

Soviet Jewry - Kit IV: 1967-1980s

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

Introduction

Famous Holocaust author Elie Weisel published a book called *The Jews of Silence*, after a visit to the Soviet Union in 1965. This book helped to bring the plight of Jews in the Soviet Union into the public sphere.

Objectives

- To familiarize students with the history of the Soviet Emigration Movement, beginning in 1967 and continuing through the 1980s.
- To help students understand the struggles, personal tragedies and sacrifices that many Soviet Jews went through in order to fight for their right to live freely as Jews in their homeland.

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.
Meaning	To reflect on your obligation to help (Jewish/all) people in need.
	To reflect on the power of a common (Jewish) voice.

Duration: 45 minutes

Materials: Source sheet

Background

During the 1970s and 1980s, Jews from all over the world staged rallies, wrote letters and begged and pleaded for Soviet Jews to be granted emigration rights. School children wrote letters to the Soviet leadership, and many bar and bat mitzvah aged children “adopted” Soviet children with whom they “shared” their Bar Mitzvah celebration. They wrote the Soviet children letters (most were never delivered), included their buddy’s name on their invitation and bestowed upon them an honorary Bar Mitzvah, which most of those children would never be able to celebrate.

The political pressure that people put on the Soviet Union was an integral part of their finally freeing people. What do you think you could have done if you were asked to help in the cause?

Procedure

- 1. Reading and Discussion:** Introduce this lesson by reading and discussing the excerpt below from *The Jews of Silence*. Give each pair or group of students one of the excerpts below. Ask them to read it together, and discuss what it means. They will then present it to the class, and explain what they discussed, asking if there are clarifying questions.
- 2. Explain to the class:** Once you have introduced the topic through the writings of Elie Weisel, explain that the 1967 war in Israel further pushed Soviet Jews to seek release from the Soviet Union. There was increased anti-semitism as a result of the Six Day War, but the Jews there were feeling euphoric for Israel's victory. More and more, images of Jews and Israel throughout the world became positively portrayed in the media. This gave the Soviet Jews, whose identity had been stifled for 60 years under a regime designed to repress spiritual and cultural initiative, the courage to apply to emigrate to Israel.
- 3. The Leningrad Trials and Prison Camp**
 - Introduce the story of the Leningrad Trials, which occurred after Soviet Jews attempted to steal a plane in order to sneak out of Russia. Once students understand the important events of the Six Day War and the Leningrad Trials, have each student read about one of the people on their source sheet. Then, have them research the following information:
 1. What happened to this person in the Soviet Union?
 2. How long were they attempting to escape?
 3. Did anyone help them? Who? How?
 4. What happened to them in the end? If they escaped, what happened to them when they arrived in Israel?
- 4. Prisoners of Conscience:** Look at the quote and picture on the source sheet. Discuss what it might have been like for prisoners each day. What formative experiences or beliefs gave prisoners the strength to go on each day?