



ACTIVITY

Freedom 25

Materials Needed

- Video clip
- screening device and internet connection
- Material for research project
- Reading from Azure journal

Time Needed

1 hour (or over several sessions)

Goal

To learn more about the movement to free Soviet Jewry, the most effective human rights movements in recent Jewish history, and glean lessons about the power of Jewish solidarity.

Before You Get Started

Look at the list of enduring understandings. Which one would you like to emphasize through this activity?

- Jewish tradition created a society where the members of the Jewish People have a responsibility to each other as joint participants in a collective.
- Judaism outlines ‘*Kol Yisrael arevim zeh lazeh*’ as an imperative. The word “*kol*” emphasizes that it is an obligation for each and every person.
- Jewish communities have always organized themselves according to this principle, building structures for mutual support of those in need.
- In the late 20th century there are numerous examples of when Jews mobilized in support of their brethren around the world based on this principle.

Directions for Activity

1. Watch the clip (www.youtube.com/watch?v=RvbZO9VUW00) produced by Freedom 25, an organization whose purpose is to teach about the American Jewish community’s efforts to free Soviet Jewry. For a more in depth understanding of the 30 year- movement to free Soviet Jewry, watch Refusenik Movie ([/www.youtube.com/watch?v=9LXlNmQbosY](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9LXlNmQbosY))
2. Consider the questions:

What motivated American Jews to become involved in a movement to help a people who lived a world away, behind the Iron Curtain?

If you were there, what motivated you? If not, how would your parents or grandparents answer that question?
3. Consider extending this activity to include a research project. Ask participants to interview parents or other friends who were involved in the Struggle for Soviet Jewry. What do they remember? Why did they get involved? What lessons did it leave them with? Interview refuseniks, who live in your community. What are their memories of the Former Soviet Union and the process of being able to freely emigrate? How did their knowledge that Jews around the world were fighting for their release impact them? Generate your own questions. And present your findings to the group.
4. Bring in the following essay written by Yossi Klein Halevi to widen the conversation:

Forty years ago, in the early spring of 1964, an imposing man in his late thirties, tall, with a Vandyke beard, a British accent, and a Russian-style fur hat, appeared on the campus of Yeshiva University in upper Manhattan, and began knocking on dormitory doors. For weeks, he went from room to room, soliciting support for a cause of which few people had yet heard: Saving the Jews of the Soviet Union.

The man, Jacob Birnbaum, had arrived in New York from Manchester, England, the previous year with the aim of convincing American Jews to rise up against what he called the “spiritual genocide” of Soviet Jewry. Only the Jews of the United States, he insisted, had the resources and connections that could make a difference. The Soviet Union was not impervious to world opinion, he told anyone who would listen. With the end of Stalin’s irrational rule, the Soviets—fearful of a rising China and desperate for technology and trade to infuse its failing economy—would increasingly turn to the United States for help, making the Kremlin vulnerable to economic pressure. With enough determination, American Jews could pressure the Soviet Union into concessions to prevent the cultural and religious extinction of Soviet Jewry. What was needed, Birnbaum insisted, was for Jews to *shrei gevalt*—to cry out in protest...

Historians will argue over the precise role played by American Jews in securing the ultimate release of more than a million Soviet Jews. And yet, the grassroots movement begun in America in the early 1960s possessed in embryonic form all the central themes of what would eventually become a worldwide campaign. What is scarcely realized, however, is that this American movement owed almost all its political vision and strategic thinking to a single man. From the idea of confronting the Soviets through the vocal protest tactics of the civil rights movement; to the insistence that only the full-scale emigration of Soviet Jews, and not the easing of the restrictions they faced, could remedy their plight; to the belief in mounting pressure on the administration in Washington to put Soviet Jewry high on the international agenda; to focusing the Soviet Jewry campaign on the plight of individual *refuseniks*—all these were the product of Jacob Birnbaum’s efforts during the movement’s earliest years. All these ideas were first put into practice by his shoestring organization, the Student Struggle for Soviet Jewry (SSSJ), which during the 1960s set the tone for the entire American movement to free Soviet Jews.

For this reason, Richard Maass, the first chairman of the National Conference on Soviet Jewry, called Birnbaum the “conscience for Soviet Jews,” adding that SSSJ was “frequently several steps ahead of the other agencies” of organized American Jewry in understanding

the nature of the struggle. The historian Martin Gilbert likewise called Birnbaum the “father of the Soviet Jewry movement.”⁴

Beyond its contribution to the freedom of more than a million Jews, the movement would bring about a major change in the way American Jews viewed themselves, giving them the confidence and political experience to take a far greater degree of responsibility for the fate of the Jews around the world. Before the mid-1960s, American Jews were reluctant to pursue Jewish causes publicly for fear of rousing anti-Semitism and jeopardizing their inroads into American society. Within the last generation, however, activism for Jewish issues has become a central feature of American Jewish life—such as combating anti-Semitism, campaigning to rescue Ethiopian Jews in the 1980s, and promoting lobbying groups such as the America-Israel Public Action Committee (AIPAC). This degree of public activism is unprecedented in the history of the diaspora, and it may not be an exaggeration to say that it is largely a product of the Soviet Jewry movement, which trained a generation of young American Jews to believe that no threat to Jewish life and memory can go unchallenged.

All of this began, to no small extent, with one man knocking on students’ doors.

Yossi Klein Halevi, *Azure* (Spring 2004)

5. Wrap up the conversation with the quote from Malcom Hoenlein in the clip “Jews have an interesting way of looking at Jewish history, we look back in order to look forward.” What are lessons that the struggle to free Soviet Jewry can have for us today? What are the issues around which we (as individuals or a collective) will shrei gevalt over?

Note to Educator

Did the enduring understanding that you set out to teach surface during this activity?