
**A STUDY OF RUSSIAN JEWS
AND THEIR ATTITUDES TOWARDS
OVERNIGHT JEWISH SUMMER CAMP**

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**FOUNDATION FOR
JEWISH
CAMP**

WHAT DO RUSSIAN JEWS THINK ABOUT OVERNIGHT JEWISH SUMMER CAMP?

Towards the middle of 2010, it felt like every time I opened my Inbox, a colleague had forwarded me another article about Jews from Russian-speaking backgrounds! Apparently, new funding opportunities and a small but dedicated and outspoken community of Russian-speaking professionals and lay leaders led to an upsurge of interest in the subject that is long overdue. This certainly is exciting news for the Jewish communities of North America since Jews coming from the countries of the Former Soviet Union represent not only a significant proportion of the overall Jewish population but an exciting source of innovation and communal revitalization, as well. And, while the players have changed over the past few decades, it is interesting that what *hasn't* changed much at all are the questions being asked about this population – often, as it turns out, by Russians, themselves.

At their core, the questions can be characterized as a collective frustration on the part of Jewish communal professionals, namely: why aren't Russian Jews participating in Jewish institutional life in numbers proportionate to the size of their population? If one in every sixth Jew on this continent is from a Russian-speaking family why aren't they far more visible in Jewish schools, camps, and synagogues? Besides their public support of Israel, goes the familiar refrain, they don't seem to want to participate in cultural and social events sponsored by established Jewish communal institutions. To date, Jewish overnight camps have not done much better at attracting this group.

The Foundation for Jewish Camp, with the support of the Genesis Philanthropy Group, commissioned a study of Russian-speaking parents to begin to learn about their attitudes towards Jewish overnight camp. The investigation, developed and conducted by Dimitri Liakhovitiski, has added a new and important dimension to a collection of market studies that FJC has published in recent years. These studies – focused on regions and/or specific target audiences – have provided considerable insight into the underlying reasons behind parental choices for or against Jewish camp. The RSJ research also has the added benefit of being the first national survey of Russian-speaking Jewish parents that explores the decisions they are making with respect to Jewish education and recreation for their children, as well as the *potential* there may be to tip the scales in favor of Jewish choices in the future.

Many of us in the field who have worked passionately with and for this community have experimented with a wide variety of program ideas over the past couple of decades. We have relied upon a combination of personal experience, knowledge of successful and innovative Jewish programs outside of North America, and basic gut instinct to make funding and programmatic decisions. As part of FJC's goal to attract a substantially higher number of children from Russian-speaking families to overnight camp, this study aimed to get beyond the “gut” and find data-driven answers to the questions about Russian Jews that have left communal leaders perplexed and exasperated for quite some time.

The goals of the research were to:

- Provide a snapshot of Russian-speaking Jewish parents (RSJPs) in North America – the demographics, the extent of their immersion in either being Jewish or Russian (through culture, activities, language, affiliation, etc.), or both.
- Learn whether cultural or affiliation trends are dependent on regions.
- Identify which summer activities RSJ parents have chosen for their children or what they are doing with their children currently.
- Understand the level of interest in Jewish overnight camp, as well as where parents get their information about summer camps and other options.
- Identify the types of activities RSJ parents are interested in for their children and what the motivations and barriers might be in making these decisions.

METHODOLOGY

In the summer of 2009, two focus groups were conducted in New York and San Francisco and, over the course of several months in late 2009. Insights from the focus groups were used to design a survey that was made available to tens of thousands of Russian-speaking Jews across North America. The survey was promoted online and offline through a variety of Russian social networks, Jewish communal organizations, and many grassroots Jewish and Russian organizations. In total, 301 individuals responded to the survey, confirming our understanding of the reluctance of émigrés from the Former Soviet Union to respond to official surveys of any kind. As a follow-up to the survey and in order to provide more depth to the information we had gathered, ten in-depth phone interviews were conducted in July 2010. These interviews lasted about thirty minutes each and were conducted primarily in Russian.

In the end, because of the general sensitivity to surveys noted above, the distribution channels that yielded the most participation in the research were those connected to Jewish community, skewing the resulting data in favor of higher levels of Jewish engagement. What is interesting, however, is that greater engagement in Jewish life did not necessarily mean that parents were more likely to have explored the possibility of Jewish camp for their children thus making the survey extremely relevant.

Taken together the survey and the phone interviews tell a story about Russian-speaking Jews in North America that highlights important trends and offers some interesting surprises, as well.

GENERAL JEWISH ENGAGEMENT

As discussed above, respondents to the survey indicated a relatively high level of Jewish engagement overall with “having mostly Jewish friends” being the highest ranking (60%) among a list of ways that they express their Jewishness. Nearly 60% also indicated that it was important to them to provide “some form of Jewish education” to their children and that they celebrate some Jewish holidays throughout the year.

An interesting and somewhat surprising finding from the research was the level of synagogue affiliation reported among the respondents. Indeed, in a population notorious for *never* joining synagogues, this group reported a 21% synagogue membership rate! Even when we take into consideration the relatively high level of Jewish engagement among the respondent pool, this statistic stood out, offering a new and very surprising finding, one that could potentially create fresh approaches towards engagement for this population.

ATTITUDES TOWARDS RUSSIAN-SPECIFIC PROGRAMS

Among the most enduring questions about the Russian-speaking community in North America is whether or not they will continue to prefer programs with a uniquely Russian flavor. One need only take note of the proliferation of Facebook groups by and for this audience to recognize the continuing strength and attraction of culture and shared history for this community. As American acculturation has taken full hold, it sometimes seems that even younger Jews from RSJ backgrounds are seeking to express their Jewish identity more with other American-Russian Jews than with the broader Jewish community. Before launching a broad recruitment effort within RSJ circles, FJC needed to test whether RSJ parents would make Jewish choices for their children based substantially on their identification with their Russian roots.

What we found from the survey and interview responses was that there is a clear trend away from Russian-focused programs for their children. When asked to rank the relative appeal of various summer camp features, parents found Russian-oriented features relating to program, staff, or other RSJ campers, less appealing.

At the same time, it was also clear that *Russian-focused marketing* plays an important role in capturing the attention of these parents. Most of the survey respondents inhabit a predominantly Russian social sphere, and the vast majority of respondents reported a high level of identification with and expression of their Russian roots: 78% said they mostly speak Russian at home and 71% report having mostly Russian-speaking friends.

ATTITUDES TOWARDS RESIDENTIAL JEWISH CAMP

The parents who responded to the survey indicated mixed levels of interest about having their children experience Jewish content at camp. On the one hand, they were interested in providing their children with something that they never received themselves - an education about Jewish tradition, history, and religion. In fact, 82% indicated an interest in nurturing their children's Jewish identity, and 74% expressed a strong interest in providing them with Jewish cultural education. Most also indicated an interest in their children experiencing Shabbat and learning Hebrew.

Nevertheless, these RSJ parents were still most likely to cite program elements such as sports, academics, and the arts as important factors in choosing an overnight summer camp. In fact, though more than two-thirds of respondents expressed very strong interest in sending their children to some kind of summer camp next year, only half of those were interested in an overnight camp option. Even more puzzling, given their strong desire to nurture Jewish identity in their children, the Jewish ties of the camp had a neutral impact on their interest level.

THE COST OF JEWISH CAMP

Perhaps the least surprising finding from the research study was the level of education achieved by the vast majority of respondents. Fully 95% of the population completed college or have post-graduate degrees. More interesting than their level of education (but also not surprising) was the reported level of annual income among the research participants. In fact, 63% of survey respondents reported an annual income of \$100,000 or higher and 35% percent reported incomes over \$150,000. This statistic is significant because it puts to rest – once and for all – the question of financial capacity within the RSJ community. At the same time, however, respondents indicated a relatively low tolerance level for camp tuition: despite the relatively high income level, most indicated a willingness to pay between \$300 and \$600 per week for camp, well below the median price of a Jewish overnight camp.

IMPLICATIONS FOR CURRENT AND FUTURE WORK OF FJC AND THE FIELD OF NONPROFIT JEWISH OVERNIGHT CAMPS

We know from our recent recruitment efforts that there is tremendous potential to increase the interest of Russian-Jewish families in overnight Jewish summer camp. Since adopting this effort as a strategic priority of FJC, we have seen the number of RSJ children enrolling in Jewish camps increase from approximately 240 in 2009 to 640 in 2010! This increase has been the result of targeted marketing and recruitment efforts led by FJC and in partnership with several of our federation and camp partners. ***We are encouraged by the speed with which our efforts have yielded such positive results and believe that the RSJ population may represent the most obvious opportunity for growth in camper enrollment numbers over the next several years.***

Children from Russian-speaking backgrounds are responding to outreach efforts – and to the One Happy Camper incentive program - by attending all kinds of Jewish camps. This fact suggests a relatively higher level of diversity among RSJs than some observers might have guessed. It also supports the research findings indicating that Russian focused programming and staffing are not necessarily what is attracting this population to camp. ***Nevertheless, we have also seen the power of Russian-speaking social networks to bring this population to camp and the Foundation will continue to capitalize on this opportunity by supporting camp and community recruitment efforts such as hiring local RSJ camp recruiters, prioritizing the placement of RSJ staff at camp, and building connections to Russian-run student and family activities.***

Despite indications that a large proportion of the RSJ population will be happy at “any” Jewish camp, we know from our current efforts that there continues to be an important place for Russian-targeted camping, as well. *Havurah* operates as part of Camp Tel Yehudah in upstate New York and recruits teen campers from across North America. J-Academy is a camp program drawing campers mostly from Toronto, Canada. Both camps use the Russian-Jewish experience as a core program element and the growth of both programs over the past couple of years indicates that there is a significant audience for them.

At the present time, FJC is providing supplemental funding for camp incentives at two camps targeting children from Russian-speaking backgrounds. *Havurah*, mentioned above, is a national program that opened in 2008. J-Academy is a camp program drawing campers mostly from Toronto. Each program provides large subsidies to first and second-time campers. ***Together with the camps and funding partners (GPG and UJA Federation of Greater Toronto), the Foundation for Jewish Camp is developing a strategy to change expectations in the community so that, in the next three to five years, Russian families attending these camps will pay equivalent tuition to others attending similar programs.***