

## Soviet Jewry - Kit V

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

### Introduction

Jewish children all over the world played an important role in the activism that eventually helped Soviet Jews attain their freedom. Have students ask adults who were kids during the 1970s or 80s if they remember being active in the fight for freedom. Their synagogues, youth groups, camps or Hebrew Schools, may have been involved in some way. Find out what they did and compare it to the options presented below.

### Objectives

- To recognize that responsibility is on us all when there is injustice in the world, and that even a small action can cause a ripple that might eventually lead to results.

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.

**Duration:** 45 minutes

### Materials:

Why Won't the Soviets Let the Jews Out: <https://goo.gl/WBnuuN>

Student Connection

## 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. Read: [“Why Won’t the Soviets Let the Jews Out”](#) together as a class.

Guided Discussion Questions:

- What are the most pressing reasons Jews wanted to leave? Why now, after being repressed for so long?
- Why couldn’t the Soviet government realize that their rejection of the Jews’ existence would be solved by allowing them to leave?
- Why is Soviet action consistently so confusing? What do their actions have in common? (Secrecy)
- The fact that the Soviet government violated international law was part of what enraged people all over the world, even non-Jews. What international law did they ignore?
- Think of an issue going on in the world today, have you heard any activism.....what can you do....

2. Explain **”The Student Connection”**: Explain to students that during the 1970s and 80s, North American students just like them did become involved. View the source sheet and read as a class some of the ways students connected the Jewish holidays to their activism on behalf of Soviet Jews trying to emigrate.

**3. Discussion:** View some of the other ways kids could become activists on “The Student Connection”. Have a class discussion using the following questions to guide the conversation.

- What is an activist?
- Are you an activist?
- What are important causes in your life that you advocate for?
- Do you think it is important for students to be activists?
- Have you ever used any of the methods recommended for advocacy?
- How did they help your cause?
- The advocacy methods suggested on “The Student Connection” are from the 1970s. Are these methods applicable to today? Which methods are the same? What methods do we use now?

**4. The End Result:** Please read the following passage. Explain to the students that because of activists Soviet Jews were able to emigrate to Israel and America. Young activists, just like them, can make a huge impact and create the change they want to see in the world.

#### SOVIET JEWS IN ISRAEL

The best reward of those Jews in the West, who work tirelessly, in the Soviet Jewry Movement, is seeing those who receive their exit visas, emigrate to Israel. For US it represents the 'end' of our struggle; for THEM, it is both the 'end' and the 'beginning' ..... the 'end' of their struggle for freedom and the 'beginning' of a new life.

To begin a new life in their chosen country, they become immersed in the absorption process of Israel, where each new 'oleh' must learn a new language, a new culture and find employment. The 'positive' stories about well-absorbed Soviet Jews are rarely known. But truly, to learn that many happy NEW ISRAELIS have found their place in Israel, should make us proud that we have fought to bring them home.

**5. Extension:** Watch this rally <https://www.c-span.org/video/?454-1/freedom-rally-soviet-jews> . The teacher can then divide up the speakers and designate one speaker to students or student groups. Students should design a presentation of the speaker including: Who they are, what their political role was, their connection to the plight of Soviet Jews, what risks (if any) they might have taken by becoming involved or what they may have considered before speaking, what happened in their life after 1987. They can then summarize the message the person gave at this rally.