

**Brandeis-Genesis Institute for Russian Jewry
Brandeis University**

Opening Reception
Faculty Club, Brandeis University
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BGI Fellow

Good evening everyone, and thank you very much for coming to the opening reception of the Brandeis Genesis Institute for Russian Jewry. I would especially like to thank Anna Ronell for giving me the opportunity to stand here today and speak to you.

My name is Julia Rabkin and I am an undergraduate in my junior year at Brandeis.

I am also a BGI fellow. What does that mean?

To get a defined explanation of what it means to be a BGI fellow, it should first be understood who the BGI fellows are.

My story is similar to those of the other fellows. I was born in Belarus of the Former Soviet Union, immigrated to the U.S. when I was a year old, and grew up in New York City. So, all in all, I am an American.

But the beauty inherent in the term “American” is the freedom to be a conglomerate of all those distinct backgrounds: New Yorker; Female; Russian; Zionist; Jew.

You see, being a Russian Jew produces a very peculiar identity—we are individuals that carry within ourselves the Soviet experiences of our parents and grandparents, as well as the rich heritage of thousands of years of Jewish history and culture.

The uniqueness of this identity lies within this blend and the fact that it is not simple, and cannot be separated out into distinguishable components. Our culture, religion, ethnicity, nationality, and race must be conceptualized as a fully integrated whole—a melting pot, if you will.

The Brandeis-Genesis Institute recognizes that. They can see that we naturally stand at a remarkably rare junction—we are living, breathing evidence of the past; we are a fusion of history, politics, language, and culture; and we have come to Brandeis with an innate potential for the future.

As students of Brandeis University, we already have the appropriate educational foundation to become leaders in a wide range of professional fields.

As Russian Jewish individuals, we possess the diverse interests, extraordinary personalities, and the basic set of skills necessary for an understanding of our community and its place in the global arena. And while there is no doubt in my mind that our Brandeis degrees will take us far in life, being a part of the BGI provides us with a specific kind of support that cannot be solely obtained from an academic classroom.

As BGI fellows, we participate in a variety of programming and activities that enable us to explore our identities in different contexts and through an assortment of lenses. BGI fosters an environment in which we can develop our basic skills in understanding the community—where we are exposed to a multitude of issues and perspectives, and where we are provided with endless opportunities for personal growth and discovery, networking, service, and community outreach.

The vision behind the program and all of the aforementioned is to develop leaders. However, I believe that we are already leaders, and have been our entire lives, purely because of this distinct background, and all of its nuances that have set us apart. BGI's role is to cultivate our natural abilities and diverse passions, so that we may figure out our own roles—in the world, and in the Russian Jewish community.

Our intellectual and social interests range from global health to environmental economics, from literature and art to neuroscience and beyond. These disciplines are representative of the conglomeration that we embody. With the help of the BGI, we are integrating these interests with our identities, and thus interacting with and contributing to the greater Russian Jewish community in more meaningful ways, as well as preserving our unique heritage.

When we graduate and go into the real world, we will be able to use these skills and experiences to become leaders in our own particular disciplines. As leaders with a cognizance and awareness of our identities and the community, the work that we engage in will be heavily influenced by this knowledge. In such a manner, we will truly be able to lead, serve, and contribute to the Russian Jewish world, and will carry on the legacy of the BGI by continuing to foster our distinct identities in the next generation.

Because of our multifaceted background, we are uniquely poised to be the linking chain between the U.S., Russia, the nations of the Former Soviet Union, Israel, Australia, Germany, and everywhere else that there are Russian Jews. Prepared with our Brandeis educations and our BGI experiences, it will be possible for us to lead these Russian Jewish communities around the world. Utilizing our diverse perspectives and leadership roles, we will be able to bring these communities together, encourage collaboration among them, and build connections between them.

As fellows of the Brandeis-Genesis Institute, we are a crucial element in the viability of Russian-Jewish communities around the world—we are their leaders and we are their future.

Thank you.