

Community Conversations with young Russian- Speaking Jewish Professionals

Main Findings

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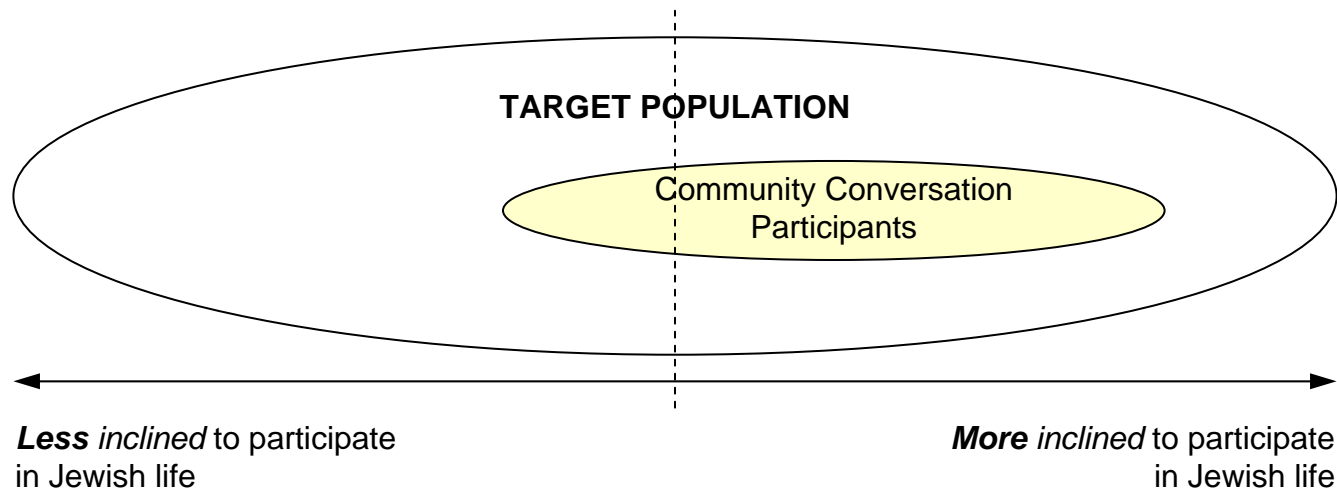
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Research Background

- Target audience: *RSJ professionals, intellectuals, and business people with a commitment to culture and education but who are NOT active in American Jewish life today; 25-45 years of age.*
- Participants invited via Internet forums, clubs, one UJA mailing, one announcement
- Ten community conversations (nine in NY and one in NJ) conducted in April-May 2005
- 66 participants
- Conversation language: a mix of Russian and English
- One facilitator and one person typing the conversation

Interpretation Note

- On average, Community Conversation participants must be considered more open to the whole topic of Jewish life and participating in it than the entire target population:



Community Conversation Participants

- 41 females, 25 males
- Average age: 30.8; median age: 31.
- ~90% have a Jewish mother; ~90% have a Jewish father
- ~50% single, ~40% married/living together, ~10% divorced/separated
- 86% emigrated in 1987 or later; 88% arrived in the US in 1988 or later; >55% arrived in the US between 1989 and 1993
- Participants came from Russia (37.5%), Ukraine (37.5%), Belarus (11%), other SU republics (9%)
- 86% of married/dating participants have a spouse/partner from the FSU (83% of whom were likely to be Jewish as well)
- Of 62 participants who studied in the US, only two did not (yet?) attain BA; almost 50% hold MA or a higher degree, 13% hold doctoral degrees

Community Conversation Protocol

1. Do you self-define as Jewish today, in the US, where “Jew” is not written in your passport? What is “Jewish” about you?
2. Do you feel a need to maintain your Jewish identity, to self-express as Jewish?
If yes:
 - (2a) How do you do it today, in the US? What is your Jewish identify based on, besides your Jewish past in the USSR?
 - (2b) How would you prefer to maintain your Jewish identify “in a perfect world”?
3. How are you planning to raise your kids/are raising your kids today – given the fact that in the US most kids are raised in some kind of “denomination”? What would you personally like to “give” to your kids?
4. Based on your experience, is the American Jewish community interested in reaching out to you, “Russian Jews”? Examples?
5. Do you think it would be worth US Jews’ while to try to reach out to you? If yes, how?
6. What are the barriers you saw in the past/see today that prevent(ed) people like yourself from getting involved in any kind of Jewish life in the US?
7. What do you think would encourage you personally to get involved at all? What did you see work in the past? What is likely to work in the future?
8. Where do you get information about things (news, cultural events, etc.) – what do you listen to, what to you read (on paper and on-line)?

FINDINGS: CONTENT ANALYSIS

What “being Jewish” means to us (1)

We are Jewish by blood, not religion (18*).

- By all accounts, Jewishness is passed on by the mother’s family line; this, then, is blood and the presence of the female Jewish chromosome.
- You can get into genes – there is stuff in my blood that definitely says that I am Jewish.

We are Jewish from a cultural and not necessarily religious perspective (19).

- Silly laws are not going to apply to my life, but I strongly identify myself as a Jew culturally, socially, and on a deep personal level.
- I consider myself Jewish because I was told that I am a Jew by my parents who definitely wanted me to know that I was Jewish. That is the greatest reason why I feel like that.
- I am absolutely non-religious. Not out of any principle, but simply because we never were in my family. I feel a certain cultural Jewish heritage in myself, at least due to having read Jewish authors in childhood.

* Overall number of comments under this theme

What “being Jewish” means to us (2)

We are Jewish because we feel part of the Jewish history and tradition (14).

- I wouldn't say that I always feel like a Jew, but it's part of my history, my family.
- ... I was raised in a Jewish spirit.
- For me, being Jewish is mostly not a religion, but history...
- At least I know about major holidays and what to celebrate them in some way.

We are Jewish because the outside world keeps reminding us of that (14).

- I have no passport with “Jew” written in it, but, as they say, “they hit the face, not the passport.”
- My both parents are Jewish and if I would forget about what I am there would always be someone to remind me about it.
- When Jews are being hurt, I feel worse than when others are being hurt. Holocaust touches me more than other acts of genocide that were committed against non-Jews.

What “being Jewish” means to us (3)

We are Jewish b/c we care a lot about Israel & Jews in other countries (15).

- One thing is the overriding support for Israel among us. We feel strong affiliation to Israel and support it.
- If something happens with the Jewish community somewhere else in the world, this too concerns us.

We are Jewish because we feel connected to the past of our People and our families (7).

- Partially my Jewishness comes from the fact that my grandparents grew up in Latvia. Half of the family were killed during the World War II.

For some of us, Jewish religion is an important part of being Jewish (4).

Being Jewish implies engaging in a fight against anti-Semitism (2).

- One important part of my Jewish identity is to spite and fight anti-Semites and anti-Semitism.

We (would like to) self-express as Jews by (1):

...participating in non-religious Jewish cultural/educational events (14).

- I try to be involved in secular things with a Jewish slant; attend Jewish cultural events; go to Jewish resorts that offer Jewish cultural programs.
- To maintain my Jewish identity I would continue to learn things having to do not with religion, probably, but with culture and history.

...trying to keep some Jewish traditions (13).

- Most of us here were married under the Chuppah. If you have a son, you would probably circumcise him, etc.
- Not eating bread for Pessakh. I am choosing not to eat it. Rituals – fasting on Yom Kippur, lighting the menorah. That is how I identify and express my Jewishness.

We (would like to) self-express as Jews by (2):

...supporting Jewish causes (9).

...visiting Israel or even staying there (9).

...learning/speaking Hebrew (6).

...marrying Jewish, because it is important to us and our families (3).

... keeping the best of the two worlds – the Jewish and the Russian one (2).

...learning Yiddish (2).

...“choosing Jewish” (3)

- I generally choose things Jewish – for instance, if I’m giving a car for donation and there’s a choice between Jews and non-Jews, I will most likely give it to the Jews.

Some of us do not self-express as Jews and/or do not feel a need to (7)

- I don't have to base my Jewish identity on anything. Everyone here believes that they are Jewish based on their religious Jewish life. To me it does not matter if someone tells me I am not Jewish; I just know I am.
- I don't feel like a Jew. I do it not because I don't like the Jewish existence, but because I do not consider it necessary to belong to anything. Here in the US, there is an opportunity to not belong to any group of people – be it a religious one, or a political one.
- Apart from the attitude of others who categorize me as Jewish by my outward appearance, there is nothing Jewish in me. I know something of Jewish history, but very little, since I was never really interested in it.

How we'd like to raise our children (1)

We'd like our kids to grow up aware of their Jewishness (13).

- I would raise them in a way that they would realize that they are Jews, would know the traditions, but I really wouldn't want them to become religious, even on the smallest level.
- I would betray my ancestors if I raised my kids without letting them know that they are Jewish and that their ancestors suffered for them.
- America is a primarily Christian country. If you don't tell him about Judaism at home, the environment will crush him.

We'd like to educate our kids in Jewish culture, teach them some traditions (27).

- I'm not sure what level of religiousness I would like to establish in my kids, but I'd like them to at least have an understanding of the tradition and the history.
- It is important for kids to know their language and history, where they come from – I would send my child to a Sunday school. They are not that heavy on religion, but they sing Jewish songs.

How we'd like to raise our children (2)

We'd like to give our kids religious Jewish education (13).

- With children, you almost feel obliged to send them a Jewish school.
- ... sending your child to a Yeshiva is a possibility. But in Yeshivas our children will have problems – we can't support our children: if they won't understand something, we can't help.

We'd like our kids to keep the Russian language and culture (8).

- We're grappling for the last straw, trying to educate our kids in a Russian culture.
- I definitely see the importance of the Jewish tradition – so many generations kept it. But I was not raised celebrating Jewish holidays. For me, Passover does not compare to the New Year's. My kids would probably end up celebrating New Years' too – like we did in Russia. If I send them to Hebrew school and they are taught to celebrate Jewish holidays, which I don't know how to celebrate, I would feel almost apart from them. I do want them to put up a New Year's tree with me.

How we'd like to raise our children (3)

We just want our kids to receive a good education (8).

- We're planning on raising them non-religiously. We'd send them to private school, but not a Jewish one. In this matter, we'll be paying more attention to the quality of the education.
- I would simply like to send my child to a good school, doesn't matter if it's Russian or Jewish.

We'd like to give our kids a chance to choose for themselves (7).

- Would not impose any morality on my children.
- I would like for my child to choose for himself on whether or not to be a Jew, and what kind.

We'd like our kids to be exposed to diversity (4).

- I would want my children to experience other religions and nationalities too. You need a wide prospective.

How we feel about the outreach to us by the US Jews (1)

American Jews did reach out to us, primarily right after we arrived in the US (32).

- Secular and religious people reached out to me. We came through NYANA – they helped. I saw lots of help and lots of interest towards us.
- JCC in Philadelphia was trying to reach out to everybody. They have always organized events, asked us to bring more people.
- I would be interested in them reaching out to me. They have this opportunity – when we first came here and didn't know our current friends, we were drawn into the Jewish life. It was worth it. I don't see a reason why not try it today.

Most of the outreach to us was done by the Orthodox Jews (23).

- Jewish Orthodox community is very interested in reaching out to the Russian Jews. They try to bring Russian Jews into the Orthodox religious way of life. The rest (Conservative, Reform, Secular) couldn't care less.
- American Jews are not interested in reaching out. Only the religious ones who want us to become religious.

How we feel about the outreach to us by the US Jews (2)

We don't experience secular US Jews proactively reaching out to us (11).

- I would say that American Jewish community has not tried to reach out to me. I have not heard from them. I've been here for 15 years, but those who've reached out to me weren't Jews.
- American Jews have "Birth right" trips, but you have to find out about it. If you are not involved, how would you find out?

To become part of the American Jewish life, one needs to show initiative him/herself (8).

- If you want to become more religious, go to lectures and other events, you have to take the initiative...you have to make an effort yourself
- Usually if you want to participate you have to reach out and look for things, why should they look for you?

How we feel about the outreach to us by the US Jews (3)

American Jews' success in reaching out to us depends on what they want to achieve (14).

- What do they want in their attempt to reach out to us? What are they expecting to get out of it? Why are they interested? I would like to know before I respond to any reaching out.
- The success of reaching out to the Russian Jewish community depends a lot on the US Jews' goals. If it is mutual education then it is possible, but not easy. If their goal is the religion – it is harder, if it is helping Israel – it is possible.
- An American Jewish organization that tries to attract us has to have its mission established very clearly.

Our perceptions of how American Jews feel towards us

We must be a disappointment to the US Jews (10).

- For secular Jews we probably turned out to be who they were expecting, but for the religious ones, not.
- I think they first tried out to reach out to us, but then gave up on us.
- If you put yourself in the American Jews' shoes, they paid for us to come, paid for the hotels, helped us find apartments. From their point of view, they give a lot, and get nothing in return. We forget about them when we get on our own two feet.

We feel some snobbism towards us (11).

- In 1860, in the US there was a big influx of German Jews. In the 1900s-1910s the German US Jews felt they were being embarrassed by their “younger brothers” who were arriving from Eastern Europe. Same thing is happening here between secular US Jews and us.
- There is animosity towards Russians in general. Since most of the Russians here are Jewish, my observation – the barriers stem from negative feelings Americans have towards Russians.

Seems as if secular American Jews were interested in an idea, not in us as real people (2).

Things that prevent us from taking part in American Jewish life (1)

- American and Russian cultures, languages, and mentalities are very different (32).
- Participation in American Jewish life is expensive (17).
- Participating in Jewish life does not come naturally to us and requires time and energy (16).
- Over-activism and religious propaganda push us away (22).
- We don't have enough information about (non-religious) Jewish events (15).
- Opportunities for interaction between American & Russian Jews are limited (6).
- We don't feel welcome when we try to attend American Jewish events (12).
- Many Russian Jews are not that interested in Jewish topics/ tradition (6).
- It seems, secular American Jews in large cities are themselves not part of any community (4).
- Many Russians prefer to stick to the Russian community (6).
- It is hard to approach the Russian community as "one piece": it is not homogeneous (5).

Things that prevent us from taking part in American Jewish life (2)

- Sometimes, Russian and American secular Jews hold different political views (4).
- Russians hate to be “organized” because of their strong anti-establishment sentiments (3).
- Jewish events we know about are not exciting (4).
- Attending Jewish services/gatherings makes us feel phony (3).
- On and off events are not likely to result in success (3).

What would encourage us to participate in American Jewish life (1)

Non-religious cultural events with a Jewish component (31).

- If we could see that there is a possibility of entering the Jewish culture without the obligation to practice religion, we would be more interested.
- I would be interested in theater trips and coffee shop discussions.
- MAKOR has different events, films, wine tasting. One they even had a Q&A with a producer.
- People should go to interesting people because they're interesting, and not because they are... Jewish.
- I would go to an even organized by the American Jewish community, if they'd invite an Israeli politician to Manhattan, and the cost of entry was strictly symbolic.

What would encourage us to participate in American Jewish life (2)

Social events with a Jewish component (32).

- This is what American Jewish community lacks in their effort to involve Russians – social events. There is not enough going on. There is nothing for Russian Jewish community of my age.
- I would probably prefer small gatherings – not to feel like a \$ sign.
- I would like to attend singles events. I have done some.
- Some sort of interesting social groups for educated and professional Jews would be attractive. A lot of young professionals work very hard and want to relax.

What would encourage us to participate in American Jewish life (3)

Tours to Israel/ mixed Russian-American trips (8).

- It would be good to organize Birth Right Israel for people of middle age, since many people under 25 didn't have a chance to do it, we could expand the age group.
- You can put people together, for example, based on traveling together.
- I would also be interested some sort of hiking tours, as well.

A shared noble cause that provides a sense of purpose (11).

- One thing they should popularize to get Russian involved – things like “Jews for Economic and Racial justice.” The fact that I never heard about it is characteristic. They should tell us more about such organizations. Those without the religious component.
- It wouldn't be enough for me just to hang out with people. For me, events have to be a little more goal-oriented... There needs to be some noble cause. If in such events you find your opinions match the others', it becomes a group of people united by common viewpoints.

What would encourage us to participate in American Jewish life (4)

Educational events with a Jewish component (8).

- It's possible to attract the Russian community through Jewish secular education centers for adults. Carry out seminars, but not orthodox, in particular, on the theme of Jewish Identification.
- Something like a club, Jewish club, but entirely secular, preferably related to an educational facility (college) ... I am looking for Jews with a specific educational level. *Geographical closeness and complete absence of any obligations* – that would attract me.
- If there were courses organized that went something like “Judaism for Dummies.” I would go there, since I'm horribly curious.

What would encourage us to participate in American Jewish life (4)

Events/activities associated with colleges and college clubs (5).

- In colleges Hillel was the main Jewish organization that reached out to us. It was a college thing, and it was not specifically targeted towards Russians. Still, there are many Russians in Hillel. Hillel was the place where you really had a chance to interact with American Jews.

More advertisement to the Russian Jewish community, especially via the Internet (12).

- When a company plans to sell its products, they do serious marketing research of consumer habits. If you want to attract people to a certain (e.g., Jewish) way of life, how much more “consumer” research should one do!
- If they want to see Russians, why don't they advertise in the Russian press, on Russian sites?

Getting us involved by appealing to our professional skills/interests (5).

- I would be interested in meetings that were oriented professionally.
- A professional social networking club would appeal to me.

What would encourage us to participate in American Jewish life (5)

Events for our children: reaching us through our kids (4).

- The most winning way of reaching out is through children. For children, we'll go to any lengths.

Having informal leaders in the Russian community reach out to other Russians (4).

- What would appeal to us is to have someone inside Russian community, who is already followed no matter what s/he does. People think that s/he can't pick anything wrong. This kind of leaders are able to influence people. If such a person attends some event, a couple of dozen people would follow him/her.

Helping us feel like we belong somewhere (7).

- If you find an environment in which you find you can fit in, you will keep going back there.

Leveraging what American and Russian Jews have in common (5).

- I would still deviate towards secular Jewish Community, 'cause I am looking for smart, educated people. I tend to meet a lot of Jewish people who tend to belong to that particular community.

What would encourage us to participate in American Jewish life (6)

Events related to politics, to Israel (6).

Events that are hip and relevant, not cheap and boring (5).

New York city and what it has to offer (6).

Opportunities to give back to the American Jewish community (2).

Events that specifically target Russian Jews (2).

Implications for Secular American Jewish Community

1. Is your vision clear? Be clear and united about your goals vis-à-vis RSJs
2. Do you have basic trust of RSJs? Earn it.
 - Possibly, you'll need to start earning basic trust from scratch
 - Religion is the wrong way to reach RSJs
 - Address RSJs with one voice; be direct, clear, and honest about your intentions
3. Reach out and start the dialogue
 - Is the outreach present and noticed by RSJs?
4. Address issues that are under your control
 - Marketing techniques to define target sub-populations and send clear messages to them
 - Educational and social events with no emphasis on religion
 - Outreach to families: Children and education are of primary concern for RSJs
 - Outreach to students in colleges
 - Intellectuality and exclusivity
 - Support for Israel
5. Don't expect an immediate (monetary) gratification
6. Stay the course