

# STRENGTHENING JEWISH IDENTITY

## Jewish Programming for Emigre Teens in the San Francisco Bay Area

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*Most emigre teens arrive in the United States feeling a strong connection to the Jewish people, and participation in Jewish programming in the San Francisco Bay area has had a dramatically positive impact on their Jewish identity. The success of programming for emigre teens provides a model for designing more effective programming for all Jewish teens, as well as for emigre young adults.*

This article explores emigre teens' adjustment to life in the San Francisco Bay Area and the impact on their Jewish identity of the Jewish programming provided by Bay Area Jewish agencies. The teens targeted for study had arrived in the United States a maximum of six years before the start of the study; most had been here four years or less. The data indicate that this programming achieves wide coverage and has had a major positive effect on teens' feelings regarding the Jewish community, Judaism, and being Jewish.

Providing Jewish programming for emigre teens is crucial to helping them integrate into the American Jewish community, as well as to ensuring the well-being of the Jewish community. The arrival of Jews from the former Soviet Union (FSU) is changing the face of American Jewry. The number of emigres is large, and their geographical concentration in such metropolitan centers as the San Francisco Bay Area makes their presence even more deeply felt; it is estimated that emigres make up one-third of the area's Jewish population. Given concerns with the transmission of Jewish identity, it is vital that the local Jewish community work to strengthen these young people's Jewish identity and commitment. The present generation of emigre teens constitutes the core of leadership for tomorrow's emigre community—and may contribute a significant portion of future leadership for the Bay Area Jewish community as well.

### METHODOLOGY

This study is based on focus group discussions and survey data. Five focus groups with emigre teens between the ages of 15 and 19 who had arrived in the United States within the last four years were convened in late May and early June 1995. The first group was made up of eight girls and boys between the ages of 16 and 19 who had arrived in the United States within the last two years. The second group included 17 teens aged 16 and 17, who had been in the United States between two and four years. The third group was made up of nine teens aged 16 and 17 who had been in the United States for more than two years but less than four years. Four 18- and 19-year-olds attended the fourth group; these youths had been in the United States between two and four years. The final group comprised five teens who had been in the United States between two and four years. Participants were encouraged to speak in the language most comfortable to them; only one group (the first) chose to conduct its discussion primarily in Russian. Focus group participants were recruited through local Jewish service organizations.

In addition to the focus group discussions, data were generated from mailed surveys. Two surveys were mailed: one to teens and another to the teens' parents. Both an English and a Russian version of the questionnaire were sent to each respondent; respondents were asked to complete the survey in the

language in which they felt most comfortable. Two hundred and twenty-eight teen surveys were sent, and 114 received, for a response rate of 50 percent. Two hundred and twenty-eight adult surveys were sent, and 109 received, for a response rate of 45 percent. These response rates are far above the average for mail-back surveys. The sample was drawn at random from a list provided by Jewish Family and Children's Services (JFCS). Ninety percent of the teen respondents had been in the United States since 1991; the remaining 10% arrived in 1989 and 1990. It should therefore be kept in mind that this study examines the experiences of teens who emigrated as teens or as preteens, rather than as young children.

The list from which respondents were selected includes all the families resettled by JFCS within the last four years. JFCS estimates that it resettles over 90 percent of all Jewish emigres from the former Soviet Union for whom San Francisco is their initial destination in the United States. There are approximately 443 emigre teens in this population resettled through JFCS. About half (228 or 51 percent) of these teens were in the target population—all families resettled within the last four years—and were sent a survey. JFCS estimates that a total of about 25,000 emigres reside in San Francisco, of whom about 1,000 are teens. Thus, the study's target population makes up approximately 23 percent of the total pool of emigre teens in San Francisco.

It is important to keep in mind that the list is based on resettlement, rather than participation in programming with Jewish content. Respondents were contacted because their families had been resettled through JFCS, not because they were involved in Jewish programs.

#### **ADJUSTING TO LIFE IN THE UNITED STATES**

Contrary to the popular perception that children and teens adjust relatively easily to life in a new culture because of their age, the focus groups indicate that teens have found initial adjustment to life in the United States diffi-

cult—more difficult than they themselves had anticipated. Although most teens knew that they would be leaving long before their actual departure, most were not prepared for the realities of leaving their country of origin when the time for departure actually came.

Emigration tore these youths away from intense friendships that they had formed with classmates through years of shared experience at school. Many reported that the most difficult aspect of leaving the FSU was leaving friends and family behind. One girl described these friendships: "In Russia, we used to go to school with the same class for ten years. They were like family with us. Then we would go to the college, where we are again in the same class for four years." Friendships are especially crucial in the preteen and teen years when youths are beginning to desire independence from their parents and invest more of themselves in peer relationships.

Teens were also jolted by the disparity between their pre-emigration images of life in the United States and the reality they encountered. Most thought that it would be easy for their families to attain a high standard of living in America. One girl stated, "For me, too, America was something bright and sparkling. The life here seems from there without any problems. But there are problems. They think that America is total paradise and that money is coming from the sky." However, on arrival, these images compared unfavorably with reality. Most teens' families have faced financial difficulties; securing a middle-class standard of living has so far proven an elusive goal. Three-quarters (75 percent) of the teens' households earn less than \$25,000 a year, and an additional 15 percent earn between \$25,000 and \$49,999. As one youth noted, his family didn't have enough money to maintain the standard of living it had achieved in the FSU.

Moreover, emigration has subjected emigre teens and their parents in the United States to a reversal of roles. Teens have had to become responsible for taking care of themselves and for helping their families financially; they also often act as intermedi-

aries between their families and the broader American culture. In the FSU, the teens reported that they did not have to work; their parents and the state provided for their material needs. In contrast, in the United States, teens have to work to help their families. One teen noted, "Nobody in the family could work because nobody had enough English to go and find a job. So I had to go and find work myself." Another boy stated,

I'm real responsible now. It used to be that my parents would take care of everything...I was still small, but still I didn't have to work. I always had pocket money all the time. In school, I was well dressed. I had everything that I wanted to have, but here I had to work. I had to take care of a lot of things. My parents couldn't go to school and find out what's wrong with me or how I'm doing in school [because of their limited English]. So I had to do everything by myself and go through everything myself.

The language barrier is one of the greatest challenges to teens' adjustment to life in the United States. Although only 10 percent of teen survey respondents stated that the English language is a problem for them, teens who participated in the focus groups overwhelmingly asserted that they have language difficulties. As one girl stated, "The first and biggest problem is English." Even those who have been here for up to four years indicated that they felt that their level of English proficiency prevented them from making friends and feeling more a part of the American Jewish community. One youth stated, "It is hard to become good friend to someone when you have to explain it like four times and you don't have words. I think it will come later, but right now I'm mostly in the Russian Jewish community. It is hard to communicate. That's the main problem."

However, the survey data suggest that in certain respects most teens are highly acculturated. For example, they do not display a preference for Russian music, food, or books (although no preference for their American counterparts has emerged): only 17 percent

of teens strongly agree or agree with the statement that they prefer Russian to American music, 34 percent say that they strongly prefer or prefer Russian to American food, and 34 percent state that they strongly prefer or prefer to read books in Russian rather than in English. Moreover, only 11 percent of teens strongly agree or agree with the statement that they feel like outsiders, and 22 percent strongly agree or agree with the statement that it is difficult for them to make American friends.

Nevertheless, teens' adoption of American cultural tastes does not necessarily mean that teens accept American teens' values, nor that they are or feel fully integrated into American Jewish social circles. For example, half (50 percent) of teens prefer to socialize with other emigre teens, rather than with their American-born peers. For some teens, American culture promotes negative values, such as extreme individualism and materialism. One girl stated, "We [Russians] are more like community people. Here, people are more individualistic...They are not as close as in Russia... That's what I found a little bit different from Russia... what I didn't really like."

#### **ADJUSTING TO JEWISH LIFE IN THE BAY AREA**

##### **Jewish Identity before Leaving the Former Soviet Union**

The linguistic, cultural, and economic obstacles to acculturation into life in the United States in general also make it difficult for teens to feel themselves a part of the local Jewish community. Moreover, emigre teens' experience growing up Jewish in the FSU was vastly different from that of their American-born peers, a fact that has made it difficult for them to integrate easily into Jewish life in the Bay Area.

Anti-Semitism has had a marked impact on emigre teens' Jewish identity. In the FSU, teens had few positive experiences with Judaism and being Jewish, and nearly all had directly experienced anti-Semitism. Most suffered discrimination from non-Jewish

peers, teachers, and other adults, and some teens were the victims of anti-Semitic violence. Indeed, many teens were afraid to acknowledge that they were Jewish. One girl stated, "When I was small I didn't like being Jewish. I was asking my parents why am I Jewish.... I was scared to tell anybody that I was Jewish."

In the virtual absence of Jewish religious and educational institutions in the FSU, most teens reported learning little about Judaism and engaging in few Jewish traditions. Asked what she knew about being Jewish while growing up, one girl said, "I knew that I was Jewish.... I never got the meaning [of Judaism and of being Jewish] until I got here." "We never celebrated any holidays," another youth reported. This situation obviously contrasts sharply with the abundance of opportunities to participate in Jewish education and Jewish community life that Bay Area Jews enjoy.

Most teens' parents were neither knowledgeable about Judaism nor very observant and thus were able to pass on little to their children. For example, one girl recalled, "My mother was not raised in any traditions of the religion; they just know that they were Jewish and they know that holidays exist." Regarding the Jewish holidays, one boy stated, "In Russia, we had no idea. I asked sometimes [about the holidays], but my parents had no answer."

At the same time, most teens reported that they were proud of being Jewish, despite repeated experiences with anti-Semitism. Almost all teens expressed a feeling that their fate is tied to that of the Jewish people and that being Jewish matters to them. This self-esteem was often transmitted within their individual family or developed through their own personal struggles when they were not accepted by teachers and peers. One girl recalled that her family explained to her what being Jewish meant after she had suffered anti-Semitism: "They tried to make me understand that I should be proud of [being Jewish] and not ashamed." Some teens fought back physically against anti-Semitism. De-

spite the difficulties of their situation as Jews, many teens reported that their families celebrated or acknowledged some Jewish holidays.

Given their considerable differences from their American-born peers in culture, language, and Jewish background, it is not surprising that most say that their closest friends are Russian Jews and are more likely to prefer to date and marry a Russian Jew than an American Jew and to feel that they are not well-integrated into the Jewish community. Eighty-one percent of teens report that most or all of their closest friends are Russian Jews, and 37 percent state that they have no close American Jewish friends (32 percent say that they have no close non-Jewish American friends). Most teens in the focus groups reported that all their friends are other teens from the FSU. These teens attributed their preference for Russian Jewish friends to their shared culture. One boy stated that although he and his classmates at an Orthodox day school felt a tie to all Jews, "With Russian Jews we feel more bonded.... You know what they like and you usually have the same feelings." A girl strongly asserted sharp differences between Russian-born and American-born teens: "I would never be American. I can't be American. I could never be like them and they can never be like me because we grew up in totally different places. The first years of all our lives took place where things were learned the most and it wasn't here."

Teens report that social class prejudice is also a major obstacle to establishing friendships with American Jews. Many claim that American Jewish teens treat them poorly because they are less affluent. One boy claimed, that at the synagogue religious school he attends, "90 percent of [the American-born students] are wealthy. Since we didn't have as much money as they do, they don't think that you are equal to them because of it." A girl added, "They forget that their grandparents are emigres too. They feel like they are the king of the world and we are the lowest people."

Teens' dating patterns suggest that emigre teens are weakly connected to American Jewish social networks. Half (51 percent) of the teens state that most or all of the people that they have dated are Russian Jews, 44 percent state that they have never dated an American Jew, and 29 percent state that they have never dated a non-Jewish American.

At the same time, teens' dating and marriage preferences may indicate a high degree of assimilation into American culture, which discourages strong preferences for group loyalty in decisions regarding dating and marriage. Teens are divided between wanting a Russian Jewish partner and not caring about the partner's ethnic, cultural, or religious background. Thirty-seven percent would rather date a Russian Jew, 7 percent would rather date an American Jew, and 47 percent have no preference for any particular group. Thirty-five percent would rather marry a Russian Jew and 8 percent would rather marry an American Jew, whereas 43 percent have no preference.

Most teens in the focus groups stated that they do not feel integrated into the American Jewish community; they consider themselves part of the Russian Jewish community and lack the ties to American Jewish friends that would make them feel connected to that community. For example, one girl stated that in the FSU she felt more a part of a Jewish collectivity than here: "In Russia we had a sense of unity.... Here there is no sense of that.... From one side, it is good because I don't worry about being discriminated anymore, but from another I feel... I lived for 14 years being like a member of a small group so I feel sometimes I have a need to be part of this group."

In contrast, the survey data indicate that most teens feel part of the Jewish community: 25 percent strongly agree and 55 percent agree with the statement that they feel part of the Jewish community. The discrepancy between the focus group and survey data may lie in the differing natures of focus groups and surveys. Because they were relatively open-ended, the focus groups enabled the teens to

express their relative estrangement from the community, whereas the less flexible survey format did not allow them to answer the question in depth. At the same time, this contradiction also suggests that emigre teens may be in the process of feeling more integrated into the local Jewish community.

Regardless of whether the majority of teens in fact do feel part of the Jewish community, most (77 percent) strongly agree or agree with the statement that they would like to feel more a part of it. The survey included a series of questions regarding what actions teens believe would help them feel more a part of the Jewish community. Teens believe that learning about Jewish history or culture and about Judaism and having more contact with American Jewish teens are important means of achieving this goal. Seventy-seven percent of teens report that learning more about Jewish history or culture and 71 percent say that learning more about Judaism would be important or very important in helping them feel more a part of the American Jewish community. Sixty-eight percent of teens say having more contact with American Jewish teens, 59 percent state that attending synagogue, and 58 percent say that going to more Jewish movies, plays, or concerts would be very important or important in achieving that goal.

#### **The Role of Initial Resettlement Programs in the Evolution of the Jewish Identity of Teens in the United States**

The Bay Area Jewish community, recognizing the need to help emigres integrate into a Jewish community that has a very different set of historical experiences and institutions, has provided Jewish programming as a central part of its initial resettlement efforts. As the following two sections make clear, this programming has enjoyed broad coverage among teens and has made a major impact on their Jewish identity. Again, it is important to point out that the teens participating in the study are relatively recent arrivals in the United States: all the focus group participants had been here a maximum of four years, whereas the survey respondents had emi-

grated within the last six years (including 90 percent who emigrated within the last four years). Thus, the teens examined here arrived as teens or preteens, rather than as children.

#### *Program Outreach*

All emigre teens in this study have participated in some Jewish activities or programs through resettlement services sponsored by the organized Jewish community in the Bay Area. All of the teens in the focus groups became connected with Jewish programs initially through guidance and referral from JFCS caseworkers.

Most teens have had some involvement in synagogue life, either attending religious school or going to services. Seventy-six percent of teens have received some type of formal or informal Jewish education. Most teens (64 percent) have received a formal Jewish education, including day school. Half (50 percent) of teens report that they attend synagogue. Since arrival, 23 percent have become *Bar* or *Bat Mitzvah*.

Informal Jewish education also reaches a large proportion of teens. Nearly half (47%) of teens have attended a Jewish summer camp. Twenty-six percent of teens have been to Israel, including 19 percent on a summer confirmation class trip, and 10 percent have participated in a Jewish youth group.

About half (49 percent) of teens have regularly attended a program, activity, or event at the Jewish Community Center (JCC). Such activities as dance and music classes, religious events such as community holiday celebrations, and fitness and sports programs are the most popular programs among teens. Nearly half (48 percent) of teens report that their family was matched with an American volunteer through JFCS' Volunteer Match Program.

#### *Program Impact*

Participation in Jewish life in the United States has had a dramatically positive impact on teens' Jewish identity. Taking part in

Jewish programming has enabled teens to build on the sense of belonging to the Jewish people that most teens brought with them from the FSU.

Formal Jewish education has had a positive effect on teens' Jewish identity. Ninety-two percent of the teens report that their formal Jewish education has made them feel very positively or positively about being Jewish, 88 percent state that it has made them feel very positively or positively about Judaism, and 85 percent say that it has made them feel very positively or positively about being part of the Jewish community. One girl emphasized the social aspect of her confirmation class experience: "I love the people there. I think it is fun. We have a really good confirmation class. We all get along and we have a really great class." (Note that her comments suggest that positive interactions with American-born Jewish teens are possible.) Some teens have served as Sunday school teaching assistants, an experience that they have found meaningful to their Jewish identity. One boy said of his teaching assistanceship, "There, I really like nailed the details. I was helping the teacher and I was doing some research myself and I found out stuff that I would have never found out."

Participation in JCC programming has also had a beneficial impact on teens' Jewish identity and in particular on their feeling that they are a part of the Jewish community. About 81 percent of teens feel that JCC activities have made them feel very positively or positively about their place in the Jewish community. About three-quarters (74 percent) of teens state that JCC programming has made them feel very positively or positively about being a Jew, whereas two-thirds (66 percent) say that it has made them feel very positively or positively about Judaism. Many youths appreciate the opportunity to learn about and participate in the special holiday celebrations for emigres that the JCC sponsors. One girl stated, "When we came here, I had a goal to learn as much as I can about Jewish history, about Jewish religion.... I read a lot of books, and I came here to the

Jewish Community Center for every holiday.... They explained what the holidays are and what's the meaning of everything."

Most teens report that Jewish summer camp had a positive impact on their Jewish identity. Eighty-four percent say that camp made them feel very positively or positively about being a Jew, and 80 percent state that it made them feel very positively or positively about Judaism and about being part of the Jewish community. Teens in the focus groups described the camp experience as very important in several ways. First, teens learned about and experienced Judaism and Jewish culture in a special way. Second, at camp teens came into close contact with their American Jewish peers. Finally, camp helped teens feel more sure of themselves. One boy said of camp:

It was fun. I was the only Russian person in my group. For some reason I was shy and didn't know how to act or how to speak...I didn't have many friends. I basically hang around my cabin, but they made me feel really welcome and didn't pay any attention to my accent or how I spoke. It was good because I was exposed to American culture and I was also exposed to the Jewish culture at the same time. It was like a double experience for me. When I came back, I was more sure of myself.

Visiting Israel on a Jewish community-sponsored trip is clearly the most powerful means of deepening teens' identification with the Jewish people. Having grown up in an anti-Semitic society, then emigrating to a country where Jews are still a minority, teens were powerfully moved by being in a Jewish country. Said one boy, "I couldn't believe that everyone there was Jewish. Even here you feel anti-Semitism, but not there." Another boy remarked, "Every person you look at is Jewish there.... We felt Jewish. Every girl was saying, 'I'm marrying a Jewish guy.'"

The Israel trip made teens feel more proud to be Jewish—and even feel more Jewish—than they had been. One boy stated that before going, "I knew that I was Jewish, but

now [after the trip] I am proud that I am Jewish." Another boy said, "I feel more profoundly Jewish and more proud of it.... In some ways it made me more Jewish and I changed my attitudes.... I'm more involved in Jewish groups at the university as a result of the trip." Eighty percent of those who have been to Israel are very interested, and 20 percent are interested in visiting Israel again.

For almost half (48 percent) of the teens, volunteers from the JFCS helped them and their families adjust to life in the United States by helping them with their English and by sharing their knowledge of both American and Jewish culture.

Teens' participation in American Jewish life has led them to greater self-assurance and security about their Jewish identity. As one boy put it, "I'm Jewish and I am proud to be Jewish. I'll always be proud to be a Jew." Adolescence is a stage of life in which young people seek to understand their individual identity, a search that is undertaken as part of an attempt to locate this identity within an understanding of the larger social world. Jewish programming in the United States has clearly helped many teens form a personal identity that wedds their self-understanding to a vision of their participation in a wider collectivity, the Jewish people. For example, one girl stated, "I started to realize how much history there is behind Judaism and behind Jewish people, and it really made me proud I guess of what I am. Just knowing that I am there to stand up for myself and for my people it makes me feel like a part of a community which needs help."

It is important to note that teens perceive financial barriers to fuller participation in the Jewish community. Forty-seven percent of teens who have not attended a Jewish summer camp stated that they did not do so because they needed or wanted to work during the summer, whereas 35 percent said that their family could not afford to send them. (Only 4 percent reported that they did not attend because they do not feel comfortable with American Jewish teens.) Nearly one-quarter (22 percent) of teens who have not partici-

pated in a Jewish youth group state that they do not do so because their family cannot afford it, despite the relatively low cost of such participation. (Only 6 percent state that their discomfort with American Jewish teens prevents them from participating.) Moreover, 61 percent of teens stated that it is not very or not at all likely that their family could afford to send them on a trip to Israel (9 percent did not know whether their family could afford it).

### CONCLUSION

Jewish teens from the FSU face difficult challenges in adjusting to American life. Cultural, linguistic, and economic barriers separate them from their American-born peers. Moreover, their Jewish identity is fragile given the anti-Semitism that they experienced growing up in the FSU. However, it is important to emphasize that teens do in fact arrive in the United States feeling a strong connection to the Jewish people and with an intense desire to learn about their Jewish heritage and to become a part of the Jewish community.

The Bay Area Jewish community's holistic approach to resettlement integrates initial services and Jewish education. As a result, most recent emigre teens whose families have participated in the Jewish community's resettlement program have taken part in Jewish programming (it is possible that the teens who did not respond to the survey did not participate in such programming). This programming has had a profound impact on the Jewish identity of teens. These young people are eager to learn about Judaism and Jewish history and actively seek out Jewish activities on emigrating. Although a variety of organizations provide services to these groups, more resources are needed to provide emigre teens with more opportunities to consolidate their Jewish identities and to help them in the adjustment process in general.

The teen years are crucial in forming personal identity. Jewish experiences during the teen years can be decisive in shaping emigre teens' Jewish identity. Positive, meaningful experiences with the Jewish community in the early stages of resettlement build a base from which these teens' commitment and "giving back" to the community can emerge.

The success of programming for emigre teens provides the Jewish community with a model for designing more effective programming for all Jewish teens, as well as for emigre young adults. The approach to emigre teen programming includes wide coverage of the emigre teen population, coordination among agencies, assistance in involving teens in a variety of activities and groups, and subsidies to underwrite teens' participation. Together, these attributes of emigre teen programming demonstrate a recognition of the importance to the Jewish future of reaching teens with high-quality Jewish programming during this critical time in their lives.

It is also vital that the American Jewish community help these teens develop their leadership capacities. The next phase of emigres' integration into the American Jewish community should involve the expansion of existing and the founding of new organizations directed by emigres. Leadership is needed to guide these organizations in their efforts to aid in resettlement and to help newcomers create a vibrant Jewish identity. With support and the right training, today's emigre teens can provide this leadership.

The Bay Area Jewish community has responded with notable success to help ensure that young people from the FSU will become an integral part of Jewish life in America. It is imperative that the mainstream Jewish community expand its efforts to assist emigre teens to form a living link between generations of emigre Jews and between the emigre community and the entire American Jewish community.