

Title of the podcast series: Life, death, and afterlife in Israel's society

Title of the podcast episode: Israel: through the lens of the “Russian” Jews.

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Submitted to Prof. Rami Zeedan

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Introduction (about 1 minute):

- Hello listeners! And Welcome to Israel: through the lens of the “Russian” Jews.
- This episode of the podcast series was produced in the Fall of 2022 as part of the First Year Seminar titled: Life, death, and afterlife in Israel's society, with Prof. Rami Zeedan at the University of Kansas.
- I’m your host Alexa Schwartz. I would like to introduce myself as a Jewish American and a KU Undergraduate. I am a Film and Media Studies Major and I love telling stories. Today, I will be telling you a story about a topic from this course that is of great interest to me.
- The information here is based on a survey of the existing literature about the topic. I will be posting my sources online and more details at the end of this episode.
- In the episode today, we will talk about three major items concerning the “Russian” Jews in Israel: Life, the practices and beliefs regarding death, and the beliefs regarding the afterlife. This series is important since it helps us understand the multicultural society in Israel. Beliefs vary and contribute to the contrasting views of the nation.

Music /sound effects: 5 seconds

Item 1: Life - 4 minutes

Let's start with the first item: the life of the "Russian" Jews in Israel.

- In the 1990s, over one million Jews from the Former Soviet Union came to Israel. Mirsky said, they enlarged "the country's population by 25 percent and form[ed] the largest concentration of Russian Jews in the world."
- They came to Israel under the Law of Return to escape persecution in their home country.
- I think the biggest event in their history is drastically shifting the demographics in Israel from their wave of immigration.
- Lily Galili's report expands on this idea further.
- Considering the Law of Return, the "Russian" Jews were faced with much adversity as many of them were not seen as Jewish by the Rabbinat
- Despite them being in a similar position as the Arabs of Israel, they wanted to establish their own leadership, instead of being subjected to that same fate.
- Their leader Avigdor Lieberman was not a fan of the Arabs and made his aversion known. He also spearheaded the expansion of the right-winged rule in Israel and contributed to the shrinking of the left.
- Aside from their political influence, the Russian language spread through Israel, and they even have tv stations, and newspapers for the Russian-speaking community. The further integration of the "Russian" Jews in Israeli society is causing a major shift in life there.
- Galili says the Law of Return has caused much debate and is a source of "endless political and social conflict"
- Another article that provided some more insight is Larissa Remennick's. It is about the Russian Jewish identity. Remennick states the "Russian" Jewish immigrants "became second class citizens in Israel and...deprived of some basic civil rights as non-Jews by religious halachic law"
- Many immigrants moved further West to America because of this.
- Although many strides have been made, the hardships they have faced are still prevalent in Israeli society due to the Law of Return and the Nation-State Law.

- The Rabbinate in Israel holds much power when it comes to what citizens can or cannot do.
- By law, if you wish to marry in Israel you have to marry someone of the same religion. Many “Russian” Jews were not allowed to marry because they were not seen as equals to the Israeli Jews. This also made adoption, burial, and other aspects of life more difficult for the Russian Jews.
- Most of the “Russian” Jews still identify as Jewish but most consider themselves nonreligious because of the strict laws. And a small percentage of them converted to other religions.
- Something interesting I found about the Russian Jewish culture, is that they celebrate a holiday called Novy God. It is more commonly known as the Russian New Year.
- This holiday has very similar traditions to Christmas, but Shaked Karabelnicoff states that the holiday is completely secular which is why the “Russian” Jews take part in it.
- They decorate a Yolka tree, gather as a family, feast, and exchange presents.
- Aside from Novy God, some traditional Russian dishes that you can typically see on the dinner table are, noodle kugel, gefilte fish, and potato knishes. These dishes are very common within most Ashkenazi families.

Music /sound effects: 5 seconds

Item 2: Death - 6 minutes

Ok, so that was an introduction to the life of the “Russian” Jews in Israel. The second item in this episode is pertaining to the practices and beliefs regarding death. This section will be based off Ellen Levine’s book chapter and my personal knowledge since these are customs I partake in as a Jew.

- The “Russian” Jews tend to follow the common practices of Judaism.
- First and foremost, two of the most important commandments to follow as Jews is to honor the dead and comfort the mourners.
- After death, the bodies must be purified and cleaned. This ritual is performed by the Chevrah Kadisha or burial society. If the deceased is a woman, only women in the Chevrah Kadisha can perform the ritual. This is to preserve her dignity.
- In the time between death and burial, the deceased is not to be left alone because the body and soul is to be respected, honored, and protected. Also, the funeral and burial take place as soon as possible after death. This is so the bereaved can start mourning without the pain of delay.
- Among the Orthodox community, women do not partake in many of the rituals as it was the man’s role. But in the more secular community they are more open to female involvement.
- Jewish funerals are kept simple but are very meaningful. A Rabbi leads the service, and the attendees recite prayers, psalms, and hear a eulogy given by someone close to the deceased.
- Some differences between the funeral practices of Jews and Christians, is having an open casket. Jews do not participate in this. They believe that having an open casket is disrespectful.
- Also, the people close to the deceased will shovel dirt onto the casket instead of toss in flowers. The shovel is not to be passed from hand to hand but placed back into the dirt in between each person’s turn. This is symbolic of how the tragedy of death is not passed on.

- Jews typically do not partake in cremation, organ donation, and autopsies since the Jews are created in G-d's image and believe that the body should remain the way G-d made it.
- Autopsies are permitted for certain cases like murder, suicide, or accidental death. There is much debate surrounding this. Some rabbis believe it is a mitzvah or good deed and others believe that the body should not be mutilated or altered.
- Once the funeral is done the bereaved will begin the mourning process. The two main components of this are Shiva and Yahrzeit.
- Shiva is the seven days that follow the burial. The funeral party goes to the family of the deceased home and guests bring food. During shiva, the family are not forced to host, others take on this duty to allow the family to mourn.
- Yahrzeit is the anniversary of death. On this day a candle is lit to remember our loved ones. Jews will often go to services on this day and recite the mourner's kaddish which is prayer to honor the deceased.
- I would like to introduce a large hurdle that the "Russian" Jews face in Israel.
- According to the strict laws of the Rabbinate in Israel, a person must meet certain criteria to be considered a Jew. If they do not meet these criteria, they will face difficulties with burial. Lev Peisakhov, a Russian "Jewish" IDF soldier was an example of this issue.
- In an article from the Los Angeles Times, an immigrant from the Former Soviet Union that came to Israel in 1990 with the rest of that wave of immigrants under the Law of Return. When he was killed 3 years later, he was buried on the edge of a military cemetery since he was not Jewish in the eyes of the Rabbinate because his mother was Christian.
- Peisakhov's mother argued that her son deserved "what every other hero killed in the Israeli army" got. She said she wanted "to look those rabbis

who put her son in the corner in the eyes and talk to them. They don't even send their sons to the army."

- Environment Minister Yossi Sarid said in the article, "Lev Peisakhov was Jewish enough to die, but not Jewish enough to be buried."
- This is only one hurdle and one specific case that the "Russian" Jewish immigrants had to face when living and dying in Israeli society.

Music /sound effects: 5 seconds

Item 3: Afterlife - 3 minutes

We have now covered the first and second items in this episode which are about the life of “Russian” Jews in Israel and their practices regarding death. For the last item I will share the “Russian” Jews beliefs concerning the afterlife. The content of this section is from Christopher Moreman’s book chapter.

- Like their practices in death, the “Russian” Jews follow the common ways of Judaism.
- Moreman says that the Jewish people are taught to take life one day at a time and not to focus on what comes after this life.
- There is very little about the afterlife in the Torah which reflects their beliefs of living in the here and now. But what is there, paints a very clear picture.
- A general note before I continue, I use the words reincarnation and resurrection in this section and something people do not know is that these words have completely different meanings. Reincarnation is the rebirth of the body into a new life whereas, resurrection is soul living on after death.
- Sheol is what biblical Jews referred to as the underworld. Sheol is where all those who die reside regardless of their status in life and the choices they have made. Sheol is basically the waiting room for souls to go to the “World to Come.” This was the belief that after this flawed world there is a better place that is yet to come. The Righteous are resurrected into this Paradise.
- Some Orthodox Jews believe in physical reincarnation, but this belief is not very widespread. But the idea of the resurrection of the soul is a more common belief.
- What they believe that happens after death does not influence the burial or funeral practices. Their beliefs also do not really influence social identity.
- Something about my family is that although we know of our losses. To ease the pain, we just remember that they are always with us as long as we keep their memories alive and keep them in our hearts. If we ever feel alone, we know we have them to lean on.
- Although the beliefs surrounding death and the afterlife for “Russian” Jews do not vary much from the general Jewish beliefs, the “Russian” Jews are a very unique social group in Israel and they and have

had to fight their way into Israeli society and have made lasting impacts in the country.

Music /sound effects: 5 seconds

Wrap up and closing remarks (1 minute)

- To sum up this episode and the main mission of this course, we have covered the Life, Death, and the Afterlife of the “Russian” Jews in Israel. Although I am Jewish, I do not know everything, and I still have a lot to learn. But now I am one step closer because of this course. Rami has been such an excellent resource for me, and I am very glad I chose to take his class.
- I will be posting my sources for this episode online so you can read further on this topic if you wish.
- Thank you all so much for tuning in and I hope you have enjoyed learning about one of the many social groups in Israel as much as I loved learning about it. If you want to hear about other social groups, be sure to listen to the other episodes in this series made by my peers. Shalom!

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