

Will Spector

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Campus Commentary 2—The Soviet Jewish Future

“Go and Don’t Be Afraid: Perestroika and the Soviet Jewish Future” was a lecture on Soviet Jews between 1988 and 1989 offered by Stanford graduate student Joshua Tapper. The lecture explained efforts to recover a sense of Jewish identity and culture during those years in the Soviet Union. The presentation started with a metaphor: the final scene of a documentary called *The Jewish Cemetery* in which a man named Spector wanders alone through an airport terminal. While the stereotype of the time was a mass desire of Soviet Jews to emigrate, Tapper argued that Spector, who moved back to Moscow, represented a significant portion of the Soviet-Jewish population who stayed in the USSR. He represented a shift of narrative from doubt and hopelessness within the country to one of optimism and hope.

Tapper went on to discuss the state of the Soviet Jewry movement, centered around the idea that fully realizing Jewish potential could only occur outside the confines of the Soviet Union. While the desire to leave the Soviet Union following years of persecution was obviously present, Spector decided to stay because he saw himself as the future of a new national community: one of possibility and agency. Tapper also discussed the beginnings of Perestroika, the reformation of the soviet economic system, which emerged through grassroots Jewish activism. Soviet Jews made an effort to change the “politics of rescue” that were common at the time to a politics of rebuilding—instead of the philanthropic movement that many Jewish

activists saw as paternalistic, Soviet Jews believed they could rebuild their culture and identity from within.

A character that emerged several times in Tapper's talk was Mikhail Chlenov, a visionary of Jewish life in the USSR and one of the main opponents to the philanthropic movement. Chlenov was the founder of the Jewish Cultural Association, which became a vehicle for change during this several year period in the Soviet Union. At the end of his talk, Tapper referenced the work of a Jewish poet which appeared in the first editorially independent Jewish newspaper called *The Dawn*. The poem was a call for communal solidarity and action for both the local and global Jewish diaspora.

Joshua Tapper had a few clear goals in his talk. The first (and most obvious) was to make a positive impression on listeners, as he is a grad student seeking a role in the Russian studies department at Davidson. He was successful in this regard: he was poised and knowledgeable, and offered most of the information in an understandable manner (though admittedly some of the more complex concepts did go over my head). His other purpose was to present his passion project to a group of people who volunteered to come to his talk. His research is niche, and because of the relatively unknown nature of some of the information he presented, he was eager to bring it to a new group of people. In this regard, he was successful, as his presentation was a cornucopia of information about his dissertation.

From my own perspective, I believe that Joshua Tapper's talk was interesting and informative, if complex. I am half Jewish (my great grandparents were Jews who immigrated from Ukraine due to pogroms in their town). Albeit at a much later date, the Soviet Jewish movement is of interest to me, as I feel like it is relevant to my own heritage. Prior to this talk, I had no knowledge whatsoever of the topic, so it was a great introduction to something which I

believe Tapper could have taught a yearlong class on. This lecture was an opportunity to learn about something I otherwise would not have, and I hope to attend more like this at Davidson in the future.