POWER OF PROTEST
THE MOVEMENT TO FREE SOVIET JEWS
RESOURCES FOR MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS
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: THE MOVEMENT TO FREE SOVIET JEWS
MIDDLE SCHOOL UNIT: “I AM MY BROTHER’S KEEPER”

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 empathize with those in need, and how empathizing can lead to action. 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. Why should young people care about the well-being of those in other countries?
2. How can young people make a positive difference in the world?
3. How can traditions like b’nai mitzvah be used for a greater purpose?

Learning objectives:

By the end of this unit students will be able to:

1. Describe the difficulties of Jews in the Soviet Union and how young people there responded.
3. Explain what “twinning” was and what its main goals were.
4. Appreciate the role of empathy in the Movement to Free Soviet Jews and in their own lives.

Procedure:

1. Ask: How many of you had/are planning your b’nai mitzvah? How many of you are doing a mitzvah project? What was/is the most important part of your b’nai mitzvah celebration? Reflect on students’ answers.

2. Tell students that they’re going to learn about several people’s mitzvah project from the 1980s. Show Facebook Chief Operating Officer Sheryl Sandberg’s letter (Source 1) and read through it together. Ask students: What do you learn about Sheryl from this letter? What do you learn about Kira? What is Sheryl worried about and why? Highlight similarities between Sheryl/Kira and students (age, interests, etc.).

3. Explain that Kira lived in the Soviet Union, abbreviated as USSR. It was a huge country that spread from the Baltic Sea in the West to the Pacific Ocean in the East. When this new country was established in 1917 after two revolutions, the USSR’s new leaders established an oppressive regime instead of a
democracy. Citizens of the USSR didn’t have many civil rights and lived behind what was called an “iron curtain,” meaning that many could not choose how to lead their lives, freely speak their beliefs, or 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 killed 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, or engage in Jewish culture. By the 1960s, there were about 2.5 million Jews in the Soviet Union. Many wanted to leave the Soviet Union but their exit requests were denied. People needed exit visas to leave the country, and 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.

4. Explain that, because it was so hard to celebrate Jewish holidays or publicly show that one was Jewish it was very rare for Soviet Jewish children to celebrate their b’nai mitzvah—the traditional Jewish rite of passage into adulthood. Many didn’t even know what a bar or bat mitzvah was. Ask: how do you think Kira might have responded to Sheryl’s letter?

5. Explain that Sheryl’s letter to Kira is an example of “twinning,” which means that American Jewish children symbolically shared their b’nai mitzvah with Soviet Jews who were not allowed to celebrate this special ritual.

Ask: How do you think they “shared” this celebration? Explain that American Jewish children wrote letters and sent presents to their “twins” and often spoke about them during their ceremonies. When they sent out b’nai mitzvah invitations, they often recognized both “twins”—American and Soviet. Show students the bat mitzvah invitation as an example (Source 2).

6. Ask: How would it make you feel to share your special moment with another person who lives on the other side of the world? What do you think writing letters, sending presents, and giving speeches accomplished? Would you “twin” even if the person was unaware of your gesture? Can this act be considered a “protest”? Why or why not?

7. Show students an excerpt from the bar mitzvah speech of Shaul Kelner from 1982 (Source 3). Ask: What does Shaul say he will accomplish by writing to his twin, Leonid? What else does he do for Leonid?

8. Explain that “twinning” succeeded as a way of protesting the persecution of Jews in the Soviet Union. Together with other forms of protest and political advocacy, “twinning” served as
one way to publicize stories about the hardships Soviet Jews faced. Americans put pressure on the Soviet government to allow more Jews to leave.

9. Ask: Why do you think it was important for American Jews to support Soviet Jews? What’s the difference between supporting an entire group of people and supporting a single person or family? Which do you think is better?

10. Conclude by emphasizing that Sheryl and Shaul were ordinary kids who made a contribution to the Movement to Free Soviet Jews. As young people, they had the opportunity to make known the hardships Jews faced in the Soviet Union. They also provided moral support to the children of the refuseniks and their families.

11. Prepare your students for the three-phase homework assignment. Ask: What did Sheryl and Shaul need to do or know in order to participate in the “twinning” program? Guide students toward answers such as the following:
   a. They needed to know what the situation in the Soviet Union was.
   b. They needed to develop a genuine interest in the lives of Soviet Jews and understand their hardships.
   c. They needed to learn about the “twinning” program.
   d. They needed to write letters to their “twins.”
   e. They needed to be willing to share their special moment with someone else.
   f. They needed to speak publicly about their choice to share their ceremony with someone else.

   Ask: What might have been the hardest part in this process?

Homework:

1. Ask an adult to help you find a pen pal through an online service. The pen pal should be around your age from a different country you don’t know much about. Try to choose a country you’ve heard about in the news, or a country experiencing some kind of hardship.
2. Do some research on what life in that country is like. What do kids do for fun there? What kinds of issues do kids there deal with?
3. Write your pen pal a letter!
Exhibition-visit Activity

**Key question:** What kinds of protests happened during the Movement to Free Soviet Jews?

**Learning objectives:**

By the end of the lesson, students will be able to:

1. Describe how American Jews rose to fight for their Soviet brethren.
2. Appreciate various forms of advocacy.

**Procedure:**

1. Start at the first panel, labeled “Power of Protest.” Have students look at the image of the rally, and ask: *What do you see? How might it feel to be part of this big crowd? What do you think “Their fight is our fight” 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 “twinning”?*

2. Remind students about protest and rights movements happening at the same time in the United States, including the civil rights movement, feminist movement, and anti-war movement. Explain that many Jews participated in these movements, learning from their tactics, successes, and failures—and applying them to the Movement to Free Soviet Jews.

3. Explain that students will now take on the role of participants in the Movement to Free Soviet Jews. In order to do this, they’ll need to explore the variety of options for protest and identify what they believe is the best one for advocating for the rights of Jews living in the Soviet Union. Ask: *What types of protests do you know about? Have you ever participated in a protest? Tell us more about it.* Fortunately, to help your students, the Student Struggle for Soviet Jewry (a real organization) prepared a backpack (**Source 6**) of materials to help them learn about forms of protest and inspire their activism.

4. *(optional)* Look at the panel labeled “Operation Wedding.” Ask: *What kind of mission do you think would be called “Operation Wedding”?* Tell the story, including sharing an excerpt from Sylva Zalmanson’s final address (**Source 4**). Sylva Zalmanson lived in a city called Riga (now the capital of Latvia) and worked as an engineer. In 1970, after repeatedly being denied an exit visa to leave the USSR for Israel, Sylva and her husband, Eduard Kuznetsov, joined the group planning “Operation Wedding.” The group decided to pretend 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! Just minutes before departure, on June 15, 1970, Soviet agents arrested the group at the airport. All were imprisoned. Sylva was 26 and received a sentence of ten years in one of the most brutal Siberian forced-labor camps. Asked how she survived, Sylva replied that freedom meant living in Israel, a goal for which she was willing to endure anything. On August 22, 1974, Sylva
gained her freedom in a prisoner exchange and immediately flew to Israel. Ask: From the beginning, “Operation Wedding” participants knew they probably would not succeed. Why do you think they tried anyway? Explain that this event was reported by American news outlets. Ask: If you saw this event on the news, how would you react? How do you think American Jews reacted at the time?

5. Instruct students to organize themselves into groups of 2–3, and then have them complete Museum Worksheet. Rotate the groups so that the students all have a chance to explore the exhibition and the the backpack. Remind students to keep an open mind about what might be considered a protest (e.g. applying for exit visas, celebrating Jewish holidays, “twinning,” and demonstrations).

6. Gather students and ask for volunteers to answer the questions, including which protests students believe are most effective and why.

7. Ask students to look at the image on their worksheets. Ask: What do you think the phrase “I am my brother’s keeper” means? Explain that this movement is considered one of the biggest successes in social justice activism. Ask: What do you think made this movement so successful? Is the success related to the phrase “I am my brother’s keeper”? How? Reflect on answers.

Homework:

Journal on the following questions:

1. Have you heard back from your pen pal yet? If so, write a paragraph reflecting on what you’ve learned from him or her. If not, what do you think your pen pal might share with you?
2. Think of the research you did on what issues kids in your pen pal’s country may be facing. What are others doing to combat those issues?
3. Choose one activist effort and think of one thing you can do to help that effort. Think of all the different forms of protest you learned about today!
**Post-visit Activity**

**Key questions:**
1. What is empathy and what role does it play in activism and in our lives?
2. What does it mean to support those who are different from you, who are not your “brothers” and “sisters”?
3. What are the advantages of working together with people who are different from you for a cause? Interfaith, intergenerational groups, etc.

**Learning objectives:**
By the end of this unit students will be able to:
1. Describe the importance of personal connections within the Movement to Free Soviet Jews.
2. Demonstrate the significance of empathy within their own lives.
3. Appreciate the importance of working with others, and especially with interfaith advocacy groups.

**Procedure:**
1. Remind your students that, so far, they’ve learned about the different ways American Jews advocated for the rights of Soviet Jews. They have also learned about how Soviet Jews advocated for themselves. Ask: *How many different forms of support and protest can you remember from visiting the exhibition?*

2. Ask: *Why was it important for American Jews to help Soviet Jews?* Reflect on students’ answers, and lead them toward the duty for Jews to help other Jews (in Hebrew: *ahavat yisrael*). Follow up by asking: *Do you think it’s also important to help others who are not like us? What’s easier about helping others who are different? What’s harder?*

3. Show students the newspaper clipping about Sister Ann Gillen. Remind students that Edward Kuznetsov, whose name she wears, was one of the leaders of “Operation Wedding.” Ask: *Why do you think Sister Gillen chose to speak out on behalf of Soviet Jews? What does she mean when she says, “we have to use the power of public opinion”? Do you agree with her statement that those who do not speak out are guilty? Do you think it was easy or difficult for Sister Gillen to convince her community to fight for Soviet Jews?*

4. Explain that empathy is very important to our ability to care about and advocate for others, whether we know them or not. Ask: *What does empathy mean? Is it the same as sympathy?* Explain that empathy is the complete opposite of indifference. It is the effort we make to understand the experiences, the lives and emotions, happiness and hardships, of other people, whether we know them or not. Empathy makes it possible to opens one’s mind and heart to the experiences of others, but does not require feeling sorry for them—only that we make an effort to understand the world form their perspective. Ask: *Why is empathy important? What’s easy or difficult about empathizing*
with others? Can you think of a time you have empathized with another person? What did Sister Gillen do to help her community empathize with Soviet Jews?

5. Share with students a local organization (may be Jewish but does not have to be) engaging in social justice activism. Ask: Do you think it’s important to support this cause? Why or why not? Brainstorm together as a class what can be done to support that organization. (For example: join one of their existing efforts, create a petition, educate others on a particular issue, collaborate with other religious groups, etc.) Make plans for implementing your proposed form of support.

6. As your students whether they think it takes bravery and courage to create change—in somebody’s life or in our communities. Explain that bravery and courage take many forms: writing a letter, going to a march, facing those who disagree with empathy, posting signs, joining advocacy organizations, talking to your friends and family. Ask your students if they believe it is possible to truly understand another person’s challenges. Explain that, despite its difficulty, connecting, listening, and sharing are critical to social change.

Home assignment:

1. Continue to do research on your pen pal’s country.
2. So far you wrote your pen pal a letter and learned about activist efforts in your pen pal’s country. Now think of a way that you can lead a protest, and moreover, collaborate with a group of people whose members are different from you. To whom would you reach out for this purpose?
3. Work toward implementing your protest!
Appendix A. List of Sources


August 1981
Dear Kira,
Hi! How are you? My name is Sheryl Sandberg. I am 12 years old and I live in the United States of America.
I have a younger brother and sister. Their names are Michelle and David. I go to school at Highland Oaks in Highland and I am in seventh grade. Twice a week I have Hebrew lessons and I also take ballet.
I like to sing, dance, collect stationary, and have fun with my friends, among other things.
I am very interested to hear about you, your family, and life in Russia. Where do you go to school? What grade are you in? What do you like to do? What are your hobbies?
I would like to keep on writing to you if you would like to write too. We’ll be pen-pals. Please write back. My address is:
Sheryl Sandberg
19010 NE 20 Ave.
N. Miami Beach, Fla. 33179

I hope you and your family have a very happy new year.
Your friend, Sheryl Sandberg

May 1981
Dear Kira,
This is a copy of a letter I sent you. I also sent you a Passover card, a letter and a Chanukah present with some friends. The present was stationary that was blue with white clouds and a rainbow. I am worried that you are not receiving my letters and presents. Please write to me and let me know if you receive this letter.

2. Bat mitzvah invitation.
3. **Bar mitzvah speech of Shaul Kelner (1982).**

I am fighting anti-Semitism by “twinning” my bar mitzvah. This is sharing my bar mitzvah with a boy in the USSR, who cannot have one due to the anti-Semitism in the Russian government. I am twinning with a boy named Leonid Barros. I have sent letters to him and have sent him a tape of our Torah and Haftorah portions. The Russian government censors all mail so by writing to Leonid I help show his government that we are aware of their anti-Semitism and what they are doing to their Jews.

4. **Excerpt from Sylva Zalmanson’s final address as a defendant at the “Operation Wedding” trial (1970).**

I cannot seem to come to my senses … I am stunned by the sentences demanded for us by the Procurator. He has just proposed execution for a crime that has not been committed. I consider that Soviet law should not regard someone’s intention to live in another country as treason, and I am convinced that it is those who unlawfully trample on our right to live where we wish who should have been put on trial. We shall never lose the dream of joining our ancient motherland. Several of us did not believe our enterprise would succeed, or hardly believed it. We noticed we were being followed at the railway station, but we could no longer turn back. Our fear of the suffering which might be inflicted on us was nothing in comparison with our dream of living in Israel. I wanted to live there as a family and to work. I would not have indulged in politics. My interest extends only as far as my desire to emigrate. Even now I do not doubt for a minute that one day I shall live in Israel. This dream, sanctified by two thousand years of hope, will never leave me. Next year in Jerusalem!

5. **Excerpt from the letter of Boris Kochubievsky to the Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev (November 28, 1968).**

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 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.
6. **Backpack contents**

- Thumb drive with all posters, images, and documents
- Juicy Fruit gum
- Cassette Tapes
- Kochubievsky flyers
- Prisoner of Conscience cards
- 4 posters for marches/rallies
- Protest photo
- Photo of *Refuseniks*
- Photo of underground Jewish kindergarten in USSR
- Copy of book *The Jews of Silence*
Step 1. Join up with 1 or 2 classmates.

Step 2. Explore the exhibit and backpack. Write down your responses to the following:

How many different adjectives can you find on the panels to describe Jewish life in the Soviet Union? List them here.

How many different forms of protest can you find? List them here. Be creative!

Find examples where someone:

- Protested at a young age
- Was imprisoned for protesting
- Protested through song
- Protested through a religious ritual
- Had his or her face used to represent the cause
- Smuggled something into the Soviet Union
- Created an artistic poster
- Was “twinned”
- Adopted a prisoner

Fill in the signs below with protests you would want to join or support.

Why did you pick these protests?

Photo by Yona Zaloscer, courtesy of Yeshiva University Archives, Students Struggle for Soviet Jewry Records
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


