

Jacob Birnbaum and the Struggle for Soviet Jewry

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

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

pressure the Soviet Union into concessions to prevent the cultural and religious extinction of Soviet Jewry. What was needed, Birnbaum insisted, was for Jews to *shrei gevalt*—to cry out in protest.

Birnbaum's proposed campaign was, on the face of it, absurd. The Soviet Union was, at the time, the most powerful empire in human history, and it had declared war against Jewish identity in all its forms. An estimated three million Jews—a quarter of the world's Jewish population—had been singled out for a state-sponsored experiment in enforced amnesia. Where other religions were permitted to train clergy in their own seminaries, and other ethnic groups were granted national theaters in their own language, Jews were denied almost all expressions of collective identity. Even the thaw following Stalin's death in 1953 did not temper the government's campaign against the Jews. Though 450 synagogues had survived the Stalin era, by 1963, all but 96 had been shut down by the regime. Jews were accused of undermining the Soviet economy, and some were executed after public "economic trials." KGB spies were planted in synagogues, and most worshippers were too terrified even to speak with Jewish tourists from the West; those few who did would only allow themselves to brush up against a visitor and whisper urgently, "They don't let us live," or, "Why are American Jews silent?" before slipping back into the Soviet oblivion. Inevitably, it seemed, the slow smothering of Jewish consciousness would result in extinction, and nothing could be done to prevent it.

Yet if the idea of mounting a protest campaign to change the policies of an intransigent, totalitarian regime seemed hopeless, the prospect of awakening American Jewry into action seemed scarcely less so. American Jews tended to view the problem with the same detached paralysis they had felt during previous periods of trial: There was, after all, no precedent for an effective protest campaign against an anti-Semitic regime.¹ Demoralized by assimilation and shamed by the failure to rescue Jews in the Holocaust, American Jews had become a community on the defensive. Israel was a source of pride, of course, but prior to the Six Day War in 1967, the Israeli example did little to influence diaspora self-perception. Many Jewish

leaders clung to the classic exilic strategy of “quiet diplomacy,” seeking intercession with government officials but shunning the public arena. Nahum Goldmann, the influential head of the World Jewish Congress, advocated precisely such an approach toward the Soviet Jewry problem and warned that protests would backfire.² Leaders of the *haredi* (“ultra-Orthodox”) community similarly cautioned that Western protests would only make matters worse. The most strident opposition came from Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the Lubavitcher Rebbe, widely perceived as an expert on Soviet Jewry because his Chabad movement maintained an underground network inside the USSR.³ Opposition to a public campaign for Soviet Jewry penetrated the mainstream Orthodox community, especially its central institution, Yeshiva University.

It was against these two great forces—Soviet determination and American Jewish paralysis—that Birnbaum set himself during the spring of 1964. In a few short years, the improbable fight to rescue Soviet Jewry would come to command the attention and resources of American Jews. Within a decade, both the State of Israel and a Soviet-Zionist dissident movement, encouraged in part by the spirited example of American Jewry, would take up the public struggle as well, calling upon the conscience of the international community to pressure the Soviet regime. The movement was so successful that, by the 1980s, President Ronald Reagan made Jewish emigration a centerpiece of his campaign of pressure against the Soviets.

Historians will argue over the precise role played by American Jews in securing the ultimate release of more than a million Soviet Jews. And yet, the grassroots movement begun in America in the early 1960s possessed in embryonic form all the central themes of what would eventually become a worldwide campaign.

What is scarcely realized, however, is that this American movement owed almost all its political vision and strategic thinking to a single man. From the idea of confronting the Soviets through the vocal protest tactics of the civil rights movement; to the insistence that only the full-scale emigration of Soviet Jews, and not the easing of the restrictions they faced, could

remedy their plight; to the belief in mounting pressure on the administration in Washington to put Soviet Jewry high on the international agenda; to focusing the Soviet Jewry campaign on the plight of individual refuseniks—all these were the product of Jacob Birnbaum’s efforts during the movement’s earliest years. All these ideas were first put into practice by his shoestring organization, the Student Struggle for Soviet Jewry (SSSJ), which during the 1960s set the tone for the entire American movement to free Soviet Jews.

For this reason, Richard Maass, the first chairman of the National Conference on Soviet Jewry, called Birnbaum the “conscience for Soviet Jews,” adding that SSSJ was “frequently several steps ahead of the other agencies” of organized American Jewry in understanding the nature of the struggle. The historian Martin Gilbert likewise called Birnbaum the “father of the Soviet Jewry movement.”⁴

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

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

II

Jacob Birnbaum was born in Hamburg, Germany, in 1926. His grandfather, Nathan Birnbaum, coined the term “Zionism” and served as secretary general of the first Zionist Congress in Basel in 1897.⁵ Dissatisfied with his western European acculturated identity, Nathan Birnbaum was drawn over time to the Judaism of eastern Europe, and eventually abandoned his secular nationalism for religion, becoming secretary general of the haredi Agudath Israel. Nathan’s son and Jacob’s father, Solomon Asher Birnbaum, a leading Yiddish scholar, moved from Germany to London in 1933. During the war, he worked for the British government’s national censor, in the Uncommon Languages Department. “He read the desperate letters from Europe, so he knew what was happening to the Jews there,” his son recalled. “He tried to do what he could, but his helplessness seared itself into my soul.”⁶

Jacob Birnbaum’s commitment to Soviet Jewry was largely informed by his grandfather’s passion for eastern European Jewry and his father’s frustration at being unable to help prevent its destruction. From his grandfather’s ability to traverse European Jewry’s bitter ideological divides, Birnbaum learned to see himself as a “*klal yisrael* Jew”—a Jew for the whole Jewish people, drawing his identity from the totality of the Jewish experience. Though he remained an observant Jew, he shunned denominational labels, feeling at home in all Jewish camps but ultimately belonging to none.

Beyond the question of identity, Birnbaum absorbed an intense belief in the importance of public action on behalf of the Jewish people. In the 1950s, he sought out groups of teenage Holocaust survivors who had been brought to England and Ireland to assist in their process of rehabilitation. In 1962, he went to France to investigate the situation of Algerian Jewish

immigrants. In a report he wrote of that experience, Birnbaum warned of a massive social breakdown, and especially of a “shocking wastage, from the Jewish point of view, taking place at the student level.” He urged the formation of a movement of Jewish students to volunteer among the immigrants and help reconnect them to the Jewish community. “A responsible body in this country should send out, on a regular and systematic basis, groups of young people to areas of need.” Such a movement, he added, would benefit not only the Algerian Jewish community but British Jewry too, creating a “cadre” of future communal leaders.⁷ Although this vision for Algerian Jews never materialized, his call for a systematic student effort prefigured his idea of a student movement to save Soviet Jewry.

By the time Birnbaum arrived in New York, the first signs of public concern for Soviet Jewry had emerged. Since the late 1950s, the problem had been a growing topic of discussion among Jewish leaders. A B’nai B’rith delegation traveled to the Soviet Union and took the issue to the UN; the American Jewish Committee organized an interfaith appeal; several prominent American Jews, including Supreme Court Justice Arthur Goldberg, briefed President Kennedy about the Soviet Jews’ plight.⁸ But those efforts were sporadic and uncoordinated.⁹ Finally, in early April 1964, hopes for more concerted Jewish action were raised when the leaders of 24 major American Jewish organizations decided, with the quiet prodding of the Israeli government, to convene in Washington to found the American Jewish Conference on Soviet Jewry. With the creation of the Conference, as it came to be known, the establishment broke with Nahum Goldman’s school of quiet diplomacy and committed itself, in theory at least, to a vigorous campaign. Yet the establishment’s lack of political self-confidence and its ambivalence about a public campaign were built into the Conference’s very structure, and it immediately became apparent that this new body would exist mostly on paper. With no budget or permanent staff, it was confined to irregular and limited activities, like meeting with government officials or sponsoring an occasional demonstration.

Birnbaum, by contrast, called for an urgent, daily campaign that would mobilize the resources of American Jewry and draw constant media attention. He described the Conference as a “toothless, fumbling group,” which would do little to effect a real change in Soviet policy.¹⁰ “We don’t need a conference,” he told his young associates, “but a struggle.”

And so, three weeks after the founding of the Conference, on April 27, 1964, Birnbaum convened the founding meeting of the College Students’ Struggle for Soviet Jewry—soon simplified to Student Struggle for Soviet Jewry, or SSSJ. About 200 young people attended, most of them students from Yeshiva University, the Jewish Theological Seminary, Columbia University, and Queens College. The meeting was held in the graduate students’ lounge of Philosophy Hall on Columbia’s campus. In the pamphlet announcing the meeting, Birnbaum had placed his vision in both an American and a Jewish historical context: “Just as we, as human beings and as Jews, are conscious of the wrongs suffered by the Negro and we fight for his betterment, so must we come to feel in ourselves the silent, strangulated pain of so many of our Russian brethren.... We, who condemn silence and inaction during the Nazi Holocaust, dare we keep silent now?”¹¹

From its very inception, then, these two themes defined the movement: The Holocaust as warning, and the civil rights movement as example. Those messages resonated for the post-Holocaust generation then coming of age, which Birnbaum perceived as the vanguard of a transformed and empowered diaspora. Many of these young Jews saw American Jewry’s failure to mount a serious effort to rescue Jews during the Holocaust as a source of enduring shame. And some of them had participated in the successes of the civil rights movement, and experienced the redemptive power of public protest.

Birnbaum sought to channel these emotions into an effective public campaign. At the meeting, Birnbaum unveiled the four pillars of his strategy, all of which would later become central features of the entire Soviet Jewry movement.

The first was to rouse a dormant American Jewry, working at the grassroots level, while simultaneously pressuring the establishment to transform the Conference on Soviet Jewry into an effective organization. Only the establishment, he argued, had the resources to sustain the kind of national protest and information campaign that could change history. Second, the movement would act to humiliate the Soviet Union by exposing its false pretensions as a model society. The third goal was to pressure Washington into becoming the active protector and defender of Soviet Jews. Finally, the movement would be directed at Soviet Jews themselves, boosting their morale.

The atmosphere in Philosophy Hall, Birnbaum recalls, was “electric.” Students denounced the “silence” of the American Jewish community during the Holocaust, vowing that their response to Jewish suffering would be different. One young man, overcome by emotion, sang a protest song he had composed on the spot, “History Shall Not Repeat.”¹² When several students demanded immediate action, Birnbaum mused aloud that it might be appropriate to begin the campaign on May Day, a major holiday in the Soviet Union, just four days away. In fact, he had not come to the meeting with a plan for a May Day demonstration, nor was he sure that a successful rally could be organized so quickly. Still, he cherished the students’ impatience. It was precisely that youthful American passion that he had counted on when he came to New York.

The May Day rally was organized from Birnbaum’s apartment—more precisely, from the room he was renting from Yeshiva University’s chief librarian. Posters were drawn, press releases prepared, Hillel chapters and Jewish youth groups contacted, all in that cramped space. On May 1, a thousand students appeared across the street from the Soviet mission to the United Nations in Manhattan and picketed in an orderly circle for four hours. In spite of their numbers, the protesters maintained their silence, to simulate the enforced silence of Soviet Jews.

This was not the first time American Jews had rallied on behalf of Soviet Jewry. In the early 1950s, there had been several demonstrations

against Stalinist anti-Semitism. In 1962, a few dozen students from a Manhattan yeshiva high school had picketed the Soviet mission to protest the Kremlin's ban on baking matza. But unlike those isolated demonstrations, which lacked any follow-up, the May Day protest launched a quarter-century-long campaign that would fulfill each of Birnbaum's four strategic goals, and would end with the freedom of Soviet Jewry.

For all his relentless faith, even Birnbaum could not have imagined, on that silent May afternoon, that the unlikely campaign to save Soviet Jewry would become the most successful protest movement in the history of the diaspora.

III

From 1964 until 1971, SSSJ was the only full-time Soviet Jewry organization in the United States. It tracked developments in the Soviet Union, distributed information on a daily basis, created nuclei of knowledgeable activists, and organized an ongoing protest campaign. The intensity and consistency of action that Birnbaum had initiated, and that was carried through on a day-to-day basis together with SSSJ national coordinator Glenn Richter, was unprecedented.

Immediately after the May Day protest, SSSJ's activities began in earnest. In its first months, the group organized a week-long fast involving Jewish and Christian clergy, picketed a visiting Soviet dance troupe, lobbied the Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City to adopt a Soviet Jewry platform, and widely distributed a Soviet Jewry activists' handbook—which included fact sheets, eyewitness reports by tourists to the Soviet Union, and suggestions for creating a Soviet Jewry program in Jewish summer camps. Perhaps SSSJ's most impressive early achievement was its October 1964 rally on Manhattan's Lower East Side, which drew

both U.S. senators from New York as well as a representative from the White House—Lyndon Johnson’s special counsel, Meyer Feldman—who delivered a message of support from the president. SSSJ (known among its members as “Triple-SJ”) even generated Soviet Jewry protest songs, which resembled the protest folk music of the civil rights movement. (“There’s a fire burning brightly in the sky/and the roar of thunder crashing from on high/I see a nation there awakening/Iron chains will soon be breaking.”) From its inception, SSSJ created a Jewish version of America’s youth culture of protest. For its activists, political and cultural empowerment were inseparable.

For all it lacked in resources and power, SSSJ compensated with commitment and energy. It had no regular budget, relying instead on three-dollar membership dues from college students, the sale of buttons and other movement material, and the occasional check from a synagogue men’s club. SSSJ’s staff, including Birnbaum and Richter, a Queens College student previously involved in the civil rights movement, received no salary. Birnbaum generally worked from his home, due to health problems, while Richter ran the office, working “part-time,” as he put it—which usually meant eight to ten hours a day. In large measure, the fate of the Soviet Jewry movement in those crucial early years depended on their dedication. Birnbaum provided the vision and the tactics and maintained contacts with community leaders and politicians, while Richter organized demonstrations, printed literature, mobilized volunteers, and updated the media about developments inside the Soviet Union.

The inner circle of SSSJ never numbered more than several dozen activists. A large portion, possibly a majority, were modern Orthodox, as were most of those who came to that first May Day protest. Other activists were drawn from Zionist youth movements. Finally, there were those whom Birnbaum called “freelancers,” students without a strong Jewish background who were drawn to the Soviet Jewry movement because of a reawakened Jewish awareness and a commitment to human rights. Perhaps

a quarter of SSSJ activists had, like Richter, been involved in the civil rights movement.¹³ Birnbaum especially cherished the freelancers, because they proved one of his basic contentions: That SSSJ would save not only Soviet Jewry, but American Jewry—by kindling the Jewish passion of its youth. Even as many adult Jews bemoaned the widespread involvement of Jewish youth in non-Jewish causes, Birnbaum argued that the real fault lay with the Jewish community, which had failed to offer them an idealistic option. His antidote was the cause of Soviet Jewry.

Birnbaum predicted that the movement would be a training ground for American Jewry's future leaders. He drew around him a remarkable group of young rabbis, most of whom would go on to play key roles in invigorating American Jewry. They included Irving "Yitz" Greenberg, who became the theologian of post-Holocaust Jewish empowerment and founder of the interdenominational group CLAL; the singer and neo-hasidic teacher Shlomo Carlebach, a fixture at SSSJ rallies, who composed the anthem *Am Yisrael Hai* ("The Jewish People Lives") at Birnbaum's prompting; Arthur Green, theologian of liberal Jewish renewal; Shlomo Riskin, whose Lincoln Square Synagogue became a role model for modern Orthodox revival; Avi Weiss, prototype of the activist rabbi and later a leading proponent of the Orthodox feminist movement; and finally, Meir Kahane, whose eventual split with SSSJ would lead him to found the Jewish Defense League (JDL). Each in his way helped revitalize American Jewry, for better and sometimes for worse; all received their training as activists in the Soviet Jewry movement.

IV

In autumn 1965, I joined SSSJ. Like many of its activists, I grew up in a Holocaust-survivor family. For me, saving Soviet Jewry meant retrieving not only the last great Jewry of Eastern Europe but also the lost honor of American Jewry, whom I blamed for failing to save my own family during the Holocaust. SSSJ offered the opportunity to resolve my inner conflict as an American Jew ashamed of American Jews. The group's slogans, which focused on our determination not to repeat the Holocaust-era sin of silence, spoke precisely to my need: "This Time We Won't Be Silent"; "I Am My Brother's Keeper." Yet the very insistence of the rhetoric revealed our anxiety. Would American Jewry really act differently now? One SSSJ button asked accusingly, "Are We the Jews of Silence?"—a pointed response to the title of Elie Wiesel's 1966 book about Soviet Jewry, *The Jews of Silence*.

As I soon discovered, Birnbaum was not conventionally charismatic. After the first months of SSSJ's existence, he almost never spoke at rallies, preferring the role of mentor as well as liaison with the Jewish establishment and, later, with Washington. Birnbaum's magnetism came from his faith in the eternity of the Jewish people and its certain triumph over evil. He filled his sentences with "you see, you see," imploring the listener to share his vision. Birnbaum convinced me that American Jewry would indeed mobilize, that the conscience of the world would be stirred, that Soviet Jews would retrieve their identity and courage and return to the Jewish people. As with the early civil rights movement, SSSJ was moved not by rage but by righteous indignation. Hope protected us from bitterness: Soon the world would respond to our pain. We appealed to justice—to "public opinion." Birnbaum repeated those two words so often that they evoked for me a

concrete image: A disciplined and organized force waiting, in his phrase, to be “galvanized.”

Birnbaum’s words evoked revolutionary dynamism. We were not just trying to influence Moscow and Washington but were engaged in a “thrust” to those centers of power. We were not mere activists but a “cadre” aiming to “galvanize the grassroots.” Demonstrations were not only media events but “great public manifestations” of responsibility for fellow Jews—and, no less, intimations of a borderless world in which human rights abuses would no longer be granted immunity behind an impenetrable veil of national sovereignty. Indeed, we were not a protest movement at all, but a movement of redemption.

From SSSJ’s inception, its declared goal was not to ease the plight of Soviet Jewry, as the establishment intended, but to “save” it. Birnbaum invoked the imagery of the Bible, glorifying SSSJ rallies with names like the Jericho March, the Geula (“Redemption”) March, the Exodus March. Heading the 1966 Geula March was a massive mural depicting divided waters and the words, “As the Red Sea Parted for the Israelites, So Will the Iron Curtain Part for Soviet Jews.” Whereas the Conference on Soviet Jewry spoke only of “reunification of families,” SSSJ demanded free emigration, ignoring the establishment’s fears that the utopian demand for opening the gates could compromise the seemingly more realistic goal of easing Soviet restrictions on Jewish life. Beginning with May Day 1964, Birnbaum insisted that SSSJ rallies include posters with the slogan, “Let My People Go.” He argued for summoning the redemptive force in Jewish history—a force that began with the mutual concern and responsibility Jews felt for each other. Without a daring vision, Birnbaum was saying, SSSJ’s strategy of diaspora empowerment would fail.

By the time I joined SSSJ, its initial frantic and fragile phase had ended. The organization I discovered had moved out of Birnbaum’s bedroom and actually had an office, donated by the Jewish Theological Seminary. Its rallies had made the organization an integral part of New York Jewish life.

Abraham Joshua Heschel, one of the first prominent American Jews to call for a protest campaign, spoke at an SSSJ rally and encouraged Birnbaum's efforts, lending the movement much-needed legitimacy.¹⁴ Nor was SSSJ alone, as it had been during its first months, in planning its demonstrations. Birnbaum had initiated the formation of the New York Jewish Youth Council for Soviet Jewry, which brought together major Jewish youth groups; the combined efforts of the council and SSSJ drew 15,000 participants to the 1966 Passover Geula March, the largest crowd until then to attend any Soviet Jewry event.¹⁵ Suddenly, it seemed that SSSJ's dream of organizing a demonstration that would draw 100,000 Jews—the magic number we imagined would transform us into a major movement—was not so delusional after all.

Still, the gap between political reality and our redemptive vision was so great that only students and dreamers could defy it. Those were, after all, years in which the most basic facts of Soviet Jewish oppression had not yet been established. The rare media reports about Soviet Jewry usually referred to its “alleged” oppression. Even many of those who did concede the truth of our claims were not convinced that the persecution of Soviet Jewry was any worse than the Kremlin's treatment of other religious and ethnic groups. Nor had the Zionist movement inside the USSR emerged yet, so SSSJ often seemed to be acting in a void, with no evident response from those it was trying to save.

Most painful of all was the relentless skepticism of American Jews. What proof existed, we were asked constantly, that the Soviet Union was sensitive to our protests? And even if the Soviets miraculously yielded, why assume that Soviet Jews, especially among the younger generation, even *wanted* to be Jewish, given the decades-long policy of enforced assimilation?

Primed by the SSSJ activist handbooks, which dealt with those very questions, I would dutifully offer proofs that the Soviets could be pressured: The suspension of the economic trials, and the shelving in 1964 of a crass anti-Semitic treatise called *Judaism Without Embellishment* that had been published by the Ukrainian Academy of Sciences. Meager gains, to be sure,

but enough to convince SSSJ activists that we had found a formula for redemption: The more protests, the more Soviet concessions. As for whether Soviet Jews still wanted to be Jewish, we cited the gatherings that began in the early 1960s in which first hundreds, then thousands of young Jews danced and sang Yiddish songs outside the last remaining Moscow synagogue on the holiday of Simhat Tora. The phenomenon was a mystery. How did they know to assemble on that night? Who dared organize them, in a society where any form of organization outside the Communist Party was illegal? Why did the Kremlin permit it? And why did they gather on Simhat Tora, hardly the most central Jewish holiday? The celebrations seemed to confirm Birnbaum's intuition that, beneath the repression, renewal was stirring.

When critics from the establishment and the Orthodox community accused SSSJ of recklessness, we responded by emphasizing our responsibility. SSSJ prided itself on its cordial relations with the police and even with Soviet officials.¹⁶ Before every rally, Richter would prepare a list of "approved slogans," and marshals would confiscate any signs considered inflammatory. An early leaflet inviting activists to a planning meeting emphasized the tone Birnbaum sought. "We intend to keep this a highly responsible movement," it declared. "Out of this student ferment there is emerging a wave of constructive, dynamic, yet responsible action."¹⁷ For SSSJ, "responsible" meant not only peaceful but legal. Even non-violent civil disobedience, which the civil rights movement and the nascent anti-Vietnam War movement had legitimized, was off limits. Birnbaum recognized that the American Jewish community could barely tolerate SSSJ's level of protest, and that civil disobedience would frighten off the Jewish establishment and thwart the goal of transforming it into an activist force. Effecting a fundamental change in American Jewry required not just a vision and a plan, but patience.

Limited in its ability to attract the media by its commitment to "responsible" protest, and lacking the resources to draw massive numbers of demonstrators, SSSJ compensated in other ways. Richter rented small halls

for rallies and then issued press releases about overflow crowds. He set up a sound truck in Manhattan's Garment District during lunch hour, and the papers reported a rally of thousands, not realizing that most "demonstrators" were in fact passersby, stopping briefly out of curiosity. SSSJ also drew media attention through its creative use of religious holidays and symbols. On Passover 1965, the Jericho March, led by seven men wearing prayer shawls and blowing shofars, encircled the Soviet Mission to "topple the walls of hate"; on Hanuka that year, protesters marched behind a seventeen-foot-tall menorah. This was not gimmickry. Rather than manipulating religious rituals for political purposes, we believed we were revealing their redemptive significance.

SSSJ's goal of embarrassing the Soviet regime was advanced through its "celebrations" of Soviet holidays, co-opting them to expose the hypocrisy of Communism. SSSJ's inaugural demonstration on May Day was a classic example of turning Soviet symbols against themselves. The anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution on November 7 was another favorite time to demonstrate. One year we interrupted a pro-Soviet celebration in a Manhattan hotel, attended mostly by elderly Jewish Communists; another year, we tried to deliver to the Soviet UN mission a giant birthday cake inscribed with the words, "Let My People Go." When SSSJ probed Soviet sensitivities, no tactic was more satisfying than mockery.

V

Central to Birnbaum's vision of diaspora empowerment was the creation of a symbiotic relationship between the freest part of the diaspora and its most oppressed. By publicly demonstrating their concern for Soviet Jews, American Jews would overcome their inhibitions and assume their place as a self-confident community within American society.

The renewal of American Jewry would be an inseparable consequence of the redemption of Soviet Jewry.

Toward that end, the Six Day War was a turning point for both American and Soviet Jews. American Jews now publicly celebrated Jewish power and suddenly longed to participate, however vicariously, in the Zionist success story. For Soviet Jews, the effect was even more profound. For many among the “Jews of silence,” Israel’s victory evoked not only Jewish pride but a willingness to challenge the Kremlin. Though there had been a nascent Zionist consciousness among some young Soviet Jews before 1967, including a lively Zionist *samizdat*, the war created widespread public identification with Israel. Young Moscow Jews greeted each other by covering one eye, simulating Moshe Dayan’s eye patch. For the first time since the 1920s, when the Bolsheviks destroyed the Zionist movement in the Soviet Union, Zionist circles began operating openly in major Soviet cities.

The Soviet Zionist revolt began with a stunning act of courage by a Moscow university student, Yasha Kazakov. Shortly after the Six Day War, Kazakov wrote an open letter to the Kremlin: “I consider myself a citizen of the State of Israel. I demand to be freed from the humiliation of Soviet citizenship.”¹⁸

A voice, a name: Suddenly “Soviet Jewry” was not a silent abstraction. Kazakov’s letter, exhilarating in its daring, was smuggled abroad and published in the *Washington Post*. A few days later, he was given a visa to Israel. With a single incident, Birnbaum’s key intuitions were confirmed. The Simhat Tora gatherings were not a fluke but a premonition. Clearly, at least some Soviet Jews wanted desperately to be Jewish and were ready to sacrifice for that identity. And public exposure in the West would protect them. Finally, as thousands of Soviet Jews began risking their freedom to apply for exit visas, Birnbaum’s insistence on emphasizing the demand of “Let My People Go” was affirmed. The Soviet Zionist renewal marked the end of what he called SSSJ’s heroic years. No longer would the organization be operating on faith and hope alone, but also on proven fact. All that remained to be tested was our resolve.

The next letter-writer to come to the attention of the West was Boris Kochubiyevsky, a Kiev engineer. “As long as I am capable of feeling,” he wrote Soviet officials, “I will do all I can to leave for Israel. And if you find it possible to sentence me for that, then all the same. If I live until my release, I will be prepared to go to the homeland of my ancestors, even if it means going on foot.”¹⁹ Kochubiyevsky was sentenced to three years in prison. After his trial, a copy of his open letter was smuggled to the Western press. In SSSJ we were convinced that had his case been noticed by the West before his arrest, he would have gone to Israel instead of to prison, just like Kazakov. The difference in the fate of the two Zionist dissidents confirmed SSSJ’s belief in the power of public opinion. With Kochubiyevsky’s arrest, we now had our own political prisoner—a “prisoner of Zion.” Instead of protesting abstract human rights abuses like the ban on matza or the closing of synagogues, we now had a living symbol of Soviet oppression.

The most dangerous phase of the movement had begun. Soviet Jewish activists now placed themselves in the position of a fifth column, in direct opposition to the Kremlin’s pro-Arab and increasingly vicious anti-Zionist policies. Soviet Jews moved from underground distribution of *samizdat* literature to overt protest, with letter-writers banding together to issue collective emigration appeals; one Hebrew teacher posted advertisements for his illegal *ulpan* in the Moscow subway. No one could imagine the consequences. Would the Soviets relent, crack down, or try to ignore the growing revolt? In fact, they simultaneously adopted all three approaches, giving visas to some and prison sentences to others, while consigning most to a “refusenik” limbo of unemployment and harassment. The policy’s unpredictability seemed deliberate. A Jew applying for a visa never knew if he would end up in Israel or Siberia.

The fact that the Soviet Jewry struggle was no longer exclusively defined by activists in the West, but also by Jews in the Soviet Union, required new tactics and concepts. As opposed to the establishment’s call for the renewal of Jewish life in the Soviet Union, Birnbaum insisted that free emigration should now become the movement’s central demand. Moreover, SSSJ was

the first to realize that the movement needed to personalize the campaign. Along with several small adult anti-establishment groups, SSSJ grasped the new opportunities to transform the movement from an abstract struggle for “Soviet Jewry” into a concrete struggle for Soviet *Jews*, with names and stories. SSSJ publicized individual protest letters from Soviet Jews and organized demonstrations in support of refuseniks and prisoners of Zion. Over the years, the personal campaign became an essential feature of the entire movement, drawing new recruits and energizing veteran activists. The pilgrimage to visit refuseniks became an American Jewish activist’s rite of passage; dissidents like Anatoly Sharansky and Andre Sakharov became household names among American Jews, with teenagers wearing bracelets bearing these and other names; and synagogues across America began observing the bar- and bat-mitzvas of individual Soviet Jewish children by adding an empty chair to their own congregants’ celebrations. Indeed, Birnbaum’s vision of a symbiotic relationship encouraging Jewish renewal in America and the Soviet Union became a central feature of Jewish life. American Jews were inspired by the courage of Soviet refuseniks, who in turn were fortified by American Jewish support.

Given the dominant role that the personalized campaign would ultimately play, and its centrality to the movement’s later success, it is surprising to recall the opposition SSSJ initially faced on this issue from the Jewish establishment. The Conference on Soviet Jewry rejected the activists’ argument that Soviet Jews who exposed themselves should be known not only to the KGB but also to the West. The Conference took its cautious cue from the Israeli government’s Liaison Bureau, the secretive organization entrusted with maintaining contacts with Soviet Jews and generating international support for their emigration. Founded in 1952, the bureau initiated Soviet Jewry documentation centers in New York, London, and Paris, and sent emissaries to meet clandestinely with Soviet Jews and provide them with material about Israel and Judaism. But the Liaison Bureau bitterly opposed the campaign to publicize the plight of individual refuseniks, fearing a backlash from the Soviets. That fear turned ugly in 1969, when

the letter-writer Yasha Kazakov, along with another former refusenik named Dov Sperling, arrived on an American speaking tour. Incredibly, the bureau warned American Jewish organizations that Kazakov and Sperling were KGB provocateurs. SSSJ and other non-establishment groups ignored the warning and enthusiastically endorsed the two men. The following year, Kazakov held a nine-day hunger strike at the UN to demand the emigration of his parents, and SSSJ activists kept vigil with him.²⁰

Eventually, the Liaison Bureau recognized the power of the personal campaign and shifted its policy; inevitably, the Conference too changed its tactics. The change was publicly marked in November 1969, when Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir read from the Knesset podium the famous letter of the “Georgian 18”—heads of eighteen Georgian Jewish families who wrote, “We will wait months and years. We will wait all our lives if necessary, but we will never renounce our faith or our hopes.”²¹

But the establishment’s relationship with SSSJ remained ambivalent, alternating between cooperation and suspicion.²² Understandably, the establishment resented the student movement for refusing to submit to its discipline. In a sense, SSSJ represented a revolt not only against passivity and the strategy of quiet diplomacy, but also against the establishment’s right to speak for American Jews on matters of political importance. For its part, SSSJ showed contempt for the establishment’s scattered efforts, dismissing them as “do-nothing.” This surely overstated the case: The Anti-Defamation League, for example, sponsored an academic group that placed ads in *The New York Times*. And the Conference organized a series of nationwide protests beginning in 1964, which, though mostly small, nevertheless created an awareness of the Soviet Jewry issue around the country and demonstrated a reach that only the establishment could achieve.

Still, as the 1960s drew to a close, American Jewry had not yet committed its vast resources to saving Soviet Jewry. Establishment efforts were chronically under-funded, poorly coordinated, and most of all, unsystematic. Indeed, SSSJ was often more effective in bringing the Soviet Jewry issue to the public than all the major organizations combined. Even after the Soviet

Zionist movement began, American Jewish organizations still refused to equip the Conference with a budget and a permanent staff.²³ “Organized American Jewry places great emphasis on professionalism,” Birnbaum wrote in 1969, “yet is handling the crisis of Russian Jews in an utterly amateurish fashion. For example, there is not even a part-time staff person in daily touch with the media in our communication-conscious society.... Equally distressing, there is no central clearing-house for information and source material.”²⁴

Yet if the movement’s future still seemed threatened by establishment passivity, a new threat soon appeared from a different direction. In 1968, Meir Kahane founded the Jewish Defense League. For the first two years of its existence, the group focused almost exclusively on domestic issues, especially the growing black-Jewish rift. Then, in the final hours of 1969, the JDL sponsored a “Hundred-Hour Vigil” at the Soviet mission. Several hundred protesters rioted, while others chained themselves to a Soviet airliner at Kennedy Airport. Nothing like it had ever been done in the name of Soviet Jewry, and suddenly the movement that prided itself on responsibility and restraint had its own equivalent of the militant SDS and the Black Panthers. The violent 1960s had finally caught up with the Soviet Jewry movement.

For Kahane, restraint meant betrayal. “He shouted at me, ‘How dare you be responsible when Jews are in danger?’” recalls Birnbaum. “I argued that so long as they’re not killing Jews, we can’t act violently, which would only alienate the American Jewish community from the struggle.”²⁵ In 1966, Kahane had written an article for the *Jewish Press* calling for the creation of a “Soviet Jewry Liberation Front,” which would confront the Soviets with massive civil disobedience.²⁶ Nothing came of that effort. Only with the creation of the JDL did Kahane find the recruits for his militant Soviet Jewry campaign, which combined violence and occasional acts of terrorism, such as a sniper attack on the Soviet UN mission, with street sit-downs and similar acts of civil disobedience.²⁷ In Kahane’s view, the uglier the protests, the more coverage they would receive.

From its inception, SSSJ had sought to build coalitions with sympathetic non-Jews, especially liberals. By contrast, Kahane argued that the Jews had no real friends; at best, they could form temporary alliances of convenience with non-Jews. His approach was perhaps epitomized by his bizarre 1971 connection with the Italian-American Civil Rights League, founded by renowned mafioso Joe Colombo. Civil Rights League members attended JDL demonstrations; when Colombo was shot in June 1971, Kahane was the only outsider admitted into the hospital room. Birnbaum was enraged at Kahane for sullyng the name of the Soviet Jewry movement with his unsavory alliances. For Kahane, those alliances were merely the expression of the Jewish people's fate, which was ultimately to find itself alone in the world. (Kahane further developed his theology of radical Jewish separatism after he moved to Israel later that year, and that theology became the basis for his far-Right Kach movement.)²⁸

Kahane squandered his efforts on violence and on self-defeating initiatives like the Colombo alliance. The JDL's tactics finally resulted in loss of life in January 1972, when a secretary was killed in a firebomb attack on the offices of Sol Hurok, impresario of the Soviet-American cultural exchange. The group's Soviet Jewry activity had lasted barely two years, and had resulted in trials, prison terms, and depletion. In the end, Kahane succeeded for a brief time in placing the Soviet Jewry cause in the headlines in a way others had not—but at the cost of exacerbating the movement's internal divisions, and undermining the civility of debate within the Jewish community.

The period between 1967 and 1970, then, was one of dynamic uncertainty for the Soviet Jewry movement. Soviet Jews, infused with pride over Israel's victory and encouraged by diaspora activism, began publicly confronting their government. SSSJ's emphasis on heroic dissidents was adopted by both Israel and the American Jewish establishment. Yet the awakening of American Jewry, and the worldwide campaign which followed, was by no means a foregone conclusion: The establishment remained, for the most

part, hesitant to invest the resources required for a full-fledged public campaign, while violent extremists threatened to discredit the cause. The powerful, widespread movement that would come later was still, at this stage, an unfulfilled vision.

VI

Beginning in December 1970, the vision became a reality. The Kremlin placed on trial eleven Soviet citizens, nine of them Jews, who had intended to hijack an airplane to Israel but were arrested before they reached the plane. When two of the defendants in what came to be known as the “Leningrad Trial” were sentenced to death—on Christmas Eve, no less—the international outcry was overwhelming. Two dozen governments, along with Communist parties in the West, protested, forcing the Soviets to commute the sentences. For the first time since the founding of the movement, Soviet Jewry dominated headlines. More importantly, the Soviets’ capitulation proved, even to skeptics, the effectiveness of public protest.

Soviet Jews escalated their confrontational tactics, going from letter-writing to staging sit-ins at government buildings. The Kremlin responded with additional trials of activists, but it simultaneously allowed a substantial increase in emigration. In 1970, 1,000 Jews received exit visas; in 1971, the number was 13,000.²⁹ The Kremlin’s sudden shift on emigration was in all likelihood meant to deplete the Zionist movement by sending its core activists abroad. If so, it was a serious mistake. The appearance in Israel of leading refuseniks energized the movement, imbuing it with a sense of success that encouraged Jewish agitation on both sides of the Iron Curtain.

Indeed, the fate of Soviet Jewry now became American Jews’ chief political concern after the well-being of the State of Israel. Independent

initiatives proliferated. A network of small but highly effective adult advocacy groups formed the Union of Councils for Soviet Jews. This was a crucial development: The Union of Councils would later emerge as a major force through the 1970s and 1980s, representing 32 member organizations around the United States, maintaining an office in Washington, and joining forces with activist organizations abroad, including refusenik groups in the Soviet Union. Its constituent members specialized in creative provocations—like painting slogans on the hull of a Soviet ship docked in Los Angeles and hiring a helicopter to fly over the Super Bowl trailing a Soviet Jewry banner. Like SSSJ, with which it worked closely, the Union of Councils engaged in daily, systematic activity, and played a central role in linking American Jews and refuseniks.

The months following the Leningrad Trial also saw the peak of the JDL's Soviet Jewry activities. Along with bombings of Soviet offices in New York and Washington, the JDL dispatched teams to harass Soviet diplomats in Manhattan, creating a crisis in Soviet-American relations. On March 21, 1971, more than a thousand young Jews were arrested at a JDL sit-down demonstration in the streets of Washington—until then, the largest number of people arrested in an American demonstration for any cause.

Even the Conference on Soviet Jewry, which had not prepared a serious campaign in the months leading to the Leningrad Trial, intensified its public activities once the trial began. Embarrassed by the activism of the Union of Councils, SSSJ, and the JDL, the Jewish establishment finally realized that the community's Soviet Jewry efforts could not continue to be left to the ineffectual Conference. The need to create a credible counterweight to the JDL; encouragement from the Israeli government, which now unequivocally backed a vigorous protest campaign; pressure from Soviet Jewish activists; years of lobbying by Birnbaum—all combined to compel the Conference's constituent groups to transform it into an organization that would mobilize the Jewish community on a daily basis.

In late 1971, the Conference, now renamed the National Conference on Soviet Jewry, was given a full-time staff and a modest budget. In parallel, the Greater New York Conference on Soviet Jewry was created as a local umbrella organization for establishment groups. Under the leadership of Malcolm Hoenlein, a longtime SSSJ supporter and today the executive vice president of the Council of Presidents of Major Jewish Organizations, the Greater New York Conference essentially implemented SSSJ's vision of a grassroots campaign. Indeed, the communal activism that became normative in the 1970s and 1980s—from synagogue committees to massive Solidarity Day rallies—had all been envisioned by Birnbaum at the founding of SSSJ. (Even the term “Day of Solidarity” had been proposed in the early SSSJ literature.)³⁰ In essence, Hoenlein successfully put into practice Birnbaum's key ideas in the New York area, which in turn served as a model for a nationwide campaign.

Three elements of Birnbaum's initial four-point blueprint were now well on their way to fulfillment: The establishment was assuming responsibility for a grassroots movement; American Jews were actively encouraging Soviet Jews; and the Soviet Union was being pressured into opening the gates. All that remained was the fourth element: The “thrust” to Washington. With the introduction of the Jackson-Vanick amendment in 1972, a congressional act linking “Most Favored Nation” trade status with Soviet concessions on Jewish emigration, Congress emerged as the protector of Soviet Jews. But when the White House, outraged at the threat to Soviet-American detente, began pressuring Jewish leaders to withdraw support for the bill and warning that American backing for Israel could suffer, some establishment leaders wavered. SSSJ and the Union of Councils responded by lobbying both the establishment and Washington. “In one decade,” recalls Birnbaum, “I went from knocking on dormitory doors at Yeshiva University to knocking on doors in Congress.”³¹ SSSJ and the Union of Councils enlisted refuseniks for the lobbying effort, with the aim of embarrassing American Jewish leaders into supporting the amendment. In April

1973, more than one hundred prominent refuseniks signed an appeal to American Jewish leaders not to abandon the Jackson-Vanick amendment. The alliance between refuseniks and American activists over Jackson-Vanick was a milestone in the relationship between American and Soviet Jews. In large measure, it was that joint effort that helped the establishment to hold firm. The amendment was passed into law by Congress in January 1975.

With the Jackson-Vanick amendment, the Soviet Jewry movement had come of age. For American Jews, it was a stunning example of their capacity to influence international politics on behalf of their people—a powerful reversal of the failures of the Holocaust.³² For Soviet Jewry activists, it meant the fulfillment of their vision, mobilizing both the Jewish establishment and Washington for the rescue of Soviet Jews.

The American Jewish establishment continued to treat SSSJ as a tolerated stepchild. Still, the establishment did assume the leadership of the Soviet Jewry movement, just as Birnbaum had always insisted it must. Through the 1980s, both the Greater New York Conference and the National Conference operated a daily campaign aimed at local Jewish communities, the media, and Washington. The culminating moment of the Soviet Jewry movement occurred on December 6, 1987, when a quarter million people—the largest number ever to attend a Soviet Jewry demonstration—gathered in Washington to protest the imminent visit of Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev. Only the establishment could have managed it. Jacob Birnbaum, whose determination and dreams had created this moment, sat silent and unrecognized among the many dignitaries on the stage.

VII

April 27, 2004, will mark forty years since the founding of SSSJ and the grassroots Soviet Jewry movement. Jacob Birnbaum, now 77 and ailing, nevertheless remains active, working from his home in the Washington Heights neighborhood of Manhattan, with the same phone number that appeared on SSSJ stationery in the early years. He advises the American Association for Jews from the USSR and promotes Jewish educational projects in Israel for immigrants from the former Soviet Union. Yet most Soviet Jews do not know the name of the man who launched the movement for their freedom. Nor do most American Jews recall the man who transformed their community. Others, of course, have a share in the credit—the refuseniks, American activists and political leaders, the establishment Conference on Soviet Jewry, and, not least, the government of Israel and its Liaison Bureau. But it was Jacob Birnbaum who was first to declare, “Let my people go,” and to translate that longing into a systematic campaign.

For all its internal disagreements, the Soviet Jewry movement accomplished precisely what it set out to achieve, initiating a worldwide public campaign to save Eastern Europe’s last great Jewish community from extinction. More than a million Soviet immigrants came to Israel in two waves—around 200,000 during the 1970s, and the rest beginning in 1989. Undoubtedly, the mass migration to Israel in the 1990s owes a great debt to the Soviet Jewry movement of the 1960s. Though opening the gates of the USSR in 1989 was part of an internal process within Soviet society, the emigration to Israel was not a foregone conclusion. Most Soviet Zionist activists, after all, had already left in the first wave of emigration in the 1970s, and those Jews who remained behind were generally lacking in Jewish national sentiment. But the presence of relatives and friends in Israel who had left two decades earlier helped convince many Soviet Jews to

consider the Jewish state a credible destination. And that first Soviet immigration in the early 1970s was, in large part, a result of the campaign mounted by American activists through the 1960s.

SSSJ's early critics, who warned that the movement could never succeed, were right in one sense: Without the uprising of Soviet Jews themselves, the movement would almost certainly have remained marginal, perhaps forcing some minor concessions from the Kremlin but fundamentally unable to reverse the policy of forced assimilation. As a protest movement aimed at a foreign power, the campaign's success depended on the emergence of a Soviet Zionist movement to generate domestic pressure. However, SSSJ was the first organization to recognize the importance of individual dissidents and broadcast their voices in the West. In the process, it prepared American Jewry for the moment when a broader Soviet Jewish awakening would require Western protection, thereby insuring its success.

A generation later, the massive immigration of Russian-speaking Jews has transformed Israeli society, infusing the country with talent and energy. But arguably a no less powerful transformation has occurred among American Jews. The Soviet Jewry movement roused them from their passivity, and taught them how to fight a diaspora-generated struggle and experience victory—not vicariously through Israeli heroism, but as active partners in their people's fate. American Jews came to see themselves as a major force for Jewish freedom and security, protecting endangered Jews through political means, just as Israel did through military means. In its struggle for the freedom of Soviet Jews, American Jewry liberated itself as well.

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Notes

1. Ironically, in the early 1960s, large numbers of American Jews *were* becoming politically active, but not in Jewish causes: Of the white civil rights activists who went to Mississippi as Freedom Riders, no less than 40 percent were Jewish. Cf. Paul Berman, *A Tale of Two Utopias: The Political Journey of the Generation of 1968* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996). Yet for most American Jews, the notion that an ongoing protest campaign could be organized for a Jewish cause was foreign, even vaguely threatening. Drawing noisy attention to Jewish issues challenged the instinct of diaspora Jews, ingrained over centuries, to keep a low profile.

2. William W. Orbach, *The American Movement to Save Soviet Jewry* (Amherst, Mass.: University of Massachusetts, 1979), p. 34.

3. Sue Fishkoff, *The Rebbe's Story: Inside the World of Chabad Lubavitch* (New York: Schocken, 2003), p. 248.

4. "Declare the Truth About Yaakov," speeches given at an evening commemoration of Jacob Birnbaum's forty years of service to the Jewish people, December 1986.

5. Hillel Seidman, "Fifty Years After the Passing of Nathan Birnbaum: The Father of the *Teshuva* Movement," *Jewish Press*, April 24, 1987, p. 56A.

6. Interview with Jacob Birnbaum, July 1972.

7. Jacob Birnbaum, "Algerian Tragedy," *Jewish Review* 13:407 (July 1962), pp. 1, 8.

8. Orbach, *American Movement*, p. 20.

9. During this time, independent initiatives were also launched by American Jews frustrated by the establishment's lethargy. The Cleveland Council on Soviet Anti-Semitism, founded in 1963 by several Reform Jews, became the prototype for adult anti-establishment Soviet Jewry groups around the country. In New York, a Revisionist Zionist businessman named Morris Brafman formed the American League for Russian Jews, whose ambitions to create an activist campaign were never realized. Moshe Decter, who directed an institute called Jewish Minorities Research (unofficially initiated by the Israeli government), provided crucial documentation about the unique discrimination that Soviet Jews suffered and organized public forums that drew prominent intellectuals and civil rights leaders.

10. This was not entirely fair. The Conference did sponsor demonstrations, including a rally in Washington that drew 10,000 people and a similarly attended protest in New York's Madison Square Garden. For a vigorous defense of the Conference, see Albert D. Chernin, "Making Soviet Jews an Issue: A History," in

Murray Friedman and Albert D. Chernin, eds., *A Second Exodus: The American Movement to Free Soviet Jews* (Hanover, N.H.: Brandeis, 1999), pp. 15-69.

11. SSSJ leaflet: "College Students' Struggle for Soviet Jewry," distributed at Columbia University, April 2, 1964.

12. Interview with Jacob Birnbaum, December 2003.

13. Over 50 percent of SSSJ activists, moreover, would later be active in the anti-war movement. Jim Schwartz, "A Study of Student Struggle for Soviet Jewry," submitted to SSSJ leaders in May 1973.

14. Cf. Orbach, *American Movement*, pp. 30-31.

15. Orbach, *American Movement*, p. 29.

16. Jacob Birnbaum archives. A 1965 report to members about a meeting between SSSJ leaders and a Soviet Embassy official in Washington noted, "The discussion was tense but polite."

17. Birnbaum archives.

18. Cited in Yossi Klein Halevi, *Memoirs of a Jewish Extremist: An American Story* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1995), p. 69.

19. Klein Halevi, *Memoirs*, p. 70.

20. It is one of history's ironies that Kazakov, later known as Yaakov Kedmi, eventually became head of the Liaison Bureau and one of Israel's foremost officials acting on behalf of Soviet Jewry.

21. Klein Halevi, *Memoirs*, p. 80.

22. One Israeli official who consistently supported Birnbaum was Meir Rosenne, who represented the Liaison Bureau in New York in the mid-1960s and later served as Israel's ambassador to Washington.

23. Birnbaum archives.

24. Birnbaum archives.

25. Interview with Birnbaum, December 2003.

26. Author's archives.

27. Author's conversation with Meir Kahane, August 1973.

28. Janet L. Dolgin, *Jewish Identity and the JDL* (Princeton: Princeton, 1977), pp. 40-42.

29. Orbach, *American Movement*, p. 159.

30. "Save Soviet Jewry" 2 (1966), pp. 5, 7, cited in Orbach, *American Movement*, p. 27.

31. Interview with Birnbaum, December 2003.

32. See, for example, Murray Friedman, introduction to *Second Exodus*, pp. 1-14.

The World Jewish Congress is saddened to learn that Martin Wenick, a trusted colleague and leader in the struggle to free Soviet Jews, died on May 7 at the age of 80, due to complications of COVID-19. Wenick was a seasoned diplomat for the US State Department, serving under its auspices for 27 years. Upon his retirement in 1989, he assumed the role of executive director of the National Council for Soviet Jewry (NCSJ), a coalition of Jewish organizations including the WJC that worked to support Jews living under Communist rule and restriction, and to assist the movement of Jewish refuseniks fro