



## DECEMBER 2011: NCSJ 40<sup>th</sup> ANNIVERSARY LEADERSHIP MISSION TO ISRAEL

From December 7<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup>, 2011, a group of top NCSJ leaders traveled to Israel to celebrate the organization's 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

NCSJ met with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and other senior government officials, all of whom emphasized the continued importance of NCSJ's mission and praised NCSJ's work to strengthen the pro-Israel positions of the governments of the former Soviet states.



Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his staff meet with the NCSJ delegation at his offices in Jerusalem (*Amos Ben Gershom/GPO*)

Other highlights of the mission included a special Knesset committee hearing honoring NCSJ and a gala reception, at which NCSJ honored former refuseniks and Soviet Jewry movement activists, and paid a special tribute to longtime NCSJ Vice-President Rabbi David Hill.



The delegation was led by NCSJ Chairman Richard B. Stone, President Alexander Smukler, and Executive Director Mark B. Levin. Other delegation members included past NCSJ Presidents Lesley Israel and Howard Sachs, Vice-President Rabbi David Hill, activist Frank Brodsky, Director of Community Services and Cultural Affairs Lesley Weiss, Fred Israel, Kathleen Sachs, and Alla Shtraks.

(l-r) NCSJ Chairman Stone and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu (*Amos Ben Gershom/GPO*)

On December 8<sup>th</sup>, at an hour-long meeting at his Jerusalem office, the Prime Minister congratulated NCSJ on its anniversary, recognizing NCSJ's decades of advocacy on behalf of Soviet and post-Soviet Jewry.

Prime Minister **Benjamin Netanyahu** said NCSJ helped to free "a million immigrants from the former Soviet Union [who] have strengthened the power of the State of Israel in all spheres of life."

Former Soviet Jews in the Diaspora, he added, continue to “strengthen their ties with Israel through a variety of projects, organized jointly by the Government of Israel with its partners.” During the meeting with Prime Minister Netanyahu, as well as other officials, NCSJ raised the issue of enlarging the pensions for longtime refuseniks in Israel to recognize their sacrifice and work as Zionist activists in the Soviet Union. NCSJ received assurances from the Prime Minister as well as from Minister Yuli Edelstein that the issue would be addressed and resolved.

NCSJ Chairman **Richard Stone** said: “The NCSJ mission gave the delegates an opportunity to consider the profound contribution that NCSJ has made to the Jewish people in its forty-year history. The enthusiastic reception NCSJ received from Prime Minister Netanyahu, the Knesset Absorption Committee, and many others made it clear: Israel’s leadership highly values not only the Soviet Jewry movement and NCSJ’s past, but also its advocacy today for the large Jewish community remaining in the FSU and for strong relations between Israel and the fifteen post-Soviet republics.”

Past NCSJ President **Howard Sachs** said “On numerous occasions, the Israeli government and its highest officials expressed their appreciation for the work that NCSJ has done over the past forty years in bringing over one million Jews to Israel from the former Soviet Union. In fact, the Prime Minister asked us to bring another million!”

Prior to meeting the Prime Minister, the delegation met with his senior staff, including Senior Advisor Ron Dermer, Head of the National Economic Council Eugene Kandel, Jeremy Schechter, and Deputy to the Senior Advisor Jordana Luks Cutler.

Reflecting on Soviet Jewish history, NCSJ President **Alexander Smukler** said, “When I was an activist and refusenik in the Soviet Union, I wouldn’t have believed that someday I would be President of NCSJ, advocating on behalf of Jews in the new independent countries of the former Soviet Union, and that Prime Minister Netanyahu would thank us for our work on behalf of Israel.”

That evening, NCSJ paid tribute to Soviet Jewry activists at a reception in Jerusalem. NCSJ honored Vice-President Rabbi David Hill at the reception for his lifelong devotion and commitment to freeing the Jews of the former Soviet Union.



NCSJ leaders and Minister Yuli Edelstein present Rabbi David Hill with a lay leadership award (NCSJ)



(l-r) Former refuseniks Yosef Begun, Natasha Ratner, and Lev Shapiro (NCSJ)

Over 100 people attended, including dozens of former Soviet refuseniks, such as Pavel Abramovich, Yosef Begun, Elena Dubiansky, Eliyahu Essas, Alex Ioffe, Yuli Kosharovsky, Lev Shapiro, Yosef Mendeleovich, Vladimir Prestin, Natasha Ratner, Aba Taratuta, and Igor Uspensky.

NCSJ Vice-President and award recipient **Rabbi David Hill** said, “I made many trips on behalf of NCSJ in the 1970’s and 1980’s and this was one of the most historic trips we’ve ever made. Words cannot express how moved I was to be a part of this mission and to be honored by NCSJ in Israel.”

Minister of Public Affairs and the Diaspora Yuli Edelstein spoke at the reception. He thanked NCSJ for its activism, for helping to secure his freedom and the freedom of the Jews from the former Soviet region who now live in Israel. Edelstein also stressed the importance of NCSJ’s current mission: combating anti-Semitism and securing the safety and well-being of Jews in the independent countries of the former Soviet Union.

In other meetings with government and NGO officials during the week, discussions focused on the Israel-U.S.-Russia relationship, Iran, and the United Nations.

From the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, NCSJ met with Danny Ayalon, Deputy Minister; Anna Azari, Deputy Director General for Euro-Asia and Central Europe; Rafi Barak, Director General; and Aviva Raz Shechter, Deputy Director General for the Middle East and Peace Process.



NCSJ leadership with Aviva Raz Shechter at the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs (NCSJ)



(l-r) Lesley Israel, Alla Shtraks, and Frank Brodsky with Anna Azari (NCSJ)



Deputy Foreign Minister Danny Ayalon reviews material at a meeting with NCSJ delegation (NCSJ)

NCSJ also met with Andrey Kozhinov, Director of Russian Affairs at The Israel Project; Asher Ostrin, American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee; Alex Selsky, the Prime Minister’s Russian-speaking Press Advisor; and Nadav Tamir, Policy Advisor to the President of Israel.

A number of the officials expressed their appreciation to NCSJ. Deputy Foreign Minister **Danny Ayalon** said, “What you have done for Soviet Jewry is the best thing you could have done for the Jewish people...It makes Israel what it is today...Your job is not finished because over one million Jews [are still] in the FSU.”

**Rafi Barak**, Director General of the Foreign Ministry stated, “Thank you for your noble mission for many years...it was important for Soviet Jews and important for the State of Israel.”

The mission's final program was a special hearing by the Knesset Committee for Immigration, Absorption and Diaspora Affairs, to recognize NCSJ's 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary and its work today. Minister of Public Affairs and the Diaspora Yuli Edelstein joined Committee Chairman MK Danny Danon and other Russian-speaking members of the Committee.

Chairman Danon stressed the importance of NCSJ's ongoing mission, and Dr. Mala Tabory of the Prime Minister's office for the former Soviet Union congratulated NCSJ during the hearing. Minister **Yuli Edelstein** praised NCSJ, saying, "Even today, you continue your vital work for the benefit of the Jews in the former Soviet Union."

Other mission highlights included visits to the World ORT Science City project in Kiryat Yam and to Boys Town Jerusalem.

In 2010, World ORT launched an \$18 million Science City project in Kiryat Yam. About half of the 45,000 residents of Kiryat Yam are FSU émigrés. Led by Mayor Samuel Sisso and Deputy Head of World ORT in Israel Avi Ganon, the delegation met with emigrants, visited the D. Dan and Betty Kahn Science Centre, and toured the Alex and Betty Schoenbaum Science, Educational, Cultural and Sports Campus, which is funded by the Schoenbaums, ORT America, the Ministry of Education and the city municipality.



At Boys Town Jerusalem, the delegation toured the facility and met with students. The most recent additions to Boys Town's student body are new immigrants from the former Soviet Union who moved to Israel without their parents, many from an orphanage in Odessa, Ukraine. The school receives strong support from NCSJ President Alexander Smukler and Vice-President Stephen Greenberg.

(clockwise from top left) Alex and Betty Schoenbaum Campus at Kiryat Yam; NCSJ leadership with Mayor Samuel Sisso; NCSJ President Alexander Smukler and students at Boys Town Jerusalem (all photos NCSJ)



Summing up the week-long visit past NCSJ President **Lesley Israel** noted, "The combination of meeting refuseniks who have had their lives changed because of NCSJ's efforts, and meeting with Israeli government officials who recognize our work was wonderful. It reinforced the importance of the contribution NCSJ has made to so many lives!"