POWER OF PROTEST
THE MOVEMENT TO FREE SOVIET JEWS
RESOURCES FOR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AMERICAN JEWISH HISTORY
A Smithsonian Institution Affiliate
The personal stories of American Jewish activists and Soviet Jews—known as refuseniks—are brought to life in Power of Protest: The Movement to Free Soviet Jews, a panel exhibition created by the National Museum of American Jewish History. The exhibition explores the significance of this dramatic, risky, and emotionally fraught social justice movement—what The Atlantic’s Jeffrey Goldberg has called “the most successful human rights campaign of our time.”

For questions, comments, or additional resources, please contact education coordinator Charlie Hersh at 215.923.3811 x272 or chersh@nmajh.org.
POWER OF PROTEST: MOVEMENT TO FREE SOVIET JEWS  
HIGH SCHOOL UNIT: “The Time Has Come”

Big Idea
The Movement to Free Soviet Jews, perhaps the most successful human rights movement in the twentieth century, shows that voices raised in protest can lead to remarkable achievements. This unit discusses what it means to protest—and more specifically, what it means to stand in solidarity with others. Students will learn about how young people can connect with others around the world and how to support others.

Pre-visit activity

Key questions:
1. How and why were Jews persecuted in the Soviet Union?
2. How did Soviet Jews and allies protest the Soviet government?
3. What elements contribute to a successful protest?

Learning objectives:
By the end of this unit students will be able to:
- Explain the repression Jews faced in the Soviet Union.
- List different types of protests and describe how protests inspire people to join the struggle for human rights.
- Appreciate the role of personal stories in strengthening protests.

Preparatory reading:
Before class, ask students to read the excerpts from Moshe Decter’s report “The Status of the Jews in the Soviet Union” (Source 1) and Natan Sharansky’s foreword to Triumph Over Tyranny by Philip Spiegel (Source 2).

Procedure:
1. Ask students to summarize the readings using the following questions: What are each author’s principle themes? How did each one describe the “war against Jewish identity”? What did Decter mean when he wrote, “without a past and a present, the future is precarious”? What did Sharansky remember as a beacon of hope and pride?
2. Tell students that for many decades, antisemitism was an official policy of Russia’s tsarist regime and was deeply rooted in Russian society. When the Soviet Union, abbreviated as USSR, was established in 1917 its new leaders established an oppressive regime instead of a democracy. Many citizens could not choose how to lead their lives, freely speak their beliefs, and, in some cases, leave for other countries. After World War II (WWII), the USSR and US began a long political rivalry called the Cold War. During this period, the USSR experienced significant political and economic challenges. Using antisemitic themes that had existed for centuries, Soviet leaders sometimes blamed these challenges on Jews as a way to both explain their failings and use persecution of Jews as a negotiating tool with the
US. For example, in 1952, Soviet leader Joseph Stalin accused several prominent Jewish doctors of conspiring to assassinate him and planned to have them imprisoned and executed instead, an incident called the “Doctor’s Plot.”

It was hard to be Jewish in the USSR—the Soviet government closed synagogues, banned the teaching of Hebrew, destroyed Jewish cemeteries, and published antisemitic books. Jews had to meet in secret to celebrate holidays, study Hebrew, and engage in Jewish culture. By the 1960s, there were about 2.5 million Jews in the Soviet Union. Many wanted to leave the country but their exit requests were denied. People needed exit visas to leave; Jews who applied were generally refused and, as a result, often lost their jobs, friends, and even their freedom: many were imprisoned. Soviet Jews whose applications for exit visas had been refused became known as refuseniks.

3. Ask: How do you think Soviet Jews reacted to being in this situation? What do you think were the opportunities and consequences to these reactions? Make a list on the board of each reaction, opportunity, and consequence. Remind students what risks protesting carried, and ask if they would be willing to accept those risks today.

4. Tell the students about the life of the refuseniks. Explain that refuseniks lived in fear because people who applied for exit visas often faced scorn, ostracism, job loss, arrest, and imprisonment.

5. Share the story of “Operation Wedding” with students: In the summer of 1970, a group of fourteen refuseniks and two non-Jewish dissidents, led by Eduard Kuznetsov and Mark Dymshits, tried to escape the Soviet Union and travel to Israel. They pretended to be a family traveling together to a wedding in Israel. They bought all the seats on a plane and even intended to fly it themselves! The group was arrested by Soviet agents just minutes before departing. After unfair trials, they were imprisoned and sentenced to death. Explain that the group knew the odds of success were very slim but remained committed to their plan. In her trial, one participant, Sylva Zalmanson, recounted, “We noticed we were being followed..., but we could no longer turn back....” Ask: Why do you think these refuseniks went through with this plan if they did not expect to succeed?

6. Explain that this event was widely reported abroad, and the arrests sparked protests throughout the world. After strong international pressure, the groups’ death sentences were reduced to 15 years in prison. Ask: How do you think information about “Operation Wedding” and subsequent protests influenced Soviet Jews?

7. Natan Sharansky, a prominent refusenik (and now an Israeli politician), cited “Operation Wedding” as an important inspiration for his own activism. A college student at the time, he spent several years spreading the story of “Operation Wedding” and advocating for the rights of Soviet Jews before being arrested on a false charge of espionage. Ask: Are any of you—or have you been—in involved in protests (e.g. the Women’s March) or other forms of activism? What inspired you to become involved?
8. Show students the poster featuring the 1968 letter from Boris Kochubievsky to Leonid Brezhnev, leader of the Soviet Union at the time (Source 3). Explain that this letter was distributed by American students to other Americans. Have students read the excerpt from the letter and respond to the following questions: Why do you think Kochubievsky wrote this letter? What do you think he meant when he said, “I will go to the homeland of my ancestors, even if it means going on foot”? Why do you think student activists in the US distributed his letter to American Jews?

9. Conclude by telling students that they have learned about just a few of the major protests by Russian Jews against the Soviet government. Ask students to list the forms of protests they discussed, and make sure they include actions such as applying for exit visas and meeting in secret to study Hebrew. There were many other kinds of protests that they will learn about in subsequent lessons, and these protests all contributed to one of the most successful human rights movements. Ask: Of the protests we discussed today, what did they all have in common? What do you think led to their successes? Reflect on their answers, pulling out the following elements:
   a. Protests highlighting individuals’ stories.
   b. People taking immense risks and suffering consequences for a greater purpose.
   c. People in other countries learning about and empathizing with Soviet Jews.

Optional homework assignment:
Have students read the excerpt from Jonathan Feldstein’s “My Struggle for Soviet Jewry, and Kate Shtein” (Source 4). Ask them to answer the following questions:
   - What led Feldstein to begin advocating for Soviet Jews?
   - How did he come to empathize with Kate’s family?
   - How effective was Feldstein’s struggle? How many different efforts did he make?
   - What do you think about his decision to marry?
   - What significance did this struggle have for Kate? And for him?
**Exhibition-visit activity**

**Key questions:**
1. What role did students play in the movement to free Soviet Jews?
2. What role did personal stories play in protests for human rights?
3. How were protests publicized and organized?

**Objectives:**
By the end of the lesson, students will be able to:
- Explain what solidarity is and what role it took within the Movement to Free Soviet Jews.
- Explain the role of youth and students in the Movement to Free Soviet Jews.
- Understand how people around the world united in service of freeing Soviet Jews, eventually leading to a mass emigration to the United States and Israel.
- Make connections between the movement to free Soviet Jews and students’ own lives.

**Procedure:**
1. Ask students to share their thoughts about the story of Jonathan Feldstein and Kate Shtein. Emphasize that this story was unique, and at the same time, similar to stories of other activists for Soviet Jewry: for example, the practice of “twinning,” which inspired Feldstein, in which families chose to “share” their bar/bat mitzvah celebrations with Soviet teens who could not celebrate this rite of passage.

2. Start at the first panel, labeled “Power of Protest.” Have students look at the photo of the rally in front of the United Nations headquarters in 1975. Discuss: What do you see? How might it feel to be part of this big crowd? Look at the sign that reads “Their fight is our fight.” What do you think this sentence means? When does someone else’s fight become your fight? Have you ever fought on behalf of someone else? How? What are the differences and similarities between this form of protest and Feldstein’s protest?

3. Explain that college students at Columbia University founded the Student Struggle for Soviet Jewry (SSSJ) in 1964. They arranged marches and demonstrations. Their political activism rapidly attracted thousands of students across the country and inspired people of all ages to speak out on behalf of Soviet Jews. Discuss as a group what it would take to gather such a huge crowd like the one in the photo. Reminding students that social media did not yet exist, ask: How do you think people learned about this march? How do you think they traveled there? What do you think they are saying?

4. Open the activist’s backpack and distribute the flyer from SSSJ’s first meeting. After students have read the flyer, ask: Why does the flyer emphasize that students should lead the grassroots movement for Soviet Jewry? Why do the authors of the flyer believe that the time for action has come?

5. Tell students they will be attending an SSSJ meeting where decisions will be made about upcoming protests. Ask them to research what protests have already occurred, how those
protests were publicized or received, and if there are forms of protest not represented. Divide students into small groups and have them complete the Museum Worksheet.

6. Gather students back together and ask each group to present its plan. Have the class decide which group presented the most convincing plan for upcoming protests. Reminding them that the SSSJ was composed of and founded by students, ask: *Are there advantages to a protest movement led by students? Are there disadvantages? SSSJ was active in the 1960s, 70s, and 80s; what are the advantages and disadvantages to a student-led movement today?*

7. Conclude by asking: *What thoughts or emotions did you have as you planned protests? Does your approach and/or do your feelings change when you advocate for yourself versus other people?* Ask students if they have heard the term “solidarity” and explain that we usually say that people “stand in solidarity” with others when they feel a sense of connectedness through advocacy. Ask: *Can you describe a time when you have felt in solidarity with another person or group of people?*

**Homework assignment:**
Discuss the following questions with your family and write a one-page reflection about your conversation either from your own perspective or describing the experience(s) of family members: *Have you ever been an advocate for something or someone? What would you advocate for? How did you learn about the issue? Would you advocate for something that does not relate to you, your family, or your country? Why or why not?*
Post-visit activity

Key Questions:
1. Who leads a protest? What does it take to become an activist leader?
2. How has technology played a role in protests, both in the past and today?
3. Why is it important to learn about past protests?

Objectives:
By the end of this unit students will be able to:
- Explain why the story of the Movement to Free Soviet Jews is important today.
- Appreciate how modern technology can assist in the fight for human rights.
- Consider the role of the arts in protest movements.

Procedure:
1. Ask for volunteers to share what they wrote for the last lesson’s homework.

2. Have students read the interview with Connie Smukler (Source 5). Briefly summarize: Connie Smukler is a Philadelphian who became a prominent organizer and advocate on behalf of Soviet Jews. Ask: What does Smukler mean by “something else,” and how would it differ from “somebody’s wife” or “somebody’s mother”? Can you find any similarities between Smukler’s words and the conversation you had for your homework assignment? Point out that these are “ordinary people” who understood the importance of fighting on others’ behalf, and that anyone can make a difference in his or her community and in the world.

3. Ask a volunteer to summarize Jonathan Feldstein’s story. Have students read the second excerpt from his article (Source 7). Ask: What is Feldstein’s main point? Why does he think people over 40 should not be trusted? What changed his opinion? Do you agree or disagree that this story retains its importance today? Why?

4. Reminding students of their previous discussion about the advantages and disadvantages of student protesters, ask: What makes it easier for people to become involved in a political movement? What makes it more difficult? Do these answers change depending on whether the setting is the past or today?

5. Ask students to imagine themselves at the conference and have one student read the lyrics to “The Time Has Come” by Michael Posnick (Source 6). Explain that it was written in 1965 and became popular at SSSJ events and marches. Ask: How would you react if you saw a video on YouTube or heard this song streaming on Spotify? How does it make you feel? Can you think of a contemporary song or other form of artistic expression with a similar call to action? What’s similar? What’s different?
6. Ask students to remind themselves of the protest plans that they were working on during their exhibition visit. Ask: What form(s) of artistic expression might you add to your plan? How would this plan change with today’s technology?

7. Explain that the Movement to Free Soviet Jews succeeded without the various forms of technology we have today. Social media, the 24-hour news cycle, and smart phones help us to connect with others, learn about unfamiliar topics, and stay updated on current events in ways that Sharansky, Smukler, Feldstein, and others could not have imagined. Ask: How can these technologies help protest movements today? Can they hinder protests today?

8. Divide students into small groups to discuss the following questions: What issues are important to you? How can you fight for them? Ask the groups to brainstorm how they can advocate for a particular issue, such as writing a letter to Congress or going to a march. Have groups report to the class on their decisions and emphasize that there are many ways to protest.

9. Conclude by asking: Why should we continue to learn about the Movement to Free Soviet Jews? Guide students to reflect on how what they have learned can inform or inspire their efforts to stand up for their own beliefs.

**Homework assignment:**

1. Think of an issue that’s important to you. It can be the issue you discussed in class or a different issue. Write a short paragraph explaining how you learned about the issue and why it is important to you.
2. Find a news article telling the story about someone directly affected by that issue.
3. Write a letter to your congressperson about the story you read and explain what action the congressperson should take—and why. Email or mail the letter!
4. Make a list of other steps you could take to support the issue. Think of ways to support both individuals, like Feldstein did, or larger groups, like Smukler did.
Appendix A. List of sources

Source 1 (handout):
Excerpt from Moshe Decter, “The Status of the Jews in the Soviet Union” (1963)

All religions in the U.S.S.R. exist very precariously within a context of official anti-religious ideology and propaganda. In a variety of fundamental respects, however, Judaism is subjected to unique discrimination. Judaism is permitted no publication facilities and no publications. No Hebrew Bible has been published for Jews since 1917. The study of Hebrew has been outlawed, even for religious purposes. Not a single Jewish religious book of any other kind has appeared in print since the early 1920s.

Soviet policy places the Jews in a complicated situation. They are allowed neither to assimilate, nor live a full Jewish life, nor to emigrate (as many would wish) to Israel or any other place where they might live freely as Jews. On the one hand, the authorities want the Jews to fully fit in; on the other hand, they irrationally fear the full penetration of Soviet life which assimilation implies. So the Jews are formally recognized as a nationality, as a religious group, as equal citizens — but are at the same time deprived of their national and religious rights as a group, and of full equality as individuals.

Official doctrine has consistently denied the existence of a historic Jewish people as an entity, and official practice has always sought to discourage Soviet Jews from feeling themselves members of that entity throughout the world.

Soviet policy as a whole, then, amounts to spiritual strangulation — the deprivation of Soviet Jewry’s natural right to know the Jewish past and to participate in the Jewish present. And without a past and a present, the future is precarious indeed.

Moshe Decter (1922-2007) was an activist within the Movement to Free Soviet Jews who organized the first American conference on Soviet Jewry. He is most famous for his reports on Jewish life in the Soviet Union, where he detailed how Soviet Jews faced restrictions on their cultural and national rights and were targeted by intense antisemitic propaganda campaigns. Reports like Decter’s helped Americans learn about the plight of Soviet Jews and become inspired to help.

Source 2 (handout):

Growing up in Communist Russia, the narrative of the Jewish people was almost completely unknown to me. This was not by accident: the Communist regime had declared a decades-long war against Jewish identity in all forms. There were mass executions of Jewish intellectuals and community leaders. Our synagogues and schools were shut down. Any public expression of
Jewish identification was met with swift and savage punishment; any chance of reconnecting with our Jewish brothers and sisters outside of the Soviet Union seemed as likely as the parting of the Red Sea.

All this changed, however, in June 1967, with Israel’s astounding victory in the Six-day War. The call that went up from Jerusalem, “The Temple Mount is in our hands,” penetrated the Iron Curtain, forging an almost mystic link with Soviet Jews. Now we had a country that wanted us, and a people — strong and courageous — who stood behind us. But it was not just pride that Israel’s victory evoked among the Soviet Jews. Our newfound identification with the Jewish state inspired a heroic few among us to break their silence for the first time, and to demand freedom from Soviet oppression...

Natan Sharansky (b. 1948) is a Soviet Jewish refusenik who became a prominent voice within the Movement to Free Soviet Jews. After being convicted of spying and sentenced to thirteen years in a Siberian forced-labor camp, he became a symbol for human rights in general and the fight to free Soviet Jewry in particular. In this foreword, written in 2008, he reflected on the plight and protests of Soviet Jews, tracing their influences, inspirations, and successes.

Source 3:

“I am a Jew. I want to live in a Jewish State... This is my right, just as it is the right of Ukrainians to live in Ukraine, the right of Russians to live in Russia, the right of Georgians to live in Georgia. I want to live in Israel. This is my dream, this is the goal not only of my life but also of the lives of hundreds of generations which preceded me, of my ancestors who were expelled from their land. I want my children to study in a school in the Hebrew language. I want to read Jewish papers, I want to attend a Jewish theater. What’s wrong with that? What is my crime?... Let me go!

I have repeatedly turned with this request to various authorities and have achieved only this: Dismissal from my job, my wife’s expulsion from her institute; and to crown it all, a criminal charge of slandering Soviet reality. What is this slander? Is it slander that in the multi-national Soviet State only the Jewish people cannot educate their children in Jewish schools?... that there is no Jewish theater?.. no Jewish papers?.. But even this is isn’t the heart of the matter. I don’t want to be involved in the national affairs of a state in which I consider myself an alien. I want to go away from here. I want to live in Israel.”

Boris Kochubievsky (b. 1936), the first public face of Soviet Jewry was a 30 year old radio engineer who lived near Kiev. He was arrested in 1967 for publicly supporting Israel and sentenced to three years in a labor camp on trumped up charges of slandering Soviet society and the Government.

Source 4:

While far from an expert or a major player in the movement, from a young age it was a central part of my identity. While others spent early adult years focusing their spare time on far more mundane things, my life revolved more and more around freeing Soviet Jews. As I got to know more about the plight of Soviet Jews, all these came together as a roadmap for my own activism in a movement that was both grassroots, and by that time, very much connected to the organized Jewish community.

One night, in the months leading up to my brother’s bar mitzvah, my mother shared a story from a magazine article that would change the rest of my life. One of the highlights of the article was the concept of “twinning.” Families and their children who participated undertook many different ways to share their bar/bat mitzvah celebration with a Soviet teen who was not given the opportunity to celebrate his or her own. I was riveted by the notion of being another person’s pen pal, reaching out over miles, across borders, beyond political ideologies, and deep into Jewish history. The activist inside me was turned on, and I wanted in.

As a member of the local Young Judaea chapter, I decided to adopt a family of my own, and use a wider group of peers and others to take on their cause, locally, regionally and nationally. Action for Soviet Jewry provided me with a name and short bio of a family in Moscow, the Shteins. Father, Victor, was a chemist. His wife, Lyudmila, was a linguist who was a translator. They had two daughters, Katya and Yelena.

Victor and Lyudmila applied to leave the USSR. Instead, they were fired from their positions and branded in every aspect of Soviet society as traitors they joined the fast-growing world of “refuseniks,” Soviet Jews who were refused permission to leave and therefore became shunned, discriminated against, and imprisoned in their own homes.

I began a monthly ritual of writing letters to the Shteins initially, and eventually to Katya. One day in the spring of 1982, a letter arrived from Moscow. Katya wrote on her family’s behalf, that because we were close in age we could become friends. So began my friendship with Kate and my adoption of the Shteins as my Soviet Jewish family.

I was given strict guidelines as to what could and could not be said. The wrong phrase, or even word, could be used as evidence that could get them arrested for any of several common trumped up charges that Soviet authorities typically used to harass and imprison Jewish activists. I took my responsibility seriously and wrote in a “code” that I assumed they would understand, although we didn’t ever discuss it.

As time passed, my commitment grew and my plans and activism intensified. My goal was simple, to get the Shteins out of the USSR. The means would take many directions, ways that I could have never imagined when I wrote, or received, that first letter.
After more than a year of writing and a few letters actually being received by us both, one of Kate’s letters that got through to me suggested I come to Moscow in the summer of 1985 for the International Youth Festival. But the point was not just to visit as a tourist. I wanted to get the Shteins out. If not on a plane with me, then in short order following my visit. Naïve or stupid or both, nevertheless that was my goal.

I took a page out of my own family history, where relatives would leave Eastern Europe through the “legal” means of a fictitious marriage I planned to marry Kate in a Soviet civil ceremony, and then do whatever necessary to free “my wife” from the USSR, taking her case to the highest legal, diplomatic, and political spheres possible.

On my first night in Moscow, I contacted Kate and made plans to meet her the next day. Making some excuse to our tour guide, I left the group the following morning and I took one subway line way out to its very last stop in northern Moscow.

I got out of the train and Kate was there, waiting for me. We recognized one another immediately, embraced, and then went to her family’s home. The walk was quiet, so as not to attract attention to ourselves by speaking in English. Victor waited for us at their apartment and we visited there a bit. Conversation was light, not forced, but not particularly substantial. Though I had felt close to them for some time, and they to me, we really did not know one another at all.

Then, as we were having tea, I let the shoe drop. Out of the blue, I blurted out my idea about getting married and making the case why it was such a good idea. Neither responded verbally, but shortly after this came up, Kate and I went out for a walk in a nearby park. She confided in me that she was so unhappy with her life there and desperately wanted to leave, but at the same time she was close to her family and could not imagine having to leave without them, possibly to never see them again. The idea of being alone on the outside terrified her. But the idea of never getting out made her miserable. We agreed we’d look into it and see if we could make it happen if it were necessary.

Upon returning home, I increased my activities on behalf of the Shteins in particular and Soviet Jewry in general. As my campaign to get Kate accepted to the university I attended and secure her freedom became public and more and more visible, I developed a reputation on campus. I initiated and publicized several public phone calls made to Kate along with other students to try to garner support and increase awareness. This was no easy thing as making a call to the USSR required a reservation, days in advance, and was always at the discretion of the Soviet operator. When it was placed, all calls were under the listening ears of the Soviet censors. Using some inexpensive electronics, many of these calls were broadcast at public events with dozens of people present including media. Through the university’s newspaper, Kate became known, and through my activities, I acquired a nickname, “Soviet Jon.” Eventually, my university accepted Kate as a “student in special standing.” This gave me a new platform from which to increase my activities.
I initiated and participated in public protests. I would travel to speak nationally, motivate and inspire people to the plight of Soviet Jews so that they would take action. Many did. My presentations were simple. I would show slides of all the people I had visited and tell stories of their personal struggles. I would end my presentations talking about Kate and her family, telling about our plans to get married, hoping desperately that some would join me in my efforts. As my college graduation neared, and Kate and her family’s freedom was nowhere in sight, I decided it was time to go back to the USSR again and make the marriage idea a reality. But while I was planning the trip, Kate sent me a letter telling me that they thought they might be able to leave soon. One day in July 1987, my parents received a call from Kate, in Italy, free at last. When I found out, though I had envisioned this happening many times, I could not believe it. I was literally speechless. I got choked up and my eyes welled with tears.

Jonathan Feldstein (b. ?) was born and educated in the US. He worked in nonprofit fundraising and marketing. In 2004 he immigrated to Israel and currently serves as the vice president of the Koby Mandell Foundation. In 2017 he published his personal epic story (above) in Tablet magazine.

Source 5
Interview with Connie Smukler at NMAJH (December 7, 2018)

“We were at a point where we were somebody’s mother and somebody’s wife, and all of a sudden, we were something else,” she says today. “Suddenly, people cared about what we said. People listened! It was very heady stuff.”

Connie Smukler (b. ?) is a longtime Jewish communal activist and community leader, former vice chair of the Jewish Federation of Greater Philadelphia. She and her husband Joe were instrumental in leading the international Soviet Jewry movement. Their work helped shepherd refuseniks to freedom in Israel and the United States. Over the years she became an activist icon, through her involvement with many Jewish agencies and boards, including the local Anti-Defamation League.

Source 6
Song, Michael Posnick, “The Time Has Come” (1965).

The time has come to rescue
The time has come to speak
Our duty lies before us
With promises to keep.

Speak out and save them
in their need
Reach out and aid them
till they are freed.
Oppression will not triumph
Oppression dare not stand
Brothers now in danger
Reach out and take their hands.

Speak out and save them
in their need
Reach out and aid them
till they are freed.

The world will know our battle
Hold it as its own
We'll not leave our station
Till freedom's seed be sown.

Michael Posnick (b. ?) is a theater director, and has taught and directed at Hunter College and Yale University. Posnick has directed numerous plays and musical productions at venues including the 92nd Street Y, Manhattan Theatre Club, the New York Philharmonic Orchestra at Lincoln Center. He earned a Master of Fine Arts degree from Yale Drama School and a Master of Science degree from Yeshiva University.

Source 7

Today, far too many people just don’t know about this chapter in our history, and many others have forgotten it. Abbie Hoffman [a prominent anti-war activist] used to say never trust anyone over 40, which was not a point to which I subscribed. But today’s corollary is that it’s hard to find someone under 40 who knows what happened then, why it was and is important, how millions galvanized untold resources, and Jews and Christians partnered together against a historical injustice and to realize a modern Exodus. Let 2017 become a milestone in which we tell this story as an essential chapter of our history, and preserve the awareness and lessons we learned for generations to come.
Museum Visit Worksheet

Name: _________________________

Your group has been asked to help the SSSJ evaluate their existing protests and plan their next protests. **Find each protest listed below in the exhibit and fill out the following chart. Add in other protests you find!**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Protest</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>What type of protest is it?</th>
<th>Find or think of an adjective that describes the protest.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach performance</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SSSJ demonstration at the Soviet United Nations Mission</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SSSJ activists heading to a rally at the Statue of Liberty</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Tisha B’Av “fast in” near the Soviet United Nations Mission</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Now plan your next protest by answering the following questions in the signs below:

Type of protest:  When and Where:  Expected attendance:  Think of one slogan you would use:  How would you publicize your protest?

What is the outcome?:  
Appendix C. Historical Background

Post-Revolution Jewish Life in the USSR
Russia experienced two revolutions in 1917, first in February and then in October (according to the Julian calendar). February brought the end of the tsarist dynasty and a valiant, if brief, attempt at democracy. Center-left parties formed the Provisional Government in Moscow while in Petrograd leftists created Soviets (workers’ councils). This system of “dual power” produced a weak state mired in debate, backstabbing, and violence. Sensing opportunity, Lenin’s far-left Bolshevik Party spent the summer courting workers and soldiers with a call for “peace, land, and bread.” The Bolsheviks, energized by their growing popularity and impatient with the pace of change, staged a bloodless coup on October 24, 1917.

The new Soviet regime granted the world’s largest Jewish population privileges, at least on paper, that had not been available for generations. Relief from restrictions on economic activity accompanied permission to leave the Pale of Settlement and freely relocate to Russia’s capital cities, Moscow and Leningrad (St. Petersburg). Jewish participation increased in government agencies, higher education, and cultural institutions. Jews could organize schools, relief agencies, publishing houses, and drama and musical groups. In 1917 alone, they founded forty-eight newspapers. Ultimately, the Soviet government suppressed Jewish religious and cultural expression—through persecution and violence—while offering opportunities for individual Jews to succeed.

The Russian revolutions abolished ghettoization within the Pale of Settlement and ended tsarist economic and political restrictions, including permitting Jews to live and work in Russia’s capitals. Jewish culture thrived following the Revolution, but vicious pogroms—organized violent uprisings against Jews—during the Russian Civil War of 1918–1921 left nearly 200,000 Jews dead. Then, in the 1930s, Russian dictator Joseph Stalin targeted and murdered Jews, first during his “Great Purge” and then again following WWII. Soviet Jews carried internal passports that marked them as Jews, suffered discrimination in academia, employment, and across Soviet society.

Jewish Protest in the USSR
Beginning in the early 1960s, small groups clamored for the right to practice Judaism, learn Hebrew, and in some cases leave the Soviet Union entirely, for which one needed an exit visa. Israel’s victory in the 1967 Six-Day War inspired Soviet Jews in new ways. They began to publicly demand their national, religious, and cultural rights, including the right to emigrate. This led to the creation of an underground Jewish movement in the USSR.

In 1969, Boris Kochubievsky, an engineer from Kiev, sent a letter to General Secretary of the Communist Party Leonid Brezhnev, demanding to leave to go to Israel, his historic homeland. As a result, he was arrested and sentenced to three years of hard labor, for “anti-Soviet slander.”
Authorities responded with repression. *Refuseniks* were fired from their jobs, deprived of higher education, and socially isolated. Those who defiantly studied Hebrew and celebrated Jewish holidays risked harassment by the KGB (the USSR’s security agency at the time) and imprisonment. Convicted on false charges of crimes against the state or petty offenses, “Prisoners of Zion” like Natan Sharansky, Ida Nudel, Vladimir Slepak, Yosef Begun, and Yuli Edelstein spent years in prison, solitary confinement, and labor camps.

**“Operation Wedding”**

In 1970, a group of fourteen refuseniks and two non-Jewish dissidents was arrested at the Leningrad airport in a daring effort dubbed “Operation Wedding.” They plotted to buy all the seats on a small airplane on a local flight, under the guise of a trip to a wedding—hence calling the mission “Operation Wedding.” They planned to throw out the pilots before takeoff and fly to Sweden, where they could continue on to Israel. They failed when KGB agents met them at the airport, and the First Leningrad Trial sentenced most of them to fourteen years in prison camps. The leaders, Mark Dymshits and Eduard Kuznetsov, were sentenced to death. The leaders’ sentences were reduced to 15 years after strong international protests and even an intervention by the US government.

“Operation Wedding” ignited an anti-Jewish campaign throughout the Soviet Union, culminating in widespread searches, interrogations, and arrests of Jewish activists and underground Hebrew teachers. The arrest of “Operation Wedding’s” participants also legitimatized the underground movement. On one hand, it suggested that Soviet authorities considered a Jewish liberation movement to be a real threat; on the other, that the small group took such large risks served as inspiration for Soviet Jews.

**Refuseniks and “Prisoners of Zion”**

Emboldened by Israel’s victory in the 1967 Six-Day War, Soviet Jews began calling for national, cultural, and political rights, including the freedom to immigrate to Israel. Their activities included ongoing appeals to the Soviet government and building relations with the global movement to support Soviet Jews. They created underground Hebrew-language classes as well as secret groups dedicated to the study of Judaism and Jewish history and culture. *Samizdat* (underground publications) became a significant way *refuseniks* communicated with one another as well as the outside world.

**Beginning of the American Movement for Soviet Jewry**

Haunted by memories of the Holocaust and inspired by 1960s social protest movements, American Jews joined with *refuseniks*, Israelis, and human rights activists around the world in the struggle to help Soviet Jewry. They marched, protested, and lobbied the American government to exert pressure. National organizations raised alarm, and community leaders organized local advocacy efforts. New national organizations arose dedicated to the cause. Some people went on secret “missions” to visit persecuted Soviet Jews, while sons and daughters from across the religious spectrum “twinned” their bar and bat mitzvah celebrations with Soviet youths denied the opportunity to celebrate.

In 1963, American activist Moshe Decter, with help from Nativ, the secret Israeli bureau that maintained ties with Soviet Jews, published an article exhaustively documenting the repression of Jews in the Russian states. Jewish fraternal organization B’nai B’rith ordered 60,000 copies to be distributed in the US, Europe, and Latin America. A year later, 10,000 people gathered in New York’s Madison Square Garden for one of the earliest public demonstrations in support of Soviet Jews. Representatives of the AJC, Synagogue Council of America, Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, and the National Community Relations Advisory Council (NJCRAC) met in Washington, DC to found the American Jewish Conference on Soviet Jewry.

Alarmed by reports of state-sponsored Soviet persecution, two NASA scientists, a psychologist, a doctor, a synagogue president, and a rabbi—all members of Cleveland’s Beth Israel–The West Temple—founded the Cleveland Council on Soviet Anti-Semitism in 1963. After President John F. Kennedy announced that the US would ship wheat to the USSR after its disastrous harvest, the Council wrote the president: “In the USSR, Jews are not permitted to make Passover matzah and should be allowed to use some of our American wheat for matzah.” The Council’s activism on behalf of Soviet Jews continued for more than two decades.

Jacob Birnbaum, grandson of the man who coined the word “Zionism,” had fled Nazi Germany as a child and grew up among Jewish refugees. In 1964, in New York, he founded the Student Struggle for Soviet Jewry (SSSJ) to rally America’s Jewish university students. The SSSJ harnessed the passions and tactics of civil rights-era activists and lambasted the Jewish “establishment” for its complacency. It won notice by staging marches, picketing embassies, and incorporating elements of the nascent American counterculture into its activities. Thanks to the SSSJ, “Singing Rabbi” Shlomo Carlebach’s song “Am Yisrael Chai” (“The People of Israel Live!”) became the movement’s anthem.

Holocaust-survivor Elie Wiesel wrote in his 1966 book The Jews of Silence that “the condition of the Jews in the Soviet Union is at once more grievous and more hopeful than I had imagined.” A visit to the Soviet Union had revealed both state-sponsored repression and grassroots efforts to keep Jewish culture alive. Wiesel’s message inspired Jewish readers and reached activists like Martin Luther King, Jr., Boston’s Richard Cardinal Cushing, and Sister Ann Gillen of the Interreligious Task Force on Soviet Jewry.
The book inspired many American Jewish activists. Many of them eventually joined together to create the Union of Councils for Soviet Jews (UCSJ) in 1970. In the 1970s, UCSJ established itself as the principal grassroots and activist component of the Soviet Jewry movement. In the 1980s, the organization united forty local councils with about 100,000 members, supporters, and activists.

At the same time, major US Jewish organizations founded the National Conference on Soviet Jewry (NCSJ). It encompassed a network of over fifty national Jewish organizations and several hundred local Jewish federations. This extensive coalition effectively led the Movement to Free Soviet Jews over the next twenty years. Jews in New York also created the Greater New York Conference on Soviet Jewry (GNYCSJ), later renamed the Coalition to Free Soviet Jews. The GNYCSJ’s diverse activities included organizing an annual protest in Manhattan called “Solidarity Sunday.”

The Movement Goes Mainstream
Soviet Jewry activists scored notable legislative victories in the 1970s. In 1974, an amendment sponsored by Senator Henry (“Scoop”) Jackson of Washington and Representative Charles A. Vanik of Ohio denied favorable trade benefits to countries in the Soviet bloc that limited free emigration. A year later, the US and the USSR joined more than thirty countries in signing the Helsinki Accords, which, as part of an effort to reduce international tensions, committed participants to respecting the human rights of their citizens. Although Russian authorities cracked down on members of the Helsinki Group, created by Soviet dissidents to monitor compliance with the Accords, the principle of civil rights, including the freedom to emigrate, had been enshrined in international law.

The movement for Soviet Jewry in the United States engaged activists as well as broader masses of affiliated and unaffiliated Jews. Some Jews “adopted” refuseniks and worked to help them from afar. Others traveled to the USSR as “tourists” bearing Jewish literature, religious objects, and material support. They brought home information and samizdat to share with synagogues, local organizations, and legislators. Many wore silver bracelets engraved with a refusenik’s name. Individuals and organizations demonstrated, picketed, and marched—some experiencing their first taste of political protest and human rights advocacy through the movement.

Jewish liturgy and practices became infused with the struggle for Soviet Jews. Some sent holiday greeting cards and personal notes to refuseniks, knowing their correspondences might be intercepted or censored by Soviet authorities. On Passover, many families set aside a special empty chair for a symbolic Soviet Jew unable to celebrate the holiday. Others added special readings about Soviet Jews to Passover seders and placed a “matzah of hope” on the table. Additionally, the cause became part of Jewish life-cycle events and synagogue life as thousands of children “twinned” their bar and bat mitzvah ceremonies with Soviet peers denied this coming-of-age ritual.
During the 1970s and 80s, American adults, students, and teens traveled to the USSR seeking to meet and support Jewish refuseniks. These “tourists” brought in Jewish books, religious objects, and clothes, as well as items to sell on the black market. American visitors also brought well-wishes from family, friends, and activists—returning with information that activists used to publicize the plight of Jews living in the USSR. Some travelers had their luggage searched and precious items confiscated, or faced harassment and detainment by Soviet authorities. Nothing that the Soviet authorities did deterred these “missions” to help redeem imprisoned brethren.

**Success of the Movement**
Sunday, December 6, 1987. On the eve of the summit between Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev and President Ronald Reagan, roughly 250,000 people converged on Washington, DC’s National Mall. Organized by the NCSJ, the protesters represented Jewish federations, community councils, synagogues, youth groups, Jewish and non-Jewish organizations, and themselves. Standing together, they called upon Gorbachev to affirm his glasnost (openness) policy by allowing Jews to freely worship and travel.

This unprecedented display of Jewish solidarity, and the president’s statements on human rights during the summit, resulted in visas that brought nearly two million Soviet Jews to primarily the United States and Israel. In 1989, the Soviet government finally granted permission for Soviet Jews to leave for Israel, America, and other countries. Between 1960 and 1991, 511,000 Soviet Jews immigrated to Israel, and 223,000 came to the United States.

**Russian-speaking Jews in America Today**
Emigration restrictions eased in the late 1980s, and following the Soviet Union’s 1991 collapse, all Jews could freely depart to start new lives. They brought with them diverse experiences, expectations, and attitudes toward Jewish identity. Today nearly 750,000 Russian-speaking Jews live in the United States. Many have established themselves personally and professionally, some to great prominence. Their children, raised in New York, Atlanta, Los Angeles, and hundreds of other cities, have graduated from American schools and universities and now face American choices about careers, identity, marriage, and religious affiliation—adding new perspectives to what it means to be an American Jew.

Despite a high level of assimilation and intermarriage, Jewish institutional activities for the Russian Jewish community in the US, not to mention grassroots organizations, are growing. In fact, today, Jews from the former Soviet Union are shaping American Jewish communal policy and have become an integral part of the diverse Jewish community of America.
Appendix D. Timeline

1917
The overthrow of the Tsar and Russian Revolutions lead to initial improvements for Jews living in Russia but do not end the practice of state-sponsored oppression. However, as a result of the civil war between the new Soviet regime and its opponents (1918–1921), between 100,000 and 200,000 Jews are killed in pogroms.

1922-1939
The Soviet government initially seeks Jewish support through the promotion of Yiddish culture but official policy shifts in the 1930s, leading to persecution and the closure of Jewish schools, theaters, and most synagogues. In addition, during The “Great Purges” of the 1930s, Stalin and his enablers in the Soviet government target Jews for imprisonment and execution.

1941–1945
Over two million Soviet Jews are killed during the Holocaust. At the same time, about 500,000 Jewish soldiers fight in the Soviet Army and 142,500 lose their lives fighting against the German army and its allies.

1948
October 16 – The State of Israel is created. Ambassador Golda Meir, head of the Israel delegation to the Soviet Union, visits Moscow’s Great Choral Synagogue and is greeted by a huge crowd of nearly 50,000. The event causes great concern among Soviet officials, who see it as an evidence of Jewish nationalism.

1948–1953
Stalin’s campaign against “rootless cosmopolitans” targets Jews and inspires incidents such as the “Doctors’ Plot” and “Night of Murdered Poets.”

1951–1952
The Soviet government accuses a string of mostly Jewish doctors of conspiring to assassinate Stalin, an incident referred to as the “Doctors’ Plot.”

1952
August 12 — Thirteen Soviet Jewish writers accused of treason are executed in Moscow’s Lubyanka Prison in Moscow, the “Night of Murdered Poets.”

1963
Trofim Kichko’s antisemitic book Judaism Without Embellishment is published in the Soviet Union. Morris B. Abram, a member of the US delegation to the United Nations and a leader of the AJC raises alarm and circulates the book to Western audiences.

1963
The Cleveland Council on Soviet Anti-Semitism, the earliest organized effort of the Movement for Soviet Jewry is launched.

1964
April 5 — Major national Jewish organizations create the AJCSJ to coordinate nationwide activities on behalf of Soviet Jews.

April 27 — SSSJ is founded at Columbia University.

1967
June 5–10 — Israel’s victory in the Six-Day War leads to the termination of diplomatic relations between the Soviet Union and Israel. It invigorates Jewish activism in the USSR and strengthens anti-Jewish government policies.

1969
May 16 — Boris Kochubievsky, an engineer from Kiev, sends a letter to Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev demanding permission to immigrate to Israel. Kochubievsky is arrested and sentenced to three years of hard labor for “anti-Soviet slander.” Shortly thereafter, increasing arrests and trials of Jewish activists accelerate international activism on behalf of Soviet Jews.

1970
March 3 — Local independent groups in the US join together and launch the independent UCSJ).

June 15 — Sixteen activists (fourteen Jews and two non-Jews) are arrested at Leningrad's airport in the daring effort dubbed “Operation Wedding.” Their arrests ignite another anti-Jewish campaign throughout the Soviet Union, culminating in widespread searches, interrogations, and arrests of Jewish activists and underground Hebrew teachers.

1971
February 23–25 — First World Conference on Soviet Jewry convened in Brussels, attended by 800 delegates from thirty-eight countries, including prominent Israeli leaders David Ben-Gurion and Menachem Begin. The meeting creates the World Conference on Soviet Jewry.

June 6 — Following widespread arrests of refuseniks and Hebrew teachers in the USSR, American Jewish organizations, together with local Jewish federations and community relations councils, create the NCSJ with a mandate to spearhead ongoing activism throughout the country.

1972
April — “Solidarity Sunday” brings together thousands to participate in a demonstration in New York City’s Dag Hammarskjold Plaza, near the United Nations headquarters. Over 100 local
communities across the country organize parallel demonstrations. It becomes an annual event, lasting until 1988.

July — The Supreme Council of the USSR introduces a higher education tax on would-be emigrants, ostensibly to recoup education costs. It is viewed as a “ransom” tax meant to deter Jews from leaving the country.

1973
June 17 — Soviet Leader Leonid Brezhnev arrives in Washington DC to meet President Richard Nixon and is greeted by a demonstration of 13,000 people, organized by the NCSJ with the National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council (NJCRAC).

1975
January 3 — Following a two-and-a-half-year campaign, President Ford signs the Jackson-Vanik Amendment linking trade benefits to emigration policies and human rights.

August — Thirty-five countries (including USSR, US, and Canada) sign the Helsinki Accords, enshrining the principle of civil rights, including the freedom to emigrate, into international law.

1976
December 21–26 — An international symposium on “Jewish Culture in the USSR: Its Present State and Prospects” is planned for Moscow. Soviet authorities declare it a “Zionist provocation” and participants are detained and placed under house arrest.

1977
March 15 — Natan Sharansky, a young Jewish emigration activist, arrested on charges of treason and spying for the US; sentenced to thirteen years imprisonment.

1978
June 21 — Vladimir Slepak and Ida Nudel, both prominent Soviet Jewish activists, are arrested and exiled to Siberia. Nudel is championed by the Washington-based Congressional Wives for Soviet Jewry.

1979
December — The USSR invades Afghanistan and relations between the Soviets and Americans deteriorate. For Soviet Jews this means the curtailment of emigration and a long period of refusal.

1980
April 27 — 100,000 people attend the ninth annual “Solidarity Sunday” rally sponsored by the GNYCSJ.
September — During the intercity Hebrew teachers’ seminar in Koktebel, Crimea, attended by over fifty teachers from nine cities, Yuli Kosharovsky, its founder, is arrested for “hooliganism.”

1981
October 12 — More than 100 Soviet Hebrew teachers and students protest against harassment and arrests.

1984
Increasing arrests of Hebrew teachers and Jewish activists in the USSR.

1985
Mikhail S. Gorbachev appointed as leader of the Soviet Union, promising a policy of openness (glasnost).

1986
February 11 — Natan Sharansky is released from prison and emigrates to Israel.

1987
December 6 — 250,000 people attend the historic “Freedom Sunday” march in Washington DC on the eve of the first Reagan-Gorbachev summit.

1989
The USSR opens its doors to Jewish emigration and ceases persecution of Jewish activists. The first Jewish Cultural Center is opened in Moscow, and, in December, more than 700 Soviet Jews attend the first national meeting of Soviet Jews in over seventy years.

1990
December 10 — Twenty years after it was launched, the daily Soviet Jewry Vigil in Washington DC, opposite the Soviet Embassy, ends.
Selected Bibliography


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