



## **Escape Room Activity**

In this lesson, students will learn about the struggle of the Soviet Jews in the 1970s, and different ways in which they fought back against the oppressive regime that denied them the right to emigrate.

### **Learning Objectives**

Students will be able to identify with the experience of Jews attempting to leave the Soviet Union, including feeling what it's like to be deprived of freedom of movement.

### **Materials**

Attached escape room document

picture of Avital Sharansky

Historical Background

### **Background**

In the 1970s, it was still forbidden for Jews to gather and express their Judaism freely. There was an unofficial Jewish quota in leading institutions of higher education and Jews had harder entrance exams. Scores of Jews applied for exit visas but were denied based on claims that they held government secrets or information that threatened national security. Many Jews were dismissed from their jobs after applying for exit visas, which in itself was seen as a betrayal of the Soviets. Jews became more vocal in their protesting, in appealing to their own government and foreign bodies, and in standing up when the Soviet government tried to deny their claims. The authorities fought back by raising the prices of exit visas (especially for educated emigrants). They stripped emigrants of their Soviet citizenship and arrested Zionist activists.

The Jews continued to lead their religious lives in secret, holding underground gatherings to learn Hebrew and to learn about Jewish culture and religion. They held secret Chanukah and Purim celebrations, and Passover seders with smuggled matzah as it was forbidden to make matzah in the Soviet Union. They tried very hard to get their hands on any religious item or text – anything that would help them connect to their heritage and to their Jewish brothers. Groups

of **refuseniks** compiled lists of names and addresses of other refuseniks which they secretly dispensed to the West, allowing Jews from abroad the ability to make contact and even to visit with them, giving them much needed support and encouragement.

In December of 1970, a group of Jews attempted to hijack a plane to fly to Israel under the guise of going to a family wedding in what became known as Operation Wedding. The group was caught while the plane was still on the ground, and they were tried in the Leningrad Trial. There were worldwide protests in reaction to the harsh sentences (including two death sentences) which led to the commuting of the death sentences and to the reduction of jail time for the others. Soviet Jews continued to hold demonstrations in protest of being refused to emigrate. Jewish organizations abroad protested as well. Students signed petitions and held their own campus rallies, handing out necklaces and bracelets with the names and pictures of refuseniks.

In 1974, American senators and congressmen signed the Jackson-Vanik amendment, which rewarded the soviets for letting out large numbers of Jews (it restricted regular trade relations with non-market countries who had strict emigration laws). In 1976, the Moscow Helsinki Watch Group was established to monitor the Soviet Union's compliance with the Helsinki accords, in which they had promised to "respect human rights and fundamental freedoms, including freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief" and "the right of the individual to know and act upon his rights and duties in this field". The Helsinki Watch Group reported on human rights violations by the Soviet government, and published them around the world with a call to action. In 1977, Natan Sharansky, a founding member of the group was arrested on charges of treason and espionage for his dealings with foreign correspondents. He was sentenced to 13 years of prison.

## **Procedure**

- Ahead of the lesson, have students interview their parents/grandparents about their involvement in the struggle for soviet Jewry. Did they attend any rallies? Sign petitions? Do they still have any items from the protests that they can bring in to show the class.
- Have students present their findings – alternatively, invite a parent to come and speak to the class about his experiences.
- Review the background history of the struggle of the Soviet Jews in the 1970s (above) having students take note of high and low points of the Jewish experience there (this will be used for a cumulative assessment).
- For younger groups: divide the students into pairs and have them pretend they are Jews during this period. One student will pretend to be a Jew living freely in Israel while his partner will be his cousin who is trapped in the Soviet Union. Have the students write a correspondence, each one detailing what their lives are like. Each letter should include the date, a description of his day, something about which he is excited, something which

worries him, and a question he would like to ask. The letters of the Israeli relative should include some form of encouragement to his cousin, as family members in such a situation would have done. These correspondences can be read out loud to the class.

- For older groups: Highlight the story of Natan Sharansky as one of bravery and resilience in a situation seemingly devoid of hope, and create an escape room based on his story. Different tasks and challenges involving the objects in the room need to be solved in order to unlock the doors and escape. Elaborateness of the room will depend on your resources and budget. Below is an example of a three part room. Ideas for challenges can be found in the attached document.
  - Room #1 – Sharansky’s prison cell – a dark room with flashlights hidden. There is a bed with a blanket and pillow, a small table with a mug, spoon, and bowl, a stool, a sink, a book of Psalms, a chess board and a picture of his wife Avital. Different keys attached to chains unlock locks which can only be reached by that particular key. Unlocking the locks releases other keys which eventually unlock the door.
  - Room #2 – Interrogation room – there is a large desk under a hammer and sickle poster, a small table with classified dissident files on it, a bookshelf filled with books, a couch, and pictures of communist leaders on the wall. Codes can be hidden in the documents, the pictures, or other objects in the room.
  - Room #3 – refusenik living room where Jews would gather for their underground activities. There are couches, chairs, a table, pictures of imprisoned refuseniks on the walls, a map of Israel, Jewish religious items, and a Hebrew newspaper.
  - Have a wrap up session where students discuss what they learned through the exercise and how they felt when they could not get out of the room – similar to the Jews who were “locked in” the Soviet Union.