

# Soviet Jewry - Kit I: Prior to 1980

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

- Develop a deeper awareness and appreciation of our freedom to be Jewish.
- To understand the ease with which we are able to freely practice our Judaism.
- Create an awareness of the prominence of Jewish materials available to us in a free country.
- Begin to recognize the basic geography of the Soviet Union.

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:

Historical Map

Historical vocabulary

## 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.

## Procedure

### Part I Activity

1. Have students divide their page into five sections, and label them as directed below.
2. Give them 5-20 minutes to write the Jewish elements that fall under each category. Examples of each are seen in parenthesis.
3. When they are finished, ask them to share their lists, keeping a record on the board, so that they can see the examples are endless.

Religion (Torah, Synagogue, Bar Mitzvah, prayer)

- Education (Day school, Hebrew School, summer camp, history, holidays)
- Media (Movies, famous Jewish people, videos on-line with Jewish content)
- Home Life (Books, art, family traditions, holidays, kosher or Jewish food)
- Community (Jewish buildings or organizations, youth groups, kosher bakery)

#### 4. Discuss:

- Why is everyone's list just a little different than everyone else's?
- Can you imagine what it would be like to live in a society here none of these things are possible? The Jews in the Soviet Union lived in such a way!
- Somehow they were able to maintain their Jewish identity. How do you think they managed to do that, even after decades of being suppressed and limited in terms of religion and culture?
- Explain that they did it in many ways, all of which were risky: secret collections of books and letters, secret Hebrew classes, books and other materials smuggled in by tourists, radio broadcasts from Israel, letters from Jews from all over the world.

#### **Part II: Geography**

1. Show the students the historical map (can be found in the materials).
2. Explain that the map of the Soviet Union marks cities where significant Jewish populations were living, many of whom were trying to leave.
3. Ask students to determine their heritage/family history. For homework, ask students to find out if where their family comes from and if anyone has roots that can be traced back to Russia, they should try to find the relevant places on this map.

#### **Part III: Historical vocabulary**

Have students match the following words or phrases to their definitions. They can do this in partners, before sharing their answers. When answers are given, explain or expand upon these basic elements of the Soviet Jewish experience. The worksheet can be found in the materials.

<b>Term</b>	<b>Definition</b>
Aliyah Movement	A Soviet Jew who served a prison time or lived in eternal exile because of their involvement in the Soviet Jewish Emigration Movement.
Refusenik	Agreements signed in 1975 by European countries, USSR, Canada and the United States. Part of the agreement guaranteed the “free flow of men and ideas” and “the reunification of family.”
Activist	In 1948, members of the United Nations, including the Soviet Union, signed an agreement which guaranteed any individual the right to leave any country, including their own.
Prisoner of Conscience	The Soviet government’s secret police
Ovir	Refuseniks who were involved as leaders in the Aliyah Movement.
Invitation	A Soviet Jew, who after applying to the Soviet Authorities for an emigration visa, received an official refusal.
KGB	Other ethnic groups in the Soviet Union have a specific territory within the country to call their own (Ukrainians, Uzbekistan). This statement says that the Soviet government recognizes that Israel is a homeland to the Jews and that some Jews will be permitted to leave for Israel.
International declaration of Human Rights	The visa and immigration office where Soviet Jews must present the invitation and formally apply to emigrate.
Repatriation to Homeland	The Movement of Soviet Jews to be reunited in their historic homeland, Israel.
Helsinki Accords	An affidavit sent by a relative in Israel to a Jew in the Soviet Union who wished to emigrate.