

The Power of Peoplehood: The Soviet Jewish Journey

David Waksberg's remarks: November 9, 2011

When I was 13 years old, a group of people tried to steal an airplane in a desperate attempt to escape the USSR and call international attention to the plight of Soviet Jews.

They failed in their first objective and succeeded in their 2nd one. Until the Leningrad trials, the only thing I knew about Jews from Eastern Europe were the faces in the family photos on my grandparents' apartment wall, all of whom had perished from unnatural causes.

In solidarity with one of the two defendants initially sentenced to death, I got myself this huge *magen david* on a necklace with the name of Mark Dymshitz and wore it to school every day.

One day an African-American friend of mine asked me why I was wearing this big Jewish star around my neck. I explained to him who Mark Dymshitz was, what the cause was about and also, that I wanted people to know I was Jewish. He pondered this for a moment and then started rubbing the skin on his face and said – “see this? I wear this so people will know I'm black!”

That boy understood something I hadn't - In fact, that necklace was my skin, my badge, my secular kippah. That the teenage me wore this necklace not only to call attention to Mark Dymshitz and his friends, but also to myself – as a Jew – was neither unique nor trivial. For many American Jews, the great re-awakening of Soviet Jewish consciousness was a wake-up call here. During the 70s and 80s, activism on behalf of Soviet Jews was, for many American Jews, their primary means of Jewish expression. Through this activity, many found their way to their own meaningful Jewish life. Observing thousands of Russian Jews

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risking all to partake in what we all took for granted – Jewish life – was not only inspiring, it was thought-provoking. Perhaps there was more to being Jewish than we had thought.

The teenage me graduated to other methods beyond wearing a necklace, and, to be honest, wearing the name Dymshitz on my chest every day was problematic for my teenage social life.

As more Soviet Jews ran afoul of the KGB, more names for posters, necklaces, buttons, and bracelets. Here's one I wore as a teenager – with the name of my co-panelist – Joseph Begun.

All these accoutrements – buttons, posters, bumper stickers, bracelets, not to mention pickets, petitions, etc. – I was never sure what exactly they were accomplishing, but they were my entry in. And for many young Jews they were, along with Israel, a set of symbols and tools by which we defined what sort of modern Jews we wanted to be: proud, assertive, defiant, principled – like our role models across the ocean.

The movement had several points of origin, including Israel and, of course, within the Soviet Union itself. I will let others speak of what went on there. I want to address what this thing was about from the perspective of those individuals involved with the Union of Councils and its associates, what we referred to as “the activists.”

This was not a movement based on ideology or theory or, for the most part, theology. While there were high-minded theoretical treatises and strategic position papers, these were not what drove us. The movement was based on the observation of empirical evidence as it unfolded in Russia, and, more than anything, on outrage. We saw

something for which outrage was the only sane response, so outrage was our response. That outrage came from a human place and also from the specter, never distant, of the six million who perished at the hands of totalitarianism, and knowledge and shame of our own impotence to prevent it. For Jacob Birnbaum, Moshe Decter, and others who kick-started this movement here in the mid-sixties, the Holocaust was barely two decades removed. Harold Light, who founded the Bay Area Council for Soviet Jews, and who spoke in a distinctly AMERICAN voice, said it well – “it’s not often you get a 2nd chance to rescue your people.”

I must confess that I am struck by the relative scarcity of women among the speakers at this conference, given the leadership role that women played in the American movement to free Soviet Jews. I understand that some of them, like Lynn Singer and Irene Manekovsky, are no longer around, and others, like Pam Cohen, were unable to attend. So I’ll simply say that the KGB colonel who told Sharansky that his fate was in the hands of “students and housewives” had it right. I began as a student, as did other leaders like Morey Schapira, and most everything we got right we learned from those housewives.

Those students and housewives didn’t confine themselves to public protest – they engaged in political advocacy at the highest and most sophisticated levels. And I never saw more effective advocacy in Congress, the White House or the State Department than that practiced by these housewives. They had a talent to cut to the core of the issue and to appeal to the basic humanity of those in power. If you don’t believe me, listen to George Schultz speak about his public service. For

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this smart and seasoned man who stood at the apex of geo-political power and influence, his most memorable and meaningful moment was when he received a phone call from Ida Nudel after she arrived in Israel with the simple words – “I’m home.”

Peoplehood means many things and we as a people are still in the process of defining just what 21st century peoplehood represents. Certainly, it has something to do with a deep sense of connection we feel toward one another – connection and responsibility – expressed by the phrase – *kol yisrael arevim zeh le zeh* (all Israel is responsible one to another). I can tell you the meaning of this phrase for me is wrapped in the way that I learned it. I didn’t learn it in Hebrew school or in my Bar Mitzvah training. It was introduced to me by Eliezer Yuzefovich, a Moscow refusenik who uttered those words when I asked him why he, a father of young children, was embarking on a hunger strike.

There is much in the history of this movement worth mining if we indeed want to establish a strong sense of peoplehood. For this endeavor – to free our people – was indeed a global partnership and one that stubbornly defied efforts to control it. It was a deeply human movement – characterized by human faces, stories, emotions.

A strange thought occurred to me as I was preparing these remarks. What drove American Jews to rise up as they did for their brothers and sisters whom they had never met? I think among their motivations – loneliness. I don’t mean that we were personally lonely, individuals devoid of friends and companionship. I mean that we, as a people felt a loss that we could barely articulate – like an amputee feels in missing a limb. It was the loss of the six million to our body politic, to our

people and, beyond that the loss borne of the forced isolation of those who survived behind the Iron Curtain. We were lonely as a people and, on some very deep and visceral level, we yearned for reunification of our family, for the embrace of our long-lost loved ones. I know I am not the only American Jew who, during those dark days of the 70s and 80s, felt most alive and fulfilled when sitting at a kitchen table in Moscow or Leningrad or Kiev or Minsk, engaged in hours of conversation with Jews I had never before met but with whom I found instant kinship. And I know I'm not the only American Jew who found himself among a group of Jewish refuseniks in the USSR only to realize in amazement how familiar it felt – how these people were JUST like my uncles, aunts, and cousins.

Peoplehood indeed.

What inspired us were stories of courage, of course, but also stories of discovery or rediscovery – a sort of Master Class in “What Being Jewish Means to Me.” I will share but one – only to illustrate its connection to and illumination of the American Jewish experience and of what Peoplehood can mean for us –

Alexander Paritsky, a refusenik from Kharkov, had been a successful scientist until he applied for a visa for Israel. One thing led to another and Paritsky found himself arrested and sent to a harsh labor camp.

The camp commandant asked him why he threw away a successful Soviet life for this hopeless quest.

Paritsky told the commandant that when he was six years old, kids taunted him with “Zhid.” He'd never heard this word before and

indeed, hadn't been aware that he was Jewish so he ran home to speak with his father.

"Yes, we are Jews," Paritsky's dad told him. "Jews are no different than Russians or Ukrainians – we are all the same. Those children who say otherwise are bad."

Paritsky was intrigued by this. Other nationalities - Ukrainians, Moldovans, Armenians - had their own culture, their own language. Do Jews have their own language?

"Yes," said his dad – "it's called Hebrew."

What do the letters look like? Asked little Sasha.

His father took a piece of paper and a pencil and, with his little boy on his lap put the pencil to paper, to write out the aleph bet.

Sasha sat there watching the pencil poised motionless over the page for what probably felt like eternity. Finally, he saw not writing, but a tear drop fall on the paper.

"Papa," little Sasha cried out, "why are you crying?"

"Because," said his father, "I can't remember how to draw the letters."

"My father's tears," Paritsky told the commandant, "seared a hole in my heart and my soul."

His journey to Israel, by way of the Gulag, began with that blank sheet of paper.

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This story represented a sort of extreme dystopian fun-house mirror image of our own experience of modernity. What American Jew could not relate to this sad scenario of Jewish illiteracy? And who would not think twice before discarding that same precious gift that Paritsky, through courage, determination and three years in the Gulag, struggled to reclaim?

Paritsky's father's words seared a hole not only in Paritsky's heart, but in mine. These stories, and there were thousands of them, seared a hole in the collective heart of American Jewry.

At the end of the day, we realized that their stories were our stories. Through these stories, through these human connections, commonalities of experience, of heritage, and of destiny were learned and a partnership was forged.

Isn't that what Peoplehood is about?