

NEW WAVE OF JEWISH REFUGEES

In the last century, more Jews found refuge in the United States than in any other country. In recent years, more Jews were finding refuge in Israel than in the United States. Now, again, the Jewish emigrant tide is turning to the United States.

Of course, those years in which Israel was receiving more refugees than America were critical. No other country, including America, would have been willing to accept the tragic post-war mass of refugee Jews. In that sense, among others, Israel was -- and symbolically remains -- *the* refuge for Jews.

However, the cold fact is that more Jews are again coming to the United States. There will be, for example, about 51 thousand Jews leaving the Soviet Union this year. Less than 20 thousand will go to Israel; about 31 thousand will come to the United States. One clue to the situation: there are more Israeli Jews coming to the United States to live than there are American Jews going to Israel to live. The military burden for Israel is crushing, both economically and psychologically.

On that score, American Jews have a two-fold responsibility to Israel. There is the philanthropic responsibility: to send more money to Israel. And there is the political responsibility: the critical financial support of Israel by the American government; as well as diplomatic support.

But American Jewry must also accept the responsibility of the New Wave of Jewish immigration to this country. One occasionally hears grumbles about the Jews coming to this country, instead of to Israel. American Jews are scarcely in a position to complain that other Jews are not going to Israel. But the grumblers say that these newcomer Jews are not serious or religious Jews, and their interest in freedom is spiked with economic opportunism.

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But why did our ancestors come here? In a little more than 3 decades, around the turn of the century, about one third of the Jews in Eastern Europe came to the United States. As Mary Antin wrote of her father: "It is true that he had left home in search of bread for his hungry family, but he went blessing the necessity that drove him to America."

There was, of course, no Israel at the time. But, as Nathan Glazer has pointed out: "Zionism was rather less influential among the Jewish East European immigrants than radicalism ... and even the Zionism (of that time) was largely a secular, Western movement, indifferent to the central concerns of Judaism." There were many complaints at that time about the fact that so many refugees were not "serious and religious Jews."

Indeed, the grumbling was much more vehement at that time. In 1908, Professor Jacob Hollander said that many American Jews saw refugee help as "a tax-like charge for the indefinite relief of misery and dependence of a distinct class, different in speech, tradition and origin, unsought in arrival and unwelcome in presence, whose only claim was a tenuous tie of emotional appeal and an identical negation in religious belief." Nevertheless, the immigrant aid agencies were developed.

That level of resistance to newcomers does not exist today. Indeed, the American Jewish community is organized to help refugees, as never before. Agencies devoted to vocational services and family service counseling all over the country are available for first-line help for refugees.

Agency resources are being strained by the New Wave of Jewish immigrants to America. But we cannot do less for them than was done for our ancestors, no questions asked.