



## Educator's Guide

# Women of the Refusenik Movement

The 1960s and 1970s ushered in Jewish unity as Jews throughout the world banded together in the plight to free Soviet Jews. Several “Prisoners of Zion” and activists working to free them on the outside rose to prominence in the Jewish world and beyond: Natan Sharansky, Yosef Mendelovitch, Jacob Birnbaum and others. Who were the women who worked for the cause, both within the USSR and without? In this video, meet the “housewives” who spearheaded “the 35’s,” as well as three women whose stories were integral to the fate of Soviet Jewry: Avital Sharansky, Ida Nudel and Sylva Zalmanson. Watch this video and use these prompts to learn about the heroines of the past generation.

Link to video: [https://youtu.be/E6\\_GL5QxDhg](https://youtu.be/E6_GL5QxDhg)

## Further Reading

1. Avital Sharansky, *Next Year in Jerusalem*
2. Ida Nudel, *Hand in the Darkness: The Autobiography of a Refusenik*
3. Trailer, *Operation Wedding*  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ef2x9CjitYo&feature=youtu.be>
4. Natan Sharansky, *Fear No Evil*
5. Judah H. Harris, “20 Years After Fight to Free Husband, Avital Sharansky Shuns the Limelight”  
<https://www.jta.org/2006/02/09/archive/reflection-20-years-after-fight-to-free-husband-avital-sharansky-shuns-the-limelight>



**6.** The Refusenik Project, “Historical Overview”

<https://www.refusenikproject.org/history/#historical-overview>

## **Review – Did the students understand the material?**

- 1.** Which one of these women was *not* involved in efforts to free Soviet Jews?
  - a.** Avital Sharansky
  - b.** Ida Nudel
  - c.** Sylva Zalmanson
  - d.** Maria Sharapova
- 2.** What tactics did Avital Sharansky employ to help rescue her husband from Soviet prison?
- 3.** Ida Nudel arranged demonstrations, correspondence, and meetings with foreigners visiting Moscow, which brought public attention to the Refuseniks’ struggles. She was ultimately exiled to Siberia after she:
  - a.** Sent an illegal letter
  - b.** Hung a banner from her balcony that said “KGB – Give Me My Exit Visa!”
  - c.** Went undercover and was caught
  - d.** Met with one too many foreign visitors to Moscow
- 4.** What was “Operation Wedding” and what were its consequences?
- 5.** What famous Jewish song did Shlomo Carlebach compose that became the anthem of the “Let My People Go” movement?
  - a.** Hava Nagila
  - b.** Hatikvah
  - c.** Am Yisrael Chai
  - d.** Oseh Shalom

## **Discussion Questions**

- 1.** The following is an excerpt from a [letter](#) that Elie Wiesel wrote to Raisa Gorbachev, wife of Soviet leader Mikhael Gorbachev, on behalf of Ida Nudel:  
“This plea is addressed to Mrs. Gorbachev with the hope that it will have a greater effect than those that many of us have addressed many times to your



husband. It is made on behalf of a remarkable woman whose plight has moved millions of people from one corner of the world to the other. She needs your intervention; she deserves it. Please, put in a good word for her. Ida Nudel and I have never met, but we have been friends for about 18 years. I admire her courage, her idealism and her moral commitment... Born Jewish, all she wants is to be able to live as a Jew. This, she thinks, is possible for her only in the land of Israel.... I will not rest until we meet. Please, Mrs. Gorbachev. Do speak to your husband about my unhappy yet proud friend Ida Nudel.”

Why do you think Elie Wiesel appealed to Gorbachev’s wife, specifically? What do you think this letter, coming from a Holocaust survivor, might have meant to Mrs. Gorbachev?

- 2.** Famous American actress Jane Fonda committed herself to Nudel’s cause. She even flew to Israel to be in Ben Gurion airport when Nudel arrived there as a free woman. Why might Nudel’s story have touched her, a non-Jewish American woman, so deeply?
- 3.** A group of Refuseniks planned “[Operation Wedding](#),” in which they intended to hijack a plane and land it outside of the USSR, though they were caught before they could put the plan into action. Were the Refuseniks justified in hatching such a plan, which would at once bring about their freedom and possibly endanger others? Explain. What distinguishes a freedom fighter from a terrorist?
- 4.** Golda Meir is another woman who was very involved in the plight of Soviet Jewry. When Meir, who served as the first Israeli ambassador to Russia, visited Moscow on Rosh Hashanah in 1948, 50,000 Jews turned up to [see her](#). What do you think her visit meant to Russian Jews at that time? Why do you think Meir described this as one of the most intense experiences of her life?
- 5.** When learning about Israel, people often reduce Israel to the Arab-Israeli conflict. What are the reasons educators often do that, and why do you think there is value in learning about the other aspects of Israeli history and society?



## Reflection Questions

- 1.** Avital Sharansky is known as a private woman who prefers a quiet life yet assumed a very public and active role in fighting for her husband's freedom. How might she have mustered the courage to fill this role when it went against her nature? Was there a time when you had to step up in a way that was challenging for you, or be in the limelight against your wishes?
- 2.** The KGB mocked the "Let My People Go" movement for being comprised of mere "students and housewives." But it was ultimately these "students and housewives" who brought about significant change and results. Why do you think these groups specifically were so successful? As a student and/or a young woman, do you take pride in their accomplishments? How can you become involved in a cause today? List causes you identify with and then search for how you can become involved.
- 3.** 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?
- 4.** Look through these [pictures](#). Write down a journal entry for each point of the year you see in these pictures. What emotions are you experiencing? What questions do you have? What are you hoping for?
- 5.** We produced one episode on the [story of the Refuseniks](#) and one episode about the women who were instrumental in this story. Do you agree with our decision to have a separate episode about the role of women in this story, or do you think the role of women should have been integrated into one episode? Why do you think the producers chose to do a separate story on the women of the refusenik movement?