

A Hanukkah Letter From Moscow

Contributed by: Enid L. Wurtman's Soviet Jewry Archives on the History of the Zionist Movement from the Soviet Union

Introduction

The background information provided below is meant to introduce young children to the idea that Jewish people in the Soviet Union were not free to express themselves as Jews or to emigrate to a different country. The original lesson plan was written prior to 1980 and can be viewed in the materials.

Objectives

Students will research different personalities from the Soviet Jewry movement. They will determine what motivated them, what happened to them, and what happened to them after the movement ended.

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| Big Ideas | Jews are responsible for one another (solidarity). |
| | You can make a difference. |
| Content | To relate to the historical events that led to freedom for Soviet Jews. |
| | To explain the Jewish values that led Jewish people around the world to fight for Soviet Jewish rights. |
| Skills | To build a civic engagement plan. |
| | To contribute to causes relating to (Jewish/all) human freedom. |
| Meaning | To reflect on your obligation to help (Jewish/all) people in need. |
| | To reflect on the power of a common (Jewish) voice. |

Background

During this time period, there were about two million Jews living in the Soviet Union. 380,000 of them requested permission to emigrate to Israel. Over 15,000 of them were refused permission to leave, and they became known as "Refuseniks." 1,200 of those were Refuseniks for ten years or longer.

It was risky for a family to request to leave the Soviet Union. Once they did so, they often stopped receiving their mail, the phone lines were cut off and many got fired from their jobs. Children were often harassed at school, and sometimes, people even got beaten or imprisoned for no reason (other than applying for exit visas, and of course, for being Jewish).

The main areas in the Soviet Union where Jewish populations were significant were Moscow, Leningrad, Kiev, Odessa, Baku, Tashkent, Kishner and Minsk. Between the years 1968 and 1986, 265,822 Jews left, mostly going to the United States and Israel. When these Jews applied for permission to leave, the process often took months or years to be completed. They had to get special permission from their parents, even if the applicants were adults. They also had to pay large sums of money for each person leaving the country. They often did not have the means to pay these fees.

Duration: 45 minutes

Materials:

Map with the Former Soviet Union labeled

Masha's Hanukkah Story

Procedure

1. Background: Begin by reading the background information to students and putting some of the important facts on the board if you wish. Once the students have heard about Soviet Refuseniks, allow them time to ask questions. Give them a choice of completing any three of the activity options listed below. (Or, have them complete all of them if your timing allows.)

2. Guided Discussion

- Why might some people decide not to apply to leave? What risks did they take by doing so?
- What things do you think a family had to consider before applying for exit visas?
- Do you think you or your family would apply or would you wait it out and hope that things would get better?

3. Activities

- **Map:** Find the Soviet Union on a map (preferably from the 1980s, as the borders have changed). Color it in and determine which is bigger, the Soviet Union or the United States.
- **Online Research:** Find pictures online of the following places. Print and cut them out and place them on your map where they belong: Red Square, Synagogue of Moscow, Leningrad Synagogue
- **Unscramble:** Write on the board or a piece of paper the following scrambled names of major cities in the Soviet Union: Scowmo, Nidgarnel, desosa, vike
- **Word search:** Create a word search on http://puzzlemaker.discoveryeducation.com/WordSearchSetupForm.asp?campaign=flyout_teachers_puzzle_wordcross Use the following words in your puzzle: Soviet, Jewish, Israel, Kippah, Torah, United States, Moscow, Mezuzah, Hebrew, Refusenik. Optional: add more words that relate to this topic and define them in your list.
- **Imagine and Write:** Imagine you are writing a letter to the Soviet Consulate to ask for permission for refuseniks to leave. What will you tell them about yourself? How will you ask them for permission. Write a draft of this letter, and compare it to a friend's. Note that children from around the world actually did this, and oftentimes, their efforts were considered!
- **Read and Discuss:** Read Masha's story and discuss the following questions as a class.
 - Why does Masha's family wish to leave the Soviet Union?
 - Why does Masha want to learn about Judaism?
 - How are the Refuseniks similar to the Maccabees?
 - How did Jews around the world (just like you) help the Refuseniks?
 - Where are the Jews of the Soviet Union today? How have they managed in the countries where they moved?