

The March that Changed the World

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On December 6, 1987, a sunny, but chilly Sunday, 25 years ago, Jewish history was made, and the history of the world was forever changed.

As a result of the work of the Jewish community, concern for the plight of Soviet Jews, and advocating freedom for their right to emigrate from the communist empire became a bi-partisan issue that had become a central tenet of American foreign policy. The March on Washington brought Jews and non-Jews from all across North America for a mass public demonstration on the mall in Washington demanding, in the eternal words first uttered by Moses when he bravely confronted Pharaoh 3500 years earlier, "*Shelach et Ami*, Let my People Go!"

The march took place during the height of the Cold War, on the eve of a summit meeting scheduled to take place the next day at the White House between President Ronald Reagan and Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev. The call to mobilize was a tremendous risk, because American Jewish leaders were worried what would be the impact on their work if the turnout would be light and unimpressive. They were concerned: what if the Jewish community would be apathetic and not respond to the call to march on Washington? It could setback the advances already made.

Some worried that our insistence on making this human rights issue a fundamental element of American foreign policy would cause Jews to be blamed for impeding the long desired warming of relations with Mother Russia, and would therefore lead to resentment and anti-Semitism. Others worried that our calling attention to the plight of Jews behind the Iron Curtain would hurt the very people we were hoping to help.

But in the end, overcoming all obstacles, it was one of American Jewry's finest hours. 250,000 people, Jews and non-Jews converging on Washington had a lasting impact beyond what anyone could have ever dreamed that day.

When Reagan and Gorbachev met the next day, Gorbachev did not want to discuss the situation of Soviet Jews, but Ronald Reagan insisted on bringing it up, saying that the demonstration and outpouring of public opinion on this issue was not something he could ignore. As a result, along with nuclear disarmament, increasing trade, and other practical and ideological issues, President Reagan insisted that this be at the top of their agenda.

Among the speakers at the rally that day were leaders from a number of major Jewish organizations, as well as labor unions, civil rights organizations, members of Congress, Vice President George H.W. Bush, Elie Wiesel and Natan Sharansky. Even folk singers Peter, Paul and Mary performed. Planes were chartered from across the country. I-95 was packed with

buses bringing people from up and down the east coast. The Stadium Armory complex was filled with buses. People chanted, "2-4-6-8. Let the Jews emigrate!" "Gorby-O. Let them go!" A little background is in order and to put the event in proper context.

The story really goes back to the end of the 19th century, and the beginning of the 20th century, when the millions of Jews living in shtetls, rural villages in Russia, as well as in Moscow and Odessa, and elsewhere were suffering under the cruel oppression of Czarist Russia and the threat of military conscription, with children as young as six years old, forcibly taken from their families, coupled with the sporadic outburst of pogroms, discrimination and attacks.

There were three responses to the Russian anti-Semitism. Many Jews thought life would be better under the Bolsheviks than the czar. Inspired by the age old Jewish yearning for a messianic era of equality, they placed their hope in the vision promised by the Marxists to create a better world. Consequently many worked for the revolution that in 1917 brought down the czarist regime and brought the communists to power. Other Jews, many of us, their descendants, abandoned hope that things would change in their homeland and set out for the Goldene Medinah, the Golden Land, the United States of America. They felt the words of the Jewish poet, Emma Lazarus emblazoned on the Statue of Liberty summoning the tired and those yearning to be free to come were a personal invitation. And the third response of Eastern European Jews at the turn of the century was to set out for the Promised Land, to make the age old dream of returning to Zion, the land of Israel a reality and to build a new Jewish nation in our ancient homeland.

As those of us in Israel and America built new lives and created new worlds, Jewish life in the countries that made up the Soviet Union was slowly and systematically being extinguished. Synagogues were closed, Jewish theaters were shut down, publication and circulation of sacred and secular Jewish books were banned, teaching of Judaism was outlawed. Stalin murdered Jewish poets and doctors, and sent those who still wanted to live as Jews to Soviet gulags and prisons. And since information was controlled by the government, those of us in the West did not know what was going on.

All of that changed in 1967, when, defying authority and overcoming their fears, inspired by the success of Israel in the Six Day War, Russian Jews realized the lies they had been told about Israel, Jews and Judaism were not true. A few months later, Simchat Torah of that year, tens of thousands of Jews converged on the one remaining synagogue in Moscow and poured into the streets in front of the building to dance and celebrate the joyous festival. Word got out, and we Jews in America began to learn of what had happened to the "cousins" we had left behind 60 years earlier. Elie Wiesel's book, "The Jews of Silence" helped awaken us to their plight and of our responsibility to do something to help our fellow Jews.

Jews in the 60's and 70's were unquestionably motivated by the specter of the nagging question, "why did our parents' generation not do more to save Jews during the Holocaust?" And now, we had the chance to correct history, to show that we were not just going to accuse those before us of not doing enough, but that when presented with the challenge, we would

act differently. A new generation, secure in our identity as Americans, and inspired by our brothers and sisters in Israel, who took pride in being Jewish, we decided to do whatever we could on behalf of our fellow Jews. A few decades after the Holocaust we were determined not to lose another third of our people.

Jews were leaders in the civil rights movement in America in the '60's, and realized if we could advocate on behalf of the rights of blacks, we could work for the rights of our fellow Jews as well.

And so the Jewish community was activated, inspired and mobilized to speak out and work on behalf of the right of Soviet Jews to emigrate to Israel. Rabbis motivated their congregants to take up the cause. Synagogues sponsored twinning programs with Soviet Jews for their b'nai mitzvah. Members of Congress were lobbied and enlisted in the campaign. The spouses of members of Congress organized a support group. Letter writing campaigns were undertaken. A daily vigil was held across the street from the Soviet Embassy on 16th Street in Washington. Simchat Torah celebrations featured a silent hakafah in solidarity with Soviet Jews. Rallies were held around the country. Bracelets with the names of "prisoners of Zion" were worn by Jews and non-Jews to put a face on the individuals. The movement was so pervasive, it was even the subject of a memorable Saturday Night Live shtick. Gilda Radner playing Emily Litella, who was always a bit *femisht*, and who misheard things asked, "What's all this I keep hearing about free 'Soviet jewelry'?"

Although the letter J was printed on their identity papers, Russian Jews were not allowed to identify as Jews or to express their Jewish identity. Discriminated against in the academic world and not allowed to advance in their jobs, Jews who asked to leave were subjected to greater discrimination, and were usually fired. Despite the Soviet government's concentrated efforts to further frighten and intimidate Soviet Jews, word of our efforts on their behalf seeped through, and the Jews of Russia became bolder and more daring in their defiance of Russia. The contraband Leon Uris' book, "Exodus" was illegally smuggled into the country and clandestinely circulated.

The names of some of the Refuseniks, those Soviet Jews who at great personal risk had asked permission to leave the Soviet Union became well known. When members of Congress would meet with Russian officials who wanted to discuss easing trade restrictions, the Congressmen would begin the meetings by presenting the names of the Jews they wanted to be granted permission to emigrate.

In 1989 I was asked by the local Jewish Community Relations Council to go to Moscow and Kiev with another rabbi to meet and teach Soviet Jews. Rarely have I felt the unbelievable power of Jewish texts to inspire and speak across the generations. It just so happens that the Torah portion when I was in Russia was about Moses asking the Pharaoh to let his people go. Without ever explicitly mentioning their situation, I knew that they knew, and they knew that I knew, the passage was really a metaphor for what they were living. We spoke in code, for it was clear that the Pharaoh of ancient times personified the Soviet regime of their day. Reading of the

ultimate liberation of the slaves from Egypt brought a tremendous message of hope and reassurance of ultimate victory and the perseverance of the Jewish people.

It is hard to understand today the odds we were up against. We were demanding that the communist regime do something it had never done before. We were up against a ruthless, tyrannical totalitarian dictatorship that did not care about public opinion, a cruel bureaucratic system of governance that did not value human rights, and that did not think twice about locking up and forgetting about individuals they accused of being enemies of the state. What we were asking for was unprecedented, and seemed to be as unrealistic as sending a man to the moon, but we were unrelenting.

Humor played a role in keeping us going. A joke from that time was that a Jew who had asked to go to Israel was denied an exit visa since he was a scientist and therefore knew too many state secrets. He told the bureaucrat, "But that is ridiculous. The west is way ahead of us in science. Whatever we have discovered or developed, they already did decades ago." The government official responded, "That is exactly the secret we don't want to get out."

There were many courageous leaders and luminaries, brilliant minds among the Soviet Jews. The most famous of all was Natan Sharansky, then known as Anatoly Sharansky. One of the most brilliant people I have ever met, he was falsely accused of being a CIA spy and thrown into prison. His plight became an international cause célèbre. As he writes in his autobiography, "Fear No Evil", he did not allow his spirit to be broken and came to realize that he was the only person in the entire Soviet gulag who was truly free, that the guards who watched him and who could go home at night were not really free, but he in his prison cell was. Embracing his Judaism was the key to his mind and soul being free. He said that although he was cut off from all information about the outside world, the more they tormented him, the more he realized Jews were working on his behalf. When the guards taunted him and said, "You have no hope of ever getting out of here. After all, we are the mighty Soviet Empire, with a massive military, and all you have are a motley bunch of students and housewives working for you," he would respond to them, "You are the ones who do not understand. Those are Jewish students and housewives." He instinctively knew the strength of our solidarity and commitment to work on behalf of our fellow Jews.

After years in solitary confinement, and demands for his release becoming an international cause, Sharansky was finally released in 1987, an event televised live on the Today show. He immediately embraced and became the leader of the march on Washington. He said it had to be massive, and that there had to be hundreds of thousands at the rally. He was told by many skeptical Jewish leaders that he did not know what he was talking about, that it was unrealistic, that he did not understand America, that the call could be counterproductive. But the man who had defied the Soviet regime would not be deterred. He wanted to be sure that the host community, Washington DC would be supportive, and so one of his first visits was to speak before the Washington Board of Rabbis to get us behind the efforts. As the President of the WBR at the time, I had the honor of introducing him and meeting him for the first of many times.

So here we are, 25 years after this march, and all too many do not know of this amazing chapter in Jewish history, its important lessons, and what we achieved.

Ultimately, we were successful. 1 ½ million Jews came to Israel. Israel, a poor country, with limited resources did not ask -- how can we afford to take in these people? How can we absorb these people who do not speak Hebrew? Rather they begged for more emigrants. Some came to America and elsewhere. It is fair to say – we would not have Google today, were it not for the Soviet Jewry movement.

We learned about political activism. Aipac would not be what it is today, were it not for the Soviet Jewry movement paving the way and showing the power of unified political activism and of the Jewish community to influence public policy.

It also led to the beginning of the end of the Soviet empire and of communist repression and dominance of Eastern Europe.

We look back on it as a time of Jewish unity, even though it was not. Divisions among the advocates on behalf of Soviet Jews about tactics were strong. But despite what divided us, we were united by a unity of purpose and faith in the justness of our cause. We believed and acted on the Talmudic passage, *Kol Yisrael arevin, zeh bezeh*: All of Israel is responsible for one another.” I urge you to share this important chapter in our history with your children so they will know and appreciate the power of an idea and principle, and of how the world was forever transformed because Jews were committed to helping their fellow Jews.

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