

A JEWISH FICTION ABOUT SOVIET POLICY

Carl Alpert writes some good columns on the next page of this newspaper, but his last one was an astonishing piece of nonsense.

According to Alpert, the Soviet government has drastically reduced Jewish emigration in "self-defense." You see, the Soviet Union does not permit general emigration, but the nice Soviet government did decide to permit the Jews "repatriation" to their homeland, Israel, if they had relatives there. It was all working sweetly until "HIAS ... and American Jewish communities went out of their way to provide homes and hospitality" to some Soviet Jews who came instead to the United States.

"The American welcome," wrote Alpert, "became so lavish that word rapidly got back to Russia." Because of this "lavish" treatment, the drop-out rate -- those coming to the U.S. instead of to Israel -- rose to 75 per cent. As a result, according to Alpert, the Soviet Union was forced to close down Jewish emigration because "repatriation" had become "dishonest" and other Russians were getting jealous.

Surely he does not believe all that! Before this period, the Soviet Union opened and closed the gates of emigration for Jews at will, without "drop-out" being a factor. The Soviet government did not let the Jews out because of its warm feeling for repatriation. Emigration policy was always part of a political strategy: will greater emigration help get trade benefits from the U.S.? Will lower emigration provide some leverage for future negotiations? And so forth.

The opinion of the Soviet citizenry was never a consideration for the Soviet government. World opinion, and American governmental opinion -- as stimulated by the American Jewish community -- did become a factor, as related to the economic and political problems of the Soviet Union at any given time. The Soviet government never cared where the Jews ended up. As a matter of fact, the drop-out rate helped

the Soviet Union get off the hook with the Arab nations; it could point out to the Arabs that all the emigres were not swelling the Israeli population.

Furthermore, the Soviet emigres to this country have scarcely received "lavish" treatment from the American Jewish community. They have been given whatever assistance they needed to get settled, learn the language and get a job. Anything less would have been a scandal. The fact is that Israel provides essentially the same assistance. The difference is, admittedly, that there are more opportunities in America. That is why there are about 400 thousand Israelis who have come to America *without* the American Jewish community providing them any institutional welcome, lavish or otherwise.

Of course, there is some understandable sadness, even bitterness, about the "drop-out" rate. Israel needs Jews, especially skilled Jews. And there would have been no emigration from the Soviet Union without Israel. In the first place, the Soviet Jews who set fire to world and American pressure, were inspired by Israel and the desire to go there. There would have been no Soviet Jewry movement without Israel. And without Israel, there would have been no pretext for emigration in the first place.

As a result, it is reasonable for Carl Alpert to feel that Soviet Jews have some special moral obligation to go to Israel. Under the circumstances, despite our own position with respect to aliyah, it would be proper for American Jews to strengthen rather than weaken that sense of moral obligation among Soviet Jews. But how far can we go?

We cannot be expected to ask the American government to close its doors to Soviet Jews. Nor can we be expected to give less than decent treatment to Soviet Jews -- or Iranian Jews -- who do come here. And we should not cloud the issue by pretending that the Soviet Union is closing its doors because Jews are coming to the U.S. instead of to Israel.