

Jews heading 'home' seek real welcome from the community

THE RABBI'S TURN RABBI ARTHUR GREEN

Here we are, on the threshold of a new decade. All of us are wondering what the '90s will mean — for America, for our world and for the Jewish people.

As I write these lines, it is still unclear whether this decade will open in peace or in war. For that reason, the broader questions seem almost impossible to answer. Our fond hopes for this post-Cold War era may or may not come to fruition, largely dependent on what happens over the course of the next few weeks. The stakes are as high as they can get, for Israel as well as for the world.

For our Jewish people, the tone of the 1990s seems to have been set already by Operation Exodus and the aliyah of Soviet Jews. A great dream is being fulfilled before our eyes. The face of Israel is being changed forever.

The big question that seems to face the Israelis is whether they are ready for our Soviet brothers and sisters. This refers, in the simplest sense, to housing and jobs, both of which have been too burdened and delayed by the complex involvement of party politics. We just hope that the squabbles of government ministers will be overcome and that every one of these immigrants will find a decent place to live and a fitting job which will help to build the society.

This is a time of great joy and opportunity for the Jewish people. Ever since the Russian Revolution of 1917, we have dreamed that the severed limb of Soviet Jews would be rejoined to the body of world Jewry. Since the 1960s, we have begun to see more and more glimmers of light from the Soviet Union that have led us to hope.

Now that the event has actually happened, we are overwhelmed at the outpouring of response from all quarters: the Soviet Jews themselves, Israelis who are receiving them, and Diaspora Jews who are giving so generously to help in the effort.

Looking ahead to the '90s, I dare to dream that this will be known as a decade of *return* for the Jewish people. As Soviet and Ethiopian Jews are coming home to Israel, so are large numbers of young American Jews returning to the Jewish community and seeking a way back to the Judaism that their parents or even grandparents rejected.

They are our own "severed limb," and it sadly represents a large part of American Jewry. This movement of return, having grown from a trickle to a stream over the course of the past three decades, continues unabated. But as Jews return to the fold, accompanied by a significant number of non-Jews

who seek to join the Jewish people, we American Jews are faced with a similar dilemma to that of the Israelis.

Are we ready for these Jews? Is the Jewish community prepared for Jews who want to take their Jewish lives seriously?

"What kind of question is that?" you will ask. "Of course, we are ready!" In our case, after all, there is no housing to be built and there are no jobs to be provided. What kind of readiness do we need? There are lots of seats available in our synagogues, after all, and the books are untouched on most of our library shelves. Returning Jews should find everything they need!

But readiness requires of us a lot more than that. We need a Jewish life that will be appealing to the best of our young people and a way to communicate it to them that does not leave them feeling as ignorant outsiders. Our efforts to reach out to these Jews and bring them home to their own roots must be done with a combination of sincerity, know-how and serious content. Otherwise, they will bear no fruit.

Adult Jews returning to Judaism want to be treated as intelligent adults. Many were turned off by "pediatric Judaism" or efforts to reduce Jewish life to the level of "I Have a Little Dreidel."

They will be attracted by a Judaism that is not watered down, but represents a rich and intense brew. They are interested in learning about holidays and celebrations, about the Jewish past and about Jewish communities around the world.

They want to know how to perform competently in the Jewish world: how to read the prayer book, how to make kiddush, how to conduct a seder, and all the rest.

Living the busy lives they do, most do not have a lot of time to give to these efforts. Only the most serious will really get around to studying Hebrew. The others will learn to read the letters, but will have to rely on English writings and translations for most of their information.

Fortunately, we have begun to build up a literature of rather easily accessible "how to" books on Jewish life. These include the *Jewish Catalogs*, Haim Donin's *To Be a Jew*, Michael Strassfeld's *The Jewish Holidays*, Blu Greenberg's *How to Run a Traditional Jewish Household* and several others that serve this purpose well.

Recent years have also seen a flurry of translations of traditional classics and works published especially by the Orthodox community for newcomers and returnees. These include the nearly endless-seeming ArtScroll series, volumes covering countless areas of Jewish ritual and intellectual life.

While I am no ArtScroll fan, I cannot but be impressed by the sheer magnitude of this effort.

Yes, the books are there. But is there a living community to receive these Jews? Where will they turn for friendship, for support, for spiritual nourishment? This is the real challenge.

We need to be a community that is open and welcoming to strangers. While standing for a Jewish life of rich content, we also have to show openness and a willingness to meet people where they are.

A Jew who expresses interest in "returning to the fold" may have a non-Jewish spouse and children whom he or she loves dearly. These may or may not also have interest in learning about Judaism. Yet a way will have to be found to make them all feel welcome.

There are Jews who become interested in their tradition through Jewish music, but are not ready to keep Shabbat or are not sure they believe in God. Others may come because they are seeking true religion, but are uncomfortable with Israel and the view of it they have learned in the political circles they inhabit. Still others may want a sense of Jewish rootedness while, at the same time, being terribly afraid of elements in the tradition they see as "male dominated" or "authoritarian."

We have to be ready to meet all of these Jews where they are. We should be grateful for the interest they have in our shared heritage and always ready to encourage more such interest in some appropriate related area.

We must learn to welcome, but not to push. Reaching out to such Jews must teach us to become real pluralists, to understand that there are many ways to be a "good Jew" in our time and that none of us has a monopoly on that claim.

Religious communities have always known that the most effective kind of teaching is done only by example. Those of us who work with returning Jews, whether we are rabbis, educators, or simply committed members of the community, know we are looked upon as models.

Jews coming from the periphery of Jewish life will — whether they are Soviet immigrants or American youth — learn by sitting in our classrooms, by watching us in shul and by being guests at our tables. The *nachas* we have in doing this work is knowing it will not take long before they, too, become models to others.

When you open yourself to such returnees and work closely with them, you get to see the "grandchildren" very quickly. And what could make a Jew happier than that? ■

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