



Jewish. Fearless. Since 1897.

[Opinion](#) »

From Russia With Lessons in Transnational Jewish Identity-Building

By [Olga Gershenson and David Shneer](#)

March 11, 2009

[Getty Images](#)

What do pork stores in Israel, mass Jewish immigration to Germany and Las Vegas-style shows in Yiddish on the grounds of the Kremlin have in common? All reflect the complex reality of post-Soviet Russian Jewry that has long puzzled much of the rest of the Jewish world.

It has been nearly 20 years since the fall of the Soviet Union and the beginning of the exodus of Russian-speaking Jews to locations around the world. And now, paradigms that predicted Russian Jewry's decline and disappearance are giving way to a more nuanced understanding of a global Russian Jewish diaspora. Rather than approaching the Russian Jewish experience with presumptions of what it means to be Jewish and how Russian Jews do (or more likely don't) measure up, some are *asking* what being Jewish means to Russian-speaking Jews.

For most Russian Jews, the primary ways of understanding Jewishness are not through synagogues, Hebrew schools and bar mitzvahs. In the Soviet Union, Jews were identified by their passports, which clearly marked their ethnicity as Jewish. Today, Russian Jews continue to see themselves as ethnically different. They also see themselves as distinct from other Russians because they possess different peer networks and have different educational and cultural expectations. For them, Jewishness is less about religious practices and more about ethnic and social relations.

As new immigrants, many Russian Jews encounter Jewish religious institutions on the streets of New York, Jerusalem, Berlin and even Moscow for the first time. And these encounters reveal deeply felt differences. In his memoir, the émigré writer Vassily Aksyonov tells the story of a Jewish engineer who, after years of trying to emigrate from the Soviet Union, finally succeeds in coming to the United States. A Jewish community leader heartily welcomed him.

“Congratulations!” he said to the engineer. “Now you are a free man and can go to a synagogue as often as you please!” “What a weirdo,” the engineer thought. “What do I need his synagogue for?”

That doesn’t mean that Russian Jews are lacking in the realm of Jewish identity. Indeed, the most recent National Jewish Population Survey found that while Russian-speaking Jews in the United States may affiliate with synagogues at much lower rates than their American-born kin, they actually score significantly higher on many other measures of Jewish identity, particularly those related to peoplehood and attachment to Israel — not surprising given their community’s international ties.

Russian Jews use traditional 20th-century means of maintaining transnational communities — letter writing, remittances, newspapers and books — as well as 21st-century ones like Web sites, jet travel, chat rooms and blogs. Their interactions with multiple countries and diverse Jewish communities highlight some of the most important issues raised by Russian Jews’ interaction with global Jewry: Who counts as a Jew? Halachic Jews, cultural Jews, ethnic Jews or relatives of Jews? Russian Jews, who often maintain multiple passports, multiple homes and multiple languages, make us re-think the meaning of homeland and exile.

In Germany, Russian Jews have fundamentally transformed the Jewish landscape. According to some estimates, Russian-speakers now represent up to 80% of

Germany’s Jewish population, depending upon how one counts. These newcomers rarely register with the organized Jewish community, the Gemeinde, and even if they wanted to, many of them would not qualify as Jews according to the Gemeinde’s halachic definition. German Jews complain that the Russians don’t integrate and don’t participate. At the same time, the Russian Jewish writer Wladimir Kaminer’s German-language stories about Russian immigrants in Germany have made him a literary sensation — and one of the most popular Jewish authors in the country.

Given that Russian-speakers now make up a sixth of the Israeli population, it is not a surprise that they have transformed Israeli culture too. Russian has become a de facto language of the Jewish state, with Russian-language radio and television stations, newspapers, theaters and film. “The Russians,” as they are known, have their own political, social and economic agendas. Predictably, tensions developed between immigrants and native Israelis. These tensions reveal deep

cultural gaps: The immigrants brought with them not only their food (non-kosher), their language (Russian) and their holidays (many celebrate the New Year with decorated fir trees), but also their own understanding of what it means to be Jewish and to be Israeli.

Although they represent a smaller proportion of the Jewish communities in the United States and Canada, Russians have transformed the most cutting-edge forms of North American Jewish culture. Much of what has been called the “new Jewish literature” is the product of immigrants from the former Soviet Union writing in English. Gary Shteyngart, David Bezmozgis, Lara Vapnyar, Sana Krasikov and Anya Ulinich have been published on the pages of the most prestigious journals and magazines. These authors are pushing the boundaries of American Jewish culture by bringing back the immigrant story, shaking somewhat complacent readers out of their cozy sense of being at home in America.

Just as Russian Jews are challenging notions of Jewish identity in their new homes, they are reasserting their Jewishness in the countries of the former Soviet Union. Hanukkah is now celebrated in the Kremlin — an unimaginable event until recently. Such celebrations are but one expression of the dramatic transformation of Russian Jewish culture in the former Soviet empire. Of course, the picture is ambivalent and uneven, with the persistence of high levels of social antisemitism. But the diminished Russian Jewish community has undergone a remarkable revival, with numerous active Jewish cultural and religious institutions. Limmud, the popular post-denominational educational gathering that originated in the United Kingdom, has spread to places as diverse as Moscow, St. Petersburg, Ukraine and the Baltics.

In cultural terms, this revival is expressed in an upsurge of Jewish press, literature, theater and film, including Las Vegas-style Yiddish music performances in the Kremlin’s Palace of Congresses. The latter bring together thousands of mostly Jewish Muscovites, who pay hundreds of dollars to see revivals of Yiddish classics.

It is not surprising that Russian Jews — who love their *treyf*, enjoy their Christmas trees and keep away from synagogues — leave American, Israeli and German Jews wondering what to think. Perhaps they should begin by considering the notion that Russian Jews have something of great value to contribute to the Jewish world.

Russian Jews, with their radically global view of the Jewish world, with their ability to bring together thousands for a Yiddish concert or a Limmud gathering, with their multilingualism and transnationalism, belong at the center of conversation about Jewish life. With Jews around the globe seeking out new ways of expressing their Jewish identities outside the confines of traditional religious practice, Russian Jews’ own secular, ethnically driven notions of Jewishness, and their experience with maintaining community in multiple homes, may eventually place them at the center, not the periphery, of Jewish experience.

Olga Gershenson is an assistant professor of Judaic and Near Eastern Studies at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst. She is the author of “Gesher: Russian Theatre in Israel — A Study of Cultural Colonization” (Peter Lang Publishing, 2005). David Shneer is an associate professor of history and director of the Jewish studies program at the University of Colorado at Boulder. He is the author of “Yiddish and the Creation of Soviet Jewish Culture: 1918-1930” (Cambridge University Press, 2004).

The views and opinions expressed in this article are the author’s own and do not necessarily reflect those of the Forward.

Join thousands of readers and give today to help fund the **Forward**’s reliable reporting, intelligent analysis, and a Jewish voice you can trust on news, culture, lifestyle and opinion. Thank you for making a generous donation now.
SUPPORT FEARLESS JOURNALISM

GIVE TODAY

Author

[Olga Gershenson and David Shneer](#)

Copyright ©2018 The Forward Association, Inc. All rights reserved. | [Contact](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Terms & Conditions](#) | [Trademarks](#) | [About](#)
| [Jobs](#)