yet we know little about their identity struggle, religious views, beliefs, and attitudes as newcomers in America.¹

The Russians Are Coming: The New Wave

Since 1994, the largest group of immigrants to New York City has been from the FSU (NYC Dept. of City Planning 1999). The first wave of Russian Jews were part of the historic nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century immigration to the United States. A second wave came after World War II, and a third wave started with the change in the immigration law in the early 1970s. In 1989, the U.S. Congress designated Soviet Jews, along with evangelical Christians, Ukrainian Catholics, and Orthodox, as a category eligible for admission to the United States as refugees if they could prove they had a credible fear of persecution if they remained in the Soviet Union. This resulted in a “fourth wave” of Russian immigrants, who began arriving to the United States in the late 1980s.

More than 200,000 Russian Jewish immigrants have arrived in New York City as refugees since the early 1970s (Galperin 1996, 229). If we also add those who came on other types of visas (for example, relatives of American citizens, asylum seekers, employment-based visa holders, and green card lottery winners), the number of Russian (both Jewish and non-Jewish) immigrants to the New York metropolitan area has probably reached 400,000. In fact, new Russian immigrants now comprise almost a quarter of New York City’s entire Jewish community (Onion 1996, 31).

In several ways, these immigrants are different from those who arrived in the 1970s.

First, although all Russian Jewish immigrants were persecuted, Russian anti-Semitism has changed over the past three decades. In the 1970 and 1980s, the state officially sponsored anti-Semitism in the guise of anti-Zionism. Now, on the surface, the state oppression has disappeared, and the state claims official neutrality in matters of ethnicity. But since 1989, Jews in Russia have still experienced hostility from the state in the form of anti-Judaism, in addition to the still popular anti-Semitism.

The notion that Judaism is a cruel and dangerous religion is widespread in Russia. Alexander Bovin, a Russian liberal intellectual and former ambassador to Israel, remarked in an interview with Alef magazine: “I am not quite sure that aspiration for higher justice is typical for Jews. ... There is no religious tolerance in the Torah. ... There are so many

So, Who Are the Jews from the Former Soviet Union?

Immigrants from the former Soviet Union (FSU) are often called Russian immigrants, Russian Jews, or just Russians. They comprise (or may soon comprise) up to 25 percent of New York City’s entire Jewish community,
fewer Jews than did the earlier waves. Zhanna Zaionchkovskaya, chief of the migration laboratory of the Russian Academy of Sciences, stated that of the nonrefugee immigrants during the last two years of the early 1990s, twice as many ethnic Russians emigrated to America as Jews (Dubrovskaya 1995). Also, many members of refugee families are not Jewish but are related to Jews, mainly by marriage. For many of them, the traditional definition of who is a Jew is not so important to their self-identity (Blumenthal 1998).

As many as 29 percent of recent immigrants to Israel from the former Soviet Union could not prove their Jewish identity (Tabory 1995, 188). Based on this fact and some observations at the New York Association for New Americans, we can estimate that the proportion of non-Jews among the refugees is somewhere between 30 and 40 percent. In a 1989/1999 study by the Research Institute for New Americans, 60 to 70 percent of the new Russian immigrants identified themselves as Jewish (AJC 1999).

Fourth, the latest wave of Jewish immigrants had an alternative that the previous waves did not. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Jewish life in the republics of the former Soviet Union has flourished. This means that the fourth wave Jews were not compelled to leave Russia for religious reasons but for some other reason like security, familial reunion, or economic opportunity. Various studies show that any Jewish activity, particularly religious, is at the periphery of the new Russian immigrants’ interests and value systems. A recent poll by the Analytic Center of the Russian Academy of Sciences found that 53 percent of Jews (but only 21 percent of ethnic Russians) could not identify their religion; 23 percent of Jews (but only 7 percent of Russians) considered themselves atheists; and only 8 percent of Jews identified themselves as practicing Judaism (Cher- tok 1995; Kliger and Carnes 1994).

Although 95 percent of Jews in Moscow, Kiev, and Minsk wanted a “Jewish cultural revival” and 78 percent wanted a “Jewish religious development,” only 17 percent (but 26 percent of American Jews) celebrated the Jewish New Year; 10 percent observed the Jewish Sabbath; and 5 percent (but 37 percent of American Jews) claimed to be members of Jewish organizations (Brym 1994, 25). According to Shapiro and Chervyakov’s study of Jewish activists, 36 percent said they were believers or “rather believers than not”; only 3.5 percent wanted to learn more about Judaism; and 7 percent regularly recited Jewish prayers at home (1992, 10, 12). The recent wave of immigrants and the American Jewish community both wonder what their common fate will be in this country in the new millennium.

curses and punishments listed that how can this apotheosis of cruelty match the aspiration for high justice?” (Bovin 1996, 13).

In 1991, more than half of 4,200 Soviets questioned in a public opinion poll wanted all Jews to leave the country (New York Post, September 26, 1991, 9). Even in post-Communist Russia, attitudes toward Jews remain quite negative (Brym 1994; Gibson 1994; Gibson and Duch 1992). Gudkov and Levinson (1994) found widespread assertions that Jews avoid physical labor and place money and profit above human relations. Carnes concluded that in Russia “more than any other xenophobia, anti-Semitism is a powerful activator and intensifier of negative stereotypes toward other people in general” (1995, 25).

In a study sponsored by the American Jewish Committee (1999), the Research Institute for New Americans found that 58 percent of new Russian immigrants strongly believe that anti-Semitism is a serious problem in the former Soviet Union. A second difference between the most recent immigrants and those of the 1970s is that the earlier immigrants were oppressed by a Soviet system that seemed to offer no friendly future for Jews, whereas the fourth wave is leaving Russia because they are afraid that the Russian government will not last into the future. Furthermore, the earlier immigrants saw their future blocked because of their Jewishness, whereas the new wave sees some advancements for Jews in Russia but do not believe the country is stable.

So, those who come to the United States are not coming so much for Jewish reasons but for fear of a Russian collapse. Consequently, the new wave is not as eager to discover its Jewish identity in the United States, although the constant undercurrent of Russian anti-Semitism has kept the Jewish identity alive.

The fourth wave recognizes that Jews in Russia have achieved much more influence in the country’s political life and economy than ever before in Russian history. Those Jews who now live in Moscow (including “half-Jews,” “some-Jews,” and those members of Jewish families placed in the “Jewish orbit”) comprise a significant part of the new Russian elite. A well-known Russian journalist, Leonid Radzikhovsky, observed that even after twenty years of emigration, Jews in Russia are stronger than they were twenty years before; furthermore, despite feeling less comfortable in Russia than do Jews in other developed Christian countries, their weight in Russian politics and business is much more significant than in any other Christian country (Radzikhovsky 1996, 6; Shanks 1996; Stanley 1997).

Third, the fourth wave of Russian immigrants contain proportionally
Russian Jews and the American Jewish Community: Mutually Broken Expectations

The American Jewish community expected that the new Russian Jewish immigrants, being cut off from Jewish life in the Soviet Union, would want to participate actively in Jewish religious and communal life in America. The newcomers were expected to bring "new blood" to the established American Jewish communities. But from the point of view of the organized American Jewish community, this is not happening yet. As they are seen by mainstream American Judaism, Russian Jews in America continue to be as indifferent to Jewish heritage and Jewish communal life as they were while they were living in the Soviet Union.

Moreover, while crediting the American Jewish community for helping them come to this country, Russian Jews nonetheless expect more practical assistance now that they have arrived. Dependent on the government in the former Soviet Union, they now need a patron in America. Emotionally, they expect love and friendliness, but instead they feel that American Jews are trying to impose on them an ideology (including "boring" religious practice), rather than helping them in their practical needs or expressing their "love" to them.

Although Russian Jews are acculturating more as Russians than as Jews, American Jews have tried to reach Russian Jews as Jews while derogating or failing to understand their distinctive Russian identity. The American Jewish community has thus been asking itself whether the Russian Jews really want to become a part of their community, to discover their Jewish heritage, or prefer to stay away from Judaism. Is it worthwhile to try to bring them closer to Judaism and the Jewish community?

Russians, in turn, ask different questions. Do American Jews really and sincerely want us, as Russian Jews, to join the American Jewish community, or do they intend to keep us as a "second-class" Jews? Should we participate in their odd and bureaucratic organizations, or do they merely want us Russian Jews to be a source of new revenues for their bureaucracies?

These questions arise from the cultural and historical divergences between the organized American Jewish community and the still disorganized Russian Jews. Furthermore, the organized American Jewish community has developed under the influence of the United States' prevailing Protestant culture, with its emphasis on communal religious practice, individual responsibility, charity, and communal life rather than ideology and theology (Shapiro 1996). From the beginning period (1895–1948), the Jewish Federation's main goal was assimilation into the mainstream (Protestant) culture, "helping Jews integrate into the United States, learning its language, its culture and its values, . . . to eliminate barriers to the Jewish understanding of America and to full Jewish participation in the American dream" (Feldstein 1995/1996, 5).

Since the 1990s, however, the emphasis has changed to ensuring the future of Judaism and fulfilling the increasing need for Jewish education and Jewish continuity (Feldstein 1995/1996, 9). Meanwhile, Jewish family values have been replaced by American cultural values. As Anita Friedman explained: "Many of us may pine for the idealized good old days. But after so many years in America, American Jewish behavior has become much like American dominant culture behavior, with few exceptions and with most of the same problems" (1995, 298).

Soviet Jews have formed their lifestyle, values, and mentality under two dominions: a Russian culture rooted in Russian Orthodox and the Communist totalitarian regime with its emphasis on ideology and the state. The idea of a Jewish religion and communal life is unfamiliar to them. At most, they know that the synagogue is a place for Jews to gather for service and prayer. But they do not understand why they should have to pay dues to belong to the synagogue. To Russian Jews, faith is very private and intimate and has to do with personal feelings and thoughts rather than action. Any explicit religious practice or communal identification (like wearing a yarmulka) and a separate Jewish communal life are not only unfamiliar but even seem shameful.

This experience is reflected in the language: Russian Jews prefer to use the word vera (Russian for faith) rather than religia (religion). To Russians, religia has the connotation of boring and tiresome rituals and observances, whereas vera popularly refers to an individual contemplating his own fate.

The Jewishness of most Russian Jews is a given fact. According to Markowitz,

Soviet Jews regard their Jewishness as an intrinsic component of who they are, Jews are born Jews, and no one in the USSR challenges or questions their . . . Jewishness. As immigrants explain it, being a Jew is an immutable biological and social fact, ascribed at birth like sex and eye color. (1993, 139)

In answer to the question "In your view, what does it mean to be a Jew?" 41.4 percent of the respondents in a 1993 survey of Jews in Moscow
Jews and Russians

Jewish immigrants in New York City who are from the former Soviet Union are commonly called Russians, regardless of their origins from quite different parts of the country. Indeed, most of those from the European part of the former Soviet Union consider themselves "Russians." This is not the case, however, for the so-called Bukharian Jews from Central Asia, especially those from the towns of Bukhara and Samarkand in Uzbekistan. In the 1990s, about thirty thousand Bukharan Jews arrived in Forest Hills, Queens. Although they had adopted the secular culture of their Uzbek and Tadjik neighbors, growing xenophobia and Islamic fundamentalism drove them to America and a distinct Bukharan Jewish identity (Bialor 1994).

Jews from all over the former Soviet Union are very similar to Russians in their religious attitudes, cultural norms, moral values, and identities. In a 1993 poll, almost half the Jews from Moscow and St. Petersburg said the Russians in their city were closer to them culturally and spiritually than Ukrainian or Byelorussian Jews, and only 17.2 percent felt Ukrainian and Byelorussian Jews were closer to them than the Russians in their city (Shapiro and Chervyakov 1993, 3, 13).

Ethnic Russians and Russian Jews also have similar religious attitudes (Hill 1989, 337). Forty-four percent of the Jews consider themselves believers or rather believers than not, and only 3 percent attend synagogue at least once a month (Shapiro and Chervyakov 1993, 9,11). Likewise, 45 percent of all Russians consider themselves believers, while only 10 percent of Russian Orthodox attend church at least once a month. Experts say the church's appeal has more to do with culture and ethnicity than spirituality (Glastris 1996; Izvestiya June 4, 1993, 3). Thus, both ethnic Russians and Jews see Russian Orthodoxy and Judaism, respectively, as merely cultural and symbolic forms of their shared national identity.

In fact, if they convert, Russian Jews in New York are more likely to become Russian Orthodox than another Christian denomination. When asked, "Which of the religious doctrines is the most attractive for you?" 14 percent of Jews from Moscow and St. Petersburg stated Christianity (Shapiro and Chervyakov 1993, 11), by which they mean, in most cases, Russian Orthodoxy (see table 10.1).

In New York, the number of Russian Jews converted to "Jews for Jesus" may be much smaller than that for converted American Jews. The number
of American Jews joining messianic groups is growing every year, with more than 300,000 Jews joining messianic Jewish groups, whereas fewer than 1,000 Russians have accepted Yeshua as the Messiah (Onion 1996, 31).

In many cases, conversion to Russian Orthodoxy takes place as a result of intermarriage. According to 1988 marriage registration statistics, 63 percent of mixed marriages in Russia involved at least one Jewish spouse, 45 percent in the Ukraine, and 40 percent in Belarus (Tolts 1992). Most of the children in such families are completely assimilated into the Russian culture. Because the Russian culture is dominant, the Jews in mixed marriages are more likely to convert to Russian Orthodoxy than vice versa. This is especially true for non-Jewish men whose conversion includes being circumcised. If they are pressured by the American tradition of belonging to a religious group, such couples usually find the Russian Orthodox church the easiest entrance to a religious community (Brym 1994, 20).

**Immigrants and Religious Practices**

Judaic life revolves around a set of practices that makes its participants holy. As given by the Torah and the Talmud, these practices create the boundaries between their participants and the rest of society and symbolizes Jewish identity in relation to God. Boundaries, as Douglas showed, symbolize the beginnings of identity and society. “The objective of these [boundary-symbolizing] rituals is not negative withdrawal from reality. . . . The rituals enact the form of social relationships and . . . enable people to know their own society” (Douglas 1966, 153).

**Practices of the Body: Circumcision**

Although Jewish religious law requires all male Jews to be circumcised (the Hebrew bris for “covenant”), the vast majority of young Russian Jews are not circumcised. As Shanks noted, “Now, five years after the Soviet Union disintegrated and Jews have been free to practice their religion and observe their customs, almost no Jewish boys are being circumcised” (1996, 46).

Since Orthodox tradition requires unconditional circumcision, a debate has arisen. Some Jewish leaders do not consider circumcision a first priority for new immigrants, and so many remain uncircumcised. For example, Belkin, twenty-seven, a Russian Jewish immigrant who does not want to be circumcised, said: “It’s not the pain. It’s just that for immigrants there are too many problems to solve. I did not have a chance to become religious.” Rabbi Eliahu Shain, a circumciser famed for having performed eight thousand operations, admits that even among those who have decided they want a bris, cancellations are in a rate of one in five (New York Times, March 15, 1995, 21,23).

**Practices of Time: Sabbath and Holidays**

Religious Jews often claim that their concept of Sabbath is the most powerful ritual for Jewish identity and community. Noted Judaic scholar Rabbi Kaplan put it this way:

> it is not exaggeration to say that the Jew has survived . . . largely because he had the Sabbath . . . . It has been said that as much as the Jew has kept Sabbath, so has Sabbath kept the Jew. As long as Judaism exists as a vibrant, vital force, the Sabbath is its most outstanding ritual practice. (1984, 5)

However, Russian Jews do not place much importance on keeping the Sabbath. According to a 1993 poll by the Jewish Research Center, 79 percent of those questioned in Moscow and St. Petersburg said that their parental families observed no Sabbath duties; only 2 percent regularly did so (Shapiro and Cheryvakov 1993, 6, 8).

Russian Jews observe Passover more than any other Jewish religious holiday. In 1993, about a third of the respondents in Moscow and St. Petersburg said that they observed Passover regularly. But Russian Jews commonly interpret “observance” to mean “remembrance,” without any ritual or moral actions. For example, when asked, “Did you take part in Passover Seder this year?” less than 20 percent said yes (Shapiro and Cheryvakov 1993, 10–11).

Two nationwide studies of Soviet Jews in the United States revealed a controversial set of data about Jewish immigrants’ religious behavior (see
Kosmin 1990a; Simon, Simon, and Schwartz 1982). According to Simon and colleagues (1982), 50 percent of Soviet Jews fast on Yom Kippur, but according to Kosmin (1990a), 84 percent fast on Yom Kippur and 67 percent attend a Passover seder. Steven Gold (1994, 5), who did the most comprehensive overview of studies of Soviet Jews in the United States, explained why the findings of some studies are controversial:

Studies of this sort . . . are less likely to capture the rich, complex, and often contradictory nature of the Soviet Jews’ experience. [They] . . . tend to suffer from small sample sizes and from the fact that those willing to cooperate with a researcher may not be representative of the entire community. Finally, there is a good reason to question the validity of former Soviets’ responses to telephone surveys, since they are noted for their distrust and manipulation of bureaucrats.

Still, other studies also show that a high rate of Russian immigrant Jews observe rituals and holidays. New York Federation (1984) data suggest that 78 percent of Russian Jews fast on Yom Kippur and 75 percent attend a Passover seder. The data from the 1991 New York Jewish Population Study—the most recent and most comprehensive survey of a sample of Jews from the former Soviet Union—obtained even higher figures: 78 percent fast on Yom Kippur, and 90 percent attend a Passover seder.

Practices of Nature: Dietary Laws

The laws of kosher food, found in Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14:4–21, identify what foods Jews are permitted to eat and how they must be prepared. But Russian Jews know and observe very little about this. Only 1.2 percent of Jews in St. Petersburg said they kept kosher regularly (Shapiro and Chervyakov 1993, 8). But the 1991 New York Jewish Population Study found that 70 percent of Soviet Jews in New York City kept two sets of dishes (Gold 1994, 55), although surveys in Russian show that most Russian Jews did not follow Jewish religious prescriptions, even after living for several years in United States.

A Four-Level Religious Attitude

Russian Jews’ religious views may be described as having four levels of attitude (Kluger 1999).

In God We Trust

Generally, Russian Jews see religion as a cultural, traditional, or philosophical concept. For them, the meaning of a belief in God is quite ambiguous. Although almost 40 percent of Jews in Moscow and St. Petersburg in 1993 were “sure that God exists,” only about 20 percent definitely considered themselves believers (see table 10.1). Thus, many Russian Jews combine belief in God with low religious identification.

Moreover, the number of atheists among Jews in Russia is significantly higher than it is for American Jews or ethnic Russians. This does not necessarily mean that Jews are less religious than the Russians, since ethnic Russians reject atheism as one of the features of Communist propaganda (Dunstan 1993). But for Jews in Russia, atheism was and still is a way of assimilation. For a Jew to be accepted in a dominant Russian culture, it is still easier to be an atheist than either to be a religious Jew or to convert to Russian Orthodoxy. By and large, a nonreligious, atheistic, secular Jew is considered in the Russian consciousness to be “less Jewish” than a religious Jew.

In our 1996 in-house survey we found that more Russian Jewish immigrants (42%) believe that God exists, which is slightly higher than the percentages for both the general population in Moscow (Kluger and Carnes 1994) and for Jews in Moscow and St. Petersburg (Brym 1994), though significantly less than that for American Jews (AJC 1997).

In a 1990 survey, 22 percent of the Moscow respondents were sure that God exists, and 17 percent were sure that such a being does not exist (Kluger and de Vries 1993, 190). The attempted coup in 1991 in Russia resulted in a significant increase in positive attitudes toward religion in general. In 1990/1991, previously hidden and oppressed religious groups and institutions emerged; a euphoria of freedom first appeared; and the Soviet parliament passed the first law concerning freedom of conscience. Religion came back into fashion after seventy years of suppression.

Since 1993, however, this religious fervor has cooled. One reason is that the Russian Orthodox Church and its leaders were accused of collaboration and cooperation with the KGB (the former Soviet secret service). Another reason is that deteriorating living conditions and political situation forced people into a struggle for survival that, many felt, left no time for religion. As a result, Russians, Russian Jews, and Russian Jewish immigrants have expressed a confidence in God’s existence, but this may reflect only their emotional and cultural attitude toward religion. A belief in
God’s existence is just a philosophical concept that does not necessarily require a person to change his or her lifestyle. It is merely a statement with no social consequences and no obligations.

Believers

The second level refers to those who consider themselves believers. For Russians, “believer” is a deeper, richer term than “belief in God.” When a Russian says he is a believer, he means that faith in God has a sacred significance and place in his heart and that he identifies himself as one of the “believers.” Although the number of those persons who see themselves “rather believers than not” increased from 1992 to 1994, the rate of those who say they are definitely believers has remained steady and is within a range of 13 to 16 percent (but 20 percent among Jews in Russia). The statement that “I am a believer” entails certain obligations and commitments, which is why a much smaller number of Russians and Jews chose it.

Morality

The third level has to do with religion and morality. The belief that morality goes hand in hand with religion is deeply rooted in the Russian consciousness, literature, and philosophy. According to Dostoyevsky in The Brothers Karamazov, “If there is no God, everything is allowed and possible.” The Bolsheviks reversed this idea, maintaining that a person can and should be moral without God, which is a concept still strongly held by post-Communist Russian youth: only 11 to 14 percent of the students say that only a believer can be a moral person. Likewise, Russian Jewish immigrants in New York City do not connect religion and morality very closely. Only 10 percent would completely trust “the word of a person with the same religion as me” (AJC 1999).

Religious Practice

On the fourth level are those who say that religion “plays a very important role” in their lives. Such a statement presumes that religion is their lifestyle and everyday practice. Only 4 percent of Jews in Moscow and St. Petersburg and 7 percent of Jewish immigrants in New York and Boston fall into this category.

When religion returned to fashion in Russia in 1991/1992, people did not see much difference between trust in God and religious practice. Although later they did realize that there was a difference, they had become accustomed to an easy religion without an everyday practice.

Conclusions

Most of the recent Jewish immigrants from the former Soviet Union in New York City identify themselves as Jews through ethnicity, memory, culture, literature, a common experience of persecution, and other sociocultural components, but not through religion. While probably half of them express a belief in God, most do not see a strong connection between their own Jewishness and Judaic religious practices.

While considering themselves Jews, most immigrants from the European part of the former Soviet Union remain “Russians” in terms of cultural and behavioral norms, moral values, and even religious views. As ethnic Russians, they prefer the term faith, which implies the idea of a simple belief in God or an inward contemplation of God without necessarily any concomitant lifestyle.

The relationships between Russian Jewish immigrants and their American brothers and sisters are constantly changing. American Jews more often identify themselves along religious lines as a community, and Russian Jews identify themselves through ethnicity and Russian cultural lines. Whereas American Jews are profoundly American, Russian Jewish immigrants are intensely Russian.

NOTES

1. I express my deepest gratitude to Gloria Blumenthal for her discernment of the issues regarding Russian Jewish immigrants’ identity that helped me clarify my vision and sharpen this chapter. I also thank Tony Carnes for ideas that he generously shared with me in numerous discussions for this chapter.

2. The numbers of Jews and non-Jews are very hard to estimate because of the various definitions of who is considered to be Jewish. In this chapter, a Jew is a person who has a Jewish mother, has converted to Judaism, or at least considers himself or herself to be Jewish.

3. Except for the “Jews for Jesus” conversion, which most of those converted do not consider as true conversion.