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# Jewish Movie Review: Refusenik

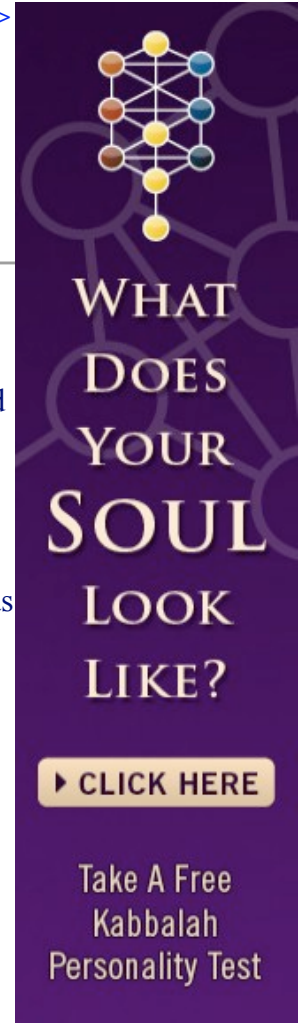


by [Jordan Hiller](#) Posted: 05-09-2008 (Viewed 130 times)



Times have changed. The fire that once stirred in the bellies of young Jews, prompting great pride in Israel and great concern for the well being of fellow Jews has been significantly diminished. The generations born with

Israel not being a dream or a miracle, but a taken for granted reality, and the generations born decades removed from the Holocaust naturally don't feel the urgency or the passion that once permeated the spirit of nearly every Jew on the planet. Of course even as the emotional legacies of our collective past are actively transcribed onto the next generation's youth (my five year old daughter "flew" to Israel yesterday in school for Yom Ha'Atzmaut, and came home with an orange), the connection is not the same. It can't be. There is no one to blame. When I watch a film like Refusenik, about a youth driven movement to free persecuted Soviet Jews and allow them to live freely as Jews in Israel, it evokes disparate feelings. On one hand, I am happy to see the unity and energy the Jewish community engendered to claim victory after such a long, seemingly impossible struggle. On the other hand I am saddened, perhaps jealous, that those glory days for Jewish causes are gone. That it has become popular amongst young Jews to exhibit mild disdain for Israel (whether one is orthodox and disapproves of the "medinah" or secular and finds ugly the "occupation"). I was at a concert this



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week which was supposed to both celebrate Israel's 60th and raise money for S'derot. While my two girls gleefully danced waving their blue and white flags, they were thankfully oblivious to the crowd of a dozen and the hundreds of empty seats. I am nostalgic for a time that I altogether missed.

Refusenik truly represents that bright flash in our history. From the mid 1950's through the 1970's and into the 1980's, Judaism was at its most vital and vibrant. More than it had been probably for centuries. The survivors of the Holocaust had astoundingly managed to rebuild their lives and their children were free to succeed in their chosen fields, and the birth of Israel, along with its subsequent decimation of enemy forces, created a Jewish air of invincibility.

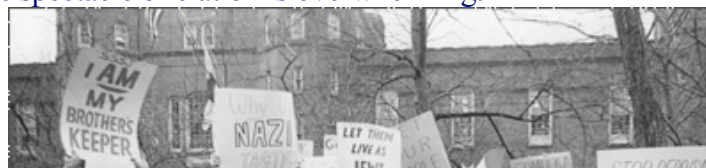


When certain sensitive individuals in Israel and America took up the cause of the Jews trapped in Russia, being tortured, imprisoned, and not permitted to express their Judaism; it

generated the perfect storm of issue and moment.

Laura Bialis' documentary is a straightforward telling of the efforts to assist the refuseniks (the title earned by Jews who were refused exit visas), but on a grander scale, the film seeks to enlighten as to how a peaceful, motivated few could snowball and topple (or at least weaken) an implacable regime. Refusenik does not so much capture the moment as it does educate, however, with material so compelling and inspiring, a thorough education serves. Bialis gained access to all the relevant players including multiple refuseniks (the most famous of which is Natan Sharansky), Israeli and American politicians (including a delusional Mikhail Gorbachev), and the leaders of the grass roots American movement. The film also comes complete with a historically accurate happy ending that should bring tears to your eyes. If a box of Kleenex were handy, I could spend hours watching the beaming faces of refuseniks departing planes after touching down in Israel, the crowds cheering wildly. There really is nothing purer in the human experience. After suffering so much, after believing for so long that the moment would never come, the spectacle of elation is overwhelming.

The lingering question is what so



we do with a film like Refusenik today? Is it merely a



documented account of something that occurred in the past? A young Jewish person growing up in a world where the USSR no longer exists might not relate. After all, everything in the film happened over twenty years ago and nothing comparable in the Jewish experience has happened since. One might very well ask what relevance the film holds if not for those with a passing interest in a once upon a time successful human rights struggle. One could also wonder how the events in Refusenik would play out today if a similar situation arose. Queries like these could fill all the seats at a barely attended concert for S'derot.

### [Interview with Laura Bialis](#)



**BIO:** Why make Refusenik now?

**Bialis:** I have always been interested in issues of human rights and stories about people who take the necessary risks to stand up against totalitarian rule. In college I was a history major and studied both the Holocaust and post-war Eastern Europe. I read books by dissident writers and wrote papers about the structure of totalitarian and communist rule, so I had some familiarity with the subject matter. Though I come from a Jewish family, everyone in my family had come to America a long time before this period-- so I didn't live through any of this. As a fourteen year old, I remember going to my synagogue to hear Natan Sharansky speak after his release. It must have had a big impact on me, because I can still remember this image of what seemed like thousands of people who had gathered to hear him. He is short in stature, but a giant in terms of his presence.... I still have that picture in my mind.

My first feature documentary -- TAK FOR ALT: Survival of a Human Spirit -- is about Holocaust survivor turned Civil Rights activist Judy Meisel. I made it with two friends during film school, and the film ended up being shown on public television

and is still used all over the US for holocaust and tolerance education. During a screening of that film in Omaha, Nebraska, I was approached by two members of the Omaha Jewish community. They wanted to bring my attention to another activist-- Shirley Goldstein. From mere appearances, Shirley appears to be a normal mid-west Jewish grandmother. But she is one of the amazing activists that ran this movement. She actually helped us with the first seed grant and contacts to get the project going.

**BIO:** Were any of the interviewees reluctant about opening up after living lives filled with paranoia for so long?

**Bialis:** Nobody was hesitant to speak about the past. My only problems with interviews were in Russia. We had interviewed the former head of KGB who dealt with this issue -- General Philip Bobkov. He refused to speak about Sharansky with us, and constantly insisted that there were no Refuseniks. It was a pretty shocking interview, but we ultimately didn't use it in the film.

**BIO:** Considering that the refuseniks desired to leave Russia to "live freely as Jews," did you get any sense of why some became religious after leaving and others did not?

**Bialis:** I think religion is a very personal thing. Everyone deals with their own Jewish identity in their own way. I have been living in Israel for the past several months and it is interesting to see how it varies from person to person, even within communities. Some of the Refuseniks became strict orthodox Jews; others just wanted the freedom to live as a Jewish person -- whether that means a secular affiliation, reform or conservative. Many of them felt the connection with the Jewish people as a whole. Living as Refuseniks gave them incredible leadership skills, and I think that is why several of the more well-known Refuseniks joined the public service arena and went into politics.



[Interview with renowned writer, journalist, speaker, and activist featured in the film](#)

[Yossi Klein Halevi](#) (whom I am very fortunate and delighted to call family)

**BIO:** You became involved in the Soviet Jewry efforts at a very young age. In the film you cite a desire to retroactively fight the Holocaust as your motivation for becoming the "6<sup>th</sup> grade Chairman of the Student Struggle." Did you find that the young people involved in this primarily youth based movement were similarly dedicated?

**YKH:** It was a youth driven movement, initially. In the early 1970's the Jewish establishment became involved. The first significant sign of it being Malcolm Hoenlein starting the Greater New York Conference on Soviet Jewry in 1972. After that, events like Solidarity Sunday brought down whole schools en masse.

But originally, the young people who came out for rallies - rarely more than a few thousand - were a very serious crowd. They wanted to be there. Of course there was socializing, but the group was focused, they listened to the speeches. Those were serious demonstrations. At that point it was a select group.

**BIO:** I know that the fight to free Soviet Jews sometimes became violent or dangerous. I know that you were arrested a number of times in Russia and America. That aspect of the struggle is not portrayed in the film.

**YKH:** When the JDL (Jewish Defense League) got involved in 1969, they added an edge. They were something slightly dangerous. They pushed people around. They sometimes got clubbed at the demonstrations. The goal was to get on the front page of the paper. I felt, and still feel that JDL's place, for better or worse, needs to be part of the story. I know the film's intention is to represent the Soviet Jewry movement as the world's most successful *peaceful* human rights effort, but there was a violent side to it...and you can't write that out of history.

**BIO:** What do you recall about JDL's involvement?

**YKH:** It was not to be necessarily violent. We went to the rallies as a JDL group to commit civil disobedience. We went to Moscow to do the same. We weren't violent in Moscow...the KGB was violent. We were careful because it was a dangerous situation.

The JDL was always a mixture of civil disobedience and violent guerilla theatre. Civil disobedience would be things like a sit down protest in Washington in 1971, where there were mass arrests though the protest was entirely peaceful. The guerilla theatre could represent anything from disrupting Soviet performers in concert...to real acts of terrorism. The point always was to gain attention for the issue.

Meir Kahane's line was that he wanted to take the Soviet Jewry issue from the obituary page to the front page. And there were two ways to get there. Either bring out hundreds of thousands of people to rally, or commit violent acts. As the mainstream in America became more involved and the numbers and voices in protest began to grow, the radicals of the JDL began to fade. Their activism became superfluous.

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