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## *Toward a Comprehensive Policy Planning for Russian-Speaking Jews in North America*

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In dealing with Russian-speaking Jews in North America, we face two main challenges and three possible outcomes.

**CHALLENGES:**

1. Consequences of disintegration of the close-knit immigrant society of newly arrived Russian-speaking Jews.
2. Utilizing the special strengths of Russian-speaking Jews for the benefit of the wider American Jewish community.

**POSSIBLE OUTCOMES:**

1. The loss of Jewish identity and rapid assimilation.
2. An adaptation of American-Jewish identity (with the benefits and shortcomings associated with it).
3. A formation of a distinctive Russian-speaking Jewish identity strong enough to be further sustained.

There is a 10 to 15-year window of opportunity for intervention with this population. There is also a need to integrate, in a comprehensive manner, organizations to positively intervene in the field. At this preliminary stage, several recommendations stand out as urgent to address this population's needs:

- An effort on a national scale to assist the communities that are home to the majority of Russian-speaking Jews.
- Funding for programs that will encourage Russian-speaking Jews to move into Jewish areas.
- Special programs to promote in-marriage.
- Dialogue mechanisms for Russian-speaking Jews in Israel, the US, Germany, and the Former Soviet Union.
- Programs building on Russian-speaking Jews' sense of peoplehood to bolster ties among all Jews to Israel.
- Possible reciprocity between Jewish education and education in science and math for Russian-speaking Jews ("Judaism for math").

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## AMERICA'S RUSSIAN-SPEAKING JEWS COME OF AGE

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“The Russian-speaking Jewish population of New York has come of age,” the *New York Jewish Week* recently announced.<sup>i</sup> It reported that almost one in five New York City Jews (18% to be precise) lives in a Russian-speaking household. Nationwide, the number of Russian-speaking Jews, according to some estimates, equals or exceeds the number of Orthodox Jews: 10-15% of the Jewish population. This large Russian-speaking population, increasingly active in culture and politics, is changing the face of the American Jewish community. More than generally recognized, American Jewry’s contemporary character and future destiny are closely intertwined with the demography, character, politics and religious life of the country’s Russian-speaking Jews.

### History

Jews began emigrating to the United States from Russia and Poland in the colonial era. Asser Levy, one of the first known Jews in New Amsterdam, originated from Vilna. The Revolutionary War hero, Haym Salomon, emigrated from Lissa (Leszno), Poland. Philadelphian Mordecai Mordecai hailed from Telz (Telsiai), Lithuania. In 1852, a “Russian-American Jewish congregation” was founded in New York, a sign that the community of East European Jews was by then large enough to seek to preserve its own distinctive traditions. Later, as railway lines eased travel within Russia and steamships reduced the hazards of travel across the Atlantic, more Russian Jews migrated to America, particularly in the wake of economic privation and religious persecution where they lived. Some ten to twenty thousand East European Jews migrated to America in the 1870s, many of them from Lithuania’s famine-swept Suwalki province.<sup>ii</sup>

Mass Russian-Jewish immigration is usually dated to the assassination of Tsar Alexander II in 1881. It set off an orgy of anti-Jewish violence along with a parade of discriminatory and oppressive legislation. When added to such long-term problems as overpopulation, economic dislocation, forced conscription, wretched poverty and crushing despair, the result was the immigration to the United States of some 1.5 million Russian Jews between 1881 and World War I.<sup>iii</sup> Several hundred thousand more Russian Jews arrived following that war, especially as part of family reunifications. On January 1, 1925 the National Origins Immigration (Johnson-Reed) Act went into effect. While the country-by-country quotas it imposed did not (as some suppose) end Russian Jewish immigration altogether, it did dramatically reduce it. Between 1930 and 1939, according to official statistics, a total of only 2,463 Russians, most of them presumably Jews, obtained legal permanent residence status in the United States.<sup>iv</sup>

The Shoah brought other Russian Jews to the United States, many of them as refugees (“displaced persons”) outside the normal immigrant quota system. Some 153,000 Jews arrived in the United States between 1945 and 1954; the percentage of them with roots in Russia is not clear. Small numbers of Russian Jews continued to arrive in the United States during subsequent decades as well.<sup>v</sup> For the most part, though, Russia’s Jews were barred from migrating to the United States. The Cold War, anti-Semitism, paranoia, and legal restrictions prevented even those who might have received entry visas into the United States from leaving.

During the 1960s, groups of Russian Jews, some of whom rediscovered their Jewish identity in the wake of the Six Day War, began agitating to learn Hebrew, promote Jewish culture, and emigrate from the Soviet Union. Israelis, operating covertly, and diverse Jewish organizations in the United States and Europe, operating overtly, moved to support them, sparking what became known as the “Soviet Jewry movement.” Its battle cry, recalling the biblical exodus and the American civil rights movement, was “Let My People Go.” The cause soon attracted both Jewish and non-Jewish supporters, including significant American politicians.

In a bid to deflect this challenge, and also to win much-needed trade concessions from the United States Congress, the Soviet Union cracked open its doors and permitted a few of its two million Jews to emigrate to Israel. In 1971, some 13,000 Jews won exit permits (almost double the total number of Jews permitted to leave during the entire previous decade), and in the two years that followed over 66,000 more Jews won permission to depart. All told, during the 1970s, some 226,000 Jews left the Soviet Union bound for Israel.<sup>vi</sup> Over 55,000 of them changed course, never went to Israel, and instead immigrated as refugees into the United States.<sup>vii</sup>

### Size and Significance

From these beginnings, the Russian-speaking Jewish community of the United States grew. Some 565,000 refugees and migrants from the (former) Soviet Union emigrated to the United States between 1971 and 2006, according to US government records. HIAS assisted about 350,000 of them.<sup>viii</sup> Other Jews – as many as several hundred thousand in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century – re-migrated to the United States following sojourns in Israel, Germany, and elsewhere.<sup>ix</sup> Still others were born in the United States to Russian-speaking parents. Nobody knows precisely how large the community of Russian-speaking Jews in the United States is today, for the US Constitution bars the government from inquiring into matters of religion, and not all Russian speakers are Jews. Accumulating evidence indicates, however, that some 10-15% of America's Jews are Russian-speaking, about 750,000 in all.

The 2011 *Yearbook of Immigration Statistics*, published by the US Department of Homeland Security, enumerates 678,072 people whose country of *previous residence* was Russia and who, since 1970, have become permanent residents of the United States. Significantly, some 183,202 Russians became permanent residents just between 2001-2011. In another table, the yearbook enumerates 488,621 individuals *born* in the Former Soviet Union (Russia plus the other FSU countries) who received permanent residence status from 2001-2011. While not all of these individuals are Jews or members of Jewish families, the statistics serve as a timely reminder that the community of Russian-speaking Jews cannot be calculated just on the basis of those who arrived in the United States as refugees or accepted aid from Jewish relief organizations prior to 2001. A considerable number of today's Russian-speaking Jews have migrated to the United States since then, in some cases after living in Israel or some other Western country. Others (not found in immigration statistics at all) are the American-born children of Russian-speaking Jews who have been brought up speaking Russian at home.<sup>x</sup>

An illuminating US government study, published in 2010, utilized the 2007 American Community Survey, a sample of just under 3 million housing unit addresses, to determine what foreign languages Americans speak at home. It estimates that 851,184 US residents five years of age and older converse in their kitchens in Russian – far more than the number who speak Hebrew (213,576) or Yiddish (158,991). Revealingly, the number of Russian speakers increased nationally by 144,932 between 2000 and 2007. This provides further evidence for the growth of the Russian-speaking community in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. If, as others have found, 84% of all Russian speakers are Jewish<sup>xi</sup> then the size of the Russian-speaking Jewish community in the United States as a whole (over the age of 5), based on the American Community Survey, was about 715,000 in 2007 and somewhat larger (owing to continuing immigration and fertility) today.<sup>xii</sup>

On the local level, a 2011 study of the New York Jewish community conducted by Jacob Ukeles and Steven M. Cohen for New York's UJA-Federation found 199,000 Russian-speaking Jews in the five boroughs of New York City, up from 186,000 in 2002 (plus 17,000 more in Nassau, Suffolk and Westchester counties).<sup>xiii</sup> An earlier study by David Pollock estimated the number at 210,000 in New York City (plus 26,000 more in Nassau, NY, Bergen, NJ and Hudson, NJ).<sup>xiv</sup>

Some insist that the number of Russian Jews in the United States is much higher than these estimates. Samuel Kliger, in an unpublished paper, insisted “there are about 350,000 Russian Jews in [the] New York metropolitan area.”<sup>xv</sup> This latter number, however, seems highly unlikely since the US census found only 251,000 Russian-speakers in the New York metropolitan area, and not all of them are Jews. Nor has the tendency to exaggerate the number of Russian-speaking Jews been confined to New York. The “Russian Jewish community of Boston” claims to represent 70,000 Russian Jews, a number repeated in print by Larissa Remennick. That would mean that one of every three Boston Jews was a Russian-speaker. In fact, a careful demographic study pegged the size of Boston’s Russian-speaking Jewish community at 14,000 adult immigrants, plus “25,500 Russian-connected Boston Jews,” the latter including everyone connected in some familial way to a Jew from the FSU. The number of Russian-speaking Jews, then, lies somewhere between 14,000 and 39,500, but nowhere near 70,000.<sup>xvi</sup>

The story is the same in Philadelphia. A report undertaken by the Research Institute for New Americans, led by a Russian-speaking Jew, estimated in 2002 that “there were at least 33,000 Russia [sic] Jewish immigrants” in the city, comprising “at least 14%” of the city’s Jewish population. But the Jewish Population Study of Greater Philadelphia, in 2009, found nowhere near that number. Only 3% of the community’s Jews had previously lived in the FSU, it disclosed, and its best estimate of Russian-speaking Jews was about 25,000.<sup>xvii</sup>

These exaggerations, perhaps the result of frustration at the limited attention paid to Russian-speaking Jews by the organized Jewish community, should not obscure the migration’s profound significance. In terms of numbers, it marks the second largest migration in all of American Jewish history. The 19<sup>th</sup> century migration of Central European Jews did not exceed 200,000; the number of pre-World War II German-Jewish refugees and postwar Holocaust refugees together is generally estimated at around 150,000. Only the great migration from Eastern Europe, which brought some 2 million Jews to America’s shores during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, exceeded the migration of Russian-speaking Jews in our time. Previous migration waves refashioned the American Jewish community, so it seems safe to predict that the coming of Russian-speaking Jews will, in due time, reshape it as well.

### **“Russian-Speaking Jews”**

That said, the term “Russian-speaking Jews” is a new locution. The Jews who came to America from the Former Soviet Union did not identify themselves that way. Like most immigrants, they identified themselves instead on the basis of their old hometowns; they considered themselves Jews from Moscow, Kiev, Odessa, and so forth. American Jews may have spoken of them as “Soviet Jews” or “Russians,” but they themselves overwhelmingly rejected both of these terms. “The most popular identities chosen by the immigrants,” Barry Kosmin discovered in 1990, were the terms “American Jews,” “New Americans,” “Russian Americans,” or “Russian Jews.”<sup>xviii</sup> Later, with the fall of the Soviet Union, the awkward term “Jews from the former Soviet Union [FSU]” came into vogue, but that served only to perpetuate the name of a communist country that most of the immigrants were only too glad to cast off. The term “Russian-speaking Jews” solves all of these problems. It provides a new language-based “group identity” for individuals who had almost nothing else in common prior to their emigration.<sup>xix</sup> It also meets the objections of those who, having emigrated from Ukraine, Georgia, or other republics, vehemently insist that they are *not* “Russian.” And it embraces children, born or raised in the United States, who, as the offspring of immigrants, remain culturally Russian even if they mostly speak English. Finally, by focusing on language, the new term highlights what many Russian-speaking Jews see as the crux of all that sets them apart from other American Jews: their distinctive cultural heritage.

## Geographical Divides

Cultures aside, many Russian-speaking Jews in the United States have also been separated from their English-speaking Jewish cousins by urban geography. Just as the urban landscape once divided “uptown” Central European Jews from “downtown” East European ones, so in recent decades immigrant Russian-speaking Jews have lived apart from their native cousins, usually in less prosperous and more polyphonic ethnic enclaves. The most famous of these by far is the small Brooklyn neighborhood of Brighton Beach, often dubbed “Little Odessa,” because of its proximity to water and on account of the many Ukrainian Jews who settled there. For years, it was “the largest Soviet émigré outpost in the world.”<sup>xx</sup> The stores and restaurants of Russian-speaking immigrants dot the area. Like the Lower East Side in its day, it serves both as an area of first settlement for many an immigrant, a so-called “mediating structure” easing the transition from one world to another, and also as a site of memory, nostalgia, and pilgrimage. Some Russian-speaking Jews return there even now for special celebrations, such as Russian-style *bnei mitzvah*.

Sections of Queens, NY, house an even more tightly-knit ethnic enclave: as many as 50,000 Bukharian Jews, most of them émigrés from the former Soviet republics of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, live in areas like Forest Hills and Rego Park. These Central Asian Jews, whose homeland was once known as the Emirate of Bukhara, are culturally, religiously and linguistically distinctive, and live apart from both other Russian speaking Jews and most non-Russian-speaking ones. They even boast a five-story Bukharian Jewish Community Center of their own, complete with a synagogue, rooms for classes and activities, and the offices of the Bukharian Jewish Congress, an umbrella organization of 30 Bukharian centers across North America. The goal of the Bukharian community is to preserve its communal identity; marriages within the Bukharian community are strongly encouraged.<sup>xxi</sup>

A nationwide 2004 survey of Russian-speakers aged 20-40 found that almost half lived in neighborhoods like these, with at least “quite a few” Russian-speaking immigrants nearby. A quarter, however, did not; they lived with few or no Russian speakers nearby.<sup>xxii</sup> Russian-speaking Jews in New York, according to a recent survey, have tended to be more densely concentrated: 82% of them live in the heavily Russian-speaking boroughs of Brooklyn and Queens; fewer than 10% in suburbia.<sup>xxiii</sup> Outside New York, Russian-speakers in larger cities have also tended to live in enclaves, at least in their early post-immigrant years. Whether, like so many immigrants before them, they will over time abandon such ethnic neighborhoods remains to be seen. Most observers believe they will, for, as Fran Markowitz observed in 1993, they “came to America with no vision, no intention whatsoever of creating a community—Russian Jewish, communist or otherwise. . . They came not to recreate some image of a hazy past; they came to link their fate with that of the United States, to become Americans.”<sup>xxiv</sup>

## Host-Country Orientation

This desire to become part of the American mainstream, what sociologists call a “host-country orientation,” has been a distinguishing feature of Russian-speaking Jewish immigrants from the beginning. Few have expressed any desire to return to the FSU; the rate of re-migration by Russian-speaking Jews in the United States is, by all indications, very small.<sup>xxv</sup> Their goal, like that of so many before them, is instead to succeed in their new homeland and to push their children to succeed even more.<sup>xxvi</sup>

“Some of the best and brightest members” of Soviet society – including physicists, mathematicians and computer scientists – came to the United States as refugees and voluntary immigrants. One observer perceptively described the wave of Jews that departed as a “brain drain comparable to the German emigration of the 1930s.” Many of those immigrants enjoyed rapid mobility. On average, within a decade or so of their arrival, the median income of Russian-speaking Jews has exceeded the American national average.<sup>xxvii</sup>

Russian-speaking Jews still, on average, have lower incomes than native-born Jews. Russian-speaking Jewish households in Greater New York, for example, “are almost twice as likely as other Jewish households to report annual household incomes of less than \$50,000, and four times less likely to report household incomes of at least \$150,000.”<sup>xxviii</sup> A disproportionate number of Russian-speaking Jews are poor. Nevertheless, the community as a whole is advancing economically. Young, Russian-speaking Jews with advanced university degrees and fluent English earn at the same level as their American-born peers.

Older Russian-speaking Jews, meanwhile, have a more difficult time. Most of them accompanied their children and grandchildren reluctantly, and sometimes, in communist times, at the urging of officials (“Police say you should take your old parents out, too.”) Adapting to new surroundings, a new culture, and a new language generally proved excruciatingly difficult for senior adults. Yet even if they failed to learn the language or gain employment, these senior citizens, the bulk of them women, helped pave the way for their children’s success. By assuming responsibility for child care and the maintenance of the house, they made it possible for the next generation – those who migrated in the prime of their life – to study hard, acquire English, and succeed in their chosen careers.<sup>xxix</sup>

### **Takhlis**

Regardless of whether they had parents around to help out or whether they made it on their own in the New World, Russian-speaking Jews, like so many Jewish (and Asian) immigrants before them in America, have exhorted their children to study hard and succeed. Stereotypically, they want them to attend the best schools, achieve the best grades, gain admission into the best colleges, and win the best jobs. Never satisfied that their offspring are learning enough, they have created supplementary enrichment programs for them in areas such as mathematics, music, art, theater, chess, as well as Russian language and literature. They look to the long range, pushing their children hard early in life so that they might achieve success and satisfaction later on.<sup>xxx</sup>

An earlier generation of East European Jewish immigrants displayed this same proclivity. In describing its *mentalité*, sociologist Moses Kligesberg famously employed the concept of “*takhlis*.” “The word comes from the Hebrew root meaning to complete, finish, end, accomplish, fulfill, consume,” he explained. “As it was used by eastern European Jewry, *takhlis* refers to an orientation toward a final outcome, i.e. toward an end-goal.” Rather than focusing on immediate rewards, *takhlis* encouraged deep investment in educational capital, even if that required years of privation, in order to succeed in the long run.<sup>xxxi</sup>

The current generation of Russian-speaking Jews may not employ the word *takhlis*, but the concept – the focus on outcomes – is deeply rooted in its DNA. That explains their high level of educational attainment. “Their 14.8 years of schooling,” a study by Barry Chiswick discloses, “exceed those of foreign born men in general (11.7 years), native-born men (13.1 years) and even Asian immigrant men (14.3 years).”<sup>xxxii</sup> It also explains why in a survey of ex-Soviet citizens who emigrated between 1977 and 1980, 14.4% of those who came to America said that they did so to improve economically or to take advantage of educational and vocational opportunities (only 5% of those who emigrated to Israel gave these as their primary motivations).<sup>xxxiii</sup>

On the individual level, Inessa Rifkin, principal of the Russian School of Mathematics in Boston, describes how in Russia she had been taught “to be polite and orderly, and to love and learn math and science. *For a Jewish child, that was the only ticket to advancement and often survival in that society.*” In America, she quickly learned, math and science were not viewed that way; indeed her own son labeled her “weird” and a “nerd.” But in this case, *takhlis* won out over America’s cultural norms. Expressing disdain for the “cool crowd” and its merchants, she refused to acquiesce and insisted upon raising her son according to the values she herself had been raised to cherish:



I insisted on my children being disciplined. I would cut short their computer playtime. I pushed them not only to get good grades, but to comprehend what they were learning. I did not understand terms like “fun” and “privacy,” which at the time were particularly important to my son. It turned out that I violated my son’s privacy every time I demanded an account of his activities and abrogated his inalienable right to freedom every time I disturbed his fun.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

In 1997, Rifkin founded the Russian School of Mathematics, an after-school math enrichment program, in order “to help children build a solid foundation for future success,” the last three words underscoring the goal that she and so many Russian-speaking parents shared. Conducted in English, based on Russian teaching methods, the school quickly attracted mathematically-gifted students from Russian as well as Asian and other cultural backgrounds, and now meets in eleven locations in Massachusetts, Kentucky, and California. Ms. Rifkin has become a spokeswoman for “healthy competition” in education, with an emphasis on hard work, classroom discipline, and critical thinking. Viewing America through the sharp eyes of a newcomer, she openly criticizes America’s schools, and evinces pride in the educational and cultural practices of her own heritage. “What happened to the US system of education,” she asks. “Did we, while pursuing NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND, turn into a nation where NO CHILD GETS AHEAD? Did America stop being a country of equal opportunity and turn into a country of equal (usually mediocre) outcomes?”<sup>xxxv</sup> Her school, and other educational initiatives Russian-speaking Jews have undertaken, serve as reminders that immigrants to America do more than merely “assimilate”; they also “transform.”<sup>xxxvi</sup>

Earlier waves of Jewish immigrants to the United States transformed both America and Jewish life through the values and learning they carried with them. The children of the first wave of East European Jewish immigrants, for example, entered universities in record numbers and made major contributions to the sciences, the social sciences, the arts, the humanities, as well as to public education. More recent Russian-speaking Jews may well do the same thing. Fortunately for them, education in the United States is moving toward a new emphasis on science, technology, engineering, and mathematics, the so-called STEM subjects. One survey of Russian immigrants aged 20-40 found that almost 40% of them (and over half of all male participants) worked in information technology, and over half (more than 70% of males) in STEM fields – a far higher percentage than among native-born Jews.<sup>xxxvii</sup> Having enjoyed a long history of excellence in these subjects back in the FSU, Russian-speaking Jews are well positioned to similarly succeed in the United States, and may even, as in the case of Ms. Rifkin, help to reshape American education in the process.

### **Economic Attainments**

From the time of their arrival in the United States, Russian-speaking Jews were known to be both better educated and more successful professionally than the bulk of refugees admitted into the country. They brought with them a great deal of economic and cultural capital. A survey in 1993, for example, found that Jewish immigrants from the Former Soviet Union were more than twice as likely as other refugees to arrive with university degrees in hand, and were almost three times as likely to have held academic, scientific, professional, or technical positions prior to emigrating.<sup>xxxviii</sup> Highly educated FSU Jews often chose to migrate to the United States over Israel or Germany. Since in the US wage levels are higher, there is more flexibility in the labor market, and the return on skills is greater, Jewish immigrants who focused on success (rather than the ideology of returning to Zion) gravitated there.<sup>xxxix</sup> From 1975 onward, a higher percentage of Russian Jews with college degrees emigrated to the United States than to Israel.<sup>xl</sup> Nevertheless, arrival in the United States generally resulted in a significant downgrade in status for these emigrants. The challenge of learning English, disparities between professional training in the FSU and the US, and job shortages in their areas of expertise meant that instead of finding work as doctors and engineers, many of them found it necessary to take on more menial jobs. One survey found that 12.6% of Soviet Jewish male refugees and 27.3% of females held academic and scientific positions prior to emigration, while the comparable post-emigration figures were 3.2% and 15.4% respectively. Similarly, only 3.6% of Jewish men and 12.7% of women had been service workers prior to emigrating. After emigrating, 31.7% of men and 50% of women

held these kinds of positions.<sup>xii</sup> In short, immigrants from the Former Soviet Union, like so many immigrants to the United States before them, struggled in the years immediately following their arrival in the country. Initially, at least, many of them were worse off economically and in terms of job status than they had been in the FSU.

Within 10-15 years, however, the picture changed for many Russian-speaking Jews in the United States. One study, focusing on early Soviet immigrants (1975-1979) found that “when they arrived, immigrant men from the FSU earned only 69.4% of the income of natives [non-Hispanic Whites], but after 10-15 years, they earned more than natives (111.9%).” As for women, the comparable figures were 88.3% when they arrived and 127.6% later.<sup>xiii</sup> Success, in both cases, came about in the immigrant generation. The same pattern holds true for more recent immigrants, those arriving in the United States between 1990-1999. “Upon arrival,” Yinon Cohen and Yitchak Haberfeld show, “they earned 59% (men) and 54% (women), of what comparable native-born Americans earned. Thereafter, the earning gap narrowed year by year, and after 13-16 years, is expected to disappear completely.”<sup>xiii</sup> Unsurprisingly, second-generation Russian-speaking Jews, the bilingual children of immigrants, are often wealthier and more economically secure than their parents. Sergey Brin, the co-founder of Google, who immigrated to the United States with his parents at the age of six, and Dmitry Salita, the successful Orthodox Jewish boxer who immigrated with his parents at the age of nine, are prime examples. Their success helps to explain why the community of Russian-speaking Jews in the United States is seen to have “come of age.”

## Culture

Another reason for the perceived “coming of age” is what one author has called “the Russification of Jewish American fiction.”<sup>xiv</sup> Some of the foremost contemporary Jewish writers in the English language, including Gary Shteyngart, Lara Vapnyar, David Bezmozgis, Ellen Litman, Anya Ulinich, Sana Krasikov, Irina Reyn and Maxim D. Shrayer are Russian-born. In a sense, they represent only a new chapter in an adoration of Russian writers well known to students of American letters. Vladimir Nabokov, whose wife was Jewish (and whose father championed Jewish rights in Tsarist Russia), enjoyed great success in America following his immigration in 1940, and the Jewish-born poet Joseph Brodsky settled in America following his expulsion from Russia in 1972, and nineteen years later was elevated to the post of [Poet Laureate of the United States](#).<sup>xiv</sup>

But it was Gary Shteyngart’s *The Russian Debutante’s Handbook* (2002) that marked a major turning point. His well-reviewed satiric novel, written in English, focused on the immigrant experience of Russian-speaking Jews in the United States, documenting it in fiction so compelling (“its linguistic brio, its unfettered imaginative daring, its spot-on portraiture of giant, carnivalesque personalities, its uncontrollable picaresque plot. . .”<sup>xvi</sup>) that it sold more than 100,000 copies. In its wake, Russian-born Americans – the so-called “Beet Generation” – became “all the rage” in literary circles. In short order, a passel of young Russian-American writers (almost all of them Jews) received significant publishing contracts. A literary “trendlet” was born.<sup>xvii</sup>

The writers, for the most part, play up their triple identities – as Russians, Americans and Jews. Their central theme is “alienation”: they feel neither wholly Russian nor wholly American, and don’t know much about what it means to be a Jew. While they display the same veneration for Russian high culture that characterized immigrant Jewish writers like Abraham Cahan a century ago, they are not cut off from their “old home” the way those earlier immigrants were. They are “equally at home on both sides of the Atlantic.”<sup>xviii</sup>

Literary scholars, in explaining the emergence of Russian Jews as American writers, point to Americans’ longstanding fascination with outsiders who can bring a fresh perspective to America. They observe that Americans have perennially sought to be educated by exotic authorities (e.g. J. Hector St. John de



Crèvecoeur and Alexis de Tocqueville). They also argue that Russian-speaking Jewish writers open a window on a slice of America that has hitherto remained hidden; they do for America's "Russians" what Gish Jen does for its "Asians." In addition, they show how Russian-speaking authors challenge the much-ballyhooed proclamation by literary titans Irving Howe and Leslie Fiedler that the American Jewish novel is dead. Rumors of that death, the new generation of Russian-American Jewish writers has demonstrated, are greatly exaggerated. Finally, literary scholars suggest that the embrace of Russian Jewish writers by American Jews "may really be an attempt to [re]claim a vicarious Jewish distinctiveness" on the part of native-born Jews who have lost that distinctiveness themselves. "Russian-tinged Jewish multiculturalism," the Penn State Russian literary scholar Adrian Wanner declares flatly, "caters to a nostalgia for Jewish difference that has been fading in real life."<sup>xlix</sup>

Be this as it may, the "Russification of American Jewish fiction" reveals much concerning the religious identity of Russian-speaking Jews. For all they identify with the Jewish people, most display little interest in the Jewish religion. "Ethnically, I'm a Jew (as was stated in my parents' Soviet passports)," Anya Ulinich, the author of *Petropolis* (2007) explains. "I was also raised culturally Soviet, with minimal exposure to the Jewish tradition beyond the stories of my wonderful grandparents. I'm also an atheist." Lara Vapnyar hoped to become an American Jew when she left Russia, but was disillusioned. "In the United States, I was finally granted the identity I had been denied my whole life. Here I became a Russian."<sup>l</sup> Gary Shteyngart identifies himself as a "Jewish agnostic." "Culturally, I'm insanely Jewish," he revealed to one interviewer, "but from a religious perspective, no."<sup>li</sup>

Even that cultural claim may be questioned. "The Jewish content of even the most openly Jewish works of modern Russian literature is informed neither by Jewish culture (Yiddish or Hebrew) nor by Judaism, but by Russian literary tradition," the literary scholar Mikhail Krutikov demonstrates. Novelists, he shows, draw upon "the texts of Turgenev, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Bulgakov, and even of the New Testament, rather than those of Mendele, Sholem Aleichem, Dubnow or Bialik, let alone Rashi or Maimonides."<sup>lii</sup> No matter how "insanely Jewish" Russian-speaking novelists may *feel*, their writing is thus actually more Russian than Jewish. Still, these Russian-American Jewish writers have done much to elevate Russian-speaking Jews into the cultural mainstream. Like Abraham Cahan, Henry Roth, and Saul Bellow before them, they are introducing the world of their fellow immigrants to a broader American readership, employing memorable fiction to bare the central themes of their lives.

## Religion

Religion, we have seen, is not one of those themes. Communism, after all, preached the gospel of "scientific atheism"; religion was suppressed. The majority of Jews in the Soviet Union, as a result, grew up without religion. They did not attend synagogues (most of which were shuttered by the regime), did not learn about Judaism, and practiced few if any religious rituals in their homes.

Naively, American Jews assumed that freedom would magically lure Russian-speaking Jews back to the rituals of Judaism. If persecution was what prevented Soviet Jews from practicing their faith, they reasoned that the absence of persecution would serve as a restorative. The fact that the world's best-known Soviet Jewish dissident, Natan Sharansky, Hebraized his name upon his release and became an observant Jew only reinforced these expectations. So it was that many synagogues offered free membership to Russian-speaking Jews when they arrived in the United States, and Jewish day schools provided many of their children with tuition-free education.

They soon realized their mistake. Only a minority of Russian-speaking Jews, it turned out, displayed interest in religion. Most belonged to no synagogue and observed only a limited number of rituals (only 8% of Jews in Russia, according to a poll taken in the early 1990s, identified themselves as practicing Judaism<sup>liiii</sup>). Barry

Kosmin's survey of Russian-speaking Jews who emigrated in 1979 found that 60% belonged to no synagogue.<sup>iv</sup> The most recent survey of Russian-speaking Jews in New York placed that number at about 66%.<sup>iv</sup> "We are not members of a synagogue, not because we don't want to follow Jewish tradition, but [because we] don't believe in God," one immigrant explained. "That's how I was raised, as an atheist. I came to this country when I was forty years old, and I just cannot change."<sup>vi</sup>

The multiplicity of Jewish options in America – Reform, Conservative, Orthodox, and so forth – has proved particularly puzzling to Russian-speaking Jews. Jewish religious pluralism was unknown where they came from. Having grown up in a country where a single powerful ideology prevailed, they have difficulty with the American idea, shaped by Protestantism, that there are many paths to one God.<sup>vii</sup>

Moreover, none of these paths – not even English-speaking Orthodoxy – truly resembles Judaism as they knew it prior to emigration, a Judaism that they naturally imagined to be more authentic. Young Raimonda Kopelnitsky, born in Chernovtsy in Ukraine, explained her feelings in her immigrant diary on November 28, 1991. "I don't like this American synagogue that is always free and open to me," she wrote. "I don't believe in it." What she did believe in was "the synagogue of my childhood, full of mystery, always closed to me." Though she visited that "small stone building" only once in her lifetime and understood nothing of what the old people around her were doing, the memory of that visit remained indelible. "I believe in the old people who were praying there, dressed in black. I believe in that Bible that I quickly closed. I still feel their mystery, their voice, their trembling fingers praying and calling for death."<sup>viii</sup>

The idea that one must pay dues in order to belong to a synagogue is strange to Russian-speaking Jews. They do not appreciate that this is the price American Jews pay for church-state separation. As penurious immigrants, they often drop synagogue membership once it ceases to be free for them. One of the many reasons that Chabad has proven attractive to some Russian-speaking Jews is that its synagogues rely totally on voluntary contributions.

At the deepest level, though, the problem that Russian-speaking Jews have with American Judaism is that for them, "Jewish identity does not mean religious practice." Instead, Samuel Kliger explains, it means "to belong," "to know," "to have," "to be proud of," "to feel," "to think," "to be," even "to believe," but not "to do." Faith, for Russian-speaking Jews, "is very private and intimate and has to do with personal feelings and thoughts rather than action." Indeed, in Russian, "*religia* has the connotation of boring and tiresome rituals and observances, whereas *vera* [faith] popularly refers to an individual contemplating his own fate."<sup>ix</sup> For this reason, many more Russian-speaking Jews believe in God than practice Judaism regularly. Some Jews might best be described as seekers: they can "simultaneously, attend a Reform synagogue because it is close to home, invite an Orthodox rabbi to officiate at a bar mitzvah ceremony, put up a Christmas tree, admire the Russian Orthodox architecture, and learn Buddhist meditation." Lighting Chanukah candles and attending a Passover seder, widely observed in the American Jewish community as a whole, have become commonplace among Russian-speaking Jews in the United States, but most other rituals have not.<sup>ix</sup>

More than 20% of Russian-speaking Jews proudly describe themselves as being of no religion. The fictional Misha Vainberg in Gary Shteyngart's *Absurdistan* speaks for this group when he exclaims that "the very best of Jews have always been assimilated and freethinking."<sup>xi</sup> The overall percentage of Jews who proclaim themselves of no religion has been steadily growing in the United States, partly because of Russian-speaking Jews, and partly in parallel to developments across the American religious spectrum. But whether this is a long-term trend or a short one remains to be seen. During the Depression years of the 1930s, many Russian Jewish immigrants and their children – particularly socialists, communists, and other radicals – likewise proclaimed themselves anti-religious. Twenty years later, however, America experienced a postwar religious revival. At that point, many of those same Jews (or their children) re-established ties to organized Jewish

religious life, and synagogue membership figures zoomed.<sup>lxii</sup> It remains to be seen whether this history will repeat itself.

In the meanwhile, Russian-speaking Jews in the United States remain distinctive, religiously speaking, for their low levels of synagogue membership, their reluctance to identify with “mainstream Jewish denominational identities,” and their insistence that they can be Jewish without observing rituals or affiliating with religious institutions. While individual Russian-speaking Jews may be found in Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox synagogues, an astonishing 46% of Russian-speaking Jews in New York described their religious denomination as “other.”<sup>lxiii</sup> Some of those “others” are drawn to Chabad, which boasts a long history as a spiritual Jewish religious movement in Russia, charges no dues, and reminds Russian Jews of home. Others have fallen prey to “Jews for Jesus” and related groups that actively missionize among Russian-speaking Jews. Jews for Jesus “hold a weekly Shabbat service and special Jewish holiday services for the Russian-speaking Jewish community” in Brighton Beach and other areas of high Russian-Jewish concentration.<sup>lxiv</sup> Most “others,” however, consider themselves religious in non-institutional ways, consistent with their experience back in Russia. Religion, for them, is secondary to their primary identity, their sense of belonging to the Jewish people.

### **Jewish Peoplehood**

Nationality based upon ethnic origin has long been a defining feature of East European life. The internal passport required of Soviet citizens specifically classified them according to their national groups. Its notorious “fifth paragraph” (*piatyipunkt*) listed even those who had long since abandoned Jewish practices as Jewish by nationality, a fact that helps explain why, in defiance of expectations, Jews did not disappear. To this day, non-Slavic family names, distinctive patronymics, physiognomy, and mannerisms continue to mark Jews off as distinctive in the FSU. Just as Ukrainians, Belarusians, and Chechens are distinctive peoples, so too, in the eyes of East Europeans, are the Jews.<sup>lxv</sup>

The Soviet Jewry movement that began in the 1960s (see above) underscored, for Russian-speaking Jews, the practical significance of their Jewish “nationality.” Fellow Jews around the world demonstrated on their behalf, demanding in a slogan that simultaneously evoked the Bible, the American civil rights movement, and a strong sense of Jewish inter-dependence, “Let My People Go!” The practice of “twinning” young American Jews about to celebrate their bar or bat mitzvah with Russian-Jewish counterparts barred from celebrating their faith likewise highlighted “the ties that bind.” From an Israeli point of view, of course, Russian-speaking Jews formed part of the persecuted Jews of the diaspora whom the Jewish state sought to redeem. Being part of the Jewish “nation,” in short, helped to save Russia’s Jews. Their identification with the Jewish people – long something of a liability in Eastern Europe – ultimately enabled them to settle in the West.

Against this background it comes as no surprise that Russian-speaking Jews have been among the foremost proponents of a Jewish identity focused upon peoplehood – the closest term to “nationality” that America legitimates. A qualitative study of young Russian-speaking Jews quotes one who defines Jewish identity as “primarily ethnic and cultural. A level of history that I completely accept and adopt.” Another proudly associates with “the Jews and the heritage and background, and what Jewish people have gone through.” A different study quotes Jews who define their identity biologically. “The type of blood in my veins is my Jewishness.” “There is stuff in my blood that definitely says that I am Jewish.” In both of these studies, the overwhelming number of young Russian-speaking Jews interviewed express a strong “ethnic” Jewishness, “a sense of pride and belonging to a people with a rich history and culture.” The interviewees confess their befuddlement at the inability of American Jews to accept that Judaism can be based primarily on “nationality” and “blood.” “In America,” one of the interviewees admits, “it is hard to explain to others who I am, since Jewish is to them mostly a religion.”<sup>lxvi</sup>

Anti-Semitism and memories of the Holocaust reinforce the secular Jewishness of Russian-speaking Jews. “I remember very well,” one explained, “why my grandfather was sent to Kazakhstan and why my brother was always being humiliated.” Another cannot forget he is Jewish because “I hear negative remarks about Jews.” A third defined an “important part” of his Jewish identity as “to spite and fight anti-Semites and anti-Semitism.” A fourth recalled that “half of the family was killed during World War II.” A fifth understood that “even if you are not Jewish by faith, to the rest of the world you are still Jewish. Being quarter Jewish could get you killed during World War II.”<sup>lxvii</sup> For these Russian speakers, in short, being Jewish is tethered to the collective memory of persecution. They are Jews, because so many non-Jews have hated Jews throughout the ages.

Israel also plays a significant role in the Jewishness of Russian-speaking Jews. Its creation provided them with the long-sought homeland that so many other Russian nationalities possessed. Israel’s victory in the Six Day War “instilled in thousands a new and unfamiliar sense of pride...[that] their own people, derided and ridiculed as they often were in Soviet society, had triumphed.”<sup>lxviii</sup> Behind the scenes, Israel also played a central role in the worldwide movement to save Soviet Jews. Over a million Russian-speaking Jews eventually settled in Israel, so the majority of Russian speakers in America have relatives there. As we have seen, a significant but unknown number of Russian-speaking Jews also lived for a time in Israel before re-migrating to the United States. For a host of reasons, then, Israel is centrally important to Russian-speaking Jews; for some of them, indeed, support for Israel is central to their whole belief system. One defined the Jewishness of his fellow Russian speakers in terms of the “overriding support for Israel among us.” Another explained, “my identification as a Jew consists primarily in the necessity to be informed of events that are happening in Israel.” A third stated flatly that “I . . . care about Israel and that makes me Jewish.”<sup>lxix</sup>

In their unwavering support for Israel, their focus on anti-Semitism and the Holocaust, and above all their tribal pride in being part of the Jewish people (or “nation”), Russian-speaking Jews echo central themes of Jewish life in the United States a generation ago. Their explanations of what it means to be a Jew recall the first four tenets of what the American Jewish educator and communal leader, Jonathan Woocher, in 1986, described as “civil Judaism”:

- The unity of the Jewish people
- Mutual responsibility
- Jewish survival in a threatening world
- The centrality of the State of Israel

As Woocher portrayed it, civil Judaism legitimated “a way of being Jewish and a program of Jewish activity within which the role of the synagogue and the rabbinate – the life of study, prayer, and ritual observance – [were] no longer primary.” If its practitioners belonged to a synagogue at all, they were members in name only; they viewed its central activities as largely “devoid of genuine spiritual significance.”<sup>lxx</sup> Many a contemporary Russian-speaking Jew, one suspects, would nod understandingly at that portrait. “Civil Judaism” is their Judaism as well.

Because rabbis and Jewish communal leaders have failed to spot the parallels between “civil Judaism” as practiced by many an American Jew a generation ago and the Judaism of many a Russian speaker today, concern over the religious identity of Russian-speaking Jews is exaggerated. The fact that previous generations of American Jews have displayed parallel behaviors, that earlier immigrants and their children abandoned Judaism and its rituals and then watched in amazement as their children and grandchildren re-embraced it, should serve as a reminder that religion in America is more cyclical than linear. Religious behaviors that one generation seeks to forget, the next generation often seeks to remember. In all

likelihood, the grandchildren of today's Russian-speaking Jews will not speak Russian, but will resemble other American Jews in their attitude toward religion.

Meanwhile, the fact that Russian-speaking Jews continue strongly to uphold the central tenets of Jewish peoplehood – expressing strong feelings of attachment toward fellow Jews and the State of Israel – opens up an opportunity at a time when so many young native-born American Jews appear to be spurning these values. A study of young Jewish adults in the United States by Steven M. Cohen, for example, found that only 29% of respondents ages 25-34 stated that they have a “sense of belonging to the Jewish people” and only 25% “feel that they have a special relationship with and responsibility for other Jews.” By contrast, a parallel study of young Russian-speaking Jews in New York found that 81% agreed (at least somewhat) that they have a “strong sense of belonging to the Jewish people” and 65% feel that they “have a special responsibility to take care of Jews in need around the world.” Russian-speaking Jews, in other words, endorsed these values at a rate more than two-and-one-half-times that of their non-Russian speaking Jewish peers.<sup>lxxi</sup>

What this suggests, from a policy perspective, is that Russian-speaking Jews now coming of age and gaining self-confidence might be encouraged to take the lead in preaching the traditional values of Jewish peoplehood – *klal yisrael* and *ahavat yisrael* – to their native-born Jewish cousins. The foremost proponents of the “Jewish peoplehood agenda” in Jewish life today, after all, are already Russian-speaking Jews, Natan Sharansky and Misha Galperin. Other Russian-speaking Jews might likewise be galvanized to speak out on behalf of these values. Better than anybody else, they can testify from personal experience how those who possessed a strong tribal sense of belonging to the Jewish people and took responsibility for Jews in need around the world, saved and transformed millions of lives.

## Politics

Just as Russian-speaking Jews in the United States diverge from their native-born cousins in their commitment to Jewish peoplehood, so too do they diverge in their political allegiances. As a group, Russian-speaking Jews are more politically conservative and more likely to vote Republican than the majority of American Jews.

Having grown up under communism, many Russian speakers champion free enterprise. They tend to recoil from big government, business-stifling programs that remind them of the Soviet Union. They resonate toward those who oppose state-sponsored programs and government intervention in the economy. Ronald Reagan, the Republican free enterprise champion who was president when many Russian-speaking Jews arrived in the United States and whom they credit with helping to bring down the Soviet Union, remains a hero to many Russian speakers. Just as Al Smith and Franklin D. Roosevelt won legions of East European Jews of an earlier day over to the Democratic Party, so Ronald Reagan won many Russian-speaking Jews of his day over to the Republicans.<sup>lxxii</sup>

By far the most important issue for Russian-speaking Jews, however, is Israel. The vast majority of them have family members living in Israel, and they pay close attention to what American politicians say about Israel and what Israelis say about individual American politicians. When they perceive that a candidate is anti-Israel, they react strongly. In 2008, a majority (roughly 55%) of Russian-speaking Jews voted for Republican presidential candidate John McCain over Barack Obama, largely because of concerns over Mr. Obama's views on Israel. Russian-speaking Jews were more than twice as likely as Jews generally to vote for McCain, who received less than a quarter of the overall Jewish vote.<sup>lxxiii</sup> In 2012, Russian-speaking Jews put on an impressive display of voting power in a hotly contested Democratic Congressional primary election in New York City. They turned out in record numbers to ensure that Black activist Charles Barron, who had supported Libya's Muammar Gaddafi as a “freedom fighter” and once described the Gaza Strip as a “virtual

death camp, the same kind of conditions the Nazis imposed on the Jews,” would be resoundingly defeated.<sup>lxxiv</sup>

To be sure, the voting record of Russian-speaking Jews is anything but monolithic. In 1996, according to an American Jewish Committee survey, they overwhelmingly supported Democrat Bill Clinton over his Republican challenger, Bob Dole. In 2000, along with a large majority of Jews, they supported the Democrat Al Gore whose running mate was Connecticut’s Jewish senator Joseph Lieberman, over George W. Bush.<sup>lxxv</sup> And in 2004, a survey of young twenty to forty-year-old Russian-speaking Jews gave the Democratic candidate, John Kerry, a more than two-to-one margin of support over George W. Bush prior to the election, even though the large Russian-speaking Jewish community of New York voted for Bush by a three to one margin when the election was held.<sup>lxxvi</sup> Neither party, in short, can take the Russian Jewish vote for granted.

Russian media in the United States nevertheless tends to support conservative politics. Russian speakers who listen solely to Russian-language radio, as a result, are more likely to support Republican politicians. The online English-language *Jewish Russian Telegraph* likewise advocates Republican policies. It even opposed the well-known and widely respected Jewish leader, Steven Grossman, when he ran for state treasurer of Massachusetts in 2010, warning its readers that Grossman was a friend of Bill Clinton who, it alleged, “besmeared [sic] Russian Jews.” The longer they remain in America, however, the more likely Russian-speaking Jews and especially their children are to switch over to English-language media. Like the Yiddish press of an earlier era, the Russian media is destined to watch its political influence erode with time.<sup>lxxvii</sup>

In the meanwhile, Russian-speaking Jews and Orthodox Jews form key elements in the Republican Party’s strategy for luring Jews away from the Democratic Party. Combined, these groups comprise more than 20% of the American Jewish electorate. Both groups are staunchly pro-Israel and both tend to be more socially conservative than the mainstream Jewish community. An exit poll in 2004, for example, found that 77% of Russian-speaking Jews favored the death penalty for those convicted of murder and 81% favored an amendment to the United States Constitution banning same-sex marriage (a far smaller number of Russian-speaking Jews favor limits on abortion).<sup>lxxviii</sup> Some Russian-speaking Jews also advocate strict fiscal conservatism (“Constitutionally limited government, fiscal sanity and free markets”), in accordance with the platform of the grassroots Tea Party movement in American politics.<sup>lxxix</sup> The Republican Party hopes that these socially and fiscally conservative Russian speakers coupled with the religiously conservative (and growing) Orthodox community will chip away at the longstanding Democratic Party loyalties of American Jews.

### **Policy Implications**

From a Jewish communal perspective, whether Russian-speaking Jews vote Republican or Democratic is far less important than whether they continue to identify as Jews. Long-term, there is much reason for concern, for peoplehood ties, important as they are, have not historically been powerful enough to prevent intermarriage in America. Indeed, intermarriages among peoples of different background have long been commonplace in the United States. American culture champions the individualistic ideal of robust choice in marriage and privileges the goal of romantic love. Ironically, the very qualities that have made American society so desirable to foreign immigrants – its tolerance, its liberal tradition, and its emphasis on individual right and privileges – are the same qualities that encourage the descendants of immigrants to marry across ethnic and religious lines.<sup>lxxx</sup>

Intermarriage poses challenges to all American Jews, of course, not just Russian speakers. But it is most prevalent among those whose religious commitments are weakest. Whereas those committed to a religious lifestyle tend to seek mates who share that lifestyle, those who are secular hardly care. Unless Russian-



speaking Jews in the United States develop a strong Jewish identity and a conscious commitment to produce Jewish children, their descendants are thus likely to assimilate into the mainstream.

Precisely this concern has spurred the Genesis Philanthropy Group (GPG), funded by Russian Jews, to focus on developing and enhancing “a sense of Jewish identity among Russian-speaking Jews worldwide.” GPG leader Mikhail Fridman has expressed the fear that “with assimilation on the rise and the Russian-speaking community particularly vulnerable, more needs to be done to prevent its heritage and talent from disappearing.”<sup>lxxxix</sup> In response to that fear, GPG funds projects that focus upon Jewish culture, values, history and heritage. Jewish pride, it believes, will go a long way to keep Russian-speaking Jews within the Jewish fold.

Our own suggestion, to repeat, is that Russian-speaking Jews now coming of age and gaining self-confidence be encouraged to take the lead in preaching the traditional values of Jewish peoplehood – *klal yisrael* and *ahavat yisrael* – to their native-born Jewish cousins. Drawing upon their own experiences, they could be trained to persuasively argue for these values, which should include the values of marrying Jews and producing Jewish children. Outside of the Orthodox world, the value of endogamy is rarely spoken about today in American Jewish circles, for fear of causing offense. Russian-speaking Jews, who intuitively understand Jewish peoplehood and its potential, are ideally positioned to break through this wall of silence, to advocate both for Jewish peoplehood and for Jewish continuity. As a secondary benefit, such advocacy would also strengthen ties between Russian-speaking Jews and the rest of the American Jewish community, a highly desirable goal.

## Conclusion

In 2001, Russian-speaking Jews in New York established COJECO (Council of Jewish Émigré Community Organizations) as an umbrella organization for grass-roots community organizations that aim to advance the Russian-speaking Jewish community. Some thirty different organizations belong to COJECO, including political, religious, cultural, philanthropic, and self-help organizations as well as several Bukharian ones. “The quantity and quality of Russian-speaking Jewish immigrants in New York ha[s] hit a critical mass,” COJECO preaches. “We [are] well-educated, successful professionals, and we [have] become a real political and economic power in the United States. But to realize successfully our great potential as a community we ...[have] to be united and well-organized.”<sup>lxxxii</sup> After more than a decade of successful programming, including a celebrated fellowship program for Russian-speaking Jews and an initiative to promote dialogue between Russian speakers and the rest of the New York Jewish community, COJECO, in September 2012, became a funded agency of New York’s UJA-Jewish Federation, its first new agency in over seventeen years. “COJECO’s inclusion represents another milestone on Russian Jews’ journey toward integration with the larger community,” the group’s executive director, Roman Shmulenson, exulted. He proceeded to warn, however, that “challenges remain.”<sup>lxxxiii</sup>

COJECO’s acceptance as an official federation agency serves as yet another indication that the Russian-speaking Jewish community of the United States has come of age. More and more Russian-speaking Jews members are bilingual and demanding recognition. “No longer a community of mostly engineers and doctors, no longer segregated in South Brooklyn and Central Queens, no longer immigrants but acculturated, hyphenated Americans, the Russian Jews are a distinct and increasingly powerful community, ”a cover story in the *New York Jewish Week* concluded. “Today’s young Russian Jews are hipper, wealthier and more actively Jewish than their parents. They are creating their own institutions and making their presence felt in the wider Jewish community.”<sup>lxxxiv</sup>

Most Russian-speaking Jews anticipate that, over the long-term, their distinctive sub-ethnic identity will nevertheless erode – much as it did for Yiddish-speaking Jews and for so many other foreign-language

immigrants to America as well. The pattern is a familiar one: the children of Russian-speaking Jews won't read Russian and their grandchildren won't understand it. Those grandchildren, born and raised in the United States, will be "fully American." Keeping them Jewish – married to Jews and raising Jewish children – will prove to be a challenge.

In the near term, though, Russian-speaking Jews are strengthening American Jewish life. They are contributing to an unexpected surge in the American Jewish population, succeeding economically, reinvigorating American Jewish literature, renewing the values of Jewish peoplehood, revitalizing cultural forms of Jewish identity, promoting strong ties to Israel, and engaging politicians of both political parties. In the decades to come, more and more Russian-speaking Jews will rise to positions of leadership within the American Jewish community. They will help to determine American Jewry's priorities as well as its future.

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## ***TOWARD A COMPREHENSIVE POLICY PLANNING***

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The Russian-speaking Jewish community in the United States is changing the face of the larger American Jewish community. American Jewry's contemporary character and future destiny are closely intertwined with the demography, complexion, politics, and religious life of the country's 750,000 Russian-speaking Jews (RSJ), who comprise some 15% of all American Jews (AJ). As American Jewry considers how to deal with the special challenges associated with this community, as well as the opportunities these new comers have to offer, two stand out, one is more preventive in nature, the other more proactively forward-looking:

1. Having to deal with the consequences of disintegration of the close-knit immigrant society of the newly arrived.
2. Utilizing the Russian-speaking Jews' special strengths to benefit the wider American Jewish community.

In this action-oriented part of the paper, which is an invitation for further discussion and is an attempt to draw public attention to this timely concern, we will deal with these two challenges separately, even though in reality their interconnectedness and mutual impact are obvious.

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### **Disintegration: Prevention or Accommodation?**

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Russian-speaking Jews display an intense desire to become part of the American mainstream, to adopt what sociologists call a "host-country orientation." Few desire to return to the former Soviet Union. While those who emigrated late in life are less satisfied, many of them, particularly grandmothers, assumed responsibility for child care and maintenance of the house, which made it possible for their children, who migrated in their prime, to study hard, acquire English, and succeed in their chosen careers. About half of all Russian-speaking Jews live in Russian-speaking Jewish communities, apart from their English-speaking Jewish cousins. About a quarter though, already live far from other Russian-speaking Jews. Like so many immigrants before them, Russian-speaking Jews may be expected, over time, to abandon their language-based neighborhoods. As they do, many of the factors preserving the Jewishness of this Russian-speaking community will be put to the test.

Specifically, as the leaders of the Jewish community at large look at the inevitable disintegration of the "Jewish Russian enclave," they have to ponder two questions:

- A. Where will Russian-speaking Jews move?
- B. What will Russian-speaking Jews do to preserve their Jewishness in their new locations?

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### **Moving House – The Policy Question**

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Can the Jewish community at large influence how Russian-speaking Jews relocate? Can they be attracted into existing more heavily Jewish communities? Is it advisable to attempt to make such areas appealing to them?

The main reason people change their place of residence is known to be economic, but the choice to relocate is always complex and involves many considerations, such as:

- Wanting an "upgrade" (or needing a "downgrade" if economic times are tough).
- Wanting better educational opportunities for their children.

- Wanting to be part of "communities" of like-minded people.

It is often the case that Jews find it much easier to retain a sense of Judaism and connection to the community when they live in areas in which other Jews also reside, and where Jewish services – synagogues, community or cultural centers, Jewish food markets, etc. – are available. In that regard, the American Jewish community would be wise to devise policies to encourage Russian-speaking Jews to move to Jewish areas as they leave their initial, heavily Russian enclaves. There are several ways the community could make it easier for Russian-speaking Jews to "choose Jewish" when deciding on their next place of residence:

1. As the cost of housing is very high, and upward mobility is one of the main drivers of those moving to new neighborhoods, policy related to attracting RSJ to the above-mentioned areas can include **financial incentives** such as: providing subsidies for Jewish pre-schools, day schools, and other Jewish activities for RSJ moving into the area; offering grants to make the hiring of RSJ by employers in Jewish areas more attractive, and initiating campaigns encouraging Jews to make such hiring a priority should also be considered.
2. In the area of education, financial incentives might not be sufficient. RSJ exhort their children to study hard and succeed. They focus on long-term outcomes rather than immediate rewards. RSJ might need specific **educational incentives**, by which we mean the creation of opportunities for them to educate their youth in ways different from those generally practiced by other Jewish groups in America – in essence, by giving them an education with a "Russian" flavor.
3. Russian-speaking Jews, like many East Europeans, define themselves primarily on the basis of their ethnic group or nationality. Their interest in religion is low. Thus, developing **communal incentives** based on elements of "Jewish peoplehood" rather than on the Jewish religion would be the better-advised course to pursue.
4. Moving to a new area is culturally confusing, and hence **cultural incentives** should also be considered. These include: activities conducted in Russian, activities related to the interests of RSJ, activities in groups of RSJ. It is important to note though, that many of those deciding to move to new areas might not want to be self-tagged as RSJ and would reject attempts to keep them within the "special needs" group of RSJ.
5. Integrating newly arrived RSJ into target areas might be easier if those moving in feel they have a voice in communal decision-making. Hence, **institutional incentives** should be devised as a way of signaling newcomers that a) They are welcomed by the local community; and b) The "host" community is willing to institute adaptive changes to address their needs.

#### Preserving Jewishness – Policy Questions

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The term "Russian-speaking Jews" is a new locution. It provides a language-based group identity for individuals who had almost nothing else in common prior to their emigration and embraces children who remain culturally Russian even if they were born or raised in the United States. It also highlights what Russian-speaking Jews see as the essence of what sets them apart from other American Jews: their distinctive cultural heritage. As the current geographically based community disintegrates, preserving a sense of Jewishness could be a challenge. Some aspects of it can be overcome by attracting RSJ to Jewish neighborhoods as described above. But a more comprehensive Russian Jewish "agenda" should be developed, as geography, language and other distinguishing characteristics expected to diminish with time may no longer be sufficient to provide and reinforce a Jewish "identity."

There are (at least) three possible outcomes of the disintegration of the RSJ communities of recent immigrants:

1. Loss of Jewish identity and rapid assimilation.
2. Adoption of American-Jewish identity (with all the benefits and shortcomings associated with it).

3. Formation of a distinctive RSJ identity that is strong enough to hold for more than the first and second generations following immigration.

Naturally, outcome number 1 is the outcome the Jewish community would like to avoid. Outcomes 2 and 3 have both advantages and disadvantages that should be considered. Choosing which outcome is desirable is the first stage in making policy decisions and in deciding what actions should be taken on the identity front:

**ADOPTION:**

Advantages: Such an outcome would be in line with the goal of maintaining a cohesive and unified Jewish collective. It would make RSJ integration into the wider community smoother and enable them to enlarge it numerically and contribute to it in many ways. It would not burden the community with having to deal with the “special needs” of a separate group;

Disadvantages: It would eliminate the opportunity associated with injecting “new ideas” and new expressions of Jewishness into the Jewish arena. It could also weaken some of the strengths that RSJ possess in comparison to other American Jews.

**FORMATION:**

Advantages: It would make the community at large more varied and hence more accommodating to all sorts of people. It could also spark new thinking in other parts of the Jewish world and contribute to its renewal.

Disadvantages: It would keep the RSJ community separate and make it harder for it to contribute to the wider community. It would also make integration into existing structures and organizations more difficult since Russian-speaking Jews would retain a different Jewish “language.” It might engender “cultural skirmishes” over the “correct” Jewish way.

Utilization: Integration or Distinctiveness?

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Russian-speaking Jews are both better educated and more successful professionally than most refugees admitted into the United States. After 10-15 years in the United States, Russian speakers, on average, actually earn more than native-born Americans. The children of RSJ are, as a rule, even more successful than their parents. Integrating them into the community can make the community stronger and supplement it with a new generation of smart, ambitious, and successful members and activists. In some respects, Russian-speaking Jews have already demonstrated their ability to have real impact on American Jewish culture.

One example: As noted earlier, Russian-speaking Jews have made a dramatic impact on American Jewish fiction. Indeed, some of the foremost contemporary Jewish writers in the English language are Russian-born. Another example: Russian teaching methods, especially in mathematics, have begun to influence American education. According to one survey, more than half of all Russian-speaking Jews work in so-called STEM subjects (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics) where jobs are plentiful.

When considering ways in which Russian-speaking Jews can reinvigorate and better the American Jewish community as a whole, four fields of influence present themselves:

1. The addition of material resources – both in numbers and in finances.
2. The re-imagining of Jewishness by those who bring fresh thinking and different needs.
3. The emergence of a renewed sense of Jewish excellence inspired by these thriving newcomers.
4. The creation of an atmosphere of peoplehood and of strengthened ties with Israel.

Russian-speaking Jews are well equipped to contribute to all four of these fields of influence, but each of their strengths also carries a challenge:

- They are a significant part of the community numerically speaking and are rapidly becoming financially successful. However, their rate of intermarriage is high, and their birthrate is low – which pose challenges in maintaining their numbers. Furthermore, the practice of "giving back" to the community is still developing among Russian-speaking Jews and would have to be encouraged.
- Their Judaism is different – much less “religious” much more “national.” Many of them are atheists. Thus, they can be expected to play a significant role in making Judaism relevant to a growing sector of Jews with limited or no religious beliefs and/or practices. However, it is not yet clear if it is possible to preserve Jewish identity in a free society with neither a sense of religion nor the coercive power of a state.
- Russian-speaking Jews are proven generators of excellence. However, this will only benefit the wider Jewish community if such excellence does not cause Russian-speaking Jews to move away from the community and integrate totally (culturally) into general American society.
- Russian-speaking Jews have a stronger sense of peoplehood and in many cases stronger ties with Israel. However, this can become a point of friction with other American Jews – and the challenge of preserving the sense of peoplehood in the next generation could be a tricky one.

All these RSJ strengths and possible contributions to the American Jewish community can be utilized to the benefit of the community, but priority setting on several key issues should precede the devising of appropriate policies:

**INTEGRATION:** This is a key question from which many follow: Should we strive to integrate RSJ into the AJ community as rapidly and as fully as possible – that is, to have it disappear as a distinctive group? Or should our goal be to try and maintain some of their distinctive characteristics, assuming that these features, while keeping RSJ a little apart, contribute much to our ability to benefit from the advantages the group offers?

**INFLUENCE:** To what extent should the AJ community be willing to “adjust” to accommodate RSJ, and what are the areas in which AJ resistance to change would be understandable?

**RELIGION:** Is it a priority for the community to make RSJ more “religious” (or at least more traditional), believing that only religious tools have the power to preserve Jewishness for future generations? Or would it be better for the community to utilize RSJ influence to become more accommodating to non-religious Jewishness?

**MARRIAGE:** How should the community encourage in-marriage among RSJ? This challenge is not unique to RSJ, but might be different for a group for which religious argumentation means little but “national” convictions are stronger. And another question: In devising policies to encourage in-marriage, is it more advisable to focus on in-marriage between RSJ or on bringing RSJ and AJ together?

**WAYS AND MEANS:** Simply stated: How soon can the RSJ be expected to “carry their own weight” – financially speaking – within the larger AJ community? Can and should the AJ community subsidize Russian-speaking Jews in the hope that beneficial returns will eventually emerge from such investment?

**PEOPLEHOOD:** Should encouraging RSJ ties to AJ be the focus of policy, or should making Russian-speaking Jews even more connected to Israel and the wider Jewish world be the better course? In some cases, these two goals might conflict with one another.



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## PRELIMINARY CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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The policy questions raised above should be a topic of further discussion by AJ, by RSJ and by local communities as they strive to meet their own goals with their own needs. However, in light of the discussion above and of the extensive background paper on Russian-speaking Jews by Prof. Sarna, some preliminary conclusions seem more plausible than others. These fall into four main categories:

**1. RSJ2RSJ:** Bringing together similarly minded RSJ from the three continents – North America, Israel and Europe (mostly Germany and FSU countries) – to discuss the commonalities and common interests of these three communities. These groups can reinforce upon one another in areas such as: STEM, literature, language, music, theater, excellence, and professional achievement as well as identity and ethnicity.

**2. RSJ2J:** Connecting RSJ to their Jewishness with *Eshkolot* type projects that speak the language of identity and Jewish culture in ways accessible to Russian-speaking Jews.

**3. RSJ2AJ:** It is essential to make room and to find venues for RSJ-AJ encounters. In such encounters, the goal would be two-fold: to make the leaders of the two groups more knowledgeable about one another and to begin a discussion of ways in which the two groups can cooperate (as well as to agree where the groups disagree and will not cooperate). It is also important, as the encountering stage progresses, to develop a narrative that will accommodate the need for RSJ to find their own version of Jewishness – a version that could either be temporary, until full integration is achieved, or a permanent feature of American Jewish life.

**4. RSJ2ISRAEL:** Without doubt, the special meaning of and the special relationship between RSJ and Israel should be cultivated both by Israel and by American Jews. Russian-speaking Jews can be advocates for Israel among American Jews and they can be advocates for American Jews in Israel. And since they bring an identity based on peoplehood and one that is unapologetic about Israel's place in today's Jewishness, they could, hopefully, also help reinvigorate relations between the world's two largest Jewish communities.

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### SPECIFIC ACTION ITEMS

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#### AMERICAN JEWISH ACTION:

- Study RJS demographics and movement within the US, alert the communities that need to develop mechanisms and policies to absorb RSJ newcomers, assist these communities in attracting RSJ into their geographic area and into participating in activities.
- Secure funding for programs that will make it beneficial for Russian-speaking Jews to move into heavily Jewish areas, including the consideration of subsidies and grants.
- Study RSJ with an eye to the following specifics: marriage habits and preferences; possible areas of interest in Jewishness; religious trends; the adaptation of North American or Israeli Jewish practices; areas of contention with the local Jewish community.
- Develop special programs to encourage in-marriage among Russian-speaking Jews.
- Examine the feasibility of exchanges between AJ schools and those of RSJ – the idea being that American Jews can help bolster Judaic studies for Russian-speaking Jews while benefiting in return from RSJ excellence in math and science.
- Establish dialogue with the RSJ leadership on both national and local levels.

#### RSJ LEADERSHIP ACTION:

- Prepare for the transition of RSJ from geographic enclaves to other places by encouraging and directing RSJ toward established Jewish areas.

- Establish mechanisms for discussing matters of common interest with Russian-speaking Jews in Israel, the United States, Germany, and perhaps in Russia as well.

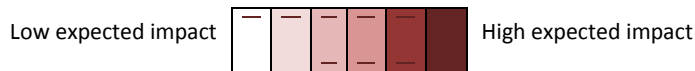
**ISRAELI ACTION:**

- Establish a separate and unique dialogue with RSJ leaders. Appoint a person to lead this dialogue and set an agenda for it in coordination with AJ leadership.
- Facilitate programs designed to build on Russian-speaking Jews’ sense of peoplehood to bolster their ties with Israel, including targeted travel programs and the posting of appropriate *shlichim* to areas where many Russian-speaking Jews reside.

The following table describes the inherent links and interactions between the fields and shows specific modes of intervention, which may have an integrated impact.

**CONTRIBUTION OF VARIOUS STRATEGIES TO THE JEWISH CONTINUITY OF RSJ**

	<b>RSJ2RSJ</b> Russian-speaking Jews to Russian-speaking Jews	<b>RSJ2I</b> <b>Israel</b> Russian-speaking Jews to Israel	<b>RSJ2AJ</b> <b>US Jewry</b> Russian-speaking Jews to American Jewry	<b>RSJ2J</b> <b>Jewishness</b> Russian-speaking Jews to Jewishness
<b>RSJ Leadership Program</b>	Dark Red	Dark Red	Dark Red	Dark Red
<b>Transcontinental Encounters</b>	Dark Red	Medium Red	Light Red	Light Red
<b>RSJ Local Social Networks</b>	Dark Red	Light Red	Medium Red	Light Red
<b>RSJ Israel Advocacy Action</b>	Light Red	Dark Red	Light Red	Light Red
<b>"Geographical" Engineering</b>	Light Red	Light Red	Dark Red	Medium Red
<b>Hi-Quality Cultural Judaism</b>	Dark Red	Light Red	Dark Red	Dark Red
<b>RSJ Entrepreneurship Fund</b>	Light Red	Light Red	Light Red	Light Red



## Endnotes

<sup>i</sup> *Jewish Week* (July 6, 2012), p. 6.

<sup>ii</sup> Jonathan D. Sarna, *American Judaism: A History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 9, 33, 44, 129; Simon Kuznets, "Immigration of Russian Jews to the United States: Background and Structure," *Perspectives in American History* 9 (1975), 42; GurAlroey, *Bread to Eat and Clothes to Wear: Letters from Jewish Migrants in the Early Twentieth Century* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2011), 8; Hasia R. Diner, "Before the Promised City: Eastern European Jews in America Before 1880," in *An Inventory of Promises: Essays on American Jewish History in Honor of Moses Rischin*, edited by Jeffrey S. Gurock and Marc Lee Raphael (Brooklyn: Carlson, 1995), 43-62; Judah D. Eisenstein, "The History of the First Russian-American Jewish Congregation," *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society* (1901), 63-72.

<sup>iii</sup> Sarna, *American Judaism*, 151-175; Kuznets, "Immigration of Russian Jews," 35-124; Irving Howe, *World of Our Fathers* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Jovanovich, 1976); Eli Lederhendler, *Jewish Immigrants and American Capitalism, 1880-1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Alroey, *Bread to Eat and Clothes to Wear*, 1-87, 211-212.

<sup>iv</sup> *2010 Yearbook of Immigration Statistics* (Washington DC: Department of Homeland Security, 2011), table 2 (online at <http://www.dhs.gov/files/statistics/publications/yearbook.shtm> (accessed 15 August 2011)).

<sup>v</sup> Jonathan D. Sarna, *The American Jewish Experience* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., New York: Holmes & Meier, 1997), 360 ("A Century of Jewish Immigration to the United States").

<sup>vi</sup> Different exit figures are presented in Dan Jacobs and Ellen Frankel Paul, *Studies of the Third Wave: Recent Migration of Soviet Jews to the United States* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1981), 6-7; Pauline Peretz, *Le Combat pour les Juifs soviétiques* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2006), 362; and Yehuda Dominitz, "Israel's Immigration Policy and the Dropout Phenomenon," *Russian Jews on Three Continents*, eds. Noah Lewin-Epstein, YaacovRo'i and Paul Ritterband (London: Fran Cass, 1997), 119. For example, Jacobs who relies on Russian sources, claims that 13,022 departed in 1971; Peretz, based on US sources, says 14,300; and Dominitz, depending upon Israel's Jewish Agency figures, says 12,897. While the precise numbers differ, the trend lines are identical.

<sup>vii</sup> Different figures for Soviet Jewish immigration to the United States are provided by the Dept of Justice, the State Department and the *Statistical Yearbook of the Immigration and Naturalization Service*; for a helpful chart, see Barry Chiswick, "Soviet Jews in the United States: Language and Labour Market Adjustments Revisited," *Russian Jews on Three Continents*, eds. Noah Lewin-Epstein, YaacovRo'i and Paul Ritterband (London: Fran Cass, 1997), 234-235. The "dropout" figure produced by the Jewish Agency enumerating those who departed for Israel in the 1970s but changed course and never arrived there is somewhat larger (about 77,000), presumably because not all "dropouts" emigrated to the US; see Dominitz, "Israel's Immigration Policy and the Dropout Phenomenon," 119.

<sup>viii</sup> See the chart in David Pollock, "Demographic Analysis of RSJ Population in New York and Surrounding Areas," prepared for Genesis Philanthropy Group and graciously made available to me by Dr. Pollock. I have added to this HIAS figures based on data from 1970s and recent years.

<sup>ix</sup> One online survey of Russian-speaking Jews found that only 64.4% of the sample immigrated to the United States as political refugees; the bulk of the rest came in under other visas (student, work, visitor's, spouse, H-4, etc.), or they won a green card lottery. Dimitry Liakhovitski, *Survey of Russian Immigrants Living in the US (age 20 to 40) Conducted in May-June 2004*(2004), p.13, online at [http://www.elinagorelik.net/emigrantsurvey/Russian\\_Emigrant\\_Survey\\_2004\\_Results.pdf](http://www.elinagorelik.net/emigrantsurvey/Russian_Emigrant_Survey_2004_Results.pdf)

<sup>x</sup> 2011 Yearbook of Immigration Statistics, tables 2 (line27), table 3 (lines 28,33,109,116,118,138,167, 182, 186,196,204,208,213) online at <http://www.dhs.gov/files/statistics/publications/LPR11.shtm> (accessed July 18, 2012). Mark Tolts, "Demography of Contemporary Russian-Speaking Jewish Diaspora," *Paper Presented at the Conference on the Contemporary Russian Speaking Jewish Diaspora* (Harvard University, November 13-15, 2011), available online at <http://www.bjpa.org/Publications/details.cfm?PublicationID=13426>, offers much lower estimates of Russian-speaking Jews in US, but has not utilized these US government sources.

<sup>xi</sup> For this estimate, see Pollock, "Demographic Analysis of RSJ Population," 3.

<sup>xii</sup> Hyon B. Shin and Robert A. Kominski, *Language Use in the United States: 2007*. American Community Survey Reports, ACS-12 (Washington DC: US Census Bureau, 2010), online at [www.census.gov/prod/2010pubs/acs-12.pdf](http://www.census.gov/prod/2010pubs/acs-12.pdf) (accessed August 23, 2011).

- <sup>xiii</sup> *Highlights from Jewish Community Study of New York: 2002 – Focus on Russian-Speaking Jewish Households* (New York: UJA-Federation, 2006), 2-3.
- <sup>xiv</sup> Pollock, *Demographic Analysis of RSJ Population*, 6.
- <sup>xv</sup> Sam Kliger, "Russian Jews in America: Status, Identity and Integration," (2004), available online at [http://www.kintera.org/atf/cf/%7B93cdf11d-9aeb-4518-8a00-25c7c531756b%7D/russian\\_jews\\_in\\_america.pdf](http://www.kintera.org/atf/cf/%7B93cdf11d-9aeb-4518-8a00-25c7c531756b%7D/russian_jews_in_america.pdf). (accessed 24 August 2011)
- <sup>xvi</sup> *Jewish Advocate*, June 17, 2011 online at <http://rjcf.com/index.html?xnewsaction=fullnews&newsarch=062011&newsid=3> (accessed 24 August 2011); Larissa Remennick, *Russian Jews on Three Continents* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 2006), 248; *The 2005 Boston Community Survey: Preliminary Findings* (Boston: 2006), 24; Benjamin Phillips to Gil Preuss (10 October 2006), my thanks to Prof. Leonard Saxe for clarifying the Boston situation.
- <sup>xvii</sup> *New American Jewish Population Study of Greater Philadelphia: Portrait of Russian Jewish Immigrants in Greater Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: Jewish Federation of Greater Philadelphia/Research Institute for New Americans, 2001-2002); *Jewish Population Study of Greater Philadelphia, 2009*, p.35 (online at [www.jewishphilly.org](http://www.jewishphilly.org); accessed 24 August 2011); "The New Russian Revolution?" *Jewish Exponent*, April 15, 2010.
- <sup>xviii</sup> Barry A. Kosmin, *The Class of 1979: The 'Acculturation' of Jewish Immigrants from the Soviet Union* (Occasional Papers No. 5, April 1990), online at [http://www.jewishdatabank.org/Reports/Acculturation\\_of\\_Jews\\_From\\_Soviet\\_1990\\_Kosmin.pdf](http://www.jewishdatabank.org/Reports/Acculturation_of_Jews_From_Soviet_1990_Kosmin.pdf).
- <sup>xix</sup> Previous emigrants to the United States were similarly "ethnicized" into new identities; see Jonathan D. Sarna, "From Immigrants to Ethnic: Toward a New Theory of 'Ethnicization,'" *Ethnicity*, 5 (1978), 370-78.
- <sup>xx</sup> Orleck, *Soviet-Jewish Americans*, 87.
- <sup>xxi</sup> Rachel Musleah, "Bukharian Jews: Preserving Identity," *Hadassah Magazine*, September 2008, online at [http://www.hadassah.org/news/content/per\\_hadassah/archive/2008/08\\_sep/feature\\_1.asp](http://www.hadassah.org/news/content/per_hadassah/archive/2008/08_sep/feature_1.asp) (accessed September 1, 2011).
- <sup>xxii</sup> Dimitri Liakhovitski, *Survey of Russian Immigrants living in the US (age 20 to 40) Conducted in May-June 2004*, [http://www.elinagorelik.net/emigrantsurvey/Russian\\_Emigrant\\_Survey\\_2004\\_Results.pdf](http://www.elinagorelik.net/emigrantsurvey/Russian_Emigrant_Survey_2004_Results.pdf) (accessed September 1, 2011), 17.
- <sup>xxiii</sup> *Jewish Community Study of New York: 2011*, p.227.
- <sup>xxiv</sup> Fran Markowitz, *A Community in Spite of Itself: Soviet Jewish Emigres in New York* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993), 257-58.
- <sup>xxv</sup> Tolts, "Demography of the Contemporary Russian-speaking Jewish Diaspora," 17, reports that about 10% of FSU immigrants to Israel (1990-2009) "left Israel without returning."
- <sup>xxvi</sup> Ewa Morawska, "Exploring Diversity in Immigrant Assimilation and Transnationalism: Poles and Russian Jews in Philadelphia," *International Migration Review* 38 (Winter 2004), 1386-1388.
- <sup>xxvii</sup> Misha Galperin, "Redeeming the Captive: Twenty-Five Years of Successful Resettlement and Acculturation of New Americans," *Journal of Jewish Communal Service* 72 (June 1996), 229.
- <sup>xxviii</sup> *Jewish Community Study of New York: 2001*, 233.
- <sup>xxix</sup> Markowitz, *A Community in Spite of Itself*, 213; Kishinevsky, Vera, *Russian Immigrants in the United States: Adapting to American Culture* (New York: LFB Scholarly Publishing, 2004).
- <sup>xxx</sup> Remennick, *Russian Jews on Three Continents*, 186-187.
- <sup>xxxi</sup> Moses Kligsberg, "Jewish Immigrants in Business: A Sociological Study," *American Jewish Historical Quarterly* 56 (March 1967), 288.
- <sup>xxxii</sup> Barry R. Chiswick, "Soviet Jews in the United States: Language and Labour Market Adjustments Revisited," *Russian Jews on Three Continents: Migration and Resettlement*, eds Noah Lewin-Epstein, Yaakov Roi and Paul Ritterband (London: Frank Cass, 1997), 242.
- <sup>xxxiii</sup> Zvi Gitelman, "The Quality of Life in Israel and the United States," *New Lives*, ed. Rita J. Simon (Lexington: Lexington Books, 1985), 59.
- <sup>xxxiv</sup> Inessa Rifkin, "Nerdy Russian Mom Saves Her Son from the Clutches of Cool," <http://fromrussiawithmath.com/2011/05/19/nerdy-russian-math-mom-saves-her-son-from-the-clutches-of-cool/> (accessed September 7, 2011), italics added.

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<sup>xxxv</sup> See the school's website, <http://www.russianschool.com/index.html> and Ms. Rifkin's blogs, <http://russianmathblog.com/> and <http://fromrussiawithmath.com/> (accessed September 7, 2011); quote is from her blog post, "No Child Gets Ahead," March 7, 2011, <http://fromrussiawithmath.com/2011/03/07/no-child-gets-ahead/> (accessed September 7, 2011).

<sup>xxxvi</sup> For the parallel in Israel, the Mofet network of complementary classes in math, physics and Russian language and literature, see Remennick, *Russian Jews on Three Continents*, 86-87.

<sup>xxxvii</sup> Liakhovitski, "Survey of Russian Immigrants living in the US (age 20 to 40), 23.

<sup>xxxviii</sup> Madeleine Tress, "Refugees as Immigrants: Revelations of Labor Market Performance," *Journal of Jewish Communal Service* 72 (June 1996), 263-281, esp. p.267.

<sup>xxxix</sup> Yinon Cohen, Yitchak Haberfeld & Irena Kogan, "Who Went Where? Jewish Immigration from the Former Soviet Union to Israel, the USA and Germany, 1990-2000," *Israel Affairs*, 17:1 (2011) 17.

<sup>xl</sup> Yinon Cohen and Yitchak Haberfeld, "Self-Selection and Earnings Assimilation: Immigrants from the Former Soviet Union in Israel and the United States," *Demography* 44 (Aug., 2007), pp. 649-668.

<sup>xli</sup> Cohen, Haberfeld and Kogan, "Who Went Where?," 17. The same situation affected Soviet Jewish immigrants to Canada: "The numbers of doctors, scientists, and engineers among the arrivals of the 1990s exceeded the capacity of the recession-stricken Canadian market. In addition, the professional skills of Soviet-trained specialists were frequently incompatible with local requirements. As a result, many Russian Jewish immigrants, especially older ones and women, had no choice but to make their living doing blue-collar or service work [Rina Cohen, "The New Immigrants: A Contemporary Profile," *From Immigration to Integration: The Canadian Jewish Experience* eds. Ruth Klein and Frank Dimant (2000), p.220 online at <http://www.bnaibrith.ca/institute/millennium/millennium00.html>.]

<sup>xlii</sup> Cohen and Haberfeld, "Self-Selection and Earnings Assimilation: Immigrants from the Former Soviet Union in Israel and the United States," 657-58; Immigrants from the FSU to Israel did not achieve similar results and continued to lag behind their native counterparts.

<sup>xliii</sup> Cohen and Haberfeld, "Self-Selection and Earnings Assimilation: Immigrants from the Former Soviet Union in Israel and the United States," 663. The authors conclude (664) that "Jewish immigrants from the FSU to the United States are of significantly higher educational level and experience faster rates of earnings assimilation in their new destination than their counterparts who immigrated to Israel."

<sup>xliv</sup> Andrew Furman, "The Russification of Jewish-American Fiction," *Zeek* (April 2008), [www.zeek.net/804furman/](http://www.zeek.net/804furman/).

<sup>xlv</sup> See MargaritTadevosyan and Maxim D. Shraye, "Russian American Literature," *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of Multiethnic American Literature* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2005), 4, 1940-1951, for a history that dates "the Russian presence in American letters" back to 1811; see also Maxim D. Shraye (ed.), *An Anthology of Jewish-Russian Literature* (Armonk: M.E.Sharpe, 2007), 2: 933-1184.

<sup>xlvi</sup> Furman, "Russification of Jewish-American Fiction," 1.

<sup>xlvii</sup> Emily Gould, "The Beet Generation," *Russia* (Summer 2008), <http://www.readrussia.com/magazine/summer-2008/00023/>.

<sup>xlviii</sup> *Ibid*, p.2.

<sup>xlix</sup> Gould, "The Beet Generation; Donald Weber, "Permutations of New-World Experiences Rejuvenate Jewish-American Literature," *Chronicle of Higher Education* (September 17, 2004); Furman, "The Russification of Jewish American Fiction"; Adam Rovner, "So Easily Assimilated: The New Immigrant Chic," *AJS Review* 30 (2006), 313-24, esp. 317; Adrian Wanner, "Russian Jews as American Writers: A New Paradigm for Jewish Multiculturalism?" *MELUS: Multi-Ethnic Literature of the US* 37 (Summer 2012), 157-176, esp. 172.

<sup>l</sup> Quoted in Wanner, "Russian Jews as American Writers," 158, 170.

<sup>li</sup> *Jewish Journal* (September 7, 2006), [http://www.jewishjournal.com/arts/article/q\\_a\\_with\\_russian\\_jewish\\_author\\_gary\\_shteyngart\\_20060908/](http://www.jewishjournal.com/arts/article/q_a_with_russian_jewish_author_gary_shteyngart_20060908/); "Rabbi Harvey interviews Gary Shteyngart," p.12 <http://jbooks.com/common/uploads/shteyngart/>

<sup>lii</sup> Mikhail Krutikov, "Constructing Jewish Identity in Contemporary Russian Fiction," *Jewish Life After the USSR*, eds. ZviGitelman et al (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), 271. Though Krutikov largely writes about Jewish writing in Russia, his analysis likewise holds true for the bulk of Jewish writing by Russian-speaking Jews in the United States as well.

- <sup>liii</sup> Samuel Kliger, "The Religion of New York Jews from the Former Soviet Union," *New York Glory: Religions in the City*, eds. Tony Carnes & Anna Karpathakis (New York: NYU Press, 2001), 151.
- <sup>liv</sup> Barry A. Kosmin, "The Class of 1979: The 'Acculturation' of Jewish Immigrants from the Soviet Union" *Occasional Papers no. 5* (CJP/CUNY, 1990), p.44 [available on the website of the National Jewish Data Bank].
- <sup>lv</sup> *Jewish Community Study of New York: 2011*, 236.
- <sup>lvi</sup> Betty N. Hoffman, *Jewish Hearts: A Study of Dynamic Ethnicity in the United States and the Soviet Union* (Albany: SUNY, 2001), 224.
- <sup>lvii</sup> *Ibid*, 213.
- <sup>lviii</sup> RaimondaKopelnitsky and Kelli Pryor, *No Words to Say Goodbye: A Young Jewish Woman's Journey from the Soviet Union into America – The Extraordinary Diaries of RaimondaKopelnitsky*(New York: Hyperion, 1994), 228-229.
- <sup>lix</sup> Gruber, "The Religion of New York Jews from the Former Soviet Union," 148-161, esp. 153; see also the chart of reported behaviors in Hoffman, *Jewish Hearts*, 216.
- <sup>lx</sup> Samuel Kliger as quoted in Remennick, *Russian Jews on Three Continents*, 196; *Jewish Community Study of New York: 2011*, p.239.
- <sup>lxi</sup> Gary Shteyngart, *Absurdistan*(New York: Random House, 2006), 251
- <sup>lxii</sup> Sarna, *American Judaism*, 223-227, 281-282.
- <sup>lxiii</sup> *Jewish Community Study of New York: 2011*, p.236.
- <sup>lxiv</sup> See, for example, <http://www.jewsforjesus.org/branches/brooklyn>; <http://www.rclc.us/>
- <sup>lxv</sup> Remennick, *Russian Jews on Three Continents*, 19-32.
- <sup>lxvi</sup> Aviva Zeltzer-Zubida and Philip Kasinitz, "The Next Generation: Russian Jewish Young Adults in Contemporary New York," *Contemporary Jewry* 25 (2005), 212; DimitryLiakhovitski, "Community Conversations with Young Russian-Speaking Jewish Professionals: Report on Findings," (Prepared for the United Jewish Appeal Federation of New York, July 2005, <http://www.elinagorelik.net/emigrantsurvey/> (accessed 7-30-2012), pp.7-8. For the modern, western ideas that transformed Judaism into a religion, see Leora Batnitzky, *How Judaism Became A Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).
- <sup>lxvii</sup> Liakhovitski, "Community Conversations with Young Russian-Speaking Jewish Professionals," 12-13.
- <sup>lxviii</sup> Gal Beckerman, *When They Come for Us We'll Be Gone: The Epic Struggle to Save Soviet Jewry* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2010), 103.
- <sup>lxix</sup> Liakhovitski, "Community Conversations with Young Russian-Speaking Jewish Professionals," 12-13.
- <sup>lxx</sup> Jonathan Woocher, *Sacred Survival: The Civil Religion of American Jews* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 67, 163, 165.
- <sup>lxxi</sup> Steven M. Cohen, "Religiosity and Ethnicity: Jewish Identity Trends in the United States," *Studies in Contemporary Jewry* 17 (2001), 106, 124; Zeltzer-Zubida and Kasinitz, "The Next Generation," 215-16. Since Cohen's figures are for those who "score high" while the figures in Zeltzer-Zubida and Kasinitz include both those who "agree completely" and "agree somewhat," the actual difference between the two groups may be narrower.
- <sup>lxxii</sup> Joseph Berger, "Among New York's Soviet Immigrants, Affinity for G.O.P.," *The New York Times* (May 8, 2012); Alexander Zaitchik, "What A Country," *Tablet*, April 4, 2011, <http://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-news-and-politics/63785/what-a-country> (Accessed August 2, 2012).
- <sup>lxxiii</sup> *Ibid*.
- <sup>lxxiv</sup> [www.thejewishweek.com/print/24567](http://www.thejewishweek.com/print/24567)
- <sup>lxxv</sup> "Election 2000: Russian Jews as Voters in New York City," <http://www.ajc.org/site/apps/nlnet/content3.aspx?c=ijIT12PHKoG&b=846741&ct=1042029> (accessed August 2, 2012).
- <sup>lxxvi</sup> Liakhovitski, "Survey of Russian Immigrants Living in the US (age 20 to 40)," 50; Sam Kliger, "Presidential Election 2004: Russian Voters," [http://www.ajcrussian.org/atf/cf/%7B66BD09D8-5251-4553-8C19-5FC7BEAF0E76%7D/russian\\_voters.pdf](http://www.ajcrussian.org/atf/cf/%7B66BD09D8-5251-4553-8C19-5FC7BEAF0E76%7D/russian_voters.pdf) (Accessed August 2, 2012).
- <sup>lxxvii</sup> Zaitchik, "What A Country"; <http://www.jrtelegraph.com/2010/10/russian-jews-should-vote-for-karyn-polito-for-state-treasurer.html> (accessed August 2, 2010).
- <sup>lxxviii</sup> Kliger, "Presidential Election 2004: Russian Voters," 7.



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<sup>lxxxix</sup> <http://www.jrtelegraph.com/2011/08/many-russians-in-the-newly-formed-jewish-tea-party-of-ny.html>.

<sup>lxxx</sup> Jonathan D. Sarna, "Intermarriage in America: The Jewish Experience in Historical Context," *Ambivalent Jew: Charles Liebman in Memoriam*, eds. Stuart Cohen and Bernard Susser (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 2007), 125-133.

<sup>lxxxix</sup> <http://www.gpg.org/mission-values>; Gary Rosenblatt, "The Man Behind the Jewish Nobel Prize," *The Jewish Week*, July 24, 2012, <http://www.thejewishweek.com/editorial-opinion/gary-rosenblatt/man-behind-jewish-nobel-prize> (accessed December 26, 2012).

<sup>lxxxii</sup> [Cojeco.org/member-organizations/](http://www.cojeco.org/member-organizations/) (accessed August 2, 2012).

<sup>lxxxiii</sup> *The Jewish Week*, September 25, 2012, <http://www.thejewishweek.com/news/short-takes/uja-f>.

<sup>lxxxiv</sup> Steve Lipman, "New Generation of Russians Now Making Its Mark," *The New York Jewish Week* (July 13, 2012), 1,12.