



Educator's Guide

Freeing Russian Jewry: The Refuseniks

This video tells the story of Soviet “refuseniks,” Jews in the former Soviet Union who were denied access to emigrate to Israel. Jews faced severe anti-Semitism and persecution and Natan Sharansky became a symbol of Jewish pride and strength. The international Jewish community united in protest of the Soviet policy against Jewish emigration and rallied for the Soviet Jews’ freedom. Known as “Let My People Go,” this movement was headed by prominent American rabbis Lookstein and Carlebach, the controversial Meir Kahane, and many others. The video features the story’s themes of Jewish unity, activism, and longing for Israel.

Video: <https://unpacked.education/video/freeing-russian-jewry-the-refuseniks/>

Further Reading

1. Natan Sharansky, *Fear No Evil*
2. Ben Sales, “Natan Sharansky Recalls When 250,000 Jews Rallied for Soviet Jewry 30 Years Ago”
<https://www.timesofisrael.com/natan-sharansky-recalls-when-250000-jews-rallied-for-soviet-jewry-30-years-ago/>
3. Oleg Yegorov, “Why Did the USSR Help to Create Israel, but then Became its Foe”, <https://www.rbth.com/history/327040-ussr-and-israel-from-friends-to-foes>
4. Robin Herman, “Marchers in Manhattan Show Their Support for Soviet Jews”, <https://www.nytimes.com/1982/05/03/nyregion/marchers-in-manhattan-show-their-support-for-soviet-jews.html>



5. David Green, “This Day in Jewish History 1948: Stalin Extends Warm Welcome to Golda Meir”,
<https://www.haaretz.com/jewish/this-day-stalin-welcomes-golda-meir-1.5175741>

Review - Did the students understand the material?

1. What tactics did Avital Sharansky employ to help rescue her husband from Soviet prison?
2. What role did American Jews play in helping Russian Jews at this time?
3. True or false? The 1987 rally in Washington D.C. was the largest Jewish gathering of American Jews in US history, totaling 250,000. (True)
4. How many Jews emigrated from the USSR between 1989-2006?
 - a. 60,000
 - b. 600,000
 - c. 1.6 million (correct)
 - d. 6 million
5. What famous Jewish song, that became the anthem of the “Let My People Go” movement, did Shlomo Carlebach compose after the 1964 New York rally to free Russian Jews?
 - a. Hava Nagilah
 - b. Hatikvah
 - c. Am Yisrael Chai (correct)
 - d. Oseh Shalom

Discussion Questions

1. The Pravda, the official USSR newspaper, wrote in 1948: “the State of Israel has nothing to do with the Jews of the Soviet Union, where there is no Jewish problem, and therefore no need for Israel.” Does a country need to have a “Jewish problem” in order for its Jews to “need” Israel? In the 21st century, do you think Jews in the diaspora need Israel?



2. Why did the majority of Soviet Jews have their eyes set on Israel rather than America or another country?
3. When Golda Meir, who served as the first Israeli ambassador to Russia, visited Moscow on Rosh Hashanah 1948, 50,000 Jews turned up to see her. What do you think her visit meant to Russian Jews at that time?

Reflection Questions

1. Jews around the world were united in this shared cause of freeing Soviet Jews. Can you think of a time when you experienced a strong sense of Jewish unity? Do you find that Jews unite only in times of crisis, or when things are going well, too?
2. In 1966, Elie Wiesel wrote: “What torments me most is not the Jews of silence I met in Russia, but the silence of the Jews I live among today.” Is there a cause today that you feel that you, or your community, is silent about? How can you raise your voice?
3. What motivated Natan Sharansky to keep going through nine years of imprisonment and harsh physical and psychological conditions? Is there something you value so strongly that you can imagine standing up for in such an extreme way?