

The Modern Exodus of the Jewish People

You've read about the Exodus of the Jewish people from Egypt but did you know that there was a modern exodus of two million Jews from a different kind of enslavement? Until the early 1990s, for nearly a century, millions of Jews in the Soviet Union were discriminated and persecuted, not forced to build pyramids but to abandon their faith and traditions. The truth is that life was never great for Jews in Russia under the Czars but the Soviets made it worse.

As a student, I was very involved in the global movement to free Soviet Jews. My activism was remarkable and, in many ways, shaped who I am today. That's another story for another time.

The global movement to free the Jews of the Soviet Union began in earnest in the late 1960s from two parallel but interrelated places: in the USSR itself with men and women beginning to reclaim their Jewish identity that the Soviets tried to purge, along with their desire to leave the USSR for Israel; and in the west where many leaders and grassroots activists undertook the complementary mission to pressure the Soviets to let our people go.

While mostly a movement of Jews, many notable Christians also were involved, recognizing the anti-Semitic discrimination and injustice and seeing an opportunity, indeed an obligation, to free Soviet Jews, one of biblical proportion.

Recently I read a book about the experiences and advocacy of many of the leaders of this movement, both in the USSR and in the west, by a woman who was a leader's leader. "Hidden Heroes" recounts the experiences of Pam Cohen, sharing her story through the voices of many others how she, as a

housewife raising three kids, got involved and made a difference. Pam rose to the top of the leadership and advocates on behalf of Soviet Jews, taking her to the White House and halls of Congress, many global capitols and throughout the Soviet Union.

Had it not been for leaders like her, half a generation later I might not have known about, much less had the privilege to be active in the struggle myself, as one of the students among many “students and housewives” as the KGB pejoratively described the movement, not realizing the power such a worldwide group could wield. She and others set the pace and many followed. God clearly worked through her to make possible the modern exodus that resulted in some two million Soviet Jews being able to leave.

The biblical exodus recounts God working through Moses, actively and miraculously liberating the Jewish people. The exodus of Soviet Jews is a story of average people called play active, sometimes superhuman, roles in a story that did not reveal God’s hand the same way but is no less historic or divine.

Even as a student activist who knew about and struggled against the repression, decades later it’s jarring to recall how horrible life was for Soviet Jews. Because it’s so unimaginable, there are people today who don’t know that there was a place called the Soviet Union, much less how much Jews were repressed and discriminated against there. That makes telling the story all the more important. “Hidden Heroes” is critical to recount this important chapter in the history of the Jewish people. {eoa}

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