

## From Russian Jews with Love: Back to the Future

A “Jewish” Nobel Prize – I kid you not!

Plans are in the final phases,

As announced at a special ceremony in mid-July in Jerusalem

By the Genesis Philanthropy Group – [that’s GPG to you & me]

To award \$1 Million annually to a Jew whose professional passion

Life achievements and all around life-purpose

Have most profoundly contributed to the betterment of humankind.

Not surprisingly, the eight member selection committee

Will be chaired by Natan Sharansky, head of the Jewish Agency,

And many might say, a worthy candidate himself.

What is most surprising, however, is the man behind the prize,

And his motivation...

Created by Moscow-based philanthropist, 48 year-old billionaire

businessman Mikhail Fridman, the Genesis Prize

aspires to reawaken a sense of connection for Russian Jews,

both in America, and many still living in the FSU – like Fridman

himself, for whom religion meant oppression,

and among whom Jewish life virtually disappeared.

As Fridman explained in an interview in NY a couple of months back:

“Our parents wanted us to feel proud of Jews who were academic and cultural leaders, from Einstein to artists and composers, and to be prepared for the difficult circumstances as Jews in life ahead.”

Acknowledging that so much of religious life in Russia has been lost,

The Genesis Prize focus is universal, [as Fridman explains]

“since any attempt to revive the particulars of ritual practice or Jewish religion in the FSU with people who grew up without it would be an absolute waste.” [The Jewish Week, 7.27.12]

I am pretty much convinced that Mr Fridman’s operative assumption is incorrect, or at the very least, misguided.

For what he cannot recognize, his eyes too close to the ground,

Are the seedlings – buried deep by generations of Communist religious repression – now sprouting, against all natural likelihood, in a remarkable rebirth.

And what is most astounding, if we look intently,

is that within the unimaginable renewal of the Russian Jewish Community today are the essential life-sustaining ideals For the continued transformation of 21<sup>st</sup> century American Jewish life. I would not have believed it but for the fact that I witnessed it myself. The great gift of being included in the second-ever U.J.A.-Federation Rabbinic Mission to the FSU [former Soviet Union] Lead by V.P. of Strategic Planning, Dr Alissa Rubin Kurshan, and CEO of UJA, John Ruskay, was that the stated aims could never have captured the ultimate outcome. For in spanning the landscape of Russian Jewry since the fall of the Soviet Union 20 years ago, we likewise underwent an unanticipated time-travel, interweaving past and present, thereby pointing the way to tomorrow. So this New Year moment, when the road ahead is paved by where we have been, join me on a journey of Jewish discovery; each encounter a '*Back-to-the-Future*' experience, revelations – hiding in plain sight, for renewing the promise of our shared Jewish future.

*Back-to-the-Future I...* [Russian] Jewish Summer Camp.

For those who grew up going as kids, or whose kids/grandkids go today, There's nothing like going away to Walt Whitman or Laurel; Kenwood or Watido, or maybe even Ramah or Eisner.

But let me assure you: being a Jew in Russia, summer camp has never meant more.

Before heading onto the bus, we met with Vadim,

Unlike any camp orientation counselor I'd ever encountered.

Rather than rules and regulations, it was pedagogic models for Jewish transformation. For with his long red ponytail and chain wrist bracelets, this now Israeli master-educator – all of 26 – former head of Youth Programming for the Jewish Agency in Russia, in just 20 minutes, presented a new paradigm for understanding the life-altering impact of Jewish camping.

After he finished, I approached with [what I thought was]

A striking realization. "You know, we face the very same challenge! Our kids come to U.R.J. camp and – experiencing a 24/7 immersion in Jewish living, the question, as they head back home is how to keep up that connection."

Standing alongside me, Susan's candor cut to the chase:

“But Vadim, with parents who are barely Jewish,  
how do you get these kids to camp in the first place?”

“You are right.” Pointing to Susan, “This is our greatest challenge – the parents, not only because they themselves, with almost no Jewish background have not given their children a connection to our past; but because many cannot effectively communicate to their kids any idea of where they are going.”

...Arriving at a Junior College campus about 40 minutes in the countryside outside St Petersburg, lots of concrete classroom buildings, We realize – we’ve made it to summer camp, as we’re greeted by the counselors who’ll be our guides for the morning.

Sonya, now a college sophomore, had been coming for 7 summers. We sat in a circle. She told of her parents dropping her off for the first time.

Mom hugs her: “Honey, you know....This is a Jewish camp.”

“Why am I going to a Jewish camp?” Sonya asks, trying to make sense of the surprise. Her father whispers, kissing her on the cheek:

“It’s who you are, who Grandma was...You’ll see.”

So for some 6,000 kids in local and regional settings throughout the FSU, Led by Russian Jewish teens and young 20’s, having grown up and into themselves through the system, now inspiring a new generation, Camp is the gateway to unearthing a connection to Jewish peoplehood many never knew they had.

We ask Sonya before heading into the Israel Day program, “So this summer as a counselor, did you have a “light bulb moment”?

After a little metaphor translation, her face lit up as she recounted:

“There’s one boy in my group – a 12-year old Russian history professor named Losha. We were teaching about great 20<sup>th</sup> century Jews.

So we learned about Einstein,

Whose theory of relativity & scientific genius changed the world.

And we learned about Einstein,

who was courted by Ben Gurion to become the 1<sup>st</sup> Pres. of the State of Israel

And Losha asks: “But wait; which Einstein are you talking about?”

He was totally confused. So I gently explained:

“There’s only one; it’s the same Einstein!”

And for the rest of that afternoon and the whole next day,

Our 12 year-old professor was in a state of disbelief.

The man who changed the way the world understood science

And the man who played a central role in Israel's statehood;  
A commitment to all people and a dedication to a particular people,  
To be wholly Jewish and fully human, all in one person...!  
The real light-bulb moment for me, however, was seeing Israel-Day.  
Following Sonya from station to station, we come to #3,  
A classroom with 20 11-12 year olds sitting in a circle on the floor.  
The sign of the door reads: *Radiyo L'Kulam – Radio for All*.  
The Russian born, now Israel counselor asks the kids to listen  
To a contemporary Israeli Hebrew song: *Kol Hay'ladim Koftzim Rokdim*.  
The kids are totally into it, bouncing to the beat...and so am I!  
"Why is our Israel station called "*Radiyo L'Kulam*?" she asks.  
I am bubbling over to share my answer with Sonya.  
"I'll tell you why! Because the song we're hearing now was the song that  
the Tsofim unit used for their creative dance last week in Eisner Camp;  
25 Jewish American kids the same age, dancing/singing the same words,  
as 600 or so at services, filling the outdoor sanctuary, grooved to the beat  
And here I am, sitting in a Jewish summer camp outside St Petersburg,  
And I realize – the faces are interchangeable.  
Jewish identity reclaimed; Jewish connection renewed, linked by the  
language of our people. 5,000 miles apart, from St Pete to Great Barrington,  
these young Jewish teens share not merely a legacy, but a common destiny!

### *Back-to-the-Future II...Y'SOD*

The JCC of St Petersburg is the flagship of this re-energized ✨community.  
The name by which its known echoes its vital impact: The *Y'SOD*,  
Literally – 'the foundation,' a gorgeous, grand facility houses  
A day-care/nursery center, an active elder-care program  
providing 2 meals daily, cultural activities, even 2<sup>nd</sup> hand clothing & medical  
supplies; a transformational Jewish Family Education initiative, "*Adayin Lo*,"  
running 8 kindergartens around St Pete, programs for special needs and  
outreach to families at risk; a Hillel House attracting a post-college  
population with everything from weekly Shabbat program to Birthright...  
AND, [if that is not amazing enough] at the core of *Y'SOD's* mission –  
*Chesed*, an inspiring community care outreach serving over 10,000 elderly  
Russian Jews in the region...Because the FSU has no social services net, no  
built-in provisions for the old and sick, unless the means or family are  
present, they are left to fend for themselves, or simply fade away.

Thankfully, for the Jewish home-bound elderly, family is close by,  
In the form of UJA's American Joint Distribution Comm. – the JDC.  
But we did not travel half way around the world to hear facts & figures;  
We wanted to see faces...

Driving out to Lomonosov with our 3 rabbi [plus Ruskay] team,  
The directive was straightforward: use the 500 rubles to buy staple  
foodstuff for the week, then pay a visit. Needless to say, the \$30. or so  
was insufficient, so with an enriched grocery order in hand, we entered  
the dilapidated apartment building, knocking at the door of the 2<sup>nd</sup> story  
walk-up. We'd arrived at the apartment of Yakov Grabshtein,  
our *Chesed* client, but what we entered was the epitome of the saga  
of Soviet Jewry in the past three generations.

We pulled up half-broken chairs to sit near Yakov,  
surrounded by books and *chachkes*, his case-worker & translator close by.  
It was not 2 minutes before we became part of his life story.

It took but one question: "So, where did you come from?"

And Yakov was transported to his town in Belarus,  
as – through tear-soaked words, he remembered the Nazi onslaught,  
shooting most every Jewish adult, his parents included,  
leaving him in the midst of the mass grave until Jewish partisan fighters  
came by and pulled him out...rescuing Yakov,  
who spent the war in hiding in the woods...Raised in an orphanage,  
subject to terrible anti-Semitic taunts, by 13 Yakov ran away,  
hoping one day to become an army officer – to avenge the atrocity...  
Though he worked as a radio engineer on a Russian Navy ship,  
Yakov never quite made his dream real...But, after marrying and living in  
this Leningrad suburb for decades, when his wife died 20 years ago,  
He felt isolated...So this oppressed Jew without a sense of Jewish practice  
Turned to the JCC where he regularly connected to its programs/activities.  
But on one cold winter visit, a terrible fall compromised his mobility,  
Limiting his ability to use his hands to care for himself...

So Yakov told us what we thought we already knew:

That the 25 hour-s-week JDC care-worker, cleaning, shopping, preparing  
meals, even dressing him – has saved his life.

Then, tearing up again, this time with joy, Yakov grabs my colleague  
Rabbi Jonathan Morganstern's hand, emphatically repeating in Russian:  
"You saved my life!" Getting up after an emotionally draining hour

packed with 75 years of Jewish struggle, I clasp Yakov's hand to say something. Welling up, I can only manage "Thanks..."

And after the other 2 rabbis and John Ruskay, do the same

My wife – with her invincibly loving spirit hugs Yakov,

Kissing him on both cheeks...And as she does, for a split-second,

Misty-eyed, I see my Zada, also a child of Belarus, standing there....

Climbing back into the van for the drive back to the city,

Exhausted and energized, it dawns on me – in reaching out

to extend *chesed*, it was not at all we who were saving Yakov's life,

but the other way around.

### *Back-to-the-Future III....ANATOLY*

I could not for the life of me understand why the head of the largest Jewish Tzedakah cause in our Jewish world was taking 2 days out and in a "back to the future" if ever there was one, flying from Tel-Aviv to Moscow to be with us – 15 nice-enough rabbis from greater NY, but nothing to write home about...

On the plane, I happened to be reading the summer issue of "Moment," eager to check out the Symposium on Jewish Peoplehood.

To my surprise, the feature piece was on our special guest.

I found a few sections so compelling, I passed it on to John Ruskay,

Who cited it in his intro at breakfast the next morning:

"He knows where he's going, but he's never forgotten where he came from....Sharansky is a brand – he's a symbol of what it means to be a Jew." [Moment Magazine, July/Aug 2012, pages 62-63]

Note: Not a Soviet Jew, but a Jew; more aptly perhaps, a symbol of what it means to be "*Yisrael – a God-Wrestler*"

He told us that morning what it means by sharing bits of his story;

Such a resonance as he spoke, I remember thinking, "our story..."

...The struggle started long ago. I remember when Stalin died in '53.

As a 5-year old, in kindergarten, we mourned the loss of a great leader.

At home, we celebrated the death of a modern-day Haman.

By the time I'd finished high school, like so many, trying to escape my religious identity through academic achievement, studying Cybernetics at the Moscow Technical Inst., the 6-Day War was an abrupt wake-up call.

Jews from America smuggled in books.

I read Leon Uris' *Exodus*, and realized that, from the time of leaving Egypt until now, it was one long story – the same book. If ever there was an unlikely candidate to be the “poster person” for the freedom struggle of Soviet Jewry, it was this 5'4" bald, Stocky guy with a guttural accent and a sneaky smile. Yet there was something immense about his presence among us. Dissident since back in 1973 when he applied for an exit visa and, After being denied, was thrust into the international human-rights spotlight, not simply as Sakharov's translator, but as the key spokesman for Soviet Jewry. Reflecting on his 9 years in the Soviet Gulag – the labor camp prison, including over a year in solitary and a 200 day hunger-strike, Sharansky shared the rationale behind his resolve:

“Suddenly, we discovered we had a history; we had a country. We were part of a peoplehood that transcended time and space...There was something more important than success in physics, more important – even – than your physical survival. So no matter how the KGB threatened, there was nothing to fear...”

...Did any of the rabbis in the room, we who'd dedicated our lives to transmitting tradition, to inspiring Jewish living, embody such spirit? “Yes,” he continued, “life becomes more complicated, for that is the life of a free person...that is when life has real meaning. This is the power of peoplehood.”

Citing the Birthright Israel phenomenon as prime example, he explained: “350,000 kids later, 10 days in Israel reveals there is a place they all belong. And the post-Birthrighters now discover not merely that they have a family, but share a connection that is cool – and uplifting. So for the 350,000 Jews still in the FSU; this historic moment tells the same tale. Identity is unearthed as a buried treasure, invaluable, because the sum of the parts is far greater than the whole...”

Ten, or certainly 15 years ago, all the Jewish Agency talk would have been about *aliyah* – how to foster a mass migration of FSU Jews to Israel.

But today, in our presence, when Rabbi Gordon Tucker posed the question: “So is there a future here for Jews in the FSU?”

Courageous if not counter-revolutionary, Sharansky proposes:

“It all starts with nurturing a pride in belonging; helping a new generation find a community...a strong connection to their identity.

Its not a question of rescuing Russian Jews; it's a matter of personal choice....Those who discover that connection, we hope, will come home." Back home in Boston, actually in Chestnut Hill, Temple Mishkan Tefilla, this past June, Safam – the great Jewish music group was in concert, playing their classic hit, written by Cantor Robbie Solomon, "Leaving Mother Russia." I was there the first time it was performed in 1977, a vehement protest against Anatoly Sharansky's incarceration in Siberia. But this time, the crescendo at the final chorus reached new heights. As over 1,000 people joined in: "We are leaving Mother Russia; we have waited, far too long..." an unimaginable figure walked slowly down the center aisle, all 5'4" of him, up to the bimah... The crowd went crazy. The band members, one x one, hugged their hero. And in that magical moment, tearfully triumphant, holding fast to Anatoly's – Natan's, now post-assimilationist Russian Jewry's dream, they/we had all come home.

Sharansky's call to peoplehood is Reform renewal at its best: Not predetermining the path but opening the door by reframing the entryway of what it means to be a Jew – thereby discovering yourself to be part of an ever extending family whose story you share, whose values you aspire to live, And whose place therein gives you your greatest possible life-purpose.

When Rabbi Rick Jacobs decided on Congregation Beth Elohim in Brooklyn for the site of his Service of Installation this past June, The temple's wonderful rabbi was a bit unsure: "You realize, Rick, CBE is in the middle of renovation...right?" But our movement's new spiritual leader knew it was an historic moment, and CBE, the perfect place:

*"Its not an accident that this Installation is taking place at CBE. Brooklyn was a different place in 1861 when this temple was founded. For the past 150 years, CBE has responded to constant changes in the world beyond its walls. This magnificent building reflects the grandeur of early 20<sup>th</sup> century Reform, yet the building is not what makes this place so special. This synagogue's refusal to allow its evolution to be thwarted by those who venerate only the past. All along the way, its leaders renewed their sense of purpose...So that CBE today is a most fitting metaphor for our*

*movement which is undergoing a different kind of renovation as together, we re-imagine Judaism for the 21<sup>st</sup> century."*

He may be an entire foot taller [standing at 6'4"] but based on the core initiatives our movement's President has thus far set in place, I'd say his vision and Sharansky's converge in the renovation process...

- ✧ Reaching far beyond institutional walls to the unaffiliated – in greater NY, about one-third of all Jews that Jacobs calls: uninspired, to engage them in the depth/relevance of J. living...
- ✧ Reaching beyond the milestone markers to reconnect the largest group of disaffected Jews – post-college to early 30's, who seek a communal spirit that confronts the most challenging questions while likewise caring for those most in need...
- ✧ Reaching deep within our membership to help individuals see beyond their personal journey as Jews, to the interwoven fabric of life-stories that link us all...

The story of rebirth we are witnessing in the FSU is, quite literally, our story; A continuation of the steps our families, our people once walked.

The centuries have changed; the script remains very much the same...

My grandfather Solly was born near Kishinev, the village that, along with his brothers Jack & Harry, he was forced to flee in the wake of the 1904

Kishinev pogrom...Solly's father, my namesake, Joseph Sirkman,

Sold his name, to avoid conscription of his sons in the Russian Army,

And fled with nothing but what they could carry. But there was one thing they did not have to put on their backs, for it was deep inside:

The knowledge of who they were, and the hope that in this new land

They'd be free to be Jews without oppression or fear – to raise a family, build a community, and so bequeath a legacy for the generations.

So I stand here today, grandson of a shoe-factory foreman from Haverhill, Mass., having witnessed a "Back-to-the Future" rebirth that is unbelievably unfolding – one that Solly is somehow seeing through my eyes...

Whereas we are renovating a grand structure, a foundation of prophetic ethics welded by social justice, reinforced with traditional renewal and insulated with spirituality, a big old house which needs a little less administrative space and a few walls opened up for faith to flow;

Our Jewish family in the FSU is constructing from the ground up, what once was a building totally abandoned, dilapidated, forsaken; but no longer...

In just the past 12-15 years, the reconstruction of community infrastructure, of trans-generational educational initiatives, of support systems for those most in need, is a rebuilding no one thought possible... It is truly without precedent; some might say, miraculous.

And who makes sure this construction continues?...

JAFI [The Jewish Agency for Israel],

By way of the life-saving network of the JDC

Funded by, yes, an acronym you should know well: UJA-Federation.

But beyond the acronym, there is UJA's mission – made real every day: a vision of peoplehood validated through the dedication of its ever-extending reach, where no Jewish soul, no Jewish story, no Jewish hope is forgotten.

So if *Teshuvah, Tefila & Tsedakah* – Repenting, Praying & Righteous Giving renew our lives for the New Year, though commanded to repair the world often moves us to causes far beyond the community of Israel – all important, for where there is need we must respond... there is no cause this moment that I hold more dear, no need closer to the heart of Israel, than giving to UJA-Federation so that Russian Jewry can claim its place in our People future...

The real Jewish Nobel Prize, *my* Genesis Award [not Fridman's but Sirkman's] would rightly go to a new generation of FSU Jews – reclaiming a piece of themselves they hardly knew was there; writing a new chapter of remarkable rebirth.

And since our stories of renewal belong side by side in the very same Book; our "Peoplehood Building Projects" reflected in mutual renovation, lest you miss the purpose we share as a people, let Sharansky's last bit of wisdom to us that night reverberate *this* day.

A couple of months ago, I had a conversation with a very wealthy American Jewish personality – a known giver.

"Natan, don't talk to me about investing in building the Jewish community. As a Jew, I must put all my efforts into saving the world. There are between 6-8 million hungry people in Africa everyday. They are my priority."

So I ask: "Do you believe that in 20 years, there will be others,

Jews among them, who are still concerned with the world, doing whatever they can to feed those hungry people?"

"Yes, I do." ..... "OK. Then save the Jewish people first!"

As we stand facing 5773

in this ultimate *Back to the Future* moment,

recognizing, as members of this covenant community,

we are here to serve – and in a way more real than we realize,

to save one another.

So may our sacred giving and our commitment to purposeful Jewish living

Help write a tale of renewal for the people Israel that includes us all....

With God's Help & your hearts....*Ken Yehi Ratson*

*AMEN.*