

A SOVIET SIGNAL?

In December of 1970, hundreds of thousands gathered all over the country to protest the Leningrad Trial in which a number of Jews were convicted and in which the death sentence was originally invoked. Since that time, many thousands of protest demonstrations and actions on behalf of Soviet Jewry have been held in the nation.

Last week, the Soviet Union released five of the Jews convicted in that Leningrad Trial, a year before their terms were up. At the same time, record numbers of Jews were being allowed to emigrate. At current rates, it is possible that about 60 thousand Jews will be allowed to leave this year.

Has the Soviet Union changed its policy towards Jews? Is it time to modify the level of community activism on behalf of Soviet Jews?

It should be pointed out that other Jewish victims of the Leningrad trials still languish in prison, including Mark Dymshitz, Eduard Kutzenov and Iosif Mendelevich. And there are other Jewish prisoners of conscience, including, of course, Anatoly Shcharansky, Ida Nudel and Vladimir Slepak. Their sentences are scheduled to run another two to eleven years.

The five released prisoners were all originally due to be released in June, 1980, on the eve of the Olympics, an embarrassing time for these political prisoners to be featured in world news. Of course, the families of those prisoners don't care much what the motivations may have been. And we are all grateful for the early release. But they *did* serve nine years, others are still serving time, and something a little less than *wild* gratitude seems called for. Despite the old axiom, there are some practical reasons for looking a gift horse in the teeth.

However, what if these early releases, along with the relatively high emigration rate, are signals? True, there are many more Soviet Jews who have expressed a desire to leave than have been allowed to leave. True, there are notable cases of Soviet Jews who have been refused a visa for many years, on no credible grounds, and who are constant subjects of harassment. But still, a jump to an emigration rate of 50 or 60 thousand a year could be considered a signal, portending better things.

The signal could be asking: "Is it going to be worth our (Soviet) while to do this sort of thing? If we release prisoners early and increase the emigration rate, give us a return signal as to what *you* are ready to do for *us*."

When lives are at stake, one cannot ignore the signal game. Perhaps a signal is in order from America, somewhat relaxing the trade restrictions which were specifically tied to the Soviets' emigration policy. However, giving a return signal is not the same thing as closing up shop. Relaxing trade restrictions does not mean eliminating the law which would allow us to quickly tighten those restrictions again if necessary.

Certainly there is no reason to reduce the pressure of public opinion. We are where we are partly because of that public pressure, and one signal does not make a summer. When progress is being made, it is all the more important to point out what has *not* yet been done.

In the same week that all the good news was coming, the Soviet Union arrested a 21-year-old Jew named Boris Kalendarov. He was a student in Leningrad who applied for a visa, and was promptly expelled from the Polytechnical Institute. He was first arrested last April, and told to join the Army. Since it was such an obvious device, he refused. He has been re-arrested and faces serious charges.

Earl Raab  
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In short, we are receiving mixed signals, and our return signals should be mixed as well. But it would be the worst possible time to slip back into apathy.

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