be able to see the stars through the roof of Sukkah. Though the roof pro-vides some sense of security, it does not fully protect us from the elements. Hopefully, Sukkot sensitizes us to the plight of homeless people, refugees and others who are not protected by a roof and four walls. It also attunes our senses to the importance of nature and the cycle of the seasons.

Sukkot Trivia

Answer true or false to the following questions:

1. According to the Jewish law, the roof of the Sukkah is solid.
2. Dwelling in the Sukkah lasts for nine days.
3. Sukkot is an agricultural holiday.
4. Sukkot begins in the middle of month of Elul.
5. The first Sukkah was built in New York.
6. We eat Matzah on Sukkot.
7. Sukkot is the first holiday in fall.
8. The Jews have been once a nation of farmers.
9. It is customary to eat in and invite guests to the Sukkah.
10. The Moon is always full on the time of Sukkot.

Special Sukkot Blessings

Blessing over the Lulav and other species:

ברוך אתה יי, אלהינו מלך העולם, אשר קדשנו במצותיו
וצונו על נטילת לולב

Barukh ata adonai eloheinu melekh haolam asher kid-shanu b'mitzvotav vitzivanu al nitilat lulav.
Praised are you, O Lord, our God, King of the Universe,
Who sanctified us and commanded us to lift up the Lulav.

Blessing over sitting in the Sukkah:

ברוך אתה יי, אלהינו מלך העולם, אשר קדשנו במצותיו
וצונו לישב בסוכה

Barukh ata adonai eloheinu melekh haolam asher kid-shanu b'mitzvotav vitzivanu Le'shev Ba'Sukkah.
Praised are you, O Lord, our God, King of the Universe,
Who sanctified us and commanded us to sit in the Sukkah.

Program 3 (November) – Shabbat

Goals of the Program:

- The learners will understand the meaning of Shabbat at the individual and group levels.
- The families will learn how to relate Shabbat to memory, hope, physical and spiritual rest.
- The families will experience Kabbalat Shabbat and learn the symbols of Shabbat (candles, wine, challah, zemirot, Shabbat food, white tablecloth).

Activity 1 – Ma Chadash?

Length: 10 minutes

As the families are seated, the leader will encourage the families to share some good news and accomplishments, accompanying each statement with enthusiastic clapping.

Activity 2 – What's the Point in Running?

Length: 40 minutes.

Materials: copies of "What's the Point in Running?"[24] story.

Procedure: Divide the families into small groups. Distribute among the participants the story "What's the Point in Running" (see below), to be used as a starting point in the analysis of the nature of Shabbat. Each group will choose a representative to centralize the task and report it to the leader. The representative will promote a debate based on the instructions attached. At the same time, the leader will supervise the groups' tasks.

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[24] Moshe Stolyar, *I Rasskazi Sinu Tvoyemu...(And Tell Your Children...)*, (Jerusalem: Gesharim, 1993), p. 29, (translation is mine).

After the discussion in groups, the leader will ask representatives to explain the group's conclusions and write down on the board any relevant idea that comes up and will show the following paragraph as a closing to the activity:

"That who feels in his heart a true attachment to the life of his people cannot think of the existence of a Jewish people away from the "Shabbat Queen." It would not be exaggerating to say that "More than Israel has kept the Shabbat, the Shabbat has kept Israel." Ahad Ha-Am

Conclusion: The coordinator will relate the relevant ideas with the previous paragraph, putting special emphasis on the verb phrase "has kept" and on the concept of people.

Activity 3 – Shabbat Dinner

Length: 45 minutes

Procedure:

1. Candlelighting.

Before lighting the Shabbat candles, the leader will explain that the two candles are associated with the two Torah verses prescribing Shabbat. While Exodus (20:8) says: " ...remember (*zachor*) the Shabbat day to sanctify it", in Deuteronomy (5:12) we read: "... safeguard (*shamor*) the Shabbat day to sanctify it". *Zachor*, to remember, that is, to know the laws, learn the meanings of Shabbat. *Shamor*, to observe, that is, to follow the precepts, obey the laws. That is why the two candles are lit together.

Ask for a volunteer to step forward and lead the group in reciting the blessing and lighting the candles. Encourage each family to light their own tea-candles.

2. Kiddush.

The leader will explain that Kiddush, which in Hebrew means **sanctification,** is the blessing said over the wine at the beginning of Shabbat. Thus the verse "remember Shabbat to sanctify it" is observed. What is blessed is the time of joy that wine represents. The cup should be brimming as a symbol of overflowing joy.

Ask for a volunteer to step forward and lead the group in reciting the blessing.

3. Hamotzi.

The leader will explain the families the reason for having two challot on the Shabbat table. When the Hebrews left Egypt, they fed on the manna falling daily from the sky during their journey across the desert. Everyone had to collect the amount of manna he or she would eat every day. But on Friday twice as much fell from the sky since none fell on Shabbat. We put two challot on the table to symbolize that double portion of manna. The cover, which should not be removed until the blessing, symbolizes white dewdrops covering manna in the desert.

Ask for a volunteer to step forward and lead the group in reciting the blessing.

The dinner is served.

After the dinner teach the families a Shabbat song. "Bim Bom" would be a good choice for the beginners.

Activity 4 – Art Project – Kiddush Cup

Length: 20 minutes

Materials: Glue, water, clear plastic goblets, colored tissue paper, paintbrushes.

Procedure:

Using a paintbrush, mix together equal parts glue and water and paint the mixture on the entire outside of the cup. With your fingers stick the small pieces of tissue paper onto the

cup, overlapping an smoothing them down until you cover the entire cup. Brush the glue onto the entire cup again, over the layer of tissue paper. Allow the cup to dry overnight. It will dry clear and the tissue paper will let the light shine through the cup like stained glass. After it dries you can drink wine or juice out of it. Remember: the cup is NOT dishwasher safe.

Conclusion: Ask the families to write their opinion about the program on the index card before they leave. Collect the cards and use them for a program evaluation.

What's the Point in Running?

Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlav (1772-1811), Chassidic leader in Podolia and Ukraine, once told the following story:

The rabbi was standing at his window overlooking the market square, when he saw one of his followers, someone named Haikel, who seemed in a hurry. He called him and invited him in.

"Haikel, have you looked at the sky this morning?"

"No, Rabbi, I have not," the disciple answered.

"And have you seen the street this morning?"

"Yes, I have."

"And now, can you still see it?"

"Yes, Rabbi, I can."

"Tell me what you see."

"I see people, horses, carts, busy traders, men and women coming and going."

"Haikel, Haikel... In 50 years, and in 100 years, there will be here a street like this one, and a market like that one. Other carts will take other traders to buy and sell other horses. But I will not be here and neither will you. So let me ask you `What is the point in running if you do not even have the time to look at the sky?'"

Chassidic story, written in Yiddish and translated into Russian.

(Translation from Russian is mine)

General questions:

- What are the main topics, messages and values of the text?
- How do you spend your time? How do you organize your time?
- What do you think about time when you stop?
- When you stop, how do you feel and what do you do?
- What customs and traditions related to Shabbat do you know?
- Are those customs and traditions some kind of ideal or is it possible to socially transform them nowadays? Back up your answer.

Shabbat Blessings

Blessing for Shabbat Candles

ברוך אתה יי, אלהינו מלך העולם, אשר קדשנו במצותיו
וצונו להדליק נר של שבת

BARUCH ATAH ADONAI ELOHEINU MELECH HA'OLAM ASHER KIDISHANU

BIMITZVOTAV VITZIVANU LEHADLIK NER SHEL SHABBAT.

Blessing for Wine

ברוך אתה יי, אלהינו מלך העולם, בורא פרי הגפן

BARUCH ATAH ADONAI ELOHEINU MELECH HA'OLAM BOREI PREE

HAGAFEN.

Blessing for Challah

ברוך אתה יי, אלהינו מלך העולם, המוציא לחם מן הארץ

BARUCH ATAH ADONAI ELOHEINU MELECH HA'OLAM HAMOTZI LECHEM

MIN HA'ARETZ.

Shabbat Songs

Shabbat Shalom

Bim bam, bim bim bim bam, bim bim bim bim bim bam
Shabbat shalom, hey!
Shabbat shabbat shabbat shabbat shalom

Mah Yafeh Hayom

Ma ya-feh ha-yom

Shabbat Shalom

What a beautiful day it is! Shabbat Shalom!

Hiney Ma Tov

Hee-nay ma tov oo-ma na-eem

She-vet a-kheem gam ya-khad.

How nice and pleasant it is to be here together.

David Melekh Yisrael

Da-veed me-lekh yis-ra-el

Khai khai ve-ka-yam

David, King of Israel, lives forever.

Hallelu

Hal-le-lu hal-le-lu-yah

Halleluyah! Thank God!

Program 4 (December) – Chanukah

Goals of the Program:

- The children will experience the celebration within the framework of the family.
- The families will have the elements necessary to light the *chanukiyah* at home.
- The activities will promote the intergenerational meeting and exchange.

Activity 1 – Ma Chadash?

Length: 10 minutes

As the families are seated, the leader will encourage the families to share some good news and accomplishments, accompanying each statement with enthusiastic clapping.

Activity 2 – Chanukiyah Making

Length: 45 minutes.

Materials: Ceramic tile or piece of wood for the base, glue, metal lug nuts, paint, paintbrushes, permanent markers, glitter, and beads.

The leader will introduce the main ritual of Chanukah: The lighting of the *chanukiyah.* Although commonly called the *menorah*, that name technically refers only to the seven-pronged candelabra used in the ancient Temple. The *chanukiyah*, (pronounced cha-noo-kee-YA) by contrast, has nine branches—eight are the same height, and are meant to hold the candles we light each night, and the ninth is taller, and holds the *shamash* (the helper-candle), with which we light the others.

The leader will explain the families that they are going to create and decorate their own *chanukiyah*, which will be used over the holiday. The families can use a ceramic tile or a piece of wood as a base and lug nuts as candleholders. Each family will need one base

and 10 lug nuts: 1 for each of 8 candles and 2, stacked on top of each other for *shamash* (to make it taller than the rest so that it stands out).

Explain the families that traditionally, all the candles are in straight line, but they can chose any pattern and decorations in order to make their *chanukiyah* unique. Allow some time for the completion of the project and ask the families to bring their work to the table in the corner of the room to let it dry.

Activity 2 – Chanukah Play

Length: 15 minutes

Materials: 11 signs with the names of the characters (Narrator, Antiochus, Jew 1, Jew 2, Jew 3, Jew 4, Jew 5, Soldiers, Maccabeem, Mattityahu, Yehuda), 11 copies of the play[25] with highlighted parts of each character.

Procedure: Ask for 11 volunteers (both children and adults) to perform in the play. Give each volunteer a sign with the name of his character. Encourage them to use all their artistic skills to make the performance into a real show.

Scene One:

Narrator: During the time of the Second Temple, The Greeks came and ruled over The Land of Israel. At first they came peacefully, but after many years, a new king, Antiochus came to power.

Antiochus: I don't like these Jews. They are different. They keep kosher, they keep Shabbat, they learn the Torah, we want them to change and be like us. I will have to do something about this.

[25] The Play was written specifically for the Russian-speaking learners.

Jew 1: Did you hear what Antiochus did? He put a statue of himself in the Holy Temple and he wants us to bow down to it!

Jew 2: I heard that whoever doesn't bow down, will be killed. Oh, look someone is coming and they are blowing trumpets! It looks like a message from the king!

Jew 1: What are we going to do? We can't stop being Jews!

Jew 2: I think my family is going to have to run away to the mountains to keep the Mitzvot secretly. We will hide in the mountains and learn Torah in secret. If we are killed, then we are killed.

Scene Two:

Mattityahu: I am very worried about what is going on. I, Mattityahu think that we should move with our five sons to Modiin a quiet town where maybe the soldiers won't bother us.

Narrator: But the soldiers came there too.

Soldier: I want you – Mattityahu – to bow to the statue of our god in front of everyone. If not, we will kill you.

Mattityahu: Never! I will never do such a thing!

Jew 5: I don't care. I'll do it.

Mattityahu: How dare you do such a thing! (Took a sword – killed the man and killed the soldier. Then said) Whoever is for God come with me!

Narrator: The Jews gathered to the mountains and decided to fight the Greeks. How could they, there were so few of them and so many Greek soldiers?

Antiochus: How dare these Jews to fight me. I'll wipe them out in a second. I'll send my strongest general to wipe them out.

Narrator: The Greeks were many, but the Jews killed the general and many other soldiers. God was with them and they won the battle.

Antiochus: I won't stand for this. I will send stronger soldiers. A better general.

Narrator: The army was called the Maccabeem. Their banner said, "Me Kamocha Bailim Adonai – who is like you our Lord. The first letters of each word spelled Maccabee – and so Yehuda Hamaccabee led them. They won this battle too.

Antiochus: Now I will send elephants with my soldiers and wipe out those Jews!

Maccabeem: How are we going to be able to fight against these elephants?

Yehuda: Don't worry, God will help us.

Scene Three

Narrator: It was a miracle. Even though the Greeks were much stronger, the Jews won the war and the Greeks left the Land of Israel. They went into the Temple and tried to clean it up. There was no more Menorah; statues were everywhere. It took a long time, but on the month of Kislev they had made a new menorah and everything was ready.

Jew 3: We're all ready, except we can't find any closed jars of pure olive oil!

Jew 4: I can't believe it! It will take 8 days for new oil to be sent to us! We can't wait!

Jew 3: Wow! Someone just found a tiny flask. But there's only enough to last one day. Should we light the Menorah or should we wait?

Jew 4: I think we should light it. We are so lucky to have our Holy Temple back, how can we wait another day.

Narrator: They lit the Menorah – but instead of one day, the flame lasted for eight days - just enough time for new oil to arrive. This was the second miracle- *Nes* of Chanukah.

Every year we light the Menorah and play *dreidel* to remember the miracles of Chanukah.

Activity 3 – Lighting the Candles

Length: 10 minutes

Leader: Now, as you learned the story of Chanukah we will light our own *chanukiyot.* The leader will explain the families that each night of Chanukah we add another candle to the *chanukiyah.* On the first night, we light one candle, two on the second night, and so forth until all eight candles blaze on the last night of the holiday. It is customary to put the *chanukiyah* next to a window so that passers-by can see the candles. This is to publicize the miracle of Chanukah and celebrate our freedom of religion.

Let the families bring their own chanukiyah to their tables and provide them with Chanukah Blessings Sheet. Recite the blessing as a group and light the candles according to the day of the program.

Activity 4 – *Dreidel* Game

Length: 15 minutes

Materials: Chocolate coins, *dreidels.*

The leader will explain that the traditional Chanukah game is Dreidel or *Sevivon,* it is a spinning top with four sides; on each one of them there is a Hebrew letter: *NUN, GIMEL, HEI, SHIN.* These are the initials of *NES GADOL HAYA SHAM, A great miracle occurred there.* It seems that this custom was originated in the prohibition of the reading from the Torah, in the times of Antiochus, and that the Jewish youth pretended to be playing instead of studying the Torah when the soldiers showed up. Each player gets coins, and there is a pot in the middle. The family members will take turns spinning the

dreidel. The key to success or failure in this game is the Hebrew letter the *dreidel* lands on. Each letter stands for a Yiddish word that hints at the way you play:

Nun—Nicht—Nothing: nothing happens.

Gimmel—Gut—Good: you get the pot.

Hei—Halb—Half: you get half the pot.

Shin—Schlecht—Bad: you have to put half of your stash into the pot.

Conclusion: As a concluding activity ask the families one of the following questions. Let each family think and answer:

If Judah Maccabee came today, what would he tell us?

What would you feel if someone issues a law prohibiting visiting the J?

Evaluation: Ask the families to write their opinion about the program in the form of a greeting card to the agency. Collect the cards and use them for a program evaluation.

Chanukah Blessings

Recite the first two blessings after you light the Shamash, prior to lighting that night's Chanukah candles.

BLESSING #1

ברוך אתה יי, אלהינו מלך העולם, אשר קדשנו במצותיו
וצונו להדליק נר של חנוכה

Baruch ata Adonai Eloheinu melech haolam, Asher kideshanu be-mitzvotav,
Vetzeevanu lehadleek ner shel Chanukah.

Blessed are You, the Lord our God, King of the universe, Who sanctified us with His commandments, and commanded us to kindle the Chanukah light.

BLESSING #2

ברוך אתה יי, אלהינו מלך העולם, שעשה ניסים לאבותינו
בימים ההם בזמן הזה

Baruch ata Adonai Eloheinu melech haolam, Sheasa neeseem laavo-teinu,
Bayameem haheim bazman hazeh.

Blessed are You, the Lord our God, King of the universe, Who made miracles for our forefathers, in those days at this season.

FIRST NIGHT ONLY BLESSING #3.

ברוך אתה יי, אלהינו מלך העולם, שהחינו וקימנו והגיענו לזמן הזה

Baruch ata Adonai Eloheinu melech haolam, Shehecheyanu vekee-yimanu
Veheegeeyanu lazman hazeh.

Blessed are You, the Lord our God, King of the universe, Who has kept us alive, sustained us, and brought us to this season.

Program 5 (February) – Tu B'Shevat

Goals of the Program:

- The families will foster their appreciation of and respect for nature, importance of taking care of the environment, continuity, and growth
- The learners will become familiar with the Tu B'Shevat celebration
- The activities will promote the intergenerational meeting and exchange.

Activity 1 – Ma Chadash?

Length: 10 minutes

As the families are seated, the leader will encourage the families to share some good news and accomplishments, accompanying each statement with enthusiastic clapping.

Activity 2 – The Talmud Story

Length: 15 minutes

Materials: "A Story from the Talmud" handouts.

The leader will divide the participants into small groups, 3-4 families each. When the families are seated, explain that they are about to begin a birthday celebration. The leader will tell the families that they don't have to worry about not having presents because this is a very special birthday party – the birthday of threes. This time we will be getting presents from trees. The leader will tell the families that they will read a story and will discuss it in the groups.

Distribute the handouts.

Ask each group to present their answers. Conclude the activity, saying that Tu B'Shevat is not only a time to simply enjoy the natural world - to go for a walk or a hike, to eat fruits and nuts, or to get your hands dirty with soil. It is also a day of profound

contemplation about the responsibility we have towards the earth. Tu B'Shevat reminds us that despite our great advances, we are still very vulnerable—and our life is connected to planet Earth. Tu B'Shevat is a day that allows us to step back, and be grateful for the amazing natural resources at our disposal. It is also a day that encourages us to step forward, and make sure that we act with respect and responsibility for the world we have been given.

Activity 3 – Tu B'Shevat Seder

Length: 90 minutes

Materials: White grape juice, red grape juice, fruits with shells (almonds, pistachios, tangerines), fruits with pits (dates, plums, apricots), totally edible fruits (figs, raisins), copies of the Seder.

Procedure: The leader will explain the families that in the 16th century, Kabbalists (Jewish mystics) in the town of Safed decided to fill Tu B'Shevat with mystical significance, and created a Tu B'Shevat Seder modeled after the Passover Seder. Over time, this ritual fell into disuse, but in the past few decades it has begun to spread in Jewish communities again and the families will have a chance to experience it by themselves. The leader will distribute the copies of the Seder, encouraging the families to take turns reading from the handout.

The Morasha Academy members experienced an adapted and translated into Russian version of the Jewish National Fund Tu B'Shevat Seder. For the novice English speaking families I suggest a Babaganewz Tu B'Shevat Seder, available on-line at http://www.babaganewz.com/kidspdfs/5408sederK.pdf

Activity 4 – Planting "Trees"

Length: 20 minutes

Materials: Potting soil, clear cups, parsley seeds, and water.

Procedure: As a conclusion of the program, offer each family to plant their own "tree". The cup can be decorated by markers, glitter, and beads. Encourage each family to take care for their project so that grown parsley can be used for Passover Seder.

Conclusion: Give each family an index card and ask to write a Tu B'Shevat postcard to the J. Explain that they can use this card as a reflection on their experience.

The Story of Honi

A Story from the Talmud

One day, Honi was walking on the road and saw an old man planting a carob tree. Honi asked the man, "How long will it take for this tree to bear fruit?"

The man replied, "Seventy years."

Honi then asked the man, "And do you think you will live long enough to eat the fruit of this tree?"

The man answered, "Perhaps not. However, when I was born into this world, I found many carob trees planted by my father and grandfather. Just as they planted trees for me, I am planting trees for my children and grandchildren so they will be able to eat the fruit of these trees."

(Ta'nit 32a)

Discuss and answer the questions:

1. What is the message of the story?
2. How can it be related to Tu B'Shevat?
3. What can one single individual do to make the world better?

Important Blessings for a Tu B'Shevat Seder

Blessing over Fruits and Nuts:

ברוך אתה יי, אלהינו מלך העולם, בורא פרי העץ

Baruch ata Adonai Eloheinu Melech ha-Olam,
borei pri ha-etz.

Blessed are You, Ruler of the Universe,
Creator of the fruit of the tree.

Blessing over Grape Juice and Wine:

ברוך אתה יי, אלהינו מלך העולם, בורא פרי הגפן

Baruch ata Adonai Eloheinu Melech ha-Olam,
borei pri ha-gafen.

Blessed are You, Ruler of the Universe,
Creator of the fruit of the vine.

8. Conclusion

If viewed closely, similar characteristics can be found in both waves of Jewish immigration to the United States, from Czarist Russia and the Former Soviet Union. The motivations for emigration were similar for both and included economic pressures, political instability, hostility from the state in the form of anti-Judaism, popular anti-Semitism, and persecution. The Jewishness of the Soviet Jews, as a result of having spent over 70 years under Communist regime, remained, however, in the form of national consciousness that has nothing in common with strong religiosity among the Jews from Czarist Russia.

The struggle to become Americans and yet to retain ties to Judaism and its expression is common for both groups. The former immigrants did not see and could not reconcile being Americans with their old-fashioned way of life. However, the innovations that were brought to the field of Jewish education by energetic thinkers like Samson Benderly and his followers dramatically changed the attitudes toward Jewish education and participation in communal life. The leaders of the time managed to change the culture and to present Jewishness as an essential part of being American. They developed strategies and tools that transformed the traditional approach to Jewish education into an exciting experience, which reached far beyond the classroom and engaged the parents of the students.

Similarly, Morasha Academy aims to instill a positive attitude toward Jewishness among more recent Jewish émigrés from the Former Soviet Union. Families are given the opportunity to discover that Judaism can be both serious and exciting. Educational programs that are offered at the Marks JCH help them learn more about American ways

of being Jewish. It does not matter for me whether they come to the J to learn more about Judaism or just to have fun with the kids and other families. The aim of the program is achieved as long as they participate – the families learn and become more familiar with American Judaism without the realization of the process. They simply learn to be a part of larger community that depends on them and on which they depend too.

After a couple of years, many Russian-speaking Jewish families will be gone from Bensonhurst. Nevertheless, a positive experience at the J will leave its imprint on their identity patterns. I truly hope that they will be seeking to belong to a new Jewish community, to send their children to Jewish school, and to develop friendships with others in the Jewish community.

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