

JEWISH MOVEMENT IN THE SOVIET UNION: WHAT WAS ITS ESSENCE?

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Introduction:

For two decades, from the late 1960s to the end of the 1980s, the eyes of the Western world anxiously followed the struggle of Soviet Jewry. Thousands took to the streets in support of their cause. When all these people fought to free Soviet Jews, they might understand differently what this freedom was about.

As we know, the slogan "Let my people go" is an abridged quotation from the Bible. The full sentence reads: *"Let my people go, that they may serve me."*

(שלח את-עמי ויעבדוני , Exodus 8:1. Shemot 7:27)

This was what the Lord told Moses to say to Pharaoh. God did not set the people of Israel free so that they emigrate from Egypt to Babylon and worship Babylonian gods there. The Covenant was about the faith and the land. The Bible does not mention "free choice" of destination or denomination. In such case, God would not help.

Today, when the struggle has passed into "history", and when our personal involvement and emotions less influence our judgment, it is time to discuss, what Soviet Jews themselves wanted to achieve. What did they actually fight for?

In spite of the vast number of publications on the issue, there is no consensus, neither amongst historians or public figures, nor even amongst the participants on the ESSENCE of the battle fought by Soviet Jewry.

How shall we refer to the Movement? Was it a Zionist Movement as

many former activists in Israel still believe, a “Jewish National Movement” as the Israeli Concise Jewish Encyclopedia (in Russian) defines it, or a Struggle for free emigration as it was perceived by many in the West?

Was it an “Independent Jewish movement”, as it is named by a few participants who never emigrated? On the other hand, the existence of an "independent" Jewish movement implies that there was a "dependent" one. But such a one never existed. So this particular definition does not add much to our understanding of the Movement.

Was it a struggle to preserve Jewishness by legalizing Jewish communal and cultural life in Russia? Or, perhaps, it was a struggle for the right to cease to be a Jew, which may have been the hope of some who just wanted to flee from anti-Semitism and forget the 5th line in his or her internal passport.

Moreover, some contemporary Russian historians deny that the movement had a Jewish national content, claiming that “Jewish origins were merely an excuse to emigrate to the West”, because only a minority of those who left the USSR on Israeli visas actually went to Israel. Is that true? Didn’t they combine Jewish content and an Israeli dimension here?

What about approximately million *olim hadashim* from Russia in Israel? What about a deep attachment that many American Jews of Soviet origin feel toward Israel?

So what was this historical phenomenon we witnessed?

Emergence of the Movement

The national self-identification of the post WWII Soviet Jews was intensified in the wake of the Holocaust, Stalin's anti-Semitism and the establishment of the State of Israel. At the end of the War, Tina Brodetsky, a future Prisoner of Zion, was still a seven year old girl, but she already knew "that we Jews must have our own banner, our own sub-machine gun, our own land, our own state."

During the Khrushchev's "Thaw", even though there were no longer mass repressions against Jews, the state closed down synagogues, defamed the Jewish religion, Zionism and Israel. There were obviously no Jewish schools of any kind in the Soviet Union, the Hebrew language was taboo, Yiddish was barely tolerated, and any contact with Jews from overseas was severed with a heavy hand. Add to this the so-called "economic trials" at the beginning of the 1960s, where most of the convicts were Jews. Thanks to their pre-war achievements, Jews still retained relatively high positions on the social ladder, but discrimination in higher education and career advancement, ban on certain professions accelerated, affecting younger people in particular.

A situation was created whereby on the one hand, more than 2 million Soviet Jews were denied (de facto) equal civil rights, and on the other hand, were deprived of opportunities to live a Jewish life. Finally, they could not leave the USSR. To quote Jabotinsky's quip, the Jews of the USSR were "forced to drag their Jewishness behind them, as a Caledonian convict drags his leg irons."

Among external influences, we should specifically acknowledge the work of the Israeli secret government agency, Nativ (officially called "the Liaison Bureau") which was formed as early as 1952 with the aim of strengthening the ties between Israel and the Jews of Eastern Europe, and their ultimate preparation for *Aliyah*. Nativ operatives posing as diplomats worked at the Israeli Embassy in Moscow, and used every opportunity to contact Soviet Jews, and distribute Jewish ritual objects and printed materials on Zionism, Israel and Jewish culture.

However, Nativ's influence was limited. Many of the earliest activists developed Zionist ideas independently, and only later, if at all, did they establish contact with the Israeli emissaries. Again Tina Brodetzky:

"At that time, around school graduation, I felt "a great strength and a momentous calling", and decided to dedicate myself to my people. (...)

On my first visit to the synagogue in Archipova Street, I came up to the Israeli Ambassador, former General Yoseph Avidar. I was the only young girl in the entire synagogue. (...) I quoted the words of Trumpeldor which I had learned somewhere – “Tov lamut bead artzeinu” (It is good to die for our country). - “It is good to live for our country” - replied Yoseph, a bit stunned.”

We shall assume that the actual onset of the Movement (as a movement) was in the second half of the 1960s – at a time when contacts were established between different isolated groups and when the movement emerged from underground. Israel’s triumph over Arab armies in June 1967 awakened a sense of national pride in the hearts of many Soviet Jews. Shortly thereafter, in August 1968, a country-wide Steering Committee of the Movement was formed in Moscow with the aim of supporting Zionist activities of separate groups.

It was also in those early years that the first group petitions were submitted by the *refuseniks*. Petitions were sent to the Soviet authorities and international organizations by Georgian Jews (August 6, 1969), by Jews of Moscow, Leningrad and Riga.

The petitions spoke of their desire to go to Israel, and not of freedom to emigrate in general. Those Jews of Georgia wrote: “For we are asking but little – let us go to the land of our forefathers”.

A turning point in the history of the Movement was the much-publicized “Hijacking Case” (1970), in which a group of Jews from Riga and Leningrad decided to hijack a passenger plane and escape to Sweden, in order to reach Israel. The Hijacking Case was perhaps the best indicator of the activists’ resolve to risk their very lives for *aliyah*. This resolve was voiced by one of the accused, 25 year old Silva Zalmanson from Riga. In her “last word” she said:

" (...) Our dream to live in Israel does not compare with the fear of the pain that could be inflicted on us...”

“(...) This dream, sanctified by two millennia of hope, will never abandon me. Even now I repeat: 'If I forget Thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither’”.

It was entirely fitting that the participants of the Movement sentenced to imprisonment were called ‘Prisoners of Zion’."

To understand the nature of the Movement, it is vital to consider its Samizdat – clandestine publications. The manufacture and distribution of Samizdat required significant effort and posed a direct risk for all those involved. We can therefore be quite certain that the materials circulated and read by the participants of the Movement were truly close to their hearts and souls.

Samizdat during the first years of the Movement left no doubt as to its ideological bent: poems of Chaim-Nachman Bialik, articles by Vladimir Jabotinsky, ‘Exodus’ by Leon Uris, the article by Boris Kochubievsky from Kiev “Why I am a Zionist”. The first Jewish samizdat periodical *Iton* was also very Zionist by its content.

In reaction to the growing support of Soviet Jewry in the West, and in the hope that the Movement would lose momentum after the departure of the “troublemakers”, the Soviet government increased the number of permits to emigrate from one-to-three thousand to thirteen thousand in 1971, and almost thirty two thousand in 1972. All of them arrived to in Israel. This was the first major success of the Movement.

On the one hand, the authorities miscalculated – the Movement gained strength. On the other hand, it underwent a certain transformation: its Zionist colors somewhat blurred when it included thousands of new people with other goals. It blurred, but never faded.

Neshira phenomenon

The year 1973 is marked by the appearance of “*neshira*” (Hebrew for “drop out”) – a phenomenon whereby Jews leaving the USSR on Israeli visas chose the US or other Western countries as their final destination. Just as the Six-Day War boosted the confidence of Jews the world over in the future of the Jewish State, the Yom Kippur War increased fears for Israel, and fears to live in Israel.

This *neshira* phenomenon was also significantly influenced by the rampant anti-Israel propaganda in the Soviet mass media. It would be a mistake to think that Soviet Jews were immune to this propaganda. While it broadened the gap between them and the state, their subconscious was penetrated by the thought that in Israel, surrounded by a wall of hatred, they and their children would only suffer.

Other sources of fear and misgiving were the letters sent back from Israel by new immigrants who complained of the hardships of absorption, and – most significantly for the Jewish intelligentsia – of the low standard of school education. (As if American public schools are much better).

Moreover, till 1972, most of the movement's veterans left the country or were in prison. So, while emigration increased many-fold during the 1970s, the departure of veterans and shortened periods of waiting for emigration permits, separated most of those interested in emigrating from any influence by the leaders of the Movement, of Zionists.

The invasion of the Soviet troops in Czechoslovakia (1968) prompted people to leave the USSR no less than the Six Day War. Let me remind you that the Jewish movement developed against the background of the dissident movement. Quite a few aliyah activists started out as dissidents and retained close contact with their dissident comrades, copying their forms of protest. Anatoly Sharansky is a perfect example. Many Jewish activists shared, along with many dissidents, the belief that the emigration is, first and foremost, a way to freedom, and therefore a person emigrating from the "Soviet big detention camp" should be given a free choice no matter which visa he or she holds. And if only an Israeli invitation can bring freedom, it should be used without qualms.

Most of the Movement's leaders refrained from criticizing those who decided to go to the US. However, Israel remained a more justified, pure goal in their eyes. To the extent that *noshrim* often found it necessary justify their choice before their more "Orthodox" comrades: "health limitation on life in hot climate," or "a non-Jewish spouse," or "profession useless in Israel labor

market," or "an only son of draft age."

The last, but maybe most important factor to *neshira* was the United States government's decision to grant Soviet Jews refugee status. Without it "free choice" would have remained an empty slogan.

While in 1972, less than 1% digressed from their route to Israel at the transit stopover in Vienna, by 1974 it was almost 19%, and in 1979 *neshira* constituted over 66%.

Yes, the statistics clearly show us that Zionist ideals did not capture the imagination of the majority of the would-be-emigrants. Still, no other big Jewish community can boast of such a high rate of immigration to Israel during the last fifty years.

Jews who wanted to emigrate to destinations other than Israel never established a movement of their own, maybe because it would mean ceasing to exploit Israeli vyzovs and the achievements of the first generations of the Zionists, and start their own struggle. Moreover, such a movement would hardly gain the strong support of the American government, as there were and are millions of people the world over whose human, national or religious rights are violated no less than those of the Soviet Jewry.

Let us see, what happened to the declared goals, slogans, symbols,, leaders of the Movement after 1973.

I would argue that it has not much changed. Approaching the authorities with a request to emigrate required a receipt of a vyzov (invitation) from Israel. Members of the Movement sang Israeli songs at their gatherings, read Sifriat-Aliyah Israeli books, celebrated Israeli Independence Day along with the rest of the Jewish holidays. Pesach and Hanukah were celebrated with Zionist meaning. Purimshpils and hanukashpils were often performed; and they often included Zionist reminiscences. The anthem of the Movement was "Kachol Ve-Lavan" (Blue and White). A majority of the recognized leaders remained Israel-oriented. The DREAM remained Zion, not Brighton Beach.

Did every participant study Hebrew?

Surely, many more studied English. However, the core of the Movement was the Hebrew ulpan, not an English class. Hebrew teachers were respected by the refuseniks, supported by Nativ, and targeted and persecuted by the authorities. I never heard that anyone was persecuted for teaching or studying English. Did they study Yiddish? Very seldom indeed.

In the mid-1970s, the Moscow activists split between *politiki* and *kulturniki*. Samizdat became more diverse: Jewish religion, culture, history, identity problem (*Evrei v SSSR* in the 1970s or *Leningradsky evreisky almanach in the 1980s*), and only a portion of it was now devoted to the struggle itself. The same was true about seminars of different kinds, sometimes even petitions. Was Jacob Birnbaum, the founder of the Students' Struggle, correct when he reformulated the slogan "Let them go" into "Let them know?"

Maybe. However, make no mistake: the main concern of the *kul'turniki*, was not Jewish culture per se. They wanted to combat *neshira* by strengthening Jewish identity through disseminating Jewish culture. This meant that long before filing applications with state authorities to emigrate, the assimilated Jewish intelligentsia was exposed to aspects of Jewish history, culture and tradition. As Zeev Prestin and Benjamin Fine testify, their intention was not so much to legalize Jewish culture in the USSR, but rather to boost people's desire to go to Israel.

On January 2, 1985 *The Wall Street Journal* published an appeal by seventy-plus refuseniks to American Jews. One of its passages read:

"When your child goes to the Jewish school, remember that we have no Jewish schools. When you take in your hands a Jewish book, remember that we have no Jewish books. When you lovingly touch your mezuzah, remember that our mezuzot are stripped during KGB searches. When you study our beautiful ancient language, remember that our Hebrew teachers are imprisoned on false charges..."

True, long term *refuseniks*, especially in the 1980s, needed Jewish life to survive spiritually, to brighten their shaky existence. The interest of many of us in the forbidden Jewish history and culture was sincere. But, believe me, neither of those whom I joined in signing the petition, would agree to exchange our right to aliyah (or emigration in general) for a stew of lentils - for legalizing some forms of Jewish culture in Russia. Besides, we were sure that as long as the Communist Party ruled the country, a compromise here was hardly possible.

More than that, a majority of the signatories of the Wall Street Journal petition did not observe Jewish tradition, did not know either Hebrew or Yiddish, and many would not send their children to a to a Soviet style Yiddish school.

There were exceptions, like Mikhail Chlenov, who campaigned for legalizing Jewish culture in belief that aliyah would fail to solve all of the problems of Soviet Jews.

Foreign Material Support

The process of leaving the Soviet Union involved considerable expense s and included visa fees, payment for the forced denunciation of Soviet citizenship, flight tickets and shipping one's personal effects.

In addition, families of *refuseniks* who lost their jobs or were imprisoned needed support. Samizdat needed to be published, religious needs cost money, maintaining contact with comrades in other cities, teaching children – any form of Jewish cultural life – all required funds.

Every western Soviet Jewry organization provided material support to the movement in different ways or amounts. These were the Israeli Nativ, the Union of Councils for Soviet Jewry, the National Conference, the Students' Struggle, the "35s" in the UK, Chabad Lubavitch and other religious Jewish groups, as well as several Christian organizations. All of them sent "tourists" to the activists – bearing "gifts" of expensive electronic equipment, photographic equipment, watches, clothing and shoes.

However, the most formidable was the clothing parcel program implemented by Nativ and financed by the JDC. It was called the "Relief-in-Transit Program." The point here was that it was primarily Nativ which decided to whom to send parcels and how many. People knew that if you order a *vyzov* from Israel, you get a parcel. So in the eyes of many, parcels came from Israel. Those who were more active, more pro-Israel usually received more aid. It was especially so in regard to Prisoners of Zion and their families. Money also came through diplomatic sources, also from Israel. That the JDC was the origin of these funds was not revealed.

Can we claim that the Israeli orientation of the Movement was just bought and paid for? No, it was more complicated, but it did play a certain role.

Concluding remarks

As Prof. Zvi Gitelman correctly noted in one of his articles, the Movement remained an Israel-oriented movement. Those who went to the United States did not set up a separate or even allied movement, nor did they make emigration to the United States or elsewhere a public goal. Rather, the decision where to immigrate was treated as a private one.

I maintain that the same applies to a small group of Jewish autonomists who participated in *refusenik* life, but stayed in Russia. It appears most likely that without the ultimate hope of emigration, the idea of Jewish revival alone would not be sufficient to fuel any kind of Jewish Movement in the USSR.

In spite of the growing rate of *neshira*, most of the movement's leaders and activists, especially Prisoners of Zion, who could choose their destination, came to Israel and live there today.

So we can indeed safely call the Movement "the Jewish National Movement." The first stage, involving a few thousand people, was purely Zionist. From 1973, the Movement ceased to be a monolith and staunchly Zionist Movement. Nevertheless, it remained an Israel oriented Movement,

which many fellow-travelers, Jews and non-Jews, joined because they could satisfy their own aspirations (emigration or cultural) only by going under the banner of this only successful opposition movement. Also, the Soviet authorities, the party and the KGB perceived the Movement as Zionist, or, at least, nationalistic.

The Movement enjoyed an unprecedented wave of support the world over, and resulted in tremendous success that forever reshaped the Jewish map of the world. It was the finest hour of American Jewry. I am not sure it could be repeated today.