

Israeli Novy God? What a Russian Holiday can Teach Israelis

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By *Mishael Zion*

[Israeli Novy God was recently selected for support by the [Bronfman Alumni Venture Fund](#) giving circle. Read more about *Israeli Novy God* in this recent [article](#). A version of this article was published in Hebrew in *Makor Rishon*.]

It's December in the Holy Land. Christmas trees are being sold in the streets, and my heart skips a beat: I can understand the Christian minority – maintaining generations of tradition – buying the trees, but when they are sold to Jewish families celebrating *Novy God*, the Russian New Year, one cannot help but hope that the Israeli melting pot will do what it does best, and make these trees a thing of the past.



That's what I thought each December, until I was approached a few months ago by Alex Rif, a Russian-born poet and civil servant and an Israeli Bronfman Fellowships alumnae. She told me of her and Barry Rosenzweig's "*Israeli Novy God*" initiative to encourage Russian-speaking Israelis to open their homes to their Israeli neighbors during *Novy God*. For Alex, the project is rooted in sweet memories of childhood *Novy God* celebrations in Netanya, highlighted by a fir tree adorned with a Star of David. But for many Russian immigrant children of the first and second generation, *Novy God* is also a sign of shame, something they feel they must hide from their Israeli friends, employers and neighbors, who view it as a Diasporic Christian holiday.

Hearing her describe "*Israeli Novy God*" reminded me of my own family connection to the struggle to free Soviet Jewry – my grandfather leadership of the Free Soviet Jewry chapter in the Midwest during the sixties, or my parents clandestine travel from Israel to Leningrad to support Russian Jews under the Community regime. I asked myself, "What is my responsibility – as a non-Russian Israeli – toward this holiday?" Just as Jewish solidarity drove so many Jews in America and Israel to fight the Communist regime despite the physical distance, does it not stand to reason that Israelis today must learn about the holidays celebrated by the families who immigrated to Israel thanks to that

struggle? I believe that not only is there an Israeli responsibility to learn about *Novy God*, despite the complexities, but that projects such as the Israeli *Novy God* tell an important story about Israeli society as a whole.

Thus I entered into a process of study and conversation with Alex, the conclusions of which I share here. I was especially proud when a few weeks ago the Bronfman Alumni Advisory Board found this project worthy of receiving one of its peer-to-peer giving circle grants. As members of the community founded by Edgar M. Bronfman, this is a fitting next chapter in the history of a philanthropist who played such a seminal role in the struggle for Soviet Jews.

A *Novy God* “*Shanah Tovah*”?

In the Russian calendar, *Novy God* (New Year in Russian), celebrated on the last night of the calendar year, has always been the most important family holiday. Families gather for a festive New Year’s dinner, a green spruce tree (*Yolka*) decorating the living room, while “Old Man Frost” (*Ded Moroz*) and his granddaughter hand out gifts to all the children. To Jews from outside the Russian tradition, the holiday’s customs are vivid reminders of Christian customs: The tree; the date (which in Israeli is referred to as “*Sylvester*” named after Saint Silvester); and a Santa Claus-esque figure. Indeed, the resemblance of *Novy God* customs to Christian traditions served as a source of shame for many Soviet immigrants and they received a tacit message from Israeli society demanding that they shed their Slavic identities in order to become a part of Jewish-Israeli collective.

But many FSU Jews who celebrate *Novy God* will adamantly tell you that this is strictly a secular civic holiday: The tree and “Old Man Frost” are not Christian symbols, but ancient European winter traditions stemming from the cold and dark of December. Their origins probably predate the Christian conquest of Europe. The date itself is also not a religious one, as Christmas is celebrated on December 25th in Western Europe, and on January 7th in Russia and Eastern Europe (in accordance with the Orthodox calendar). And what about “St. Silvester” the name commonly associated with the New Year? Perhaps surprisingly, this is a title which has become rooted in Israel – certainly not in Russia.

This is where the people behind “Israeli *Novy God*” come in, wishing to create a mental shift within both communities: on the one hand, to introduce Israelis to *Novy God* as a secular, civic Russian holiday; and on the other, to encourage immigrants from the former USSR to celebrate *Novy God* as a full-fledged Israeli holiday.

As a Rabbi, this dilemma reminded me of the Halakhic debates around celebrating Thanksgiving in America, despite its non-Jewish religious roots. While the Orthodox Halakhic authorities differ to this day on the question – Rabbi Yitzhak Hutner famously prohibited everything from taking a day off to eating Turkey, an animal unknown to our ancestors in Europe – the vast majority of American Jews have embraced it wholeheartedly, with the ancient Spanish Portuguese synagogue of New York even reciting the *Hallel* prayer. As for religious Russian Jews, many abstain from celebrating *Novy God*; others celebrate it in its entirety as a secular holiday; and others still omit the Christmas-like trademarks but have a festive New Year’s dinner.

The question remains, should there be an “Israeli *Novy God*”?

It is a *Mitsva* to tell the tale of the Soviet Exodus

The answer may very well be found in the story of *Novy God* itself. For those of Russian origin, the most distinct attestation to the non-Christianity of *Novy God* is the fact that the holiday was celebrated in the Soviet Union – a regime which obliterated all religious symbols from the Communist landscape. And yet this was not always the case: *Novy God* was a popular civic holiday under Czarist Russia, and at first the Soviets wished to annul it as well. The Soviet calendar only contained holidays which were of significance to the Communist revolution – the 1st of May, Lenin's birthday, etc. At its core, the threat *Novy God* posed to the Communists was not religious in any way, but rather the fact that *Novy God* is a family holiday. Communism declared war not only on Christianity and Judaism, but also on the nuclear family as the fundamental unit for instilling values, traditions and identity.

And yet this modest family holiday proved to be stronger than even the Soviet juggernaut of reeducation. As early as 1936, the regime reversed its policy regarding *Novy God*, permitting it to be celebrated in the USSR. Fifty years later, with the fall of the Iron Curtain, *Novy God* was immortalized as a symbol of the significance and strength of the nuclear family. It is precisely this familial aspect of the Israeli *Novy God* which offers Soviet immigrants – and Israelis as whole – a new vision for Israeli society.

An old joke describes all Jewish holidays as having the same features: "They tried to eradicate us, we won, let's eat!" *Novy God* tells a similar story – life under a regime which sought to eliminate all family and traditional identity, to obliterate the Jewish languages, and to instill a single secular socialist identity. It is also the story of those who defied this attempt at obliteration, those who chose to strengthen the bonds with family, Judaism and Israel. It is also the story of the Jewish communities in the USA and in Israel, who fought for the rights of their oppressed brethren from afar. And it is, of course, the story of millions of FSU Jews and their families, who returned to the Holy Land and were once again able to speak Hebrew. Fittingly, we just marked 25 years since the mass immigration for the Soviet Union began.

It is one of the grander stories of our generation, but it is fading fast: the first generation of immigrants is busy integrating into Israeli culture, and rarely speaks of the many years living under the Soviet regime. In the Israeli educational curriculum, there is almost no mention of the Soviet attempt to eradicate all other cultures, or of the subsequent resistance against it. Israeli *Novy God* is a rare opportunity to relate this Jewish/Russian story, by means of the holiday which is both most Russian and most family-oriented.

Homemade Identity: *Novy God* and the Passover Seder

People have been trying to find the equivalent to *Novy God* in Israel. Is it like *Mimouna*, the ethnic post-Passover holiday of Moroccan Jews, which many Israeli enjoy visiting? Is it like the phenomenon of American immigrants celebrating Thanksgiving in Israel? To me, it is most reminiscent of the Passover *Haggadah*. Tellingly, the *Haggadah* indicates that the most important tales of identity are not meant to be taught in schools or in synagogues. This story must be told in a familial context, at the dining room table, passed on from parent to child. Contrary to Israeli society, which seeks to instill identity through the national school system and the national calendar, our Sages taught us that **identity is a homemade delicacy**.

And Israel is in need of more homemade identity. An identity instilled at home will always be rich, varied and nuanced. An identity acquired by means of stories, foods, traditions and holidays – both national and ethnic – is one that is capable of containing diversity within unity. Instead of being lumped together into one homogenous narrative, we are now beginning to understand that we ought to be telling many Israeli stories – diverse, and sometimes even contradictory stories – which together form our multifaceted Israeli society, one which chooses to live its life here every day.

We are currently experiencing a renaissance of rich ethnic identities, which in the past were not able to find their place in the public or in the media. *Israeli Novy God* is an exceptional opportunity to tell a greater, more encompassing Israeli tale; to adopt a secular, civilian Russian holiday and make it Israeli; to find ways to allow generations of ex-Soviets to understand their own family stories; and to enable a new generation of Israelis to understand how the Jewish/Russian narrative can galvanize, enrich and inspire us all.

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