

Present, Protest, and Inspire:
Learn about individual Refusenks, and prepare a presentation to save them!

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Introduction

In this lesson, students will imagine that they are activists in the free world advocating for Soviet Jews. Students will learn about a chosen refusenik, and come up with a plan for how to bring public attention to their refusenik's case. Students will build creative presentations about their refusenik through drawing, writing, creating songs, speeches, collages, etc. Students will then present the case for their refusenik.

Learning Objectives

- Students will learn the stories of individual Refuseniks. Through learning these stories, students will gain an understanding of what it was like to be Jewish in the Soviet Union.
- Students will learn about the activities of those who fought for Soviet Jewry in the West.

Materials

[Printed pictures and biographies of Prisoners of Zion](#)

blank board for collage

pens, markers, papers, glue, etc

Background Information

Before the 1960s, the West was largely unaware of the extremity of the Jewish problem in the Soviet Union. In 1965, Elie Wiesel was sent to the Soviet Union by Ha'aretz to report on the lives of the Jews there and, in 1966, he published "The Jews of Silence", his eyewitness account of what he saw there. His book was a wake-up call to action, directed at world Jewry whose silence regarding Russian Jews was deafening, and greatly helped raise public awareness for the cause. Jews around the world began rallying, lobbying, and doing everything they could to release the Jews from the Soviet Union. These efforts helped lead to the eventual falling of the Iron Curtain and mass emigration of Jews from the Union.

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.

On December 6, 1987 – the largest rally in support of Soviet Jewry was held in Washington D.C., on the day before Mikhail Gorbachev was to meet with U.S. president Ronald Reagan. More than 250,000 people attended this historic “Freedom Sunday” rally that sent waves throughout the world and helped the imminent lifting of the Iron Curtain. In 1986, without internet and social media, they were able to spread the word and mobilize a massive turnout for the rally. They did this by writing in local papers, creating a telephone hotline, holding lectures, running educational programs, organizing transportation to Washington, and handing out pledge cards and pamphlets in local synagogues with slogans such as “Gorbachev is coming to Washington...are you?”

Procedure

Go over the background information in class.

Discuss:

1. What did social activists, and the global Jewish community, do to help free Soviet Jews?
2. In what way did their efforts impact the Jews in the Soviet Union?
3. What specific methods did social activists use to tell the story of the Refuseniks and bring attention to their cause?

Learn the story of a Refusenik:

Divide the class into small groups. Each group should chose (or be assigned) a Refusenik (see link to folder in materials). Students will read their refusenik’s biography and look at his/her photos.

Present your story:

Each group should imagine that they are activists working to free their refusenik. To do so, they need to tell his/her story to the world. Students should be begin by writing an outline of how they would like to tell this story. Then think of creative ways to present it using their talents. Suggestion: in each group have one student draw, one write the speech/presentation, two-three to create an archive collage. Presentation can include dances, songs, etc.

Students should prepare their presentations and present to their class, school, community.