

OPEN BOOK

Teacher
Guide
7th – 11th
Grade

Are we Responsible for Others?

The Movement to Free Soviet Jews

This lesson explores the significance of the Movement to Free Soviet Jews—a dramatic, risky, and emotionally fraught social justice movement that The Atlantic’s Jeffrey Goldberg has called “the most successful human rights campaign of our time.”

Ordinary citizens sustained a grassroots effort to demand freedom for Soviet Jews, who were denied the right to speak, write, worship, work, or depart the Soviet state. Inspired by the civil rights, antiwar, and feminist movements of the 1960s, students, community leaders, and tens of thousands of people mobilized to free Soviet Jews—and achieved remarkable outcomes. This unit discusses what it means to protest—and, more specifically, what it means to stand in solidarity with others. Students will learn about what it means to empathize with those in need, and how empathizing can lead to action.

KEY QUESTIONS:

- Why did American Jews create a movement to free Jews living in the Soviet Union?
- Who is responsible for starting and carrying out a protest?
- How do we make decisions about our responsibilities – to individuals, our communities, our nation, people in distress around the world?
- What role do personal stories play in advocacy for human rights?
- Why is it important to learn about past protests?
- How can young people make a positive difference in the world?

LEARNING OBJECTIVES:

By the end of this unit students will be able to:

- Apply inquiry-based methods to interpreting museum objects and/or primary sources.
- Explore a historical question using critical thinking, text analysis, object interpretation, and discussion.
- Describe the difficulties of Jews in the Soviet Union and how young people there responded.
- Identify multiple types of protests and assess their efficacy.
- Explain the role Jewish youth played in freeing Soviet Jews.
- Identify how historical issues continue to be relevant in their lives today.

Suggested Pre-Lesson Activity

- 1. Ask students: “What does it mean to be responsible for others?”**
- 2. Explain to students that they will be creating a relationship web. Have them start by listing people that they know: friends, relatives, classmates, etc.**
— (optional) To make this exercise easier/quicker, have students write down the categories of people in their lives, as opposed to individuals’ names.
- 3. Once students have a list, ask them to draw all the names on a blank piece of paper. Their own name should go in the middle, and others’ names/groups of people should go around their own name.**
- 4. Have students turn this into a relationship web by answering the question: “Who is responsible for whom?” Students should draw arrows between all of the names, from the responsible person/group to the person/group they’re responsible for. Students can draw arrows in any directions they want.**
- 5. Ask: “How did it feel to make this web? What was difficult about it? What was surprising about it? In which situations did you have an arrow going only one way (i.e. one person is responsible for another)? In which situations did you have an arrow going both ways (i.e. two people are responsible for each other)?”**
- 6. Ask students to turn to the person next to them and explain one arrow/relationship they drew. Who did they say is responsible for whom, and why?**
- 7. Take it a step further by asking students to widen their web. Have them add larger communities to their web – your town, your state, your country, others nations or peoples around the world. Ask students what arrow they would draw to indicate responsibility between themselves and these larger communities.**

Procedure

1. Refer to the *Open Book Overview* and follow the instructions for the “See, Think, Wonder” activity as a class. Consider using the following discussion questions.

See:

- What information do you see about the card’s subject?
- What images do you see on the card?
- What structures do you see around the person in the image?
- What is the person in the image wearing?
- What shape is the necklace?
- What is engraved on the necklace? What languages are they in?

Think:

- What do you think this card and necklace were used for?
- Why do you think the necklaces have English and Hebrew on them?
- Do you think this counts as a form of protest? Why or why not?
- Can you think of any contemporary activities that involve similar strategies?

Wonder:

- I wonder what information is missing from this card.
- I wonder what “anti-Soviet and Zionist activities” meant in this situation.
- I wonder how much time [person] served in prison.
- I wonder how many of these packets were created.
- I wonder how many people wore these necklaces.

2. If you haven’t already, divide students into pairs or trios. Distribute one Talmud page to each group and Student Guide to each student.

3. Refer to the *Open Book Overview* and follow the instructions for the *havruta* study.

4. Refer to the *Open Book Overview* and follow the instructions for the *Wrap up activity*. Consider using the following discussion questions.

- Can you find two texts that agree with each other? What do you think their authors might say to each other?
- Can you find two texts that disagree with each other? What do you think their authors might say to each other?
- Which text surprised you? Why?
- How many authors speak about everyone being responsible for each other? How many authors speak about a specific group of people being responsible for others? What do you think these two groups of authors would say to each other?
- Which texts talk specifically about students being responsible for leading protests? Do you see any differences between those and the rest of the texts?
- How many authors reference the Holocaust? Why do you think they do so? What are the similarities and differences between these texts?
- How many authors reference others' stories? How?
- The SSSJ flyer (#2) and Gonzalez (#9) discuss the importance of student-led protests, but Kaepernick (#6) talks about celebrities taking a stand. What do you think these authors would say to each other?

General prompting questions:

- What does it mean to be responsible for others?
- Who are you responsible for? Who is responsible for you?
- What does it mean to share responsibility?
- What does it mean to protest?
- Why is protesting important?
- What emotions do you associate with protesting? How do you think it feels when one protests?
- Who do you think can participate in protests? Why?
- Is there a right or a wrong way to speak out on an issue? Why?
- Have you ever been a part of a protest? What was the issue? How did you protest? Why did you join it?

Suggested Post-Lesson Activity

1. Pair *havruta* groups together, so students are in groups of 4-5.
2. Have students discuss as a group what social issues or causes are important to them. These causes can be of any size – from national or global problems to something they want to change in their school or community.
3. Ask students who is responsible for addressing this problem? They can then make a list of all individuals and/or groups of people who are affected by and/or play a role in the chosen issue.
4. Have students brainstorm as many different ways as they can to address or protest that issue. Emphasize types of protests that students themselves can participate in.
— (optional) As they make a list, have students identify which texts would support each protest.
5. Have a representative from each group present to the class their issue and list of ways in which they can take responsibility, writing letters, volunteering, protesting, etc.
6. After each group has presented, identify which protest types were mentioned the most, and discuss why you think that is.

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Object Information

Anatoly Altman Prisoner of Conscience kit, Project of the Union of Councils of Soviet Jews, ca. 1970s

“Prisoner of Conscience” kits were created in the 1970s by the Cleveland Council on Soviet Anti-Semitism (CCSA) in coordination with the Union of Councils for Soviet Jews (UCSJ). A prisoner of conscience is someone who has been imprisoned by his or her government for their political or religious views.

Each kit represented a Jewish prisoner of conscience in the Soviet Union. The kits consisted of two information cards and one Star of David-shaped medallion stamped with the name of the Jewish *refusenik* it represented.

The first information card described the general plight of *refuseniks* in the Soviet Union, and the second listed the specific individual’s name, age, address, relatives, and stated reason for imprisonment. The second information card often featured the *refusenik’s* picture overlaid onto a drawing of a prisoner. American Jewish activists would often wear these medallions to rallies and marches.

The kits were sent out by the UCSJ to local councils, synagogues, community centers, organizations, and individuals across the United States as part of a People-to-People campaign. Recipients were encouraged to send letters to the prisoner’s address, send financial assistance to the prisoner’s family, and make appeals to local, national, and international governments on the prisoner’s behalf.



National Museum of American Jewish History, 1991.51.8.2

Appendix A – Historical Background

Crying “Let my people go!” American Jews launched one of the most successful human rights campaigns ever. Before the internet, social media, or a 24-hour news cycle, ordinary citizens sustained a grassroots effort to demand freedom for Soviet Jews, who were being denied the right to speak, write, worship, work, or depart the Soviet state. Inspired by the civil rights, antiwar, and feminist movements of the 1960s, student activists, community leaders, organizations, and tens of thousands of individuals mobilized to free Soviet Jews; and this dramatic, risky, international human rights movement ultimately reached the highest echelons of the American government.

After World War II, Jews who lived in the Soviet Union were denied the rights to live freely, practice Judaism, or leave the country. Synagogues were shut down and the teaching of Hebrew forbidden. Those who publicly demanded the right to practice Judaism and to immigrate to Israel were arrested and imprisoned, some serving years behind bars or in labor camps. Likewise, the increase in applications for emigration led to a simultaneous increase in the numbers of people who were refused exit visas by the Soviet government. These *refuseniks* formed a cohort of Soviet Jewish activists.

Refuseniks faced persecution, imprisonment, and isolation with pride, determination, and resolve. United in the desire to improve life for Jews in the Soviet Union, some focused on immediate emigration, while others sought to foster Jewish culture within the USSR and to increase Jews’ knowledge and practice of Judaism. *Refuseniks* created and disseminated *samizdat* (clandestine publications) where they expressed their ideals and struggles and

transmitted Jewish knowledge. They organized underground ulpanim (Hebrew classes), seminars on Jewish culture and history, children’s education, and Jewish art exhibitions. Some even risked their lives by openly picketing government offices and organizations.

In a 1963 sermon responding to the obstacles to Jewish life in the Soviet Union, rabbi, scholar, and activist Abraham Joshua Heschel made an impassioned plea to American Jews, stating: “What is called for is not a silent sigh, but a voice of moral compassion and indignation, the sublime and inspired screaming of a prophet uttered by a whole community. The six million are no more. Now three million face spiritual extinction.”

Haunted by memories of the Holocaust, American Jews joined with refuseniks, Israelis, and human rights activists around the world in the struggle to save Soviet Jewry. They marched, protested, and lobbied the American government to exert pressure. National organizations raised the alarm, and community leaders organized local advocacy efforts. Beginning in the 1960s, various grassroots groups in the United States joined together to create the Union of Councils for Soviet Jewry. In 1971, American Jewish organizations created the National Conference on Soviet Jewry. The World Conference on Soviet Jewry became the cornerstone for an international movement.

Emboldened by Israel’s victory in the 1967 Six-Day War, Soviet Jews began calling for national, cultural, and political rights, including the ability to immigrate to Israel. Authorities responded with repression. *Refuseniks* were fired from their jobs, deprived of higher education, and socially isolated. Those who defiantly studied Hebrew and celebrated Jewish holidays risked harassment by the KGB, the Soviet state security agency, and imprisonment. Convicted on false charges of crimes against

the state or petty offenses, “Prisoners of Zion” like Natan Sharansky, Ida Nudel, Vladimir Slepak, Yosef Begun, and Yuli Edelstein spent years in prison, solitary confinement, and labor camps.

Beginning in the early 1970s, dozens of American Jews traveled to the USSR under the guise of tourism bringing refuseniks literature, religious objects, and material support, while collecting information and bringing back *samizdat* (underground publications passed from reader to reader) as evidence to make their case with the U.S. government. In the US, Jewish liturgy and practices became infused with the struggle for Soviet Jews. Some people sent holiday greeting cards and personal notes to *refuseniks*, knowing their correspondences might be intercepted or censored by Soviet authorities. On Passover, many families set aside a special empty chair for a Soviet Jew unable to celebrate the holiday. Others added special readings about Soviet Jews to their Passover Seders and placed a “Matzah of Hope” on the table. Additionally, it became part of Jewish life-cycle events and synagogue life as thousands of children “twinned” their bar and bat mitzvah ceremonies with Soviet peers denied this coming-of-age ritual.

Major Jewish organizations like the American Jewish Committee (AJC), American Jewish Congress, World Jewish Committee (WJC), B’nai B’rith, Anti-Defamation League, Hadassah, and the National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council made freeing Soviet Jews a top priority. AJC spent three decades leveraging political ties in Washington, DC, Europe, and Latin America. In 1971, WJC cosponsored the first World Conference of Jewish Communities on Soviet Jewry in Brussels, Belgium and Charlotte Jacobson,

national president of Hadassah, met with refuseniks and faced Soviet officials.

Emigration restrictions eased in the late 1980s, and following the Soviet Union’s 1991 collapse, all Jews could freely depart to start new lives. They brought with them diverse experiences, expectations, and attitudes toward Jewish identity. Today nearly 750,000 Russian-speaking Jews live in the United States. Many have established themselves personally and professionally, some to great prominence. Their children, raised in New York, Atlanta, Los Angeles, and hundreds of other cities, have graduated from American schools and universities and now face American choices about careers, identity, marriage, and religious affiliation—adding new perspectives to what it means to be an American Jew.

Today, a single tweet can reverberate across the globe and capture the attention of millions. Everyone commands the power to communicate—to unite or to incite—in ways unimaginable when the Soviet Jewry movement stood at its height. Change, nevertheless, remains a laborious process, demanding initiative, passion, compromise, and communal cooperation. The movement to free Soviet Jews, perhaps the most successful human rights movement in history, shows that voices raised in protest can lead to remarkable achievements.

Appendix B – Supplementary Information for Talmud Page

01 PROVERBS

The Book of Proverbs is part of *Ketuvim* (Writings), the final section of the *Tanakh* (the Hebrew Bible). In Hebrew, this book is called *Mishlei Shlomo* (the Proverbs of Solomon), and tradition holds it that Solomon wrote all of Proverbs. Unlike other parts of the *Tanakh*, which focus on topics in Jewish history, ethics, and law, Proverbs focuses on how to live one’s life wisely.

This quote comes from Proverbs 31, which a series of advice from the mother of Lemuel, a biblical king. In this chapter, Lemuel’s mother gives advice in the first half about how to be a wise king, and in the second half about how to be a woman of valor. Standing up and providing for those in need comprises part of her advice for kings.

02 LEADING THE CHARGE

The Student Struggle for Soviet Jewry (SSSJ) was founded by Jacob Birnbaum in 1964, with the goal of helping to liberate Soviet Jews during the latter part of the 20th century. The SSSJ harnessed the passions and tactics of civil rights-era activists and lambasted the Jewish “establishment” for its complacency. It won notice by staging marches, picketing embassies, and incorporating elements of American counterculture into its activities. Additionally, the organization popularized the use of the

song “Am Yisrael Chai” (The People of Israel Live!), composed by Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach and which became the anthem of the Soviet Jewry movement.

The quoted text comes from the flyer announcing the SSSJ’s first meeting on April 27, 1964, on Columbia University’s campus. The flyer included the meeting’s agenda, which included discussing three goals: “clarifying the issues... examining possible courses of action, and... appointing a pro-tem city-wide college committee for Soviet Jewry.” While the flyer referenced students’ activism regarding other causes, namely the Civil Rights Movement, it emphasized the importance of Jews helping other Jews, regardless of location or situation.

The SSSJ is still an active organization today, and it primarily raises funds to help to promote Jewish education in Israel and Russia.

03 JEWS OF SILENCE

Ellie Wiesel (1928 – 2016) survived and documented his experiences as a victim of the Holocaust. His memoir, *Night*, tracks his harrowing ghetto confinement, forced labor in an Auschwitz offshoot work camp, and participation in a “death march” before liberation. After the publication of his book, Wiesel became a vocal activist who spoke out about global atrocities for decades—fixating particularly on the crucial role of bystanders in preventing devastation. These humanitarian efforts secured him the Nobel Peace Prize in 1986.

In September of 1965, Wiesel traveled to the Soviet Union as a reporter to document and publicize the oppression of Jews under the Soviet regime. He published his observations in the book *The Jews of Silence*, where he noted

that “the condition of the Jews in the Soviet Union is at once more grievous and more hopeful than I had imagined.” He described both the state-sponsored repression and the grassroots efforts to keep Jewish culture alive, publicizing a crisis that was largely unknown to the outside world. Wiesel emphasized that while Soviet Jews lived in “silence” due to fear, the rest of the world could not be silent themselves.

04 FINDING MY ROOTS

Natan Sharansky (b. 1948) was a leading figure in the Soviet Jewry movement. After graduating from the Moscow Physics Technological University, Sharansky applied for a visa to emigrate to Israel in 1973. When the Soviet Union denied this visa based on “security reasons,” he was inspired to fight for the freedom and equality of Russian Jews. In 1977, Sharansky was accused of collaborating with the CIA, and soon after he was captured by the Soviet Union and spent nine years in various gulags, interrogation facilities, and imprisonment camps. He was finally freed in 1986 after immense international pressure and a successful campaign led by his wife, Avital. Immediately after being freed, he emigrated and arrived in Jerusalem the same day, but continued to fight on behalf of Soviet Jews. His largest accomplishment came on December 7, 1987, also known as Freedom Sunday, when he helped to organize a march of 250,000 people on Washington, coinciding with a visit by Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev to President Reagan.

After immigrating to Israel, Sharansky held various positions within the Israeli government, most notably Minister of Jerusalem and Diaspora Affairs. He remains a guiding voice in helping Jews from around the

world get to Israel, as well as being a human rights advocate.

05 DEFENDER OF RIGHTS?

Mikhail Gorbachev (b. 1931) is a Russian politician and former Soviet official who served as the general secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union from 1985 to 1991 and president of the Soviet Union from 1990 to 1991. He was born in southwestern Russia as the son of Russian peasants and joined the *Komsomol* (Young Communist League) in 1946. While at the law school of Moscow State University he became a member of the Communist Party and went on to rise through the ranks of the regional committee, Central Committee, and finally Politburo.

Gorbachev was elected general secretary by the Politburo on March 11, 1985, and was at the time the youngest member of the bureau. His most radical reforms during his rule, which lasted until 1991, were *Perestroika* (“restructuring”) and *Glasnost* (“openness”).

The policy of *Perestroika* mainly attempted to stimulate economic progress by mitigating government intervention in business, removing some governmental controls of the economy, allowing the existence of private businesses, and opening the market to greater foreign trade and intervention. These efforts were ultimately unsuccessful and resulted in an economic downturn in the Soviet Union. Under *Glasnost*, a policy advocating greater government transparency and democratization, increased freedom of speech and press, released many political prisoners, declassified some censored literature and increased scrutiny towards government corruption. Additionally, Gorbachev pursued warmer relations and trade with other nations, and in 1988 announced the

end of the Soviet control over the internal affairs of Eastern bloc nations.

Ultimately, Gorbachev's policies, along with already-dwindling funds, served as a major catalyst for the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union. For the positive changes that arose in the Soviet Union towards the end of its existence, Gorbachev received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1990. After the fall of the USSR, Gorbachev unsuccessfully ran for the Russian presidency in 1996, founded the Social Democratic Party of Russia, established a number of nonprofit organizations, and won a Grammy Award for Best Spoken Word Album for children in 2004 for Sergei Prokofiev's Peter and the Wolf.

06 A FACELESS MOVEMENT

Connie Smukler was one of the leading American activists who aided *refuseniks* during the Soviet Jewry Movement at the end of the 20th century. After a trip to Jerusalem with her husband in the summer of 1973, Smukler learned of the difficulties faced by Soviet Jews who attempted to request exit visas so they could immigrate to Israel. Smukler decided to take action at home in Philadelphia, and led various movements and trips in order to rescue Soviet Jews. She became proficient in secret codes, smuggling, and bribery in order to help Jews immigrate to both Israel and the United States. Smukler also worked with U.S. senators and other government officials in order to nationally publicize the plight of Soviet Jews and how Americans could help.

In this quote, Smukler explains why she felt compelled to take such a large role in the Soviet Jewry movement. Today, Connie Smukler still

resides in Philadelphia and continues to promote human rights causes worldwide.

07 USING YOUR PLATFORM

Colin Kaepernick (b. 1987) is a former National Football League starting quarterback for the San Francisco 49ers. In his six seasons, Kaepernick threw for 72 touchdowns, helping the 49ers to compete in the Super Bowl during the 2012 season.

During the 2016 season, Kaepernick began to kneel during the National Anthem in protest of police brutality and racial injustice. His protest spread, with other football players and later other athletes and cheerleaders kneeling for the National Anthem. This action drew the ire of NFL officials, politicians, and others who saw the kneeling protest as a sign of disrespect against the United States and its veterans. Despite his prowess on the field, Kaepernick was not signed to a team during the 2017 season and he has since become a free agent. However, his protests have also garnered him significant praise from anti-racism and other civil rights organizations, such as Amnesty International, who awarded Kaepernick with their Ambassador of Conscience Award in 2018.

This quote comes from Kaepernick's first media conference after beginning his kneeling protest. During the conference, he addressed his reasoning as to why he decided stage his protest during the National Anthem.

08 DANGER OF COCOONS

Gloria Steinem (b. 1934) boasts a decades-long career as an activist, during which she has

published, funded, protested, marched, lobbied, spoke, and organized against injustice, particularly sexism.

For example, in the 1960s, Steinem assumed the position of a Playboy Bunny and reported on the poor treatment and exploitation of those employed by the magazine. She later co-founded the feminist magazine, *Ms.*, in 1972. In 1984, she was arrested during a protest opposing South African Apartheid.

However, since Steinem's rise as a prominent figure within the feminist and reproductive freedom movements in the early 1970s, activism has changed. With the rise of the internet and social media, the "get out there and fight!" protests of Steinem's youth have increasingly given way to methods of digital protesting that can be done without "getting out there" at all. This form of activism might include liking social media posts, signing petitions, or writing politically outraged status updates that are shared within online communities made up of members with similar views. Critics refer to this as "slacktivism," or social action meant to foster a sense of fulfillment for the participant while minimally effecting the relevant cause.

09 HAVING OUR SAY

On February 14th, 2018, an active shooter murdered 17 students and teachers in a school shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, a wealthy suburb of Miami. After this horrific event, many of the students who survived the shooting, along with students from across the country, began to lead a new movement to advocate for increased gun control and, more importantly, to end school shootings. These students have organized

rallies and marches across the country, such as "The March for Our Lives" and a national school walkout day, to allow students to protest and advocate for gun control.

Emma Gonzalez (b. 1999) was a senior at Stoneman Douglas High School who survived the shooting. After the massacre, Gonzalez became a prominent activist for the gun control movement, as well as for LGBTQ+ rights. She has given various speeches in which she promotes the need for stricter gun laws, increased mental health awareness, and better mental health services in order to prevent future mass shootings. Three days after the murder of 17 classmates and teachers, Gonzalez gave a speech which included the above quote, where she called her fellow students to action in support of gun control.