

Fundraising, fund-spending for Russian immigration -- some innovative ideas

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The Jewish fundraising leadership abroad have agreed to raise \$600 million over three years for the absorption of Soviet Jews in Israel. American Jewry, through the Community Federations and the UJA, have taken on the responsibility of raising \$420 million of the total. This is a huge task, even greater than the \$600 million (over five years) undertaken by Diaspora Jews for Project Renewal, the urban renewal effort for Israeli slum communities.



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But the campaign for the Russians is not just a "project" or an "operation." It is a national and international Jewish emergency, and time is of the utmost importance. Should perestroika and Gorbachev tumble or succeed, Jews could be caught in the middle of tremendous and perilous social upheavals. The Arabs are now trying to block Jewish immigration to Israel, as they did successfully in the days prior to World War II. We cannot allow this and its consequences to happen again.

Grassroots Jewish donors did not blindly follow their leaders in providing massive support to settling Russian Jews in

America, and the "Passage to Freedom" campaign turned out relatively poorly. Hopefully, "Operation Exodus" (to Israel) will do well -- as far as fundraising is concerned.

But how will it do regarding fund-spending? How will the hard-won donations be used in Israel? Who will determine the allocation, accountability, follow-up and evaluation regarding the use of those funds in Israel?

Donors to mainstream (i.e., UJA and Keren Hayesod) philanthropic campaigns have traditionally been savvy in fundraising, but more passive and much less involved in watchdogging their money in

How will the hard-won donations be used in Israel?

Israel. Since the leadership has resigned itself to accepting the politicization of the Jewish Agency, with its World Zionist Organization politicians, individual donors should be very careful about monitoring the Russian campaign money.

Immigration politics

It would be unfortunate if Operation Exodus money is allocated directly to the various departments of the Jewish Agency.

Each department is a semi-private fiefdom, with an eye for its own programs, rather than an overall strategic plan. For example, Youth Aliyah, still angry over budget cuts of last year, will most likely seek to place Russian immigrant children in its extensive boarding-school system, while social-work professionals are struggling for funds to help keep families intact during the early immigration years.

Operation Exodus money freely granted to the Aliyah Department would weaken the efforts of many of us here to transfer responsibility and money to the local municipalities to enable them to immediately and directly integrate the Russians into the municipal services network.

Donor options

How can donors watch out for their money in Israel?

One option is to insist that money for the Russians goes into a separate account at the Jewish Agency, and not allow it to flow into the various Agency departments. Funds should then be released only after a joint Diaspora-Israeli professional advisory committee makes recommendations for funding specific programs, based on proposals submitted by external contractors, as well as from Jewish Agency departments.

The competition should be open to all. The entire Russian Fund should be administered by non-political, non-party people,

with a majority representation by Diaspora professionals and lay leaders.

Another option for donors is to unilaterally bypass the Jewish Agency, just as the innovative New York philanthropist, Joseph Gruss, has done. This means finding Israeli non-profit organizations to work with, and giving funds -- tax-deductible in the U.S. -- directly to them on a contractual basis, and in installments based on track record. More donors, foundations (and innovative Jewish Federations) are taking this route than ever before. Many others are diversifying their philanthropic portfolios, giving some to the Federation and some directly to non-profit organizations in Israel.

It is possible, and highly recommended, that specific Federations abroad twin directly with Israeli municipalities that are taking in large numbers of Russian immigrants. The twinning concept used so well in Project Renewal (and conceived by this author) is also totally relevant for "Operation Exodus."

The Russian immigration is of extreme positive significance to Israel. I would also hope that Diaspora Jewry will grasp the potential for changing both the structure and style of its philanthropic partnership with Israel.

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