
Faces of Soviet Jews

Johanna and Deane Shapiro



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FACES OF SOVIET JEWRY

1. Boris Kelman, Temple Beth El's Adopted Refusnik
2. The Next Generation: Elizabeth and Mikael Sverdlov
3. Orthodoxy in the Soviet Union: Leah Perlman
4. Chabad in Russia: Alexander Loshkin
5. Coming To America (They Hope): Maya Bablina
6. The Latvian--Israeli Friendship Society

Faces of Soviet Jewry

by Johanna and Deane Shapiro

Boris Kelman, Temple Beth El's Adopted Refusenik

As most of you already know, Boris Kelman and his family were formally adopted by Temple Beth

El several years ago; and many of us participated in a letter-writing campaign on their behalf. Boris is a 48 year old former engineer who has been in refusal since 1978. He is perhaps the most prominent leader of the Refusenik movement in Leningrad. He is married to a pediatrician, Alla. They have two sons, Efim, 21, who has just finished his military service, and Maxim, 13.

Boris met us right in our hotel room, the only person who risked this type of official visibility (hotel rooms are still "bugged") in all our time in Leningrad. He was extremely busy, and had just returned from the first Conference on Soviet Jews which had been held earlier in the week in the city of Riga. As one of the most famous Soviet refuseniks, Boris has borne major responsibility for coordinating both internal and international efforts on behalf of Russian Jews who wish to emigrate. Nevertheless, to his visitors from Temple Beth El he was warm and personable. On behalf of the Temple, we brought him gifts of the Encyclopedia Judaica, a book by



Dennis Praeger translated into Russian, a havdallah candle, a challah cover made by one of our daughters, some canned food and coffee, even a pair of shoes from Rabbi Krause! Boris was appreciative of these small tokens of our regard, and he brought us a gift in return, in the form of a striking message.

Speaking intensely and eloquently (in English), Boris told us that, for all intents and purposes, the

refusenik movement is dead, that there remains all told possibly 100 families still in refusal in the USSR. He counseled that we in America should have compassion for their individual plights, and should continue to work to support political solutions for their release. However, he was convinced that the situation of the remaining refuseniks will resolve itself internally. He was personally optimistic about his

(Cont.)

own circumstances, although when we spoke with him he still had not been given permission to leave.

Boris felt that now the most important step to be taken by the Soviet Jewry movement in the United States is to help and support the Russian Jewish community to develop an organizational infrastructure. He was acutely aware that Gorbachev's emigration window of opportunity might close at any moment. Thus, his primary concern was that as many Jews as possible take advantage of the possibility of leaving. Like many Jews we met, Boris saw virtually no possibility of Jewish life flourishing in the Soviet Union.

Boris Kelman felt that most Jews remaining in the Soviet Union are so apathetic and ignorant about their Jewish heritage that they lack the motivation to emigrate. He deplored the five generations of official atheism that have succeeded so well in severing the Jewish people of Russia from their religious identity. When we showed Boris pictures of our daughter's bat mitzvah, and asked if Russian Jews were ready for such a thing, he replied, "They aren't even ready for men to study Torah." His hope was that, if Jews become awakened to Judaism, it will eventually lead to their

leaving the Soviet Union, as they realize how limited their opportunities for religious expression are in their own country. Therefore, what is essential is a movement to make them aware of the richness and promise of their ancient heritage. Boris believed that in the current climate of glasnost, such a movement is possible.

At the conclusion of our conversation, Boris sent greetings to the Temple Beth El congregation. He expressed the hope that next year, he will be able to personally thank some of the many individuals and groups in the United States and Israel who have helped sustain him and his family in hope during the past 12 years of darkness. For Boris, and his family, we hope and pray that the light is finally dawning.

*a "refusenik" is an individual who has been denied permission by the government to emigrate from the Soviet Union, ostensibly for reasons of state security, although usually there is only the flimsiest justification for this concern. As a result of application to leave, in the past these individuals lost their jobs, and often many of their social contacts. Many refuseniks were refused year after year for 10 years and longer.

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**T h e N e x t
G e n e r a t i o n :
E l i z a b e t h
Z u n s h a i n a n d
M i k a e l S v e r d l o v**

This is our "poster" Soviet Jewish family: young, beautiful, intelligent. Liza and Misha are a couple in their early twenties. They live in Riga, the capital city of Latvia, one of the three Baltic states recently much in the news because



of their bids for increased autonomy. When we met them in May, Liza was 7 months pregnant. We have had no confirmation of her safe delivery. At the time, Misha was very worried about Liza's health, which had not been good during her pregnancy, and critical of the poor medical care in the USSR. He also was frightened of rumors they'd heard ("I don't know whether they're true") that refusenik women are sometimes given inferior maternity care.

Liza and Mikael have been unable to leave the USSR for two years because they are "poor relatives." Theirs is a particularly bad situation. Misha's parents originally opposed their emigrating, but now have themselves been

"converted," study Hebrew, and wish to make aliyah. These parents are concerned they will not be able to "get permission" from the mother's mother, who is a vigorous 75 and a committed socialist. Liza's mother is virulently opposed to their emigration, which she sees as a betrayal of everything her generation has worked and sacrificed for. Liza describes her mother as very patriotic and very "sovietistic." Liza and her mother no longer communicate: apparently the older woman rants and screams whenever Liza even attempts to send her a letter. However, Liza and Misha are adamant that this situation should not be blamed on interpersonal conflict, but rather that is a by product of the "sickness" of the Soviet state.

typical of the Baltic states' greater freedom and permissiveness. Its members are mostly young Jews rediscovering their religious and cultural roots. They have an extensive library, especially strong on English books about the Jewish way of life. Unfortunately, Misha and Liza report that it is mainly their friends who make use of the library, although their membership is expanding a little now. They would appreciate more books.

Liza and Misha were also involved in printing a magazine on Jewish culture, which had 50,000 copies and was circulated in Leningrad and Moscow as well as Riga. But they pointed out that it had been forbidden to write about controversial topics such as (See "Faces" page 1)

Misha and Liza are the "librarians" for LOD (Latvian-Israeli Friendship Society). LOD was the only formally organized and officially recognized Jewish group which we encountered in the Soviet Union, and is

("Faces" Continued from page 8)

aliyah and poor relatives; and that permission had not yet been given for a second issue.

Liza had taken some courses in journalism at Moscow State University. She says she had to leave the university because of her desire to emigrate. She currently works writing ad copy for various products. She describes it as a "useless" job, because either they don't have the products or they are no good, but an easy one because she only works a few hours a day and there are many Jews working there. Misha works with computers (he is some kind of engineer) in what he describes as an "international" job because Latvians, Jews, and Russians alike work at the same Institute, and reports many heated discussions over the relative merits of glasnost and perestroika.

Misha and especially Liza are very disillusioned with the USSR and want desperately to leave. They requested a letter-writing campaign on their behalf. Liza has many relatives currently living in the U.S. They are very afraid of the increasing popularity of groups such as Pamyat, a nationalistic and virulently anti-Semitic movement with support among both the common people and the intelligentsia. They also strongly dislike the queues, the shortages, the closedness of Russian life, where there is so much control over trivial things. Liza feels she has no future in the Soviet Union. All both of them want is a chance for a new life in a

free country.

Liza and Misha can be reached at the following address:

Elizabeth Zunshain, Mikael
Sverdlov
69 Bikernieku Street, Apt. 15
Riga 226059
Latvian SSR, USSR

Letters on their behalf may be sent to :

Central Committee of the
Communist Party, USSR
4 Staraya Sq.
Moscow, USSR or
Ministry for Foreign Affairs
32/34 Smolenskaya-Sennaya
Street
Moscow, USSR or
OVIR (Central Soviet Visa Office)
5 Sadovo-Sucharewkaya Street
Moscow, USSR

*This term refers to a governmental policy which requires would-be emigres to get permission from immediate relatives before being allowed to leave the Soviet Union. Such permission is often difficult to obtain, because of differing political beliefs or relatives' fear of punitive reprisals, and effectively pits generation against generation, one family member against another. The policy is politically useful because the government can then claim at international forums that it is not responsible for these people's inability to leave the USSR.

FACES OF SOVIET JEWS

by Johanna and Deane Shapiro

Orthodoxy in the Soviet Union: Leah Perlman

We met with Leah Perlman in her one-room apartment in Leningrad, where she lives with her two children, her baby, and husband, all of whom had gone for a walk in the park. Given the size of the room, we imagined they spent as much time as possible in the



park. The family appeared quite poverty-stricken. The apartment building itself was in a state of terrible disrepair. The stairs which we climbed for three flights to reach their apartment were broken and pitted; the plaster peeling from the walls. The stench of urine and garbage was overpowering. But when we finally reached our poorly lit, dilapidated destination, there was a mezuzah bravely angled on the door-frame (we were told later that many Jewish families out of fear of identification, place their mezuzah on the inside of their doors). Leah shares a communal kitchen with two non-Jewish families; nevertheless, through Herculean efforts, she is able to keep her family strictly kosher. In our conversation, she was extremely worried about food and air pollution in Leningrad. She reported that originally her parents opposed her making Aliyah, but now they feel it will be better for the health of the children.

Leah is a follower of the Lubavitcher rebbe. His picture, along with a map of Israel, is displayed prominently on the wall. She is a sweet and lovely woman, with a tired pretty face, and bright blue eyes, who conducts herself in accordance with strict orthodox observance. She is a Hebrew teacher of young children, and says that it is often through the children that she starts to reach skeptical or ignorant parents to begin their return to Judaism. Leah reported that the level of Jewish knowledge was still very low among Jews that she knew; that she was still explaining to people about shabbos candles, mezuzzot, kashrut, and the holidays. She

would very much like to have books in Russian about how to make a Jewish home.

Leah, like Liza and Mikhail, has also been a poor relative for several years. Her first husband, "a Jew, but a very hard man," will not

agree to let her go to Israel, although he has very little contact with the two older children (his children by their first marriage). Leah is hoping to raise some money to bribe him to let her go. She believes that "real Jews," those who are more observant, who really want to build a country, and to live as Jews, and who are lucky enough to get out of the Soviet Union, go to Israel. Other Jews, she asserted mildly, go to America, primarily to have a better life materially. She believed it would be hard to be a Jew in America because of pressures toward assimilation. Most of her contact with foreigners is with Israeli groups and Chabad.

We found something extremely moving and tragic about the situation of Leah Perlman and her family. With her covered hair and long dress, and the incredible hardness of her daily life, she reminded us of a Jew from another century. She belongs to the small minority of Soviet Jews who long desperately for Eretz Yisrael, yet are denied on cruel and capricious grounds. Instead, day in and day out, she labors to keep kosher in a non-kosher kitchen, surrounded by hostile and scoffing neighbors. She meticulously observes the Sabbath and holidays in one tiny room, crowded with her husband and three small children. She patiently teaches Hebrew to little children, and hopes they and their parents will be luckier than she — that they will be allowed to live as Jews outside of the Soviet Union. When we left, we showered Leah with gifts from the supply provided by Temple Beth El-

See "Faces" page 12

"Real Jews go to Israel; others go to America..."

a kosher salami, colorful aleph-bet books to teach Hebrew, coloring pens for her children, cans of tuna and coffee, a Havdallah candle. But we couldn't give her what she wanted most- freedom.

Books (preferably in Russian, but simple English would be acceptable) about the Jewish life cycle and the holidays would be extremely useful to Leah. Also, because of the food shortages in Leningrad and the extra difficulty of obtaining kosher food, edibles which are clearly marked as kosher would be a valued gift to Leah and her children.

Leah Periman
Saltikova-Shedrina 40/15
Leningrad USSR 191123

FACES OF SOVIET JEWRY

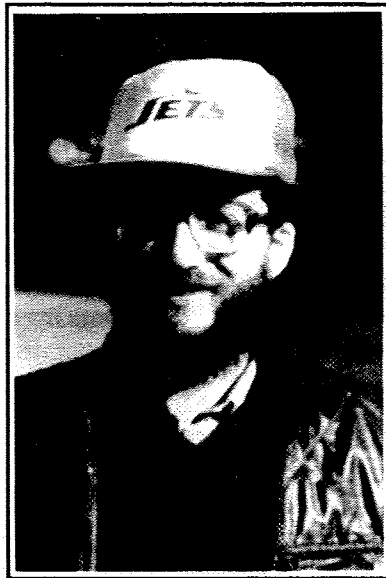
by Johanna and Deane Shapiro

Chabad in Russia

We spent our first Erev Shabbat in Leningrad with Alexander (Sasha) Loshkin, his girlfriend, and a 19 year old student who was planning to make aliyah in the next few months. Sasha had been taught by Chabad, and was extremely orthodox. He requested that we arrive at 10:21 (at that season, the "white nights," this was sunset) for the lighting of the Sabbath candles. Because we got lost, we arrived at 10:40, and the candles had already been lit. Sasha lived in a small, dingy apartment, up a crumbling and unlit stairwell. Bravely, like Leah Perlman, he had affixed a mezuzah to the outside of the door (we were told many Soviet Jews place them inside the doorframe, so they cannot be seen from outside). The apartment was filled with Judaica — a shofar, a picture of the Lubavitcher rebbe, a map of Israel, kiddush cup, and many religious books in Hebrew. Sasha spoke fluent Hebrew and very good English, as did the young student. The girlfriend apparently spoke no English, and we did not really communicate with her. In any case, most of their time was spent preparing the Shabbos meal, and she was very silent during the meal itself.

Sasha and the student began the Ma'ariv (evening) service immediately after we arrived. They invited Deane to join them, but refused to let Johanna pray with them because she was a woman. During the service, Johanna sat in a chair in the corner. Sasha prayed in a very orthodox fashion, very quickly, in fluent Hebrew, davvening, taking three steps back and forward at the appropriate places in the service.

When we did the blessing over washing the hands, the student instructed us carefully on how to hold the pitcher so we wouldn't make a mistake. We kept silent after the hand-washing, as is traditionally correct. We had never really understood this custom. But that night, during that time of silence, our eyes



feasted on the sight of the Sabbath banquet and candlelight, and we gloried in the smells of the simple repast. We truly experienced the miracles of nourishment and quietude which usher in the Sabbath, and separate it from the poverty, hunger, and petty hassles of the other days of the week in the Soviet Union. Then the student (who was a flutist, and hoped to study at Juilliard) quietly began humming Sholom Aleichem in a very moving way.

It was the second Pesach, as Sasha explained, so we ate matzah instead of challah. Sasha very much enjoyed being in a teaching role, and was extremely knowledgeable. He said that often he has up to 30 young people celebrating Shabbat with him. Although he has strong feelings for Eretz Israel, he is ambivalent about leaving, because he sees this as an exciting time in the Soviet Union, with the possibility of much change and the revival of Jewish culture.

Sasha had many negative stereotypes about Reform Judaism. He had met a Reform rabbi once, whom he described as "a nice Jew, but no rabbi." He also had heard of "quicky conversions," and the laxity of patrilineal descent. He described reform Judaism basically as social work, and said this was not applicable to the Soviet Jews' situation. His basic approach was that, as Jews, we could discuss, we could question all we wished, but our behavior must always conform to the most strict interpretation of the Law.

Spending time with Sasha was a conundrum and at times a heartbreak for both of us. He was one of the few Jews we met in the Soviet Union who understood Judaism much as we do — not simply as Zionism, or as cultural heritage, but as a living, vibrant, and spiritual expression. He davvened with fervor and with

(See "Faces" page 13)

"Bravely, like Leah Perlman, he had affixed a mezuzah to the outside of the door..."

Faces (Continued)

love (Johanna had plenty of opportunity to observe him, since she was not permitted to pray with the men). According to his view of Judaism, as a woman Johanna was excluded from sharing many of the moments of Sabbath we find particularly precious. For example, there was a big debate between Sasha and his flutist friend over whether Johanna could sing Shalom Aleichem with them. Sasha was adamantly opposed, but the flutist won out, not we suspect out of respect for tradition but because his musical training recognized she could carry a tune. Sasha also discounted or was offended by many aspects of our daughter's recent Bat Mitzvah which held so much meaning for us — her reading from the weekly portion, or carrying the Torah. Sasha's love for Judaism was passionate and real, but for Johanna the fence he had built around Torah was so high it left her out in the cold.

Because the evening had been so confusing and painful, we decided to meet again with Sasha the following Shabbos afternoon. We discovered that strong and serious differences remained among us. Yet at the same time, we were able to recognize, discuss, and affirm what we had all just read in the Pirke Avot

(Sayings of Our Ancestors):

Ben Azzai used to say: Do not be scornful of any person and do not be disdainful of anything, for you have no person without his hour and no thing without its place (4.3)

The fact that we took our Judaism seriously, and yet were Reform Jews, challenged some of Sasha's preconceptions. For all our differences, we were able to discuss the appropriate Torah portion, and the counting of the omer (we were there between Pesach and Shavuot). In this final meeting with Sasha, we also discussed twinning (the practice common in the U. S. of having Bar and Bat mitzvah candidates select a same sex Russian child with whom to symbolically share becoming a son or daughter of the commandment). Sasha expressed some interest in organizing twinning between U. S. and Leningrad communities — but, of course, only Bar Mitzvahs, and only with Orthodox synagogues. Still, by the end of our contact, he admitted that, if the USSR ever became a truly open and democratic society, he could see the value of having many different options for expressing Judaism from which free Jews could choose.

FACES OF SOVIET JEWS

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Coming to America (They Hope)

We met Maya Biblina at the Great Choral Synagogue in Leningrad. She is a 19 year old student of English, preparing to be a secondary school teacher. Like many other young Russian Jews, although she was completely unfamiliar with the service and liturgy, she often went to the synagogue to meet foreigners from America and Israel. Later in our visit, we also had tea with Maya and her family. They had been refused permission to leave the Soviet Union in 1988. However, the family had been granted permission to emigrate shortly before we met them, and intended to leave in August. They were headed first for Ladispoli, and then for the Midwest, where they had relatives.

The parents were extremely concerned about the situation in Ladispoli and asked us many questions. They had difficulty, as did we, in understanding why the U.S. was not being more receptive to the Jews let out of the Soviet Union. They were very worried at the prospect of starting over again in the US, and as we talked with them, we were struck by the incredible courage required to leave one's home, with only a few hundred dollars and a suitcase each, and try to create a new life. These were middle-aged people, with a daughter only a few years older than our eldest daughter, who had been relatively successful by Russian standards, yet were willing to give up their work, their home, their ties in order to seek freedom and safety in the United States.

Previously, both parents had worked as chemical engineers. They had quit their jobs in preparation for leaving, and were engaged in an ongoing process of attempting to convert their possessions into cash. Their apartment was one of the nicer we'd seen, with relatively good quality furniture and knick-knacks. However, Mrs. Biblina had stood in line for fow hours to buy the cake she served us. And, while we were at their home from 5 p.m. to 10 p.m., her daughter told us later that Mrs. Biblina was too embarrassed by the quality of their food to invite us to eat with them. She also told us that a new edict had been issued that day limiting people in Leningrad to 1 bar of soap every 3 months, and 600 grams of laundry detergent.

Mrs. Biblina in particular seemed hungry to learn more about Judaism. The family was very proud of her father, who was regarded as a Jewish scholar, and had been imprisoned in Siberia during Stalin's era. When we said the blessing over the cake, she had tears in her eyes, and said she remembered her grandmother saying this blessing. Maya asked whether Reform rabbis ever said blessings over meals: she had met one several months ago, and she had never observed him to do this. We tried to explain the philosophy of Reform, to convey the idea of conscious and well-reasoned choice given to individuals to practice Judaism in ways congruent with their values and beliefs. This seemed to appeal to the Biblinas. They were fascinated by the pictures of our daughter's bat mitzvah, and interested in the possibilities for religious education of children in the U.S. Maya said most Jews she knew were proud to be Jews, "because of all the great people who have been Jews, like Freud or Einstein." She didn't think most Jews in the Soviet Union were really interested in learning more about Judaism, but her mother disagreed.

When she reached the U. S., Maya hoped to become a doctor. She appeared very confused by the almost limitless possibilities and options in American culture. Maya was currently a member of Komsomol (the official Communist youth organization to which all young people are strongly encouraged to belong until age 27), but said she just paid her dues, never attended meetings, and didn't take it seriously. However, she added, if you don't belong, it can hurt your career. Both parents were very concerned about Maya's education, and had made many sacrifices to get her into the right institutes, putting aside a significant portion of their salaries for regular tutors. We have not heard from the Biblinas since we left the Soviet Union. We hope and pray that this family made it to Ladispoli, and from there, to this country of freedom and opportunity. We hope that this country, our country, welcomed these good and hardworking people who had the simple dream to escape persecution and make a better life for themselves and their daughter.

"most Jews she knew were proud to be Jews..."

*Great News!
Maya Bablin
and family are
now living in
Cincinnati.*



FACES OF SOVIET JEWRY

This will be the last column recounting the saga of our two-week trip to the Soviet Union. In many ways this seems the right time to end. An entire year has passed since we traveled to Leningrad, Riga, and Moscow. Amazing things have happened in that time, both for the country of the Soviet Union, for the Soviet Jews, and for some of the families we visited.

Incredibly, despite liberalization and glasnost, Boris Kelman, Temple Beth El's adopted refusenik, has still not been allowed to leave the country, although a year ago he was optimistic that he would be in the United States by this time. However, we assume that the several families who have already received permission to make aliyah when we met them are now safely ensconced in Israel. Happily, immediately after the publication of our column on the Bublina family, we learned that they had arrived safely in Cincinnati. One of the families we met, Sasha and Marina Gusman, traveled to the United States on a tourist visa, spoke (among other places) at Temple Beth El, and returned to the Soviet Union. In this past year, another young family, Mikhail and Lisa, have continued to suffer under the Catch-22 of the "poor relative" restrictions, but have become the proud parents of a beautiful baby girl. Life goes on.

By way of conclusion, we would like to share the activities of the Latvian-Israeli Friendship Society (LOD), located in the Latvian capital city of Riga. Although recently the Latvian Parliament voted in favor of independence from the Soviet Union, a year ago most Latvians, Jews and non-Jews, viewed it as an impossible dream. Still, there was an unmistakably different feeling in Riga. It was more European than Leningrad, better off economically, more open, freer. These qualities were true of the Jews we met as well. Most of the Jews we met in Riga were young, enthusiastic, optimistic, and defiant. Typical was Sasha Zarud, a young man in his early twenties, married, and with a small child. He and his wife were refused two years ago, but when we met them, they were hoping to make aliyah soon to Eretz Israel.

Sasha was strongly Zionist. He was also right-wing politically, and strongly pro-Kahane. He spoke fluent Hebrew, which he

by *Johana and Deane Shapiro*

had taught himself, and was one of Riga's Hebrew teachers. He was a spunky, energetic fellow, who paraded about the streets of Riga in a baseball cap prominently sporting an Israeli flag. He dismissed Pamyat (the nationalist, reactionary, and anti-Semitic movement) contemptuously, and said of anti-Semitism, "It's their problem, not mine." He described himself as reform in his practice (he observed Jewish Holidays, fasted on Yom Kippur, and lighted Shabbat candles), but "Orthodox in his heart." He said he was waiting to "be religious" until after he reached Israel. He had helped organize a demonstration to reclaim the old Jewish Theater of Riga, now used as a general cultural center, for Jewish functions. Although over 50 people had participated, Sasha reported scornfully, "It was all demonstration, no results."

Sasha, like many of Riga's young Jews, was a member of LOD, the Latvian-Israeli Friendship Society. This Society, headed by the charismatic but mysterious Gaft, a powerful man with a large beard and penetrating eyes, was one of the few Jewish cultural organizations we encountered which actually had received formal recognition from the government. The Society was responsible for the first communal Chanukah and Purim celebrations held in Riga in almost 50 years. LOD also had an active Hebrew language program for both children and adults and a lending library. It had recently sent Sasha to Budapest for a Conference of Jewish Educators. Another member was being sent to Jerusalem to complete a course in Judaic studies at the Hebrew University. Other Society activities included an oral history project with aged Jews in the community, the development of a scientific-technical institute, and plans to initiate a free medical clinic.

In contrast to the caution, cynicism, even at times despair we encountered among Jews in Leningrad and Moscow, the Jews of Riga seemed bursting with high spirits and self-confidence. We did not always agree with their political views or their assumptions about Judaism in America (usually

"Amazing things have happened ..."

See Faces Page 7

Faces Continued from page 5

inauthentic). But we could not help but be moved by their passionate rediscovery of their Jewish heritage, and their efforts both to prepare themselves to become Jews in Israel, and to revitalize the dormant Jewish community of Riga. Theirs was not a memory of Judaism, but a living experience. For us they represented a new generation of Soviet Jews, ready to reclaim their Judaism and carry it to their ancient homeland. It is our heartfelt prayer that their fervor, energy, and commitment will be for a blessing both in the Soviet Union and increasingly, as they desire, in the land of Israel.