

Israel Feels Growing Anguish As Immigration Flow Falters

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Body

Hanna Mandelgeim's Jewish friends in Leningrad tried their best to talk her out of moving to **Israel** earlier this year.

The Palestinian uprising was at its height, and Soviet television seemed to glory in showing footage of Israeli soldiers beating up Arabs.

"They said we should go to America," Mrs. Mandelgeim recalled, sitting with her 14-year-old son in one of the bare but functional apartments that **Israel** makes available to new immigrants for six months, rent-free.

"They said there are Arabs in **Israel**, and everybody in America is rich. But we think the place for Jews is **Israel**, not America. Here we **feel** in our own house." Mrs. Mandelgeim is an exception. Last month, **Israel** issued 1,169 visas to Soviet Jews who were given permission to emigrate to **Israel**. But that was not the number who came.

Many Go Elsewhere

When the Soviet Jews stopped to switch planes in Vienna, 1,059 of them, or 91 percent, changed their reservations and flew on to the United States, infuriating Israeli officials and contributing to what the Government is beginning to call the **immigration** crisis.

It is "a disgrace" and "a national tragedy," said Yaacov Tsur, **Israel**'s Minister of Immigrant Absorption. His ministry is the Government agency in charge of **immigration** matters.

Hardly another country in the world complains that it takes in too few immigrants. Most try to keep them out. But the principal tenet of Zionism is that **Israel** should be home to the world's Jews, who lived without a nation of their own for 2,000 years. Few issues stir more passion in **Israel**.

From 1980 through 1987, about 117,000 Jews **immigrated** to **Israel**, according to figures from the Ministry of Immigrant Absorption. But during the same period, about 94,000 Jews emigrated from **Israel** to other countries, primarily the United States. The population of **Israel** is about 4.5 million, and about 84 percent of Israelis are Jews.

The Jews 'Don't Come'

"This is the only Jewish state, we are the pioneers and we created it for the Jewish people," said Uri Gordon, the head of the **Immigration** and Absorption Department of the Jewish Agency, which acts as an intermediary between **Israel** and the world's Jews.

"We built it for them, but nothing happens," he said, **anguish** is his voice. "The Jewish people don't come." So far this year, **immigration** to **Israel** is about as high as it was last year. This is primarily because even with the high

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"dropout rate" of Soviet Jews, those with Israeli visas who wind up elsewhere, the number of arriving Soviet Jews has been three times greater than it was last year.

Nonetheless, the Soviet dropout rate has never been higher. Last year, about 30 percent of the Jews leaving the Soviet Union came to Israel, and officials are worried that soon, no departing Soviet Jews will move to Israel.

At the same time, 25 percent fewer Americans moved to Israel in the first three months of 1988 than moved here in the first three months of 1987, according to Government figures. And twice as many Israelis left for the United States last year as American Jews moved to Israel in the same year.

Government figures show that even when American Jews do move here, within two or three years about half of them move back to the United States.

'Very Worried'

Since the United States and Soviet Union offer the largest pools of potential immigrants, "this sudden decline causes us to be very worried about the trend," said Gad Ben-Ari, the spokesman for the Absorption Ministry.

Many Israelis see immigration as a reflection of their success, or failure, in creating an attractive, livable nation.

The bulk of Israel's immigrants have come in waves, based largely on events in the countries of origin of the refugees. Pogroms in the Soviet Union late in the last century and early in this one sent thousands of Russians to Palestine. Germans and Eastern Europeans arrived before and after World War II. North African and Middle Eastern Jews came in large numbers in the 1960's after meeting with persecution in their homelands. And large numbers of Americans moved here after the Arab-Israeli war in 1967.

With immigration levels apparently ready to fall off even more, many Israelis and supporters of Israel attribute the trend to a host of issues other than the country's troubled image in the world today, six months into the Palestinian uprising.

U.S. Is Faulted

Some angrily blame the United States for the Soviet dropout phenomenon, pointing to the United States policy of giving refugee status to Soviet Jews, automatically entitling them to a visa and other benefits. Washington's approach amounts to "bribing Soviet Jewish emigrants," said Mikhail Agursky, a specialist in Soviet and East European Affairs at Hebrew University. Mr. Agursky set forth his thoughts in a recent newspaper column.

"Could Israel stand idly by if U.S. Jewry were to try enticing Israelis to emigrate to the U.S.?" Mr. Tsur, the Absorption Minister, asked in the Israeli Parliament last week.

A senior United States Embassy official calls that idea ridiculous. People immigrating to Israel get far more attention and benefits than those entering the United States, he said, even with the advantages of refugee status.

Permits, Not Demands

Besides, the Israeli visas given to Soviet Jews are "permits, not one-way tickets or demands," the United States official said. "Whether or not to use it, that's an individual's right."

To solve the problem, the Government said Israel is planning to fly Soviet Jews directly here, denying them the chance to change planes en route. The Government has also said it may channel Soviet Jews through Bucharest, Rumania, where it is much more difficult to change travel plans. But it is unclear whether or when that will become official policy.

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"If we find a way to make a straight flight from the Soviet Union, not stop in Vienna, then the Jews would come," Mr. Gordon of the Jewish Agency said. Asked if they would come then only because they had no choice, he said: "That's right. We built a Jewish state for the Jewish people to come here!"

Bureaucracy as Bane

Some Israelis say their country's immigration bureaucracy is so thick and daunting that it alone discourages people from moving here.

New immigrants "are being grinded into the ground by the bureacracy," said Zeev Bielski, a former Government immigration official and the chairman of the Israeli Forum, a private group that maintains contacts with young American Jews, in part to encourage them to move to Israel.

"When they come here and see the absorption process" he said, new immigrants "run for their lives because it's hopeless, useless." Immigration officials quickly offer those and other explanations for the immigration "crisis." But on reflection, after talking for a while, almost all of them settle on one core issue, as Mr. Bielski did.

The Uprising as Deterrent

"People don't want to come here when they see us beating Palestinians," he said. "It's a sad, bad situation, and there's only one solution. We have to give immigrants a better place to live."

Mr. Gordon said: "It's very difficult here. We have a crisis of leadership. Or leaders stop to dream. They are tired. We need new leaders. For the ones that come to Israel now, life is very hard. Every day in the morning we have a new drama. Why go to a place with a lot of problems?"

"Rather than move to Israel and fight wars," said Simcha Dinitz, the head of the Jewish Agency, a Soviet Jew might think, "I can go to Brighton Beach and pick the money off of trees."

Mrs. Mandelgeim, the Soviet emigre, said many of her friends chose to move to the United States "because they want the good things in life."

"Their motivation is financial, money, their own car," she said. "Everyone knows that the style of life is better in America. And there's lots of Soviet propaganda about Israelis hitting people."

The Orthodox Predominate

"A normal person from a developed country just doesn't pick up and move here," Mr. Dinitz said. That is why so many newcomers are the Orthodox, who come for religious reasons, he said.

At the absorption center in this village west of Jerusalem, 33-year-old Yitzhak Miskin, formerly of Harrisburg, Pa., said the reason that he and his family moved to Israel nine months ago "was my Jewish identity, and to improve my knowledge of the Torah."

Twelve families from the United States are living in the Mivaseret center today, and "only two of them are not religious," Mr. Miskin said.

Mr. Bielski said that when he approaches American Jews about emigrating to Israel, he tells them: "Israel is hard place. Help us fix it. We need new leadership. Come help us lead and fix the problems." And Mr. Gordon says he tells American Jews: "Come. Bring your ideas. Work with us." 'Have a Voice'

"With all the problems I saw here, I couldn't just keep sitting in my easy chair, criticizing," Mr. Miskin said. "I decided to come here and have a voice in how it's done."

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Asked if he has a favored political party, he said: "I certainly do. Kach. Rabbi Meir Kahane." He was referring to the nationalist party of Rabbi Kahane, the extreme rightist who advocates forcing all the Arabs out of Israel and the occupied territories.

Even with the disappointing immigration results, dozens of full-time Jewish Agency officials travel across the United States year-round, trying to persuade Jews to move to Israel.

But Mr. Ben-Ari said the immigration authorities have grown "so disillusioned and discouraged" about the level and type of Jewish immigrants from the United States "that there are talks going on now about stopping the efforts altogether."

"They will not come, so let's forget it. It's an illusion," he said. Mr. Gordon does not agree. "The United States is just the Diaspora," he said. "The Diaspora is a journey. Maybe it will take much work and 1,000 years, but Israel is the destination."

IN AND OUT OF ISRAEL

Number of Jews immigrating to Israel and Israelis emigrating to other countries, primarily the U.S.

	To	From
	<u>Israel</u>	<u>Israel</u>
1980	20,122	10,700
1981	11,665	22,000
1982	13,176	8,600
1983	16,401	4,100
1984	19,230	10,400
1985	12,298	15,300
1986	10,142	13,900
1987*	14,000	9,000

* Preliminary

(Source: Israeli Ministry of Absorption)

Graphic

Photo of Hanna and Valery Mandelgeim with their daughter, Rachel, at the Absorption Center in Mivaseret Zion, Israel (NYT/Micha Bar-Am) (pg. 5)

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