

"THE NEW RUSSIAN - JEWISH IMMIGRANTS IN ISRAEL"  
Problems and Prospects

What a little country, what great problems! Israel is a poor land with gigantic undertakings; a people proud of its hard-nosed practicality, whose national goals are visionary, of a piece with poetry; a population united by common enemies -- and divided by mutual distrust.

As you know, I have just returned from a two-week trip to the Holy Land where I attend<sup>ed</sup> The World Conference of Orthodox Synagogues in Jerusalem. In addition to meeting with the heads of many communities throughout the world, it afforded me the opportunity for another look at the situation in Israel after an absence of a half-year and a year. I emerged from this reassessment feeling that it was most enlightening, and also most confusing. It left me depressed, and elated; sanguine and worried. I confess to you: I was concerned what to tell my congregation, and, if for no other reason than to avoid confusion, I decided to be honest, and tell the truth as I see it, unvarnished.

So, next Saturday <sup>"</sup>שבת, I will venture my evaluation of the religious problems and the Kulturkampf into which Israel has now entered. Today, I would like to devote my comments to a specific problem, that of the new Russian Jewish immigrants, an issue which may well prove one of the most decisive social, political, and religious issues in Israel's brief history.

When I speak of Russian Jews I except from this treatment the

special problem of Georgian Jews. For various reasons, they must be dealt with separately. Their problem is far from completely solved, but I believe it is at least on the way to solution.

It is the other Russian Jews, the major part of the Russian aliyah, that presents for Israel a crucial problem. Unlike the oriental Jews from Arab countries, the Russians are sophisticated, educated, highly cultured. And unlike American olim, whose historic experience is one of working patriotically with the government, Russian Jews have had to fight their government. Otherwise, they never could have reached the blessed shores of the State of Israel. Hence, they are militant, and this militancy will at least in some ways prove to be a great boon to the State. They will, I believe, refuse to accept blandly Israel's notorious bureaucracy and the characteristic slogan of its petty clerks -- *הכל נעשה בצורה הזאת*, "things aren't done that way here," the natural response of the bureaucratic soul to any quest for innovation and creativity.

The Russian aliyah represents a three-fold problem for the Israeli government.

First and foremost, it already constitutes a major drain on Israel's precarious financial, housing, and employment situation. I do not believe anyone in Israel expected the Soviets to open their gates quite as much as they have done so far: this year alone 45,000 Russian Jews are expected to enter Israel. What was once a trickle now shows signs of becoming a flood. Where will such people be housed? How will we be able to stand the economic strain? Where will we find employment for all of them? This is a problem


that Israel and Jews throughout the world together will have to shoulder.

The second element represents a potential threat, particularly to the Labor government. This issues from what I mentioned before, the militancy characteristic of so many Russian Jews. As a minor example, it is amazing and satisfying to notice that young Russians in the country for about a week or two are so very anxious to register in the Army at once. Many of these people come from areas in Russia where the name of Jabotinsky and the whole Revisionist tradition is held in awe and admiration. Politically, they will probably go well to the right of the present Labor government, and possibly join forces with Herut.

Third, and much less admitted publicly, is the fact that the Russian aliyah contains a far larger proportion of religious Jews than heretofore anticipated. I do not mean to say that all or necessarily most Russian Jews are Orthodox. But there is a significant percentage of observant Jews, even a larger percentage of Jews with religious inclinations, certainly larger than the proportion of religious to secular Jews in Israel at the present time. And this threatens to unsettle the status quo in the religious complexion of the country.

Now, there are two problems with which we are confronted: one is social and economic, and the other is -- one must forgive the strange bed-fellows -- religious and political. Most of the immigrants, during the first four or six weeks of their arrival in Israel, must suffer considerable privation. They have no heat, no

food, only the clothing they brought with them, and almost no guidance in the complexities of ordinary daily routine, such as how to shop in a store and what government offices to visit.

I would like to make it crystal clear: I mention this without the least whisper of complaint against the Israeli government. On the contrary, to my knowledge never before in recorded history has any government gone out of its way with such open-heartedness to welcome people who will immediately constitute for it grave problems. Through the United Jewish Appeal, and through the extraordinary tax burden placed on Israeli citizens, has it been made possible to bring these Jews out of Russia and into the State of Israel. Every family is met at Lod, given IL400, put into a taxi and taken to their apartment -- and most of these dwellings are not only adequate, but beautiful. But, in these apartments they have nothing but the required number of beds and thin blankets, charmingly called , "Jewish Agency blankets." But food, heat, and the elementary needs are not there for them immediately. Here is a need for civic consciousness and social concern on the part of Israeli citizens who will be their neighbors, and Jews in America and elsewhere who must now help over and above their regular and special contributions to the United Jewish Appeal.

The second issue is related to the first: and that is the religious problem. Here there seems to be developing a fight for the loyalty for the Russian Jews, for their very souls.

In order to appreciate what is happening, we must understand the nature of Russian Jews. Though they are highly sophisticated,

they are not aware of the complicated religious patterns that prevail in the State of Israel. How many Russian Jews, who have dreamed of Israel as the political embodiment of redemption, as the cynosure of the eyes of generations, can believe that Jews who live in Israel and speak Hebrew are not in some way intertwined in the Jewish tradition? - that a majority of schools teach no religious subjects, and that when Bible is taught, the instructors go bareheaded and teach it as if it were the Israeli equivalent of Shakespeare or the source book of some national mythology?

Hence, these Russian Jews are open to influence, most easily and effectively exerted by the first ones to greet and befriend them in their new homes.

What do the secularists do? Here I must point to the specific activities of one group. All immigrants are under the aegis of the Ministry of Absorption, headed by Mr. Peled, one of the leaders of Mapam, which is the Neturei Karta of Israeli socialism. This is a Marxist group dedicated to anti-religious principles.

What Mr. Peled has done is to assign, at government expense, 80 emissaries to help in the absorption and adjustment of Russian Jews. Three of these are religious; 77 are hand-picked, dedicated kibbutzniks of the Hashomer Hatzair, one of the constituent movements of Mapam. This proportion is quite strange not only on the basis of equity, not only on the present proportion of religious Jews in Israel, but especially in the light of the rather high percentage of Russian Jewish immigrants who are religious and

traditional. When attacked because of his abuse of position in the Knesset, Mr. Peled had no real answer.

Furthermore, one of the most effective influences on newcomers is exercised through the ulpanim, the schools where the immigrant learns Hebrew and is introduced to the country as a whole. There is one such ulpan in Kfar Chabad, and one or two others in religious areas; all others -- are in secularists and anti-religious centers.

Some Russian Jews are told that religious schools teach no secular subjects; that other than Bible and Talmud, nothing else, such as mathematics and science, is taught. Since Russian Jews are cultured and career-oriented, this makes them shun the religious schools. And, of course, this information is an un-truth. Russian Jews, if they happen to live closer to a non-religious school, are often told that by law their children must attend only the nearest school. And, of course, this too is a non-truth.

As a result, it now seems as if a battle will be fought over the life and destiny of each child.

These efforts to recreate Russian Jews in the mold of the dominant secularist majority can be effective only because of the peculiar ignorance of Judaism, by most Russian Jews, especially the young.

An example: two or three weeks ago, a Russian Jewish psychiatrist, at an Absorption Center near Jerusalem, noticed two or three young Hasidim walking by. He turned to his neighbor, a young South African, and asked, "Are they Jewish? They don't look Jewish!"

A week ago, I met Avraham M., a 29-year old chemical engineer



who had just come, within the past two weeks, from Leningrad. He was still unemployed, because the Haifa factory which he applied refused to employ one who would not promise to work on Saturday. In his early youth he used to attend services, which were held in rotation in various private homes. For the past 10 or 12 years, he had not been at a service. Just three weeks ago, Friday night, he attended his first *אשכנזי* Service. Upon hearing the words *וְיָשָׁב* -- this tough, proud, young scientist, who had defied the might of the Soviet empire, dissolved in tears.

There are young men who have arrived from the U.S.S.R. who, in their home country, used to lay the tefillin quickly, recite the *Shma* rapidly, and take them off before their roommates would return to the dormitory; who suddenly developed an interest in "vegeterianism" as the only way to keep kosher in Moscow and Kiev and Odess and Leningrad. Yet, they cannot identify the names of Abraham or Isaac or Jacob, and they do not know that there were two Temples that once existed in Jerusalem. Such people are open to any influence, and such beautiful souls can be lost to us.

In Natanya only a few weeks ago, a couple came from Russia with one young daughter. They registered her in the nearest school -- which, they were told, is what had to be done -- and looked forward to their future in the State of Israel. When a young rabbi who makes it his avocation to welcome Russian Jews visited with them and calmly explained, amongst other things, that there were two types of school systems, one of them religious and the other non-religious, the father showed immediate concern. He called over his

daughter and examined her as to her curriculum. When he learned that she had been attending a non-religious school, the father immediately fainted and a physician had to be called. Upon revival he began to weep, saying, "Is it for this that I had to risk life and limb in Russia? Did I give up everything in order to come and lose my child amongst fellow Jews in the Holy Land?"

So, the intense loyalty plus the profound ignorance of so many Russian Jews creates an explosive mixture in the State of Israel today.

How ironic! Until quite recently we were told that the Rabbinate and the religious Jews would create problems for Russian Jewry and impede their immigration because of such questions as intermarriage and conversion. Now we find that the reverse is true: that it is the secularists who are creating problems for the successful integration and absorption of Russian Jews.

As for us, we religious Jews made one tragic mistake above all others in the last 25 years: that painful issue of the children of Teheran, children of pious and traditional Jews who were brought to Israel. By any sane, fair, democratic procedure, they should have been raised in a religious environment in keeping with the life-style of their parents. Instead, we were forced to submit to a "key" which determined their settlement in different centers by the proportion of votes that religious and secularists parties had in the government. We have, thereby, lost a generation of Sephardic children not only to Torah and to religion, but to the well-being of Israel as well. This is the human pool from which the "Black



Panthers" emerged. And who can blame them? They have only slums in which to live, inadequate and lowly jobs, a high rate of unemployment, nothing to look forward to -- and now the politicians of Israel have taken away their God, the framework of observances that alone could keep them anchored in a feeling of continuity, of tradition, of meaningfulness. That error must not be repeated with the Russian Jews.

What must we do? We must do two things that are one: *צוה* and *חן*, acts of compassion and acts of education.

First, we must welcome the Russian Jews in an attitude of *צוה פלג צוה*, with warmth and love for their own sake, for no ulterior motive. We must welcome them, offering our help, providing <sup>for</sup> their needs, giving them friendship. Then, when we have succeeded in providing for their basic physical and psychological necessities, may we offer our guidance as to religion and education, non-political, and then offer *כלי צדקה*, the various objects necessary for religious life.

I must say that this is not an easy task that can be performed by anyone. It is more than language that is necessary -- either Russian or Yiddish. Last Sunday, in Hadera, I visited with a Jewish family that had just arrived from the Carpathian mountains. His face was that of a typical Russian Jew of 50 or 70 years ago. He had managed to raise two daughters and teach them Judaism by himself, so that their Jewish education today is in no way inferior to the best of our children who have attended the finest of our schools. Yet, when we were talking to him, his oldest daughter

I want to emphasize that I have no complaints against the government as such, except for the fact related before as to the abuse by the Minister of Absorption of his responsibility. Otherwise, it is primarily the task of religious Jews in the free market of ideological competition to influence Russian Jews in the way we would like. Where we find that others have acted with falseness, we must counter their baneful influence with truth. And we must do it not later, but today.

We are told that the Jews in Egypt, as they were leaving the land of their exile, ate the matzot יֵצְאוּ מִצֶּמֶת וַיֹּאכְלוּ מַצּוֹת, because they were expelled from Egypt and they could not tarry. Rabbi Yaakov Moshe Charlop (in his " א' נרום ") maintains that the last three words, וַיֹּאכְלוּ מַצּוֹת , "they could not tarry," is

not a physical but a psychological statement. The rush and the haste were not the results of a decision by Pharoah to expel them immediately, but rather their inner feeling that once the Egyptian exile was coming to an end, they could not bear to wait another moment before leaving this land of horrible memories and making their way to the Promised Land.

Some Russian Jews have had to fight and strike and languish in prison in order to get visas to Israel. Others, miraculously, were told upon submitting their applications that they have 48 hours to get out of the country. But, no matter what their experiences, all felt that *הנהלת המבחן* / *הנהלת המבחן*, they could not bear to wait another minute in that land and make their way to the State of Israel.

I hope you appreciate what we owe these Jews, expelled from modern-day Egypt and propelled by this inner feeling. At the very least, we owe them a warm welcome -- socially and economically and spiritually.

I hope you appreciate that we have reached an historic watershed. It was Russian Jews who made the modern State of Israel, and it is the new Russian Jews who will remake the contemporary State of Israel. This is a group marked by vitality and distinguished by dynamism, it is the living reservoir of the future leadership of the State. They will be a major power in the future of Israel. We can influence the direction of that new development. We can determine, by our wrong action or inaction, that they will contribute to the further deJudaization of Israel until it becomes a colorless political entity. Or, we can determine by our own positive action that Israel will now recapture its ancient eminence, return to

its roots, that it will reflect Jewish continuity and tradition and history, and therefore a continuing bond with Jews of the Diaspora.

I cannot emphasize the gravity of the situation sufficiently. Remember that the Jewish future of your children and my children will be highly influenced by the image of the State of Israel 10 or 20 years from today. And that image will, in turn, be largely determined by what these vital new immigrants will make of the country. If we Orthodox and religious Jews, both in Israel and American, do not offer them our welcome, we may well lose them.

We now have opportunity and dangers all rolled into one. For pittances, for only a few thousands of dollars, we can keep large numbers of Russian Jews within the fold, allowing them to experience the fulfillment of their dreams when they were yet in the land of their persecution, and thereby allow them to help us redeem all our people. But by being small, *אנו קטנים*, we may yet fail -- again.

I know that I can count on my congregation and friends to take a lead, to approach me before I approach them.

Remember that these Russian Jews *הם בני ארץ רוסיה*, they are the modern exiles from the latter-day Egypt. Hence, for us -- *אנו*, we cannot afford to tarry, to wait, to delay or to postpone.

Our task is now to rally to their aid and to the glory of Torah -- at once.

Redemption is at hand, if we will but be bestir ourselves.