Remembering Yesterday: The Rally that Changed the Future of Over 1 Million Soviet Jews

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper was to revive the importance of the Soviet Jewry Movement of the later 1900s, a historical occurrence that was quickly lost to history. It explored how the Soviet Jewry Movement not only relied on the unification of American Jews, but also on the mobilization and recognition of US politicians. Unification of American Jews entailed having to find common ground between the Orthodox and more secular Jews. The Soviet Jewry Movement successfully accomplished this by relying on the idea of Jewish solidarity to reach into the hearts of the Jews of the United States. The mobilization of US politicians relied more on typical lobbying and political tactics in order to garner a response. This came primarily in the form of urgent appeals to the public, calling on them to act now, as there would not be another chance. In appealing to both groups of people, the Soviet Jewry Movement was able to amass a substantive following, allowing it to effectively shape policy in favor of Soviet Jews through public pressure. The culmination of decades of work put in by the Soviet Jewry Movement, through both grassroots and establishment organizations, was the Freedom Sunday March that took place on December 6th, 1987. The paper focused on this particular event,

researching the historical occurrences that took place beforehand, and examining its afterwards effects, in order to better understand the magnitude of this march for freedom.

Keywords: Soviet Jewry movement, solidarity, "Let my people go!", anti-war movement, Civil Rights movement, religious, Judaism, politics, Freedom Sunday, Orthodox, Jewish, protests

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As the sun shined down on Washington D.C. on 6 December 1987, many people were getting ready to go outside and protest, gathering their signs that they had made the night before from beside their doors. Others flew in from as far as Hawaii, in order to demonstrate their opinions on the Soviet Union's policies of denying their Jews the freedom to emigrate and practice their religion. Over 250,000 people gathered in the National Mall that Sunday, two days before the Washington Summit. *"*Let my people go!*"* could be seen painted across several signs amongst the enormous crowd. The Soviet Jewry Movement in the United States participated in a variety of ways to show their solidarity with Jews in the Soviet Union. A notable demonstration of this unity was expressed through rallies, such as the Freedom Sunday for Soviet Jews, held on 6 December 1987. Different forms of media captured the event, such as an advertisement posted in the *New York Times* on 2 December 1987 by the Coalition to Free Soviet Jews, who sought to pull in more people to the event (Fig.1). In one photo of the protest, Rabbi Fred N. Reiner poses with his family with a huge banner behind him reading, "Let my people go" with a mass of people congregating in the background (Fig.2). Andrew Rosenthal was a journalist with the *New York Times* during this event and captured the enormity of this movement the following day in his newspaper article, "March By 200,000 In Capital Presses Soviet On Rights." These rallies

were demonstrations advocating for human rights for the Jews and refuseniks[1] residing in the Soviet Union. I will argue that the Soviet Jewry Movement in the United States was able to garner support from primarily American Jews by appealing to Jewish solidarity, but also political activists/politicians by creating an urgency to address the issue of human rights. By mobilizing both Jews and politicians, the Soviet Jewry Movement was able to place pressure on the Soviet Union to reduce its restrictions of emigration and religion for Soviet Jews. These actions demonstrated that ordinary people were able to unite in order to influence the focus of governmental affairs. Although several authors have written on this topic, my argument departs from theirs in that I will specifically be focusing on the influence of the appeal to Jewish solidarity to inspire the American Jewish population to participate in the Soviet Jewry movement.

The Soviet Jewry Movement had always been divided in terms of the approach that was to be taken to procure a solution to the status of Soviet Jewry, even within its early years. According to Altshuler, the movement began within Columbia University, when four students decided to launch a rally at the Soviet Union's UN mission in 1964. Entangled in the passion of the civil rights movement of the time, more than 1,000 students showed up at the rally, carrying signs protesting the Soviet Union. The success of this rally led to the creation of the Student Struggle for Soviet Jewry. Soon after the Six-Day War[2] in 1967, there began to emerge two visions of the future of Soviet Jewry: "the established Jewish organizations' National Conference for Soviet Jews [in 1971] and the grassroots/activist Union of Councils for Soviet Jews [in

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[1] A Jewish person in the former Soviet Union that was denied an exit visa, which inhibited them from settling in Israel.

[2] This was a war that was fought between Israel, Egypt, Jordan, and Syria over the course of six days, with an Israeli victory. Israel claims it fought in defense, as the Arab nations surrounding it were not on amicable terms with the Jewish nation.

1970].” As both organizations grew, it was clear that there was an ideological struggle between the two, notably over the Jackson-Vanik Amendment of 1974, which would restrict trade with nations that refused freedom of emigration to its citizens. (Altshuler 27-30).

However, while Altshuler asserts that the Soviet Jewry Movement was divided into establishment[3] and grassroots[4] organizations and had ideological differences that made it hard for them to work together, he also acknowledges that in the Freedom Sunday that took place on 6 December 1987, they were able to set aside their distinctions and work together in order to facilitate a unity within the Soviet Jewry Movement as a whole (Altshuler 83). This allowed for the Freedom Sunday to have the impact that it did, because it mobilized the strengths of both sides. Andrew Rosenthal’s newspaper article affirms this unity. He writes that “[t]he marchers, singing ‘God Bless America’’ and ‘Hatikva,’ the Israeli national anthem, gathered on the Ellipse south of the White House and then, behind placards that read like a road map of the United States, poured down Constitution Avenue.” The choice of songs is reflective of the involvement of Israel in the Soviet Jewry movement, as it facilitated many Soviet Jews’ migrations into Israel (Bialer 179). Zionists within the movement believed that Israel’s support was vital for the Soviet Jewry, as it is the proclaimed Jewish homeland and a center of Jewish culture and tradition. US nationalism also played a role in the Freedom Sunday March, as American citizens proclaimed the importance of freedom in particular to argue against Soviet Union restrictions of the Jewish religion (Bialer 179). Furthermore, one must remember that the Soviet Jewry Movement in the US took place during the Cold War, when tensions were high between the two superpowers. This meant the use of Cold War language, in this instance anti-Communist propaganda, in order to

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[3] This is a more formal type of organization, focused on the usage of diplomacy and non-intervention.
[4] This is an organization that is not affiliated with the government, and focuses on the usage of activism in order to espouse their mission.

make a statement about Soviet Jewry (Dollinger 134). It is important to note that while the

Soviet Jewry Movement in the United States was largely composed of American Jews, non-

Jewish people also stood in solidarity with the movement, thus demonstrating the effective use of

"American values" to broaden this particular issue.

Rosenthal's article on the rally emphasizes the amalgamation of the people at the march.

By describing the marchers as singing the national song of Israel and "God Bless America" and

gathered all together he creates an image of a passionate group of American citizens, both Jewish

and non-Jewish, that are fighting in solidarity for Soviet Jewry freedom. He draws no distinction

between the establishment and grassroots organizations that competed for leadership of the

Soviet Jewry Movement. In merging them into one group, he establishes that they are fighting

for the same cause, and that their ideological differences are able to be set aside in order to

participate in a demonstration that had the potential to sway governmental policy.

The Soviet Jewry Movement did not rise out of thin air through people who solely cared

about the human rights of Soviet Jewry. This has been noted by several authors who have written

on the Soviet Jewry movement within the greater context of US history. Murray Friedman,

known for his role as the Middle-Atlantic States Regional Director of the American Jewish

Committee, and Albert D. Chernin, who headed the National Jewish Community Relations

Committee, pose another catalyst in the rise of the Soviet Jewry Movement. They argue that the

Soviet Jewry Movement was ultimately "a product of its time and place" (Friedman & Chernin

7). Friedman and Chernin, corroborate Altshuler's claim that the Soviet Jewry Movement arose

in a time of the civil rights movement, as well as student activism. Many participants in the

Student Struggle for Soviet Jewry indicated that they had participated in an antiwar movement,

civil rights activity, and campus activism (Friedman & Chernin 7). These outside movements

informed the Soviet Jewry Movement, ultimately influencing the grassroots portion of the movement and its activities. However, this activist legacy would seem to stand in tension with the Zionist ideas that were also prevalent in the Soviet Jewry Movement and Israel's general involvement in this issue. One might wonder how the Civil Rights and the anti-war movement could have translated into the Soviet Jewry movement given that these very liberal movements were often very critical of Israel. Thus, there must have been an ideology that bridged these liberal movements with the later movement for Soviet Jewry. Marc Dollinger, professor of Jewish studies at San Francisco State University, accounts for this continuity when he makes the poignant point that "Black Power activism inspired American Jews to internalize the call for identity politics'' (Dollinger 133). The Civil Rights movement drew heavily upon the argument that "each ethno-racial group must take care of [their] own" (Dollinger 133) providing a value that American Jews were able to take and apply towards the Soviet Jewish cause.

Activism within the Soviet Jewry Movement was similar to that of the antiwar movement. The Coalition to Free Soviet Jews had an ad published on 2 December 1987 in the *New York Times* for the upcoming Freedom Sunday March. Its concluding lines read: "This may be your one chance in history to improve the lives of every Soviet Jew." (Fig.1) What this phrase implies, specifically through, "one chance in history" is that there is a necessity to act upon the situation immediately, otherwise it will be too late. This stemmed from historical guilt that many American Jews felt due to the belief that they had been largely inactive during the genocide of Jews in Europe during WWII. Many believed that the Soviet Jewry Movement was a chance at redemption. Here the Coalition to Free Soviet Jews used rhetoric that invoked pathos, in order to create an image of the Soviet Jews that would receive attention and relevance among the American public. In doing so, the audience would feel that there was an exigency to act upon the

matter promptly; if not, there would be a sense of guilt that they had not participated in saving

Soviet Jews. This rhetoric of urgency and use of media recalled the activist tactics of the earlier

anti-war movement. In 1965, for instance, the *Valley State Sundial* printed an ad that drew

attention to the ongoing situation in Vietnam (Fig.3). It presented an ultimatum, in which

America had to decide whether the war was to continue or to end with peace. It is clear that the

ad was in favor of ending the war as it discussed the dire effects of going through with the

Vietnam War. There is a proclamation in the middle of the ad: "Speak out and act now!" Like

the 1987 ad by the Coalition to Free Soviet Jews this too acted on pathos, in that it implied that

there was a need to act at that moment, and if not, that there might not be another time in which

people could take action. However, despite the similarity of their rhetoric and common use of

paths, it is important to note that the anti-war movement encompassed a much more broad goal,

while the Soviet Jewry Movement was more narrowly focused on helping a single community,

the Soviet Jews.

Furthermore, Jewish protesters took cues from the Civil Rights Movement, eliciting a

similar religious analogy. In Figure 2, there is a banner with big, bold, blue letters proclaiming,

"Let my people go!" This was actually a slogan that was commonly used throughout the Civil

Rights Movement in the 1960s in the US, as noted in an article from the *Haaretz*, an Israeli

newspaper. The black community saw their plight like that of the Israelites in Egypt, with the

structure of American society and government serving as the oppressive Pharaoh. This left an

impression on the American Jewish community, who saw black engagement with identity

politics as something that could be adopted in their own fight for the Soviet Jews. This religious

analogy was another shared connection between the Civil Rights movement and the Soviet Jewry

movement.

The Soviet Jewry Movement focused on attracting American Jews, regardless of their denominational background. Adam S. Ferziger, an intellectual and social historian, argues that the Soviet Jewry Movement was particularly effective at drawing in Orthodox Jews through the Student Struggle for Soviet Jewry (SSSJ) organization. Jacob Birnbaum, founder of the SSSJ, had come to the United States from Germany with the hope of instilling in American Jews a sense of passion to fight for the cause of Soviet Jewry. He saw the importance of raising this issue with university students and especially those from a Modern Orthodox background. The role of Modern Orthodox communities in the Soviet Jewry movement was particularly important. As Ferziger highlights. "the collective roots of the Modern Orthodoxy lay in the efforts of children of Jewish immigrants to create a formula that would enable them to integrate fully into American society without abandoning an observant lifestyle" (Ferziger 85). Modern Orthodox students, therefore, were more likely to be passionate about activism, and were still in an age range where their political mindset was fluid. Furthermore, Birnbaum appealed to universities in New York that had many Orthodox Jews in attendance, such as Yeshiva University and Stern College. This resulted in the SSSJ consisting of 65% Jews that identified as "intensely Jewish" (Ferziger 92). It is important to note that the highest concentration of Orthodox Jews existed within New York. The SSSJ was thus more able to draw in more Orthodox Jews into its movement, as they had the capability of presenting their cause to areas of larger Orthodox Jewish populations within college institutions.

The presence of so many Modern Orthodox students in the Soviet Jewry movement shaped both the movement and the politics of Modern Orthodoxy. Orthodox Jews were typically known to keep to themselves, that is, to "remain inside the shul." Ferziger claims that for many Orthodox Jews "there was a clear Orthodox tendency to defer to the American Jewish

establishment," and they didn't often participate in public events unless it pertained directly to them. This meant that secular Judaism had historically been more politically prominent (Ferziger 95). However, Ferziger asserts that through the SSSJ, there was a role reversal. Because Modern Orthodox Jews had "internalized the 'new Jewish politics' that both celebrated public protest and shifted priorities from universal to more precise issues (i.e. anti-war movement to Soviet Jewry movement) years before this ethos gained acceptance among mainstream American Jewry" (Ferziger 95) — they were able to hold a spearheading position within the Soviet Jewry Movement. This was important, as it meant that Modern Orthodox Jews had the ability to "define Judaism's approach to the public arena" (Ferziger 95) and, I argue, in turn led to the centrality of Judaism to the movement.

The concept of Judaism Orthodox that activists advocated asserted the idea that the Jewish community must look out for their own (hence the use of the slogan "Let *my* people go!"). To be sure, this wasn't a unique idea, and many communities advocated this sentiment of communal solidarity. According to this idea, it was the ethno-racial solidarity of Jewish that had contributed to the survival of the Jewish population throughout their history, and thus not only bore a religious significance but a historical one as well. Although Ferzinger and Altschuler both acknowledge the importance of Jewish values to the Soviet Jewry Movement, I argue that this was the defining feature of the movement and reveals a larger transition from universalist to more single issue protest movements within the grander scope of US history. Activists in this campaign began to note the importance of a single community, rather than the consolidation of many issues into one larger goal. If it had not been for the role of Modern Orthodoxactivists, this movement would have been less about the specific idea of uniting Jews to fight for their brethren abroad, and more an extension of the much broader human rights movement. Through Modern

Orthodox Jews' willingness to extend themselves into the political setting, and their ability to spread the message of the importance of Jewish unity as imperative to survival, the Soviet Jewry Movement was catapulted across the country.

However, as central as the contribution of Modern Orthodox Jews was to the Soviet Jewry Movement, it is important to recognize that many of those who participated were secular Jews. Ferziger's argument draws away from the significant role that more secular American Jews played. In a photograph taken of Rabbi Fred N. Reiner on 6 December 1987 during Freedom Sunday for Soviet Jews, something seems amiss (Fig.2). Where is the rabbi? Nowhere in the photo can the typical black hat, black suit, tzitzit[5] and the long beard of an Orthodox Jew be spotted. Many would be surprised to know that the man in the center of the photo with his family *is* the rabbi. Rabbi Reiner was one of the rabbis of Temple Sinai, a reform Jewish synagogue in Washington D.C. Reform Judaism is a more relaxed form of Jewish practice than Orthodoxy, established in order to adapt to modern changes that were happening outside the religious sphere. The presence of Rabbi Reiner demonstrates that Jews across the religious spectrum participated in the Soviet Jewry Movement. From the Rebbe[6] of Hasidic[7] Jews to Rabbi Reiner of Reform Jews, Jews regardless of their observation of Judaism gathered on 6 December 1987, in order to protest the restrictions imposed on Soviet Jewry by the Soviet Union.

In uniting the American Jews under the Soviet Jewry Movement through an emphasis on Jewish unity, protests often contained references to the Torah (Bible) tying Jewish people together through solidarity. Both Rabbi Reiner's photograph and Rosenthal's newspaper article

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[5] Fringes that are tied to the corners of a prayer shawl of a Jewish man.
[6] The Rebbe is the head rabbi of the Hasidic movement of Judaism.
[7] A mystical Jewish movement that was founded in Poland during the 18th century.

allude to the phrase "let my people go." Rosenthal notes that this phrase was painted across the signs of the people protesting at the rally, while Rabbi Reiner's photo depicts a large banner with the phrase painted across it, hanging over the heads of the protesters. The significance of this phrase is it's allusion to the Biblical story of the Israelite enslavement in Ancient Egypt, when Moshe[8] appealed to the Pharaoh, requesting, "let my people go." Moshe, in this story, fought for his enslaved brothers and sisters tirelessly, knowing that through God, his people would be saved. This analogy presented the Soviet leader Gorbachev as Pharaoh who refused to let the Israelites leave Egypt. The Soviet Jews in the analogy were presented as the enslaved Israelites, who were unable to break from the grasp of the Pharaoh/Gorbachev. Similarly, American Jews protested for Soviet Jews abroad to be free to emigrate and practice their religion. The common value between both of these instances being that of united solidarity among the Jewish people. To quote Rabbi Zevi at Chabad of UCI, "if your right arm got hurt, your left arm will naturally do what it can to save it." Thus, the Jewish people are a body, and if one part gets hurt, the rest will partake in protecting it. By citing the phrase "let my people go," in both primary sources there is a suggestion that this value was widespread amongst the movement and within the protest, and thus demonstrates the centrality of upholding Jewish solidarity as a major part of the Soviet Jewry Movement. This united force of American Jews also turned to official politics after seeing that change must occur through legislation and governmental discussion.

The growing agitation within the Soviet Jewry Movement did not go unnoticed by politicians. In as early as the 1970s, "congressmen and senators, who were always more susceptible to public pressure and political demands than the State Department or the president, would often favor legislation or would offer to give strong public manifestations of support to

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[8] Moses

the cause of Soviet Jewry" (Altshuler 37). Politicians realized that their constituency was

passionate about this issue, and politicians themselves wanted to continue to propagate to the

world that the Soviet Union was a prime reason as to why communism was not a favorable

system. This caused many of them to become involved in the Soviet Jewry Movement. The

Soviet Jewry Movement began to influence the government more directly by placing full time

lobbyists[9] in Washington DC and having constituents directly contact their Congressmen on the

matter of the Soviet Jewry.[10] With the activism of the grassroots organizations, enough pressure

was placed to the point that there came to be a discussion about a potential Amendment. The

Jackson-Vanik Amendment declared that any nations that had a non-free market would be

denied trade concessions. What this entailed was a threatening of trade with the Soviet Union, as

a way to pressure them into lessening their discrimination against the Jews. Several politicians,

notably President Nixon, were against such an amendment, as they preferred quiet diplomacy,

and feared that such an amendment would potentially threaten dètente.[11] Nevertheless, the

Amendment passed in 1974 through both House and Senate and signed by President Ford (Lazin

75). Much of the 1980s saw a much quieter era of the Soviet Jewry Movement politically, until

Gorbachev was elected. With the election of Gorbachev, and his policies of glasnost[12] and

perestroika,[13] there was discussion of potential amiable relations between the US and the Soviet

Union. The Soviet Jewry Movement saw new strategic opportunities to push for their demands

and began to pick up their protests again.

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[9] A person who participates in an organization to influence legislation,

[10] This information was listed in Fred A. Lazin's book, *The Struggle for Soviet Jewry in American Politics*, specifically in chapter 2.

[11] The easing of strained relations between two countries, particularly on political terms.

[12] The practice of a more open government and a wider spread of information amongst the people.

[13] The reformation of a country's economic and political system.

This official politics was exhibited in the Freedom Sunday for Soviet Jews rally. In the newspaper ad created by the Coalition to Free Soviet Jews, the authors draw upon the importance of political discussion to facilitate change: "Do your part to help Reagan convince Gorbachev that a comprehensive resolution must be reached at the Washington Summit." The Coalition to Free Soviet Jewry advocated the use of political pressure in order to create change on a diplomatic level. They maintained that it was a "must" that a resolution must come out of the summit, playing on the notion of "this is your one chance to change history," recalling to mind the guilt that many felt for their inaction during the Holocaust years. By encouraging the American Jews to come participate in the rally, and describing the potential result of their involvement, the Coalition to Free Soviet Jewry knew that if they were able to draw in enough people their rally would be brought up in the discussion between Gorbachev and Reagan, laying out a path for there to be a potential resolution. Their focus on pressuring President Reagan to take up discussion with Gorbachev on the matter of Soviet Jewry was a success. The Memorandum of Conversation, written during 8 December, 1987, makes note of how the beginning of the summit began with a discussion about the current situation of Soviet Jewry in the Soviet Union. It was clear that it was a contested subject, particularly for Gorbachev, who sought to uphold his image. The discussion of Soviet Jewry ended up with no resolution. However, the pressure of the American Jewish public and American government stressed enough importance on the matter that ultimately Gorbachev and his government began to allow for increased Soviet Jewish emigration in 1988 and onwards.

6 December 1987 was arguably one of the most important moments in the Movement to Free Soviet Jewry in the United States. Over 250,000 people showed up to demonstrate. In Rosenthal's article on the event, he captured the enormity of the demonstration, as well as the

Soviet Jewry Movement's success in attracting all types of people, from politicians to Soviet

emigres. In the section of the article titled "Wide Variety of Participants," Rosenthal lists names

of people that were popularly known. Natan Sharansky for example, a refusenik, a Prisoner of

Zion[14] and a symbol[15] of the movement, spoke to the crowd gathered at Capital Mall. Vice

President Bush was also featured in the protest, discussing the importance of upholding

American values, such as freedom of religion. In mentioning such prominent names of those who

appeared at the rally, Rosenthal depicts the importance of the Soviet Jewry Movement to both

Jewish and non-Jewish protestors. He also asserts the achievement of the Soviet Jewry

Movement in mobilizing the people from both Jewish communities and politics in mentioning

such distinguished names of both realms. Lazin and Altshuler both recognize this event in their

books as imperative to the movement's overall success. Altshuler notes it as a "historic

gathering" with people coming from across the States to participate in demonstrating their beliefs

(Altshuler 83). Lazin concludes that the rally was what "helped the American government

convince the Soviets that the issue of "freedom of emigration" for Jews was important to the

American people and their elected leaders" (Lazin 227). Altshuler corroborates this, stating that

Natan Sharansky helped fashion this rally into reality and "[proved] that it was possible to

achieve the impossible and that the challenge that then awaited the American Jewish community

was its ability to translate the massive show of solidarity for Soviet Jews by American Jewry into

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[14] A Jewish person in the Soviet Union that was imprisoned for participating in Zionist activity.

[15] Natan Sharansky was a refusenik in the Soviet Union, denied the ability to emigrate on the notion that he had information about the Soviet Union that could compromise its security. He was later arrested on counts of treason, facing the accusation of being a spy for the American government. He was forced to work in the gulags as part of his punishment. His wife launched a campaign to bring awareness to his situation and others who faced the same reality, resulting in his eventual release. After emigrating to Israel, Sharansky participated in the Soviet Jewry Movement, using his experience as a catalyst to help free the other Soviet Jews still remaining in the Soviet Union. One of his largest contributions was that of the Freedom Sunday rally, in which he was able to help gather over 250,000 people in December, in order to fight for discussion of the betterment of the Soviet Jewry Movement within the Soviet Union. For more information, consult "American Reaction to the Shcharansky Case" by William Korey.

a concrete political agenda" (Lazin 83). For the American Jewish population, through the establishment and grassroots organizations, to launch a campaign that was powerful enough to make the plight of the Soviet Jewry a topic of discussion at the Washington Summit in 1987, illustrates the power of community solidarity through.

The aftermath of the Freedom Sunday for Soviet Jews and the Soviet Jewry Movement was bittersweet. Gary Rosenblatt, the editor and publisher of the newspaper *The Jewish Week of New York,* identifies the Freedom Sunday for Soviet Jews as "a key turning point in the eventual release of more than a million Jews, most of them settling in Israel and the U.S." This illustrates that the rally had succeeded in the long run, in terms of the Soviet Union giving into the demands of the United States' government and its people. He notes that this could not have been done without the unification and persistence of the American Jewish people. However, Rosenblatt also discusses how few people remember such a prominent rally. In a phone interview with Natan Sharansky, Sharansky woefully states to Rosenblatt that "it's very unfortunate that the movement that changed the world is almost nonexistent today in our educational curriculum and in the historical memory of our people." Daniel Eisenstadt and Michael Granoff, both co-chairs of the coalition known as "Freedom 25",[16] corroborate Rosenblatt, somberly writing that "the success story (of the Soviet Jewry Movement) has not been integrated into our contemporary Jewish narrative or our understanding of American history." While the outcome of the Freedom Sunday for Soviet Jews and the Soviet Jewry Movement was ultimately a success, as they were able to convince the Soviet Union to let the Soviet Jews freely emigrate, in forgetting events of such magnitude we are doing a disservice to those who participated, and those who were affected by

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[16] focuses on promoting the history and lessons of the Soviet Jewry movement to the next generation

the outcome. History serves as a reminder of what has occurred, so that we can learn to better the human disposition. In neglecting the history of the past, we surrender the hope of a better future.

"If I am not for myself, then who will be for me? And if I am only for myself, then what am I? And if not now, when?" These wise words spoken by Hillel, a Jewish leader in the Bible, resonate deeply with the Soviet Jewry Movement in the United States. For the activists of this movement, the Jewish people were responsible for their community. If they did not fight for themselves, no one else would. They fought together, as they saw it, for the betterment of all Jews. In pursuing this struggle, the Soviet Jewry Movement in the United States was able to launch a successful campaign, in which it sought and achieved rights for Soviet Jews.

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