The Story of Former Soviet Jewry and Their Rebirth

Prepared By Ner Le'Elef

THE STORY OF FORMER SOVIET JEWRY & THEIR REBIRTH

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1. INTRODUCTION

The former Soviet Union (the FSU or, as we refer to it, the CIS) is a vast area spanning seven time zones, and some 12 countries[1]. It spans Moslem countries on the one hand and European countries on the other; countries with modern economies belonging to the European Union and countries that still exist either in the former Soviet mindset or are at best emerging third world countries. It is not really one area at all, if not for the fact that the Communists had turned this, for seventy years, into one country, settling Russians in each area, and imposing the Russian language.

The Jewish presence in Russia dates back to the 7th Century, and a converted Jewish Khazar kingdom sprang up a hundred years later. At the end of the 19th century, most of the Jews in the world lived in Russia. In 1884, just before the start of the mass immigration to the West, there were about 5 million Jews there. By the formation of the Soviet, there were some 2.5 million Soviet Jews, mostly Ahskenazi. In 2004 - after three waves of mass emigration (at the start of the 20th century, in the 1970s and in the 1990s), one Holocaust and 70 years of oppressive Communism, there are about 1 to 1 ½ million Jews left in the CIS[2].

After its collapse, many emigrated to Israel, USA and Germany, turning these countries into Russian Jewish stories all on their own. Those that are left still comprise the third largest Jewish population in the world. In a certain sense, these Jews represent a chain of tradition that goes back for many centuries. On the other hand, Russian Communism represented a massive state effort, over three generations (70 years) to wipe out all remnants of that chain. The Soviets nearly succeeded – they should have succeeded according to all laws of natural history. But they didn't reckon with the Jewish soul, a soul that stood at Sinai and into which G-d's Divine utterances seared right to the core.

In 2006, we are still in the middle of that story, and perhaps we are still right at the beginning. Although its roots are earlier, the Russian Baal Teshuva movement really began in the 1980's. We are now barely twenty years into that movement. Most of those who returned in the first, second and third waves of Teshuva made aliyah. Three hundred thousand other Jews did so with them as well. Almost a million left the former Soviet Union throughout the nineties. It was only in the early 2000's that it appeared, for the first time, that sustainable communities could be built on local soil.

Now, Torah is beginning to flourish in certain cities for the first time. The effort to build these communities is brick by brick, Neshama by Neshama. There are no short cutes, here. The people doing the building are people of extraordinary character and dedication. While the stories of the Refuseniks are well known, those who came after them are little talked about. They are our silent emissaries who proclaim the eternity of the Jewish people.

In the beginning, these people were all non-Russians who chose to dedicate their lives to this mission: People like Rabbi Pinchus Goldschmidt (Switzerland), the rabbi of Moscow, Rabbi Yaakov Bleich (U.S.A.), chief rabbi of the Ukraine, Rabbi

[1] Azerbaijan, Belorus, Estonia, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldavia, Russia, Turkmenistan, Ukraine, Uzbekistan.

[2] The figure used by Ner LeElef is the lower figure.

Beryl Lazar (Italy), head of Chabad's extensive network, and Rabbi Shlomo Baksht (Israel) of Odessa, Ukraine and Rabbi Kaminetzky of of Dnepropetrovzk.

Backing them were other Jews, who were no ordinary philanthropists. They were people who themselves became totally dedicated to the cause of Soviet Jewry, and Jews of Eastern Europe in general. Rabbi Shlomo Noach Mendel together with Mr. Barry Reichman off the Canadian Fouundation, Rabbi Mordechai Neustadt[1] and the Vaad Hatzola team, Mr. Reuven Dessler and the Open Cutrain team, Mr. Lev Leviev and Mr. George Rohr, and many others.

Later, Soviet-born Jews increasingly joined the rebuilding efforts, tens and tens of Talimdei Chachamim and others, most of whom were baalei teshuva themselves, people like Rabbi Gedaliah Mankoveztky (Migdal Ohr, Moscow), Rabbi Eliezer Nezdatny (Migdal Ohr, St. Petersburg), Rabbi Mordechai Reichenstein (Aish HaTorah, Kiev), Rabbi Ariel Levine (Chief Rabbi of Georgia) and Rabbi Sender Uritzky (Minsk).

Much has been written about the history of Russian Jewry of almost every era but the modern one. No book that I have found, have given a sense of how we got from there to here, of how all the pieces of HaSh-m's Hashgocha, and Soviet Jewry's breathtaking Mesirus Nefesh, formed together to weave a fabric that is the picture we see today. Perhaps no such book can ever be written, and I make no claims about this attempt answering that need. But, when one person makes an attempt, he makes it easier for those coming after him to the job that he dreamt of. Here is my attempt; I wish much brocha to he who uses this to write what I could only dream of.

2. THE MYSTERY OF TESHUVA IN THE USSR

The story of the rebirth of Russian Jewry is one of the open miracles of our times. How the early generation of Baalei Teshuvah managed to find their way back to Judaism after they, their parents, and their grandparents had been deprived of books, synagogues and teachers is quite mysterious. How they managed to learn Torah, keep kosher, weather the harassment of the KGB, and find Tefillin is testimony to the great covenant between the Almighty and His Beloved people. We cannot tell that story here except in passing, a story of incredible self-sacrifice that must surely have its worthy place in the annals of Jewish history and whose testimony is borne daily by the thriving communities of Russian bnei-Torah around the world.

Many have returned to the CIS to serve their Jewish brethren there. Rabbi Yitzchak Kogan spent 14 tough years waiting to receive permission to leave the

[1] Rav Mordechai Neustadt, together with his wife, traveled to the Soviet Union for the first time in July 1976. As a very successful travel agent in Boro Park, Rav Neustadt took advantage of his professional know-how and made a trip to Moscow, which wasn't the most desirable tourist location in those days. Rav Neustadt's second trip to Russia was in December 1980. The Schifrins of Moscow would accommodate tens of baalei teshuva into their home, which was a ten-minute walk from the shul. Somehow, Rav Neustadt had found out about the Schifrins, and planned to make a visit. For a tourist to contact a native entailed a certain risk of a KGB interrogation. In truth, Rav Neustadt was more concerned about the possible interrogation of the Russian Jews than for his personal safety. "We were more afraid of the connections we had with ba'alei teshuva," said Rav Neustadt. Mrs. Schifrin opened the door, and said, "Oh, Baruch Hashem, I knew something would happen. I have thirty people sleeping and I have nothing to serve them." Rav Neustadt mentioned that the Schifrin's daughter was sixteen at the time. He was very impressed by her knowledge. "We decided to visit them and deliver food," Rabbi Neustadt recalls. (Avraham Zuroff , Reflections on 25 Years of 'Hard Labor', in Hamishpacha)

country, until he and his family were finally able to make Aliyah in 1989[1]. The very next year Kogan went back to Russia to serve his brethren and remains there to this day[2].

Why so many of those Jewish Neshamos were touched by the most unusual of events will ultimately remain a mystery. Kalev Krelin[3] began his spiritual odyssey when his second generation secular father saw him eat meat and milk together and innocently commented that a frum Jew would never do such a thing[4]. Moshe Pantilav[5] experienced something even more remarkable:

> *"I was born to a typical assimilated family. I knew nothing about Judaism. My first encounter with Judaism was as a young boy. I was traveling on the train to vacation together with my mother. I wanted to go to the dining car to get a cold drink. I went from car to car in the long train. In one of the cars one of the train's staff blocked my path. He said, "Young man, to what nation do you belong?" I really did not like the situation or the question. When children in school asked me this question it often led to me being hit. I answered him, hesitantly, that I am a Jew. He was very happy with my answer. He took me by the arm and dragged me to his private cabin. He took out from his small suitcase a little velvet sack and from it he removed black boxes with black straps. He asked me if I know what they were. I had no idea. "He got angry, "What kind of a Jew are you?" He explained that he was a Jew. He lived in Georgia. He had plans to soon move to Israel - that in itself was rather terrifying. At that time, Jews in USSR were afraid of thinking, not only speaking, about Israel. The first opportunity I had, I fled from there. I went back to my mother forgetting totally about my purchase. I told her the whole story. She also had no idea what these black boxes were. Afterwards, I asked one of my relatives who was from the Ukraine. There they were just a bit closer to Jewish tradition. I asked him what it was. He said, "I think it's a tallit!" This was my first encounter with Judaism.*
>
> *Once I was telling this story at a women's convention near Bnei Brak. One of the women asked me, "Tell me, how old were you when you had this meeting in the train". I started to count, it was a year after my father z"l died. He died in 1968 and this was in 1969 and I was born in 1956.*
>
> *Suddenly, I felt that I couldn't continue speaking. At that time I was thirteen years old. It was in the summer. Maybe only two weeks after my birthday. That is how it happened.*

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[1] In 1972, Kogan's family applied for emigration to Israel and was refused an exit visa because of his sensitive military job and his "anti-Soviet activity." For many Leningrad Jews at the time, Kogan became a symbol of spiritual resistance to the regime. His figure still remains a kind of a legend for many in the Chabad movement, earning him a reputation as a tzadik, or a righteous man, the 'Tzadik of Leningrad.' " (Lev Krichevsky for the JTA, Sep. 9, 04)

[2] He was sent back by the last Lubavitcher Rebbe, Menachem Mendel Schneerson.

[3] Today, the head of the Shevut Ami Yeshiva and Outreach Center in Heidelberg.

[4] The incident took place in Moscow in 1982. It got him thinking what a religious Jew was.

[5] Today, one of the senior educators for Russians in Israel and in the CIS.

Ariel Levine[1] started thinking about the purpose of life and G-d on his own. In 1981, he made contact with some Jews in Tibilisi who in turn had learned from those in Moscow. He then traveled many times to Moscow to learn Torah there. At around the same time, Rav Moshe Eisenman of Ner Yisrael and Rabbi Mordechai Auerbach of Toronto began to visit Tibilisi. R Levine continued this way until he was due to make Aliyah in 1988. At that stage, he needed to delay his Aliyah for family reasons. Rabbi Mordechai Auerbach told him that he must find chavrusas to learn Torah with. So he went to the Shul and hung a sign on the door inviting any Jew who wanted to, to come and learn. Three showed up; six did on the second occasion. On the third occasion, 60 people showed up. When Rabbi Eisenman saw this, he informed the Vaad Hatzalah LeNidchei Yisroel who then established a school, a yeshiva and later other institutions.

Many Russian Jews were originally turned on to their Judaism through their Zionist activism[2]. It is not easy to separate the early activism of Jewish dissidents from the later Baal Teshuva movement. For the early dissident and later refusenik, the desire to make Aliyah, commemorate massacres of Jews and study Hebrew on the one hand was as bound up with their Jewish identity as studying Torah and keeping Mitzvos on the other. Mikhail Zand, one of the central activists throughout the 60's, grew a beard and began wearing a kipah[3]. Yosef Mendelovich and Shimon Grilius, part of attempted hijack of a plane to Israel in 1972, were *chozer b'teshuva,* while serving their sentence[4]. Perhaps the most famous example was Anatoly (Natan) Sharansky[5], who finally made Aliyah in 1986[6]. Anatoly kept Mitzvos for years in places that amounted to no more than a dungeon, thrown in there for his desire to make Aliyah.

In the 60's, Soviet Jews started to hold commemorations at sites of massacres during the Nazi occupation. Young Jews with hardly any knowledge of Judaism began to meet informally at synagogues, closely watched by the KGB, and take part

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[1] Now Chief Rabbi of Georgia and the representative of the Rabbinical Courts of Israel in the Caucasus.

[2] The dissident movement to allow Aliyah is another remarkable story of Soviet Jewry. The story is not being told in this issue of Nitzotzot min HaNer, though it worthy of being told.

[3] He was allowed to make Aliyah in 1971

[4] The plot was led by Dymshits and Kuznetsov who received the death sentence which was reduced to life with hard labor. Over 200 people were arrested and sentenced in connection with the plot. The plot was for one group to take a plane from Leningrad to Priozersk, close to the Finnish border. There several others would board the plane, the crew would be seized and the group, which included pilots, would fly to Sweden. There the group would seek sanctuary and go on to Israel. However, the KGB got wind of the plot.

[5] Anatoli (today Natan) Sharanski was a prioner of Zion who became a founding member of the Helsinki Group in Moscow, fearlessely monitoring the human rights record of the Soviet Union. After he made aliyah, he launched his own political party and later, under Sharon, became a member of the ruling government, resigning over the disengagement from Gaza in 2005. He is a distinguished fellow at the Shalem Center

[6] Two members of the plot Gillel Butman and Yosef Mendelevich found themselves imprisoned in the town of Christopol together with Anatoly Sharansky. Although Butman and Mendelevich were not religious at the time, they insisted on making kippahs for themselves from rags, and lit threads as Shabbat candles, trying to observe as much of the Shabbat as they knew how. "It gave us a sense of commitment", Butman recalled, and it was also the only way we could keep track of time." (H.M. Sachar, *Diaspora,* pg. 448).

in underground Hebrew lessons. Other 'cultural' expressions of being Jewish began[1]. Israel had diplomatic ties with the Soviets until the Six Day War in 1967[2]. They used this to secretly nurture a desire for Aliyah, but also to give out miniature Menorahs, Mezuzahs, and the like. Some of those who went as 'tourists' for the Israelis are involved with outreach in Russia to this day[3]. Of the 2,268,000 Jews then in the Soviet Union[4] a few thousand were let out at the end of the 60's[5], though the plight of thousands more[6] became the source of an international outcry[7].

3. THE STATE OF CIS JEWRY TODAY AND TOMORROW

The Miracle and the Lost Romance

Judaism in the former Soviet Union has been built out of the ashes. Thirty years ago, Russian Jewry was a wasteland. There were no yeshivas, less than a handful of minyanim and but a few, old frum Jews. Today, there are hundreds of Bnei Torah[8] (most of them in Israel), several thousand observant Jews, yeshivas, shuls and

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[1] Societies for music, theater and dance were set up, as were language courses in Yiddish and Hebrew. In St. Petersburg the first Jewish gymnasium was opened, and dozens of Jewish magazines and newspapers began to be published. Although all of this was far away from Torah-Judaism, it served to spark a desire to be Jewish which helped the later baal teshuvah movement.

[2] The Soviets had expected Israel to become a communist state.

[3] An example is Rabbi Dr Simcha Fishbane today of Touro College. His first visit to the Soviet Union was in 1967, around the Yamim Noraim and Sukkos. He talks of the incredible joy of some Jews in Kiev when he produced a Lulav and Esrog for them. In the 90's, he set up a branch of Touro College in Moscow, and later helped to establish the IDT program.

[4] In 1959, the official census recorded these numbers, including 2,047,000 in the pre-1939 Soviet area and 221,000 in the annexed countries of Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia (the Baltic Republics), Moldavia and parts of Poland.

[5] In 1966-7, the Israeli embassy was able to get permission for 4,500 special cases on the basis of family reunification. These people were usually old or sick. 213 were let out in 1968; 3,033 in 1969. Many of these were much younger than those that had gone through the embassy (which was by now closed), and they had applied directly to the government.

[6] They were either dismissed from their jobs or demoted, and their children were harassed in school.

[7] As early as 1961, an international conference of intellectuals, with an impressive line-up, met in Paris on this issue. Starting from the late sixties, western governments as well as a long list of Jewish and non-Jewish people of note denounced the Soviet treatment of the Jews. In the USA, the National Jewish Conference of Soviet Jewry, which included 25 American Jewish Organizations, was formed. Rabbi Meir Kahane unleashed his 'ten plagues' on the Soviet Consulate in New York. Some of the biggest demonstrations and protest marches were organized by Jewish students, starting in the early seventies. "Let my people go!" became a rallying cry of world Jewry.

In the beginning, the Israeli Government did not join this outcry, believing that quiet diplomacy was a better way to approach things. This changed in 1969.

[8] For example, Shevut Ami has been running two high level Kollelim, a three-year kollel for Rabanus and a two-year kollel for future teachers. These kollelim have 25 avreichim a piece and the standards of learning are comparable to other high level learning kollelim in Israel. The student and graduate population of these kollelim is approaching 150 avreichim, with many more applying than are getting in.

Jewish schools throughout this vast region. It is this author's opinion that overall, of all the cultural groupings, Russians make the best baalei teshuva.

Until the end of Communism, world Jewry, religious and secular, were gripped by the saga of this rebuilding. Many of the major Israel-based outreach organizations, and even Yeshivos like Ateres Yisroel and Yeshivas HaNegev[1] were involved in receiving Russian Jews or running summer camps for them. Donors were readily available – many would call unsolicited and ask where they could send their money to[2]. But all this changed in the last ten years. There are many people, very special people working *bemesirus nefesh* in the former Soviet Union today, but they are little talked about, and they have to sweat blood to raise their funds. Soviet Jewry is no longer the romantic thing that it was once, though the needs remain enormous.

The public perception of what goes on can sometimes be very misleading – tens of thousands visit Uman via Kiev every year, but barely one could tell you about a single Jew in the Kiev community. Thousands visit Jewish graves in Belarus and elsewhere, but few ever visit living Jews. The impression on the outside is former glories testified to by Matzeivos and local towns empty of Jews and Yiddishkeit. The new romance is to one of personal odyssey – of roots, rather than of investing in Torah-continuity.

But the Ribono shel Olam has his ways. Rav Yisrael Meir Zaks would visit his grandfather's – the Chofetz Chaim's kever – going via Vilna until Hashgocha once took him through Minsk. This led to his involvement with the community there. More recently the Manhattan Day School, Maor and Rabbi Shimon Kurland's Israel-based seminaries for Americans visited and participated in schools in Pinsk and elsewhere. Every year more and more American youngsters apply as madrichim for summer camps in the CIS. There was even an attempt to create an American Bais Yaakov style seminary in Kiev!

Anti-Semitism and the General Climate

Most Anti-Semitic incidences in the CIS have been concentrated in Russia and the Ukraine. In 2005, anti-Semitic slogans were painted on the walls of two synagogues in Dnepropetrovsk., a city of about one million. Several newspapers of nationalist orientation published appeals by members of the Ukrainian Writers Union against the "Judaization" of the union and in favor of the expulsion of the group's Jewish members and the head of the Ukrainian Book Chamber published an open letter calling for violence against Jews. MAUP[3], Ukraine's largest private university[4], continues to be virulently anti-Semitic and extremely powerful. MAUP, which has an unabashedly anti-Semitic publishing house, recently presented a blacklist of "media and organizations who distribute and defend or support Jewish racism, Judeo-

[1] Yeshivas HaNegev was involved primarily in bringing Jews from the Belarusian town of Gomel, (which was originally in the radiation belt of Chernobyl), to the yeshiva in Netivot.

[2] "In those days, it used to rain money," Rabbi Eli Meir Klugman, of the Open Curtain, stated.

[3] the Interregional Academy for Personnel Management

[4] MAUP is the country's largest private university. With a dozen branches throughout Ukraine, MAUP has about 35,000 students, including hundreds of foreigners, mostly from Arab and developing countries. Created by prominent representatives of the Ukrainian ruling elite, MAUP went private after the fall of communism in 1991.

Nazism and Jewish organized crime in Ukraine." In June, its conference titled "Dialogue of Civilizations: Zionism as the Greatest Threat to Contemporary Civilization" attracted the likes of white supremacist and former Ku Klux Klan leader David Duke[1].

In an open letter to Yushchenko, members of the Ukrainian Conservative Party and several far right-wing editors demanded that Jews be prevented from teaching the *Tanya* in Jewish schools and synagogues, so as to stop the spread of "this misanthropic religious system."

The campaign is strikingly similar to letters sent to the Russian authorities earlier this year, signed by members of Parliament and academia, which attempted to outlaw other Jewish religious books as inhumane and claimed that Jews had staged anti-Semitic attacks to besmirch the name of patriotic Russians.

Ukrainian anti-Semitism has sometimes overflowed into violence. In 2005, a Ukrainian rabbi and his 14-year-old son were beaten in Kiev by eight skinheads attacked the two during a beer festival. Neither was seriously injured. More seriously, student was severely beaten in the Ukrainian capital. The student was flown to an Israeli clinic in a coma to undergo brain surgery. However, the police consistently refuse to call such act anti-Semitism, calling them mere hooliganism instead.

These activities have come as the USA is gradually decreasing trade restrictions on the Ukraine[2].

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[1] Maup recently appealed to the United Nations to "close" Israel, and to revoke its 1947 resolution on the creation of a Jewish state.

Until recently Ukrainian authorities have been largely silent on MAUP's anti-semitic activitieis, although President Viktor Yuschenko has urged his country's elites to condemn anti-Semitism and xenophobia, and hasspecifically condemned MAUP. Nevertheless, the school appears to have close ties to leading policymakers, including Foreign Minister Boris Tarasyuk, an expert on Arab countries who only recently gave up his job at MAUP, reportedly under pressure from Yuschenko. Many of Ukraine's top politicians - including Yuschenko, Tarasyuk, former president Leonid Kravchuk and several members of Parliament - have received honorary degrees or titles from MAUP. The school has aksi bestowed honorary titles and degrees on some internationally renowned hate-mongers, including U.S. white supremacist David Duke, who has a doctorate in history from MAUP and has participated in a number of MAUP-organized anti-Zionist conferences in Kiev. The university offers degrees in law, economics, business administration, accounting, political science, practical medicine and psychology and claims to have a network of alumni and supporters in 60 countries.

Neighboring Poland said it may not recognize MAUP degrees because of the school's controversial stand on international issues. Yet the criticism seems to have had little effect on the school and its president, Georgy Schokin. Schokin earlier this year founded a political party, the Conservative Party of Ukraine, that's preparing for parliamentary elections in the spring.

Besides his friendship with figures such as Duke, Schokin and his school are said to maintain close ties to a number of Muslim countries, particularly Saudi Arabia and Iran, and they may receive substantial funding from these two countries, as well as a number of public groups in the Arab world. In fact, it is precisely the school's reputation what attract many students from Arab countries and Iran.

Almost every issue of MAUP's newspaper, Personal Plus, carries anti-Semitic and anti-Israel articles. 70 percent of all anti-Semitic publications today in Ukraine are published by MAUP, including "Mein Kampf" and "The Protocols of the Elders of Zion."

[2] The Ukraine still suffers from trade restrictions from the USA, and the Anti-Defamation League is urging Congress to keep them, because of the steep increase in acts of violence and vandalism against Jews across Ukraine. The Senate passed a bill last month, graduating Ukraine from trade restrictions placed on former Soviet countries in 1974, because of human rights and emigration concerns. Other Jewish organizations, such as NCSJ, have supported Ukraine's graduation from restrictions.

There have been several attacks on Jewish cemeteries throughout the CIS, especially in the Ukraine and in St. Petersburg, Russia

Sometimes the problem of anti-Semitism may be more a function of neglect and insensitivity, rather than hatred. Such an example is Vilnius (Vilna), Lithuania, where the old Jewish cemetery of Vilna is in a very precarious situation. Currently a building is being built over the site of the cemetery. Human bones were strewn about the site in the course of the building and an open grave was visible.

This cemetery is one of three in Vilna, and it was used starting about six hundred years ago until 1815. Buried in this holy site are tens of thousands of Jews from the "golden age" of Vilna.

The destruction began under Soviet rule, the tombstones were removed and a stadium was built on part of the cemetery. Yet, beneath the ground most of the graves remained intact. The great sages of Vilna, Lamed Vav Tzaddikim, the family of the Vilna Gaon, the Chayei Adam, as well as many other Torah giants are interred in this sacred earth.

In 1999, the Vilna municipality cancelled plans to develop the site. The president of Lithuania at the time, and some senior government officials promised the Jews that no building would take place within the cemetery's borders.

More serious has been recent events in Russia. Since 1991, Moscow's Bronnaya Street Synagogue was the target of three attempted bombings. In the most serious of these incidents, dozens of people attending a family celebration in 1999 narrowly escaped tragedy when the Rabbi's teenaged son discovered an explosive device hidden inside the prayer hall. There have been several cases of religious Jews being attacked, usually with only minor injuries. It may have been easy to claim that these incidences were the work of a tiny minority. However, in 2005, over 5,000 known public activists and members of the clergy in Russia sent a petition to the state prosecutor's office in which they demanded to outlaw Jewish groups. In the petition, the signatories used quotes from *Kitzur Shulhan Aruch*, which they argue prove their claim that Judaism is a fanatic and racist religion that hates gentiles. Among those who signed the letter are ex-generals, artists and the former world champion in chess.

The petition came two months after about 20 members of the lower Russian parliament house, the State Duma, asked Prosecutor- General Vladimir Ustinov to to launch proceedings "on the prohibition in our country of all religious and ethnic Jewish organizations as extremist." They accused the Jews of fomenting ethnic hatred and saying they provoke anti-Semitism[1]. Some suspect these lawmakers of cynically hoping to win support 'by playing the anti-Semitic card.'

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[1] The letter also said, "The negative assessments by Russian patriots of the qualities and actions against non-Jews that are typical of Jews correspond to the truth ... The statements and publications against Jews that have incriminated patriots are self-defense, which is not always stylistically correct but is justified in essence."

The Kitzur Shulchan Aruch was frequently quoted in the letter to prove "Jewish extremism." Many of the arguments used in the letter were taken directly from a 90-year-old anti-Semitic manifesto that was compiled during the Beilis trial in 1911. That infamous blood libel case ended with a full acquittal of Mendel Beilis, a Kiev Jew falsely accused of ritual murder.

The letter was followed up by a popular television month in which callers supported a notorious anti-Semitic politician over his opponent.

Arguing that Jews were to blame for anti-Semitism, the authors of the letter demanded that Jewish groups be outlawed, based on legislation against extremism and fomenting ethnic discord[1].

What is encouraging in all these cases, however, is the reaction of the local governments in each case. In the Russian incident demanding the outlawing of Jewish groups, for example, a 306-58 vote in the State Duma adopted a declaration saying that the 'clear anti-Semitic intent' of the letter and other appeals for government actions targeting Jews 'prompts indignation and sharp condemnation.'

Both the Ukrainian and the Russian governments have encouraged religious tolerance and neither government, nor any other in the former Soviet Union, is considered anti-Semitic. In both cases, the authorities have failed adequately prosecute the perpetrators of anti-Semitic and racial violence. In some case, government officials have seemingly acted out of sync with their higher ups. In June 2005, the state prosecutor initiated an investigation into Keroor (one of the two umbrella bodies for Jewish communities in Russia) for printing a Russian edition of the Shulchan Aruch, considered insulting to non-Jews. (After vigorous protests from around the world the investigation was suddenly dropped.) The response of most Jews in Russia was to yawn and say that they knew all along that 20% of the population was anti-Semitic.

Both Putin and Yaschenko have attended many Jewish events. President Vladimir Putin's has appeared at public Chanukah lighting ceremonies and joined in commemorating the liberation of the Auschwitz concentration camp by Soviet troops[2]. President Viktor Yuschenko's team, which includes several Jews in high offices. For example, Yevgeny Chervonenko, the country's minister of transportation and communications, is a vice president of the United Jewish Community of Ukraine, was the first minister in Ukrainian history to have a mezuza affixed to his office door when he took up his cabinet post earlier this year. Yuschenko has repeatedly condemned anti-Semitism. On the other hand, Yushchenko's Foreign Minister Borys Tarasyuk and Finance Minister Viktor Pynzenyk have previously served on MAUP's board of trustees. Yuschenko's own public profile has been to support Jews. He went to Auschwitz for the commemoration of the 60th anniversary of its liberation, and he joins a Kiev synagogue each year to light Hanukka candles.

There is another source of concern, however, and that is the rise of Moslem fundamentalism. Since the fall of the Soviet Union ,Islam has grown increasingly

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[1] Echoing anti-Semitic tracts of the Czarist era, the letter's authors accuse Jews of working against the interests of the countries where they live and of monopolizing power worldwide. They say the United States 'has become an instrument for achieving the global aims of Judaism.' 'It is possible to say that the entire democratic world today is under the monetary and political control of international Judaism, which high-profile bankers are openly proud of,' the letter says. Along with outlawing Jewish organizations, the lawmakers called for the prosecution of 'individuals responsible for providing these groups with state and municipal property, privileges and state financing.

[2] Overall, all the Soviet countries have recognized the Holocaust and the roles their country played in this. However, in February March 2005, a prominent Latvian newspaper (*Latvijas Avize*) attempted to whitewash the history of national hero Herbert Cukurs, whom the Mossad liquidated in the 1960s for his part in the murder of Jews. Cukurs was the deputy commandant of Latvia's Arajs Kommando, which murdered tens of thousands of Jews. When the Israelis protested, there was an anti-Semitic outpouring on the Internet and in the local press. Nevertheless, even the Latvians are poised to return to the Jews dozens of buildings and pay millions of dollars in holocaust reparations, spurred in the main, by their membership to the EU.

visible and influential in Russia[1]. This is as worrisome to the Slavic Russians as to the Jews, who fear not only Muslim extremists, but the possibility that Russia could one day become a majority Muslim state. However, it is also true that in many places, Muslim and Christian cultures are peacefully adapting to each other. There are now an estimated 14 million to 23 million Muslims in Russia, as much as 16 percent of the population. They are in the majority in Russia's turbulent south, but more live quietly in places like Tatarstan and Bashkortostan on the Volga River, and in virtually every city.

Given the historic domination of the church, the czars and then Communism, Islam here has adopted an essentially Russian character. Believers pick and chose tenets of faith to follow, just as Orthodox Christians do. Even in predominantly Muslim cities, for example, alcohol flows abundantly. But, Islamic fundamentalism is making inroads. The Kremlin, increasingly, has sought to control Islam, persecuting those who worship outside state-sanctioned "official" mosques. A crackdown in Nalchik, Kabardino-Balkariya's capital, closed six mosques and many Muslims were harassed. In October, at least 136 people died when armed men attacked police and security posts in what their relatives said was a revolt against official abuses.

Despite the many incidences, anti-Semitism is not a major factor in the development of CIS Jewry today. In most places, there is little overt anti-Semitism on the streets[2], and local government bodies often are quite helpful in assisting Jewish organizations to secure buildings and sometimes even provide funding[3]. Certainly, there have been horrific anti-Semitic incidents here and there – defacing of graveyards and the occasional violence – and in Russia many frum Jews walk around in a base-ball cap rather than display a kippah or a black hat. Rabbi Ariel Levine, the chief rabbi of Georgia fled the country after he received a death threat. But nobody is sitting huddled in their apartments, too scared to venture out on the streets. The things that matter to people in their everyday lives – that they are not discriminated against in jobs, schools, renting apartments and not being daily harassed - are firmly in place and Jewish community buildings are thriving - a dramatic and refreshing change from Soviet times.

To understand the level of Russian anti-Semitism, let us compare this to England. In England there have been threats by the Anglican church to divest from companies that trade with Israel, notably Caterpillar (though no such decision was made[4]. In Russia, no movement for divestment exists. Some "disaffected" members of the Muslim community have led a campaign to cancel Holocaust Memorial Day[5].

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[1] Islam spread into what became the Russian Empire in the 10th century - 66 years ahead of Christianity, said Ravil Gainutdin, chairman of Russia's Council of Muftis. "Islam is a religion of native peoples in Russia and a traditional religion of this country," he said.

[2] In the Ukraine, cemeteries have been defaced. There have been several stabbings in Moscow, the most recent in December '04. These incidences have usually take place close to Shuls and Yeshiva buildings or on the subway. Most other cities have been quiet.

[3] Elsewhere, we have brought a long list of the synagogue buildings that have been returned to Jewish communities around the CIS.

[4] This is due to the use of its machinery in security operations carried out by the IDF in the West Bank

[5] instituted in Britain in 2001 by a government-led initiative to ensure that the lessons of the Shoah are not forgotten

British campuses have been hotbeds of anti-Semitism. Last year the Association of University Teachers actually passed and then later cancelled a proposed boycott of Israeli universities, but the campaign continues. A recent study[1], which warns of the rise in extremism on campuses, and gives testimony to the anti-Semitic activities of prominent groups[2]. Although some comparisons can be made to incidents in Russia and elsewhere, the situation in these countries is certainly not worse than in the UK, a country known to be user-friendly to the Jews.

Take the Ukraine. Above, we observed the many anti-Semitic incidences in 2005 alone in this country. Jews in this part of the world are wont to say that the Ukrainians are the most anti-Semitic of them all (followed by the Poles and the Russians). Chelmienicki, who perpetrated the worst of all the pogroms, remains a national hero. His picture is on the currency and his statue stands proudly in the center of Kiev. A Jewish member of parliament, Alexander Feldman[3], believes that the whole Jewish-non-Jewish relationship is in a very delicate balance and good be toppled at any time.

Yet, although Jews still don't walk the streets late at night, but do so freely throughout the day, and many do so with Kippot on their head. There are dozens of Jewish day schools throughout the Ukraine and there are numerous Jewish millionaires. Jews in France tend to be far more worried about their situation than Jews in the Ukraine.

In fact, the day to day Jewish lives of Jews appear to be getting better all the time. Under Communism, keeping kosher was extremely difficult and there could be many months without any meat. Today, Moscow has a medium-scale kosher meat production operation with a weekly output of some eight tons of kosher meat. Cities as far apart as Kiev, Tibilis and Tashkent have at least weakly shechita. Kosher stores exist in Odessa, Kiev, Moscow and elsewhere. There are at least eleven full-day yeshiva frameworks[4] and several more part-time ones.

To the degree that Jews are sobered by their surroundings, it is a result of draconian government laws, strict penalties, and a culture of bribery[5]. Some of the Moslem states, like Georgia, Uzbekistan and Azerbaijan have seen civil war on their streets. It is also extremely expensive to obtain visas for non-citizens, including those Klei Kodesh formerly from these countries who made Aliyah.

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[1] by Prof. Anthony Glees of Brunel University. An extreme example is of the amalgamation of Islamists and left-wing activists is the School of African and Oriental Studies at London University, commonly known by the acronym SOAS.

[2] Reported by Henry Grunwald, in the Jerusalem Post, Oct. 2, 2005

[3] Alexander Feldman is a multi-millionaire businessman from Kharkov who is a currently a member of the Ukrainian parliament. He is a traditional Jew who prays and lays Tefilin daily. His only son, currently a university student (but already running for the Kharkov municipality at the age of 19), walks around with a kippah on his head. Mr. Feldman gives very generously to general causes and less but significantly to specific Jewish ones. He has positioned himself as the representative of minority groups in the Ukraine in general, including Jews, Armenians and others. For this, he was honored with a special award by the French government.

[4] Three in Moscow and Kiev each, and ones in St. Petersburg, Saratov, Minsk, Tibilisi and Baku.

[5] Belarus is the strictest in this regard, while its northern neighbors, Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia, are becoming the most Western in their approach to things.

Although Moscow, Kiev and Riga have the feel of a modern European city, elsewhere many of the shlichim are living in cramped quarters in places which are not quite as advanced. In Baku, when they want to shecht a cow, they do it on the street in front of the butcher store. In Tibilisi there are no street signs – they were all stolen because they were made of valuable aluminum[1]. Water and electricity supply is often sporadic. In the bigger cities housing has become prohibitive. In the inner circle of Moscow, where many of the Orthodox institutions are, rental of a two bedroom apartment goes for $1200 a month. Chalav Yisroel is usually in short supply.

But the biggest mesirus nefesh has been chinuch banim. Until recently, there was no Chareidi chinuch or even chinuch at the level of a good American Jewish day school. For most Russians, this meant living in the CIS for a period, and then moving to Israel, to become a commuter, usually ten days of the month in Russia. Migdal Ohr in St. Petersburg has a 'bachelors' apartment' full of 'single' rabbis whose families are in Israel.

The few who stuck it out have magnificent children learning in the best Yeshivas – and today that has become increasingly possible. Odessa, Moscow, Kiev and Tibilisi have today Chareidi chinuch tracks in their schools. The arrival of Kollelim to these places introduced a group of families that both demanded this, created the numbers of children to justify this and the staff to be able to service the demand

The Legacy of Atheism

Memorial Park in Moscow has a huge monument to all Russia's fallen soldiers. Passing here brings to mind the grand legacy of mighty Russia through the centuries. After the fall of communism, a remarkable thing happened here: The Russian allowed for the erection of a synagogue, a church and a mosque – all erected in different parts of the park, so that you cannot see the one from the other. The Memorial Synagogue, paid for by Vladimir Gushinsky, is a beautiful building which doubles as a museum of the history of Russian Jews. A few excellent videos show this history, including real footage of pogroms and the holocaust. The museum attracts tens of thousands of non-Jewish Russian school children, coming on official school trips. There could be no greater legitimization of the Jewish right to practice their religion than this synagogue in the middle of Russia's most precious park.

But things are not so simple. Many Jews have so absorbed the lessons of Atheism that they find themselves battling to express the longings of their soul.

Following Karl Marx's lead that religion is the opium of the masses, the Soviet Union did not only ban religion, but actively inculcated atheism. Quoting Eliyahu Esses, Miriam Zakon reports:

The first day of school. The youngsters file into the classroom. A little tense, alittle excited, wondering what lies in store for them.

The soon find out. The teacher stares sternly at them and barks out:

"Who believe in G-d?" she asks.

Some of the children, still not schooled in the ways of the Communist state, hesitantly lift their hands.

[1] To avoid this problem, the government subsequently made the decision to the make the signs out of low cost steel.

Teacher's voice grows gentle, though her eyes are still hard. "Now children," she says quietly, "I want all of you to close your eyes tight and pray as hard as you can to G-d for something very, very good."

Eyes close shut in intense concentration. The children's brows grow wrinkled; some sway back an dforth. A you Jewish child, perhaps remembering some words of his ancient grandmother, whispers, "Shema Yisrael."

"Open your eyes, children."

The desks are bare.

Teacher smiles again. "Now children, close your eyes very tight and ask the glorious Communist state to give you something very, very, good."

The silence in the room is broken by a slight rustling. At the teacher's signal, the eyes are opened. The youngsters, delighted, gaze at the small mound of candies puled upon each desk.

"There is no G-d, children. He does not answer your prayers. Only the state will answer your prayers. "

The lesson is over. And it was well learned[1].

Most Jews never came to trust the Communists fully either. What Communism activated was Jewish skepticism, and this skepticism seemed to play out as a disadvantage to Jewish commitment later on.

Many former Soviet Jews distrust religion (read-Judaism) because they distrust communism and therefore all ideology. "We were fooled once," they think, "We are not going to be fooled again." Jews, like other Russians, are willing to behave in a certain way if they feel this is to their advantage. Pay them to come to minyan, and they will show up and even, if that is what is asked, daven. But even those who have been paid to come for years will generally stop the day the payment stops. For them, this is a kind of job: "Tell me what I have to do to get my money and I will do it. You want me to be an atheist - I will be that. You want me to be religious – I will be that. You want me to sit in a lecture – I sit there, looking totally attentive for the hour that is required."

Certainly, in both the Baltic and the Asian countries, the penetration of atheism-skepticism, was far less. Many Jews in these countries maintained a basic faith, despite the best attempts of the Communists. The fact that today there are thousands of Russian baalei-teshuva is a remarkable testimony to the power of the Jewish soul.

4. YESTERDAY

Continuity

There is, unfortunately, only a small overlap between the great Torah communities of pre-War Eastern Europe, and what we find in the CIS today. The double blow of 70 years of Communism and the Holocaust devastated the glorious Torah-communities, yeshivas and other institutions that once flourished on this soil. Many of the famous names, Volozhin, Mir, Radin[2] – have been emptied out

[1] Miriam Zakon, *Silent Revolution,* ***pgs. 78-79***

[2] All of these are in Belarus

of any Jews. The original buildings are generally there, sometimes in the hands of Jews and sometimes not[1]. But the communities, the yeshivas – the souls of the Jewish nation are gone. Vilnius, (Vilna) has about 2,000 Jews and two rabbis, but Judaism there is only in its infancy. Minsk, Pinsk, Berdichev and Kiev have done much better, in population size and vibrancy of Judaism[2]. Many of the cities where there are Jews today, had surviving Batei Knesset, usually wrecks of what were once grand buildings. Most of these have today been renovated, some of them today are amongst the most beautiful shuls anywhere in the world[3]. St. Petersburg, Kiev and Kharkov come to mind[4]. Others stand derelict, wrecks or semi-wrecks waiting for some future redemption – Samara and Varonish[5] for example.

It is encouraging that so may synagogues buildings that have now been returned to the Jewish community. Some of these were used as store-houses, theatres, sports buildings or schools. There are forty-two such building in Russia[6], forty-nine in the Ukraine[7], and another forty-seven scattered around other former Soviet countries[8].

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[1] The original Volozhin Yeshiva, with considerable property around it, is in the hands of the Belarus Community. The roof has been renovated, but otherwise it is an abandoned building. Plans to put a yeshiva there are not currently realistic. The main thing in Radin is the Kever of the Chofetz Chaim Z"l. The yeshiva building of the Mir is today a post office.

[2] See the Appendices for profiles of some of these cities.

[3] Kiev today has three such renovated shuls, two of them in particular are quite beautiful to behold.

[4] The main shul in St. Petersburg has been renovated by Chabad, thanks in part to a large donation by Edmund Safra of Sao Paulo, Brazil. The Chabad shul in Kharkov is a magnificent site to behold, and is considered one of the finest buildings in the city.

[5] Renovations have recently resumed in Varonish.

[6] Some of these were returned in part only, and some for usage by the Jewish Community though without ownership. The Synagogues in Irkutzk and Marina Roshcha, Moscow were returned but then arsoned. The latter became the headquarters of Chabad in the CIS. The main synagogue in Samara has yet to be renovated and is currently unusable. Synagogues in Varonezh and Saratov had to be extensively renovated after being returned. The main synagogues in Moscow and St. Petersburg were both kept open under Communism and have both been extensively and beautifully renovated. Some had to be bought by the Jewish community. The one in Tula was a hut without foundations and has been replaced by a modern building. The full list comprises synagogues from the following towns: Astrakhan, Birobidzhan, Chelyabinsk, Derbent, Kazan, Krasnoyarsk, Kursk, Malakhovka, Makhachkala, several synagogues in Moscow, Nalchik, Nizhnii Novgorod, Omsk (x 2), Orenburg, Penza, Perm, Pyatigorsk, Rostov, Ryazan, Saltykovka, Samara (x 2), Saratov, 31. St. Petersburg (x 3), Syzran, Tomsk, Tula, Tver, Tyumen, Vladikavkaz, Vladivostok. Voronezh, Yaroslavl. (Sources: Authors personal research, www.jafi.org.il/education/worldwide/synagogues/appendix2.html)

[7] See www.jafi.org.il/education/worldwide/synagogues/appendix2.html for the full listing. Synagogues in Odessa (x 2), Lvov and Kiev have undergone extensive renovation.

[8] There are nine in Belarus, sixteen in Georgia, ten in Moldova, five in Uzbekistan, five in Azerbaijan and one each in Kirgyzstan and Kazakhstan. Synagogues in Vinnitsa, Kazan, Kuba (Azerbaijan) have undergone extensive renovation. One of three Synagogues in Tashkent burnt down as was rebuilt. In some cases, as in Minsk, an alternative building was designated to the community as compensation. (Source www.jafi.org.il/education/worldwide/synagogues/appendix2.html).

But, if buildings survived, the Torah of these places did not. At the beginning of the baal teshuva movement, there were no rabbis, a handful of books, and, in rare cases, distant memories of some of the Shabbos candles their grandmothers lit. Nevertheless, we do see an interesting thing. Those countries like the Ukraine and Belarus, that had more Torah, are easier to work in today as well. The Jews are somehow closer, more interested in their Judaism than say the Russians, without them realizing why. The Torah seeped deeper into their bones and stayed there, dormant for seventy years.

This is even truer in the countries with Sephardic populations, generally the more southern, Moslem former Soviet countries, places like Georgia and Uzbekistan[1]. The Buchari Jews of Uzbekistan (Tashkent, Samarkand and Bukhara) as well as the mountain Jews of Dagestan (with a lot in Tibilisi today), date back to the first Babylonian exile and wrote their dialects in a Hebrew script. The Georgian Jews (mainly in Tibilisi) were more recent, extending back to the 10th Century, still over a thousand years old. Numbering around 120,000 in 1970, these communities were more threatened by a huge Aliyah to Israel than the Soviet oppression[2]. "Like their neighbors, they placed much emphasis upon the integrity of the *chamoula,* the extended family. It was this intense filial solidarity, in turn, that preserved the ancestral Jewish faith. Even if a father was a member of the Communist Party, the male child was circumcised, and later Bar Mitzvahed[3]." There was little intermarriage. The locals were more anti-Russian than anti-Semitic and, mercifully, the Holocaust never reached these areas. Though with much smaller numbers, the remnants of these communities are thriving in those same cities, often in the same synagogues buildings as centuries ago. Tibilisi in Georgia, for example, boasts of two fully-functioning shuls, a kollel, two Jewish day schools, a cheider, shechita, a host of weekly adult shiurim and a mikvah.

Pre Communism

The history of Russian Jewry before the Soviet Union has been well documented and there is no need for us to repeat this here. However, there are a few elements that were put in place during this time that are vital for our picture of Soviet Jewry later on.

One of these was urbanization. Our memory of European, including Russian, Jewry is of the shtetel, of Jews concentrated in villages rather than cities, each with its own rabbi, one or several Shuls and vibrant community life. But this picture was long ago inaccurate. By the 1960's, the concentration of over 80% of Jews in about 30 major cities, and another 15% in satellite towns around those cities made communication between Jews, and organized Jewish life more possible to regenerate. Perhaps shtetel life was better for the vibrant Judaism of the ages. But, once

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[1] Today, many of these Sephardic Jews have moved to Moscow, though the majority has moved to Israel. Nevertheless, enough remain in cities like Tibilisi, Tashkent and Baku for vibrant communities to continue growing there.

[2] A few hundreds of Jews from these communities began to make Aliyah already at the beginning of the 20C. 80,000 were allowed by the Soviets to go between 1971 and 1974, nearly a third of the total Soviet Jewish emigration of that period. The Soviets perceived that their lower level of professional qualifications made them less valuable to the country.

[3] Howard M. Sachar, *Diaspora,* pg. 437.

destroyed, it would have been nearly impossible to regenerate if the Jews were spread over the country-side.

The common man's understanding is that this life was destroyed by the events of the two World Wars and especially the ghastly Nazi beast. However, although this is true for large parts of Europe, it is not true of Russia.

Russian urbanization took place in two stages:

Stage one was during the 19th Century under the Tzars. A series of ghastly decrees, each one worse than the next demanded that the Jew leave the village and enter the city, usually destroying his parnosa in the process.

1914 – 1960: Judaism Snuffed Out

The Baal Teshuvah movement in the CIS began in the mid-seventies and to some degree it grew out of the pro-Israel movement which began a decade earlier.

To understand the context of this movement, we need to distinguish five periods of Communist history that negatively impacted Torah life for the Soviet Jews.

The first period was from the beginning of Communism until the first Stalinist purges beginning in the mid-thirties. In the beginning, it looked like Communism would actually be an improvement on the Tzarist regime. A large number of Jews had participated in the revolution, many of them quite senior in the Communist party[1].

Between 1917 – 1921, the Russian economy spiraled every downwards, reducing the country to poverty[2]. There was civil war, peasant uprisings and a Japanese invasion. Russia lost enormous territories in the West. After that, things got a lot better. Economic centralization and collectivization was eased, and Lenin consolidated his power. But, by 1924, Lenin was dead and Stalin emerged from as the country's leader after a brutal, four-year power struggle.

This was a period of the rapid urbanization of the Jew and of great opportunities for Jews to go to the best universities and get top jobs, especially in academia, research and the professions[3]. (Until 1917 the Jews had been confined to the shtetls in the Pale of Settlement). Jews were requested to leave their Judaism and become Russians – Communists – and they succumbed[4].

At the same time, traditional Jewish life was severely suppressed by the Soviet authorities. Jews were deprived of their cultural institutions and synagogues; their schools were closed. The creation of the State of Israel in 1948 was soon followed by a major anti-Jewish purge in the Soviet Union.

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[1] Among them were Trotsky', Zinoveiv, Litvinov, Kamenev and Kaganovich.

[2] By 1920, industrial production was about 13% of the 1913 level. By 1921 94% of wags were paid in kind rather than cash. The peasants, faced with the prospects of turning their crops over to the committees of the poor, decided to reduce output. (Abraham Ascher, *Russia, a Short History*, pg. 173-4)

[3] Despite discrimination, by the 1980s Jews constituted the Soviet Union's best educated nationality. As long as Jews did not express themselves as Jews, they stood a chance of making it in the Soviet system.

[4] As late as 1938, Jews occupied 10% of the civil service posts in Russia, 20% in the Ukrained and 30% in Belorus. (Howard M. Sachar, *Diaspora,* pg. 374)

All of this pushed the Jews into becoming more Russian, and they responded accordingly, changing their home language from Yiddish to Russian and identifying increasingly with Russian culture[1].

Stalin is historically one of the most evil people to have ever lived. He certainly killed more people than Hitler, perhaps up to 40 million of his country-men. In the 1930's he began a series of purges, regarded here as the second period. The purges of the late thirties were not particularly focused on Jews, but Jews were disproportionately represented in the institutions and professions being purged, and hence they suffered disproportionately as well.

The third period was the Second World War. The war changed several things: Firstly, the Russians came to control over 1.8 million more Jews (mainly through occupying eastern Poland, but also by occupying the Baltic States). Secondly, the Soviets moved a huge number of Jews inland and southwards (at least 350 000), of whom about a third perished from the terrible conditions. Thirdly, the Nazi's conquered Poland, the Baltic's, the Ukraine, Belarus and parts of western Russia – and the Holocaust was quickly implemented in these places. Fourthly, many Jews gave their lives for "Mother-Russia". A half a million Jews fought for their homeland of whom 340 000 were awarded medals! Finally, when the Jews moved back to their old cities after the war, they met a wave of anti-Semitism from the local population.

This was followed, starting in 1948, by the fourth period, a massive anti-Jewish campaign by the State itself just as the State of Israel was declared. Teaching Hebrew or Judaism was banned. Jewish history, including any mention of the Holocaust, disappeared out of text books. Jews were barred from any sensitive government position. A large number of doctors lost their jobs (having been accused of negligence or worse). Universities were purged and Pravda vilified the Jews in the most horrible terms. Trials of Jews on trumped up charges were a daily occurrence, and the chances of survival in prison thereafter were slim. Most Synagogues were closed. Just before his death in 1953, Stalin had planned a mass deportation of all Jews, some say to kill them all, Nazi-style.

Nikita Khrushchev, who took over from Stalin (after a short period of Malenkov), released most of the people from the labor camps, and rehabilitated many others. He allowed cultural traditions and languages to resume, even in the schools. But the Jews continued to suffer greatly, and were increasingly shunted out of any good universities and government jobs[2]. During this period, there were between 2.2 and 2.3 million Jews - fully a third less than just before the war[3]. Having failed to

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[1] Under these conditions, Jews may have become totally assimilated. After all, three generations of Jews lived under Communism. However, two factors kept Jewish identity alive. One was forced upon them: the Soviet internal passport system, which identified every Jew clearly. (Children of mixed marriages were allowed to choose between the nationalities of their parents.) The other was the Jewish soul which miraculously produced a Russian baal teshuva movement in our day.

[2] This decline was accelerated after the Six Day War. The total number of Jews admitted to universities declined from 112,000 in 1968 to 88,000 in 1972. Between 1970 and 1974, the number of Jews admitted to graduate work fell by 30 percent. The number of Jews entering the ranks of the "scientific community" during 1972-3 was a bare 1,000, in contrast to an annual average of 2,000 to 3,000 between 1955 and 1971. (Howard M. Sachar, *Diaspora,* pg. 425.

[3] *Diaspora*, Howard M. Sachar, pg. 380: In 1959, the official census recorded the Jewish population as 2,268,000. These included 2,047,000 in the pre-1939 Soviet area and 221,000 in annexed eastern Poland, Moldavia and the three Baltic Republics of Latvia, Lithuania and

improve the population's economic plight, the government put the blamed of the financial corruption and intellectual domination on the Jews and their international connections. The fact that most Jews lived in the Western World, and that Israel now faced Soviet client-states on its borders, contributed to Soviet suspicion of all Jews. Khrushchev was replaced by Kosygin and Brezhnev in 1964[1] and things then took a significant turn for the worse. Government sponsored anti-Semitism became a daily affair.

This continued with ups and downs until Gorbachov began his glasnost and perestroika, in the latter part of the eighties.

The Sixties: Judaism as Nationalism

Many Russian Jews were originally turned on to their Judaism through their Zionist activism[2]. It is not easy to separate the early activism of Jewish dissidents from the later Baal Teshuva movement. For the early dissident and later refusenik, the desire to make Aliyah, commemorate massacres of Jews and study Hebrew on the one hand was as bound up with their Jewish identity as studying Torah and keeping Mitzvos on the other. Mikhail Zand, one of the central activists throughout the 60's, grew a beard and began wearing a kipah[3]. Yosef Mendelovich and Shimon Grilius, part of attempted hijack of a plane to Israel in 1972, were *chozer b'teshuva,* while serving their sentence[4]. Perhaps the most famous example was Anatoly (Natan) Sharansky, who finally made Aliyah in 1986[5]. Anatoly kept Mitzvos for years in places that amounted to no more than a dungeon, thrown in there for his desire to make Aliyah.

The truth is that secular and religious Jews in most parts of the world find that pro-Israelism and pro-Judaism mutually reinforce each other, but in Russia there were several unique factors. The official atheism of the Soviet Union, coupled with its policy of identifying nationalities contributed towards Jews defining their Jewishness as a national rather than a religious idea. They were Jews because they were descendents of people with a certain history. Some added a racial understanding (being Jewish in their blood or genes), but rarely did they see how Jewish they were

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Estonia. The Jews suffered losses in the war that were proportionally four times as severe as those of the Soviet population as a whole.

[1] Alexei Kosygin became party first secretary, later succeeded by Leonid Brezhnev.

[2] The dissident movement to allow Aliyah is another remarkable story of Soviet Jewry. The story is not being told in this issue of Nitzotzot min HaNer, though it worthy of being told.

[3] He was allowed to make Aliyah in 1971

[4] The plot was led by Dymshits and Kuznetsov who received the death sentence which was reduced to life with hard labor. Over 200 people were arrested and sentenced in connection with the plot. The plot was for one group to take a plane from Leningrad to Priozersk, close to the Finnish border. There several others would board the plane, the crew would be seized and the group, which included pilots, would fly to Sweden. There the group would seek sanctuary and go on to Israel. However, the KGB got wind of the plot.

[5] Two members of the plot Gillel Butman and Yosef Mendelevich found themselves imprisoned in the town of Christopol together with Anatoly Sharansky. Although Butman and Mendelevich were not religious at the time, they insisted on making kippahs for themselves from rags, and lit threads as Shabbat candles, trying to observe as much of the Shabbat as they knew how. "It gave us a sense of commitment", Butman recalled, and it was also the only way we could keep track of time." (H.M. Sachar, *Diaspora,* pg. 448).

as function of how observant they were. This is why too, it was less of a contradiction for a Jew from the Soviet Union to intermarry, than someone from the West. Having a non-religious definition of being Jewish, they were reconciled to being a Jewish person professing to a non-Jewish religion or to atheism, for that matter[1].

In the West, even those Jews who claim not to be religious give some religious understanding to what being Jewish means. Not so to Jew from the CIS, and just as well. Going to synagogue was prohibited; eating matzos for Passover was a courageous act[2]. The ability to stay Jewishly identified for all Soviet Jewry lay in their national-racial definitions of what being Jewish means. boundary between the religious and non-religious expression of Jewish identity.

Herein lies part of the reason of why the Zionist-nationalist aspirations of Soviet Jewry, which began to be expressed in the 60's, was the precursor of the baal teshuva movement of the 80's.

In the 60's, Soviet Jews started to hold commemorations at sites of massacres during the Nazi occupation. Young Jews with hardly any knowledge of Judaism began to meet informally at synagogues, closely watched by the KGB, and take part in underground Hebrew lessons. Other 'cultural' expressions of being Jewish began[3]. Israel had diplomatic ties with the Soviets until the Six Day War in 1967[4]. They used this to secretly nurture a desire for Aliyah, but also to give out miniature Menorahs, Mezuzahs, and the like. Some of those who went as 'tourists' for the Israelis are involved with outreach in Russia to this day[5]. Of the 2,268,000 Jews then in the Soviet Union[6] a few thousand were let out at the end of the 60's[7], though the plight of thousands more[8] became the source of an international outcry[9].

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[1] See, for example *Community Conversations with Young Russian-Speaking Jewish Professionals*, Dimitri Liakhovitski , prepared for the UJA-Federation of New York, July 2005

[2] *Community Conversations with Young Russian-Speaking Jewish Professionals*, Dimitri Liakhovitski , prepared for the UJA-Federation of New York, July 2005

[3] Societies for music, theater and dance were set up, as were language courses in Yiddish and Hebrew. In St. Petersburg the first Jewish gymnasium was opened, and dozens of Jewish magazines and newspapers began to be published. Although all of this was far away from Torah-Judaism, it served to spark a desire to be Jewish which helped the later baal teshuvah movement.

[4] The Soviets had expected Israel to become a communist state.

[5] An example is Rabbi Dr Simcha Fishbane today of Touro College. His first visit to the Soviet Union was in 1967, around the Yamim Noraim and Sukkos. He talks of the incredible joy of some Jews in Kiev when he produced a Lulav and Esrog for them. In the 90's, he set up a branch of Touro College in Moscow, and later helped to establish the IDT program.

[6] In 1959, the official census recorded these numbers, including 2,047,000 in the pre-1939 Soviet area and 221,000 in the annexed countries of Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia (the Baltic Republics), Moldavia and parts of Poland.

[7] In 1966-7, the Israeli embassy was able to get permission for 4,500 special cases on the basis of family reunification. These people were usually old or sick. 213 were let out in 1968; 3,033 in 1969. Many of these were much younger than those that had gone through the embassy (which was by now closed), and they had applied directly to the government.

[8] They were either dismissed from their jobs or demoted, and their children were harassed in school.

[9] As early as 1961, an international conference of intellectuals, with an impressive line-up, met in Paris on this issue. Starting from the late sixties, western governments as well as a long list of Jewish and non-Jewish people of note denounced the Soviet treatment of the

The Seventies: The Early Teshuvah Movement

The first baalei teshuvah of Soviet Jewry began their spiritual odyssey in the seventies. The spiritual landscape was then quite bleak. The Russians had allowed a few shuls around the Soviet Union to stay open[1]. There were even a few official rabbis. The whole thing, however, was a mere show for the West, rather than a reflection of their religious tolerance. One was in danger to practice religion below reaching the age of 60 (until he received a pension), and it was illegal to teach Hebrew[2] or Judaism[3].

Eliyahu Essas[4] in Moscow, Tzvi Wasserman[5](pto) in Leningrad (today St. Petersburg) and a handful of others[6](pto) began what was then a most dangerous

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Jews. In the USA, the National Jewish Conference of Soviet Jewry, which included 25 American Jewish Organizations, was formed. Rabbi Meir Kahane unleashed his 'ten plagues' on the Soviet Consulate in New York. Some of the biggest demonstrations and protest marches were organized by Jewish students, starting in the early seventies. "Let my people go!" became a rallying cry of world Jewry.

In the beginning, the Israeli Government did not join this outcry, believing that quiet diplomacy was a better way to approach things. This changed in 1969.

[1] The main shul in Moscow, the Archipova (Choral) Synagogue, remained open as did the Marina Roscha Synagogue. The former was sometimes used by the Soviets to bring in Rabbinic-looking figures to make announcements supporting the party line. It is currently undergoing extensive renovations. The latter, then just a hut-like structure, is now the site of a seven-story Chabad headquarters.

[2] Yuli Edelstein, Alexander Cholimansky, Moshe Abramov and Josef Begun were all imprisoned for teaching Hebrew. Begun was sentenced for three years. After his exile in a tiny Siberian hamlet was over, Begun returned, began to teach Hebrew again, and was sent to a labor camp. For his third arrest, Begun spent seven years in still another Gulag. (Mimi Zakon, Silent Revolution, pg. 38)

[3] The Russians allowed one shiur to continue, in Yiddish, in the main (Choral) Moscow Shul, and then only elderly people were allowed to attend. Rabbi Shalom Tovbin, who was once the tutor of Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik of YU, gave the shiur. Reb Shalom died in the street in 1978, returning from giving the shiur one night. He was accompanied by Rabbi Avrom Miller. His last words were: "Avrom, keep the shiur going." Avrom Miller had spent a short time in the Chofetz Chaim's yeshiva in Radin, and from 1973 to 1984 became Rabbi Eliyahu Essas' teacher. He died in 1987. (Article by Rabbi Eliyahu Essas, in Refused.)

[4] Rabbi Essas is today head of Aish HaTorah's Russian department. In particular, he oversees their Russian Web Site, one of the largest Jewish Russian web site. Born in Vilna, in 1946, Eliyahu Essas moved to Moscow in 1970. He completed his PhD studies, but never received a formal certificate because he could never afford the 25,000 rubles the government demanded from any refusenik for his PhD. (The average salary in those days was 120 Rubles). He first started to learn Hebrew in 1971. In 1972, he got his first Sefer Kodesh from Rabbi Lev Grigoevich, who in turn had learned, as a young boy for a short period in Volozhin Yeshiva. Rabbi Grigoevich also taught him how to read Rashi letters. In 1973 he began to be observant, essentially teaching himself Torah. (He did, however, learn some Gemorrah from Avraham Miller who had learned for a period in the Yeshiva of Radin, until its closing). He began to attend shul on Shabbos, finding himself the only young man in Synagogue at that time. Those elders who did go were not, in the main, Shomrei Shabbat and only gained the courage to begin to keep more Judaism (mainly in hiding) after they were already on pension and too old to be fired from their jobs. There, he met the aging Rabbi Shalom Tov Bin who, at age 18 was the tutor of the late Rabbi Yosef Dov Ber Soloveitchik of YU. He also traveled back to his hometown, Riga, where he saw a model of how to keep Shabbos from Rabbi Shalom Jakobson. Also influential in his early development was Rabbi Pinchus Teitz, of

undertaking. Living under the threat of arrest by the KGB on a daily basis, they began to organize groups to learn Hebrew and Torah. Essas in particular became father to a whole generation of Torah leaders of the Russian people[1].

Elizabeth, N.J. Rabbi Teitz was a prodigy in Riga in the 1930's who had personal contact with both the Ohr Somayach (Rav Meir Simcha of Dvinsk) and the Rogatchover. From 1973, Rabbi Teitz was the representative of Jewish Religious Council, and in that capacity met with the Russian ministry of religion twice a year. For seven years he met with Rabbi Essas and taught him, until the KGB realized the importance of this and stopped it. For seven years Rabbi Essas was not allowed to visit the only Synagogue in Moscow. He does not know if the KGB were behind this, or whether the Synagogue elders were afraid of a young man with a Zionist record participating in their services. In 1977, Rabbi Essas began to develop a network of Torah learning - highly illegal at the time. For example, the punishment for teaching religion to a youth below the age of 18 was 3 years in prison. Rabbi Essas lived in constant danger of being arrested. His phone was cut off for 6 months. He was summoned, on several occasions to the KGB for interrogation, and indeed was arrested on more than one occasion for brief periods. Overall, he suffered from a policy of intimidation on the part of the KGB. Twice, his apartment was searched. One month before his Aliyah, (1986), his wife was beaten by KGB staff. The KGB once entered an apartment where a shiur was taking place. The students present were then expelled from university, resulting in their being drafted to the army. Sacha Bark and some others were even less fortunate – they were committed to the infamous psychiatric institutions. There is still no clear explanation as to why Rabbi Essas was not arrested and tried. Possibly, it was due to the KGB's fear of world reaction. The constant threat of arrest, however, remained.

[5] Rabbi Wasserman is today the chief editor for Shevut Ami, and does outreach in Haifa and Rechasim.

[6] Yuri Kosharovsky and handful of Chabadskers in Moscow and St. Petersburg were amongst them.

[1] Many of the leaders of the Russian baal teshuvah movement are from the first group of students that Rabbi Essas taught.

They include:

Moshe Pantilat;

Meir (Marick) Lisnevski and Gershon Kantorovich of Shevut Ami;

Michael Karaivanov and Pinchas (Petya) Polonsky now heading Machanaim;

Avigdor Eskin, leader of the Russian Yamini movement;

Michael Goichberg, former Rosh Yeshiva of Tomchei Tmimim, Moscow, now one of Chabad Leaders;

Ezra Chovkin, a writer, Chabad affiliated;

Aryeh Katzin, principal of a school and outreach organization in New York;

Reuven Kaplan, principal of the Shuvu school, in Jerusalem.

Some of his students, like Alexander Bark (now Rosh Kollel of a Russian kollel in Beitar) and Elisha Gogolev (who started a youth movement), became significant Talmidei Chachamim. The latter was one of the best talmidim in Ateres Yisrael.

Others include :

Ury Tair (Bunishko), now professor in Israel;

Reuven Pitigorski, a famous Russian lecturer and Russian Torah newspaper producers;

Chaim Briskman, now a businessman, but a few years ago a famous personality in the Russian Teshuva world;

Zeev Meshkov, the head of the Midrasha Tzionit, Kiev and historically one of the famous personalities on Russian Tshuva street;

By the end of 1970, 44 Jewish prisoners had been sent to labor camps for dissident activities. Chaim Burshtein, now the rabbi of Vilnius (Vilna) was arrested 15 times[1]. Natan Virshubsky[2] of Moscow, toured other Soviet cities, making contact with other interested Jews. He was imprisoned for two years on trumped up charges of stealing siddurim and other items from the Kiev main shul. Applications for exit visas usually resulted in job dismissal[3], followed by months of financial hardship that carried the extra risk of arrest on charges of "parasitism." Some refuseniks took menial jobs such as street cleaning to avoid being arrested. Nevertheless, 113,800 Jews were allowed to leave between 1971 and 1975, and 250,000 by the end of the decade[4]. In 1981, however, following the rise of Cold War tensions, the emigration of Soviet Jews was again limited to an insignificant annual rate by the Soviet rulers.

Yet Essas and his group ploughed on fearlessly. The group, committed to Amud Yomi, completed in five years, several mesechtos. Aided financially by Rabbi Hershy Hirsh[5], Rabbi Essas started in 1980 to build a Torah network in several cities[6]. Since it was dangerous to transfer cash money to Russian citizens, Hershy Hirsh would send "tourists" with expensive goods, such as cameras, which were then given to Rabbi Essas and his group to resell in Russia. Astonishingly, they even managed to run summer camps. Whenever the KGB closed one down, they would begin another one in a different place.

Besides their tenacious faith, this group was encouraged by the smallest signs of hope. One such sign were their frequent visitors. Another was the Helsinki Accords. On August 1, 1975, the Helsinki Accords were signed by 35 countries and made economic cooperation with the Soviets dependent on their human rights record[7]. Not all refuseniks were pleased by this development. The Russian Refuseniks reacted with deep skepticism, if not fear. As Natan Sharansky wrote, "Here, it seemed, were the Western democracies handing the Soviet Union a deal the latter could only dream of: legal recognition of the Soviet occupation of Eastern Europe and economic

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Zeev Giesel, who was high up in Likud circles. Now he is an engineer.

[1] He was then living in St. Petersburg. In the later nineties, he became the Keroor Rabbi of St. Petersburg. Just walking down the streets would recall for him his earlier arrests, so he was relieved to be able to move to Riga. He caused so much trouble; the Soviets announced that they would never allow Rabbi Burstein to make Aliyah. Eventually, a civil (non-halachik) marriage was arranged between him and an American citizen for the purposes of getting him out of the country.

[2] Most recently, he was the rabbi of Varonish.

[3] Soviet law sometimes made dismissals quite complicated. When Rabbi Yaakov Tipograf applied for his visa, he was the head of an engineering department of a large state-owned company. In order to get rid of him, the company closed down this department for a day, laid Rabbi Tipograf off, and then reopened it. (Rabbi Tipograf is today head of Ner LeElef's Russian division.)

[4] Initially, almost all went to Israel. However, by the mid-1970's the majority of Jewish émigrés were "dropping out" en route to Israel and heading to other Western countries in Europe or North America.

[5] "Ezra Toranit le Anshei Tora"

[6] Moscow, Smolensk, Kuibyshev (Samara), Sverlovsk (Yekateringburg), Novosibirsk, Dushanbe, Riga, Vilnus, Minsk, Kiev, and Vinnitz

[7] Helsinki created a direct linkage between the three "baskets," or underlying basic principles – recognition of territorial borders, economic cooperation, and human rights

benefits in exchange for Soviet declarations accepting principles of human rights[1]. my dissident friends were sure that the Soviets would successfully drown their commitments in endless conferences defining "human rights" and proving that such rights were violated in the West no less frequently than in the Soviet Union."

In Moscow, the dissidents created the Moscow Helsinki Monitoring Group, headed by the esteemed Prof. Yuri Orlov and including Anatoli (Natan) Sharansky[2]. It monitored the Soviet's fulfillment of the human rights obligations and informed the world of its failings in doing so. Virtually all the founding members of the Helsinki Group paid for this decision with their freedom - either in prison or in Siberian exile[3]. In the end however, the Helsinki accords turned the last decade of the Cold War into one of ever-increasing international pressure on the Soviet Union to change its human rights policy[4].

Helsinki, Jewish protests around the world, visitors from the outside - much as they provided much needed chizuk and a glimmer of hope for the future, were not enough to keep someone from losing his job, from KGB harassment and from going to jail for his activities. In the end, it required enormous faith – a deep belief that the Torah was true and that G-d was watching over him, for any returnee to continue. From where such faith in a country that had allowed only atheism for 60 years? There is no normal, historical or sociological answer to this question.

But continue these Jews did. Bris Milah was an exceptional challenge, and was subject to imprisonment. Those needing a bris would get fictitious diagnoses from the Urology department saying that they (or their child) needed such a procedure.

Following early forays by Rabbi Pinchus Teitz, Rabbi Mordechai Neustadt[5] and others, by the late seventies 'Jewish American (as well as English and Canadian) tourists' to the Soviet, began regular visits. People like Rabbi Moshe Eisenman, Ernie Hirsch and Rabbi Aaron Rakefet began their first 'sight-seeing tours', with free KGB chaperones every step of the way[6]. "Let my people know![7](pto)" now became a

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[1] Natan Sharansky, The Jerusalem Post, July, 28, 2005.

[2] The Israeli Liaison Office categorically opposed the participation of Soviet Jews in this monitoring effort, telling the participants that they would no longer be considered loyal Zionist, and could not expect Israeli support even in case of arrest.

[3] Sharansky, ibid.

[4] Sharansky, ibid. He continues: "Helsinki was one of the most effective and durable mechanisms ever confronting and defeating dictatorships. History has clearly shown that in Helsinki the Soviet Union signed its own death warrant .

[5] Rabbi Neustadt later founded and headed the Vaad Hatzalah Lenidchei Yisroel. Rabbi Neustadt was a travel agent. As such, he was well positioned to arrange a trip for himself, which he did in 1976.

[6] Previously, 'outsiders' had visited Russia to international conferences and sports competitions. Sometimes the local Jews would try to make contact with them, though this was not in an organized fashion. Now, frum Jews began to tour the Soviet Union with the specific goal of teaching Torah. One of the first to visit was Rabbi Mordechai Neustadt, until this year the head of the Vaad Hatzalah LeNidchei Yisrael. In those days, he was a travel agent, and it was in that capacity that he visited Moscow and St. Petersburg in 1976. He returned from that trip fired up with the need to do something and he then began to organize the trips of Rabbi Moshe Eisenman of Ner Yisroel, Rabbi Chaim Dov Keller of Telz and others. The rabbis would either visit Russia with their wives or with another rabbi. They would dress as tourists,

second slogan next to the famous "Let my people go!" (By the end of the 1980's, perhaps over 1000 of these Torah teachers and smugglers of articles had visited the Soviet Union, mainly from the States, England[1], and Canada.)

The Eighties: Full Bloom

The Baal Teshuva in the former Soviet was in its infancy in the Seventies. In the Eighties, still in the full glare of Communism[2], it took off.

Until 1980 there were no men below the age of 60 (other than Rabbi Essas) visiting the main Shul in Moscow. Those attending[3] were already on pension, and no longer in danger of losing their jobs. But, after the Baal Teshuva movement began, the numbers began to grow. By 1981, there were 3 minyanim comprising 50-60 people daily, a lot of whom were now young participants. Around this time there were about 100 women observing Taharas Hamishpacha. It was only very recently that these kinds of numbers were again reached.

From the end of 1988 through 1991, nearly 350,000 Jews left the Soviet Union and, within a few years, that number was doubled. Most saw themselves as leaving Russia rather than coming to Israel[4].

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feeling that it called too much attention to their mission to wear traditional Chareidi clothes. Rabbi Neustadt reports that the first time he met with Rabbi Essas (1980), he, Rabbi Neustadt was wearing a tourist-like hat. Rabbi Essas, however, showed up fearlessly in a black hat! In Moscow, Rabbi Essas became, in time, the main organizer of these visits, ensuring that the locals knew when and where (always in private homes) shiurim or melaveh malkas were being given.

[7] This was based on Moshe Rabbeinu's appeal to Pharaoh – שלח את עמי ויעבדוני. The more secular groups working in Russia conveniently left out the final word – "that they may serve Me."

[1] The main English initiative was called the RRJ (Russian Religious Jews) Fund and was run by Ernie Hirsch and his wife. It ran throughout the decade of the 80's sending 246 people to the former Soviet Union, 49 of who traveled more than once. (From *Refused,* pgs. 40-41). One of the people who got significantly involved with this group is the head of the London Beis Din, Dayan Chanoch Ehrentreau, Shlitah.

[2] Although Mikhail Gorbachev became the country's leader in 1985, Glasnost ("openness,") and Perestroika (a restructuring of the Soviet State).

[3] About 20-30 men in two minyanim during the week and 150-200 in Shabbat, including about 50 women. The official minyan in the main sanctuary used a microphone on Shabbat, while a smaller minyan was without chillul Shabbos.

[4] These Jews were not in the main, Zionistic or religious. The vast majority of Zionists and religious Jews, for whom emigration was a question of obtaining freedom and "returning" to the mythical homeland of Israel, had left in the 1970s, and the remainder were among the first emigrants who left the Soviet Union when the gates opened in the late 1980s. The destination of the Jews who were leaving in the 90's was a function of the immigration policy of the Western countries rather than the Jewish identity of the immigrants. By the end of 1989, new restrictions on Soviet immigration were introduced by the US government, and these were soon followed by most other major receiving countries in Western Europe. The mass movement was consequently again directed towards Israel. As a result, the Jewish state saw a 12% increase in its population during the early 1990s.

In 1985, Michael Gorbachev came to power and implemented perestroika (reconstruction) and glasnost (openness) over the next few years[1]. In 1986, Anatoly Sharansky was permitted to emigrate, and was soon followed by other refuseniks. (Andrei Sakharov and Elena Bonner were released from their exile in Gorki in December of that year[2].) In 1989, the flood-gates of Aliyah had been opened. Between 1987 and 1991 more than half a million Jews left the country, of which 350,000 went to Israel and 150,000 to the United States.

The new freedom of expression also had its dark side: anti-Semitic and racist publications appeared. The Russian on the street was filled with anxiety about his economic future and market-reforms initially led to a serious decline in living standards. Blaming the Jews for everything that had gone wrong was popular. During the summer of 1990, widespread rumors were circulating in Moscow and St. Petersburg that pogroms would break out on certain days. "Anti-Semitism from above", (the official, state-imposed anti-Semitism) decreased and "Anti-Semitism from below", (i.e. popular anti-Semitism) increased or appeared in a more overt form. Two years later, in 1991, Communism fell.

By the mid to late eighties, the visitors to Russia were still a handful of mainly American Orthodox Jews. However, the number of refuseniks and others[3] had steadily risen – Jews who were risking everything for their love of Torah and the Land of Israel. The 'refuseniks' in Moscow alone were soon to number well over 100 families, most of them living in Israel today. They lost their jobs and lived from hand to mouth, doing private tutoring and other odd jobs[4].

The refuseniks would meet regularly in apartments, the slightly more advanced ones teaching the beginners. The most famous of these was Rabbi Eliyahu Essas, (as mentioned earlier), now head of the Russian department at Aish HaTorah, whose energy, leadership, fearlessness and organization abilities coupled with hard-earned Torah knowledge was unmatched[5]. To come to these shiurim, the Jews had to pass the KGB downstairs as they went into one apartment or another. Occasionally, the KGB would knock on a door on Shabbos and demand to see papers. When told

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[1] Both terms were never fully defined. Glasnost led to an increasing toleration of a media dealing with ,many issues that, up until that time, had been taboo. These included corruption in the government, the excesses of the Stalinist era, destruction of the environment, crime and other issues. Many books and films were unbanned.

[2] They were personally invited by Gorbachev to return to Moscow. Andrei became the leader of the democratic movement.

[3] Various names were used to describe different types of people. An 'activist' was someone who engaged in Zionist, religious or any other activity considered to conflict with the official communist ideology of the state. A 'dissident' was the same, though engaging in illegal ideas rather than actions. A 'prisoner of Zion' was a 'Refusenik' who was in prison for his request to immigrate or on trumped up charges. The term, a 'Waitnik' was also coined. This was someone who had requested to make Aliyah, and had yet not yet received an answer.

[4] Some refuseniks receive support from the VAAD & and other organizations.

[5] He was assisted by Chaim Briskman and Eliyahu Shteingart. The latter, now in his 60's and living in Jerusalem, was a Refusenik for eleven years. His initial application for emigration was rejected in 1979. From 1980, Rabbis Essas and Shteingart worked together. When Rav Essas received permission to emigrate in 1985, Eliyahu took over his Jewish Underground until his eventual immigration to Israel in 1989. (Avraham Zuroff, Reflections on 25 Years of 'Hard Labor', in Hamishpacha.)

that it was Shabbos and the Jews did not have their papers with them, the KGB would drag the unfortunate Jews to a lock-up for a day or two. Once in a while, the KGB, on some pretext, locked someone up for a lot longer - usually the ringleaders.

Rabbi Zev Rothschild, now of the Vaad Hatzalah LeNidchei Yisroel, describes how, in Moscow, he went from metro station to metro station. At each stop he would emerge and go to someone's house, to find between ten and twenty people waiting for him to give a shiur. To minimize KGB detection and avoid danger to the participants, each place would be contacted only about an hour before. Since these refuseniks had lost their jobs, they were available on a moments notice. On one occasion, he reports, somebody gave an alert. People started jumping out of windows and running in every direction. Since these Jews had no way out, whereas later Jews who were chozer b'teshuva would leave for yeshiva, there were more people attending shiurim in Moscow than, he says than for the next 12 years. Recently, this changed again (as we explain elsewhere).

Rabbi Tracthenberg, now running Kollel Ushvuaso LeYitzchak and one of the early refuseniks, describes how one Purim some of the chevra put on a Purim play in one of the apartments in Moscow. The place would fill to capacity, and when over, another wave of people would come. This scene would then repeat itself again and again. And that was not the only Purim play in town that year. Somehow, the KGB never did anything on Purim.

It was not just Moscow who had refuseniks. Several other Soviet cities also had their groups. Rabbi Sender Uritzky, now the Chief Rabbi of Belarus, belonged to one such group in Riga. In the Eighties, there were but seven to eight of them. By the Nineties, this had grown to a few tens.

Rabbi Uritzky lived with his wife and two kids in one room of an apartment. A closet divided the children from the adults, and this room had to serve as a dining room as well. A kitchen and bathroom was shared with four other families occupying the apartment, mainly non-Jews.

Rabbi Uritzky, who had learned for a while under Rabbi Essas, and was one of the leaders of the group, wanted to keep the lights in the bathroom lit for the whole of Shabbos. He approached the neighbors with this request. Their response was simple. Pay for the whole electricity bill for the whole month, and you can keep whatever lights you want on or off. Rabbi Uritzky did just that.

In the southern Moslem republics of the Soviet Union[1], the Jews had remained far more traditional throughout Communism[2]. Their return to Judaism was more of a climbing the rungs of a ladder than the revolutionary changes of their more north-western Ashkenazi brethren.

Things were a also a bit easier in places like Riga and Vilnius (Vilna), where the Latvians, and especially the Lithuanians, themselves oppressed, gave more leeway to the refuseniks[3] (notwithstanding the considerable anti-Semitism which

[1] Georgia, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, etc.

[2] The local population hated the Russians more than they hated the Jews. The local KGB did not look for pretexts to persecute the Jews, only responding to specific instructions from central headquarters. In addition, these were Sephardic Jews, who have a better track record of keeping a natural and deep faith than the Ashkenazim.

[3] In general, the Jews of Russia were further away from Judaism than those in the Baltic countries (Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia), as well as the Ukraine and Belarus. The original Aliyah-Jewish identity movement was centered in Riga. In late 1961, several hundred young Riga Jews began holding memorial gatherings and festival celebrations at the Rambuli forest, site of a major massacre by the Nazi's of the Jews.

accompanied this). This provided an opportunity for some of the Russians as well. Rabbi Gedaliah Minkovitzky, one of the Moscow teachers[1], learned his Hebrew from a visit to Vilnius (Vilna) and Rabbi Essas finally witnessed a real Shabbos by visiting Riga. But easy is a relative term. Here too people lost their jobs, suffered harassment and sometimes arrest and could only practice Judaism in the privacy of their homes. Mezuzahs, when they were obtainable, had to be hidden between the inner and the outer doorpost.

In Moscow the visitors were Americans and English. In Riga, the Londoners were joined by Montrealeans. A refusenik discussed one such visit – a couple from London spent Shabbos with them and at the Friday night table, both burst into tears and cried and cried.

What made all these Jews start returning? The Pintele Yid? However, why just then? What gave them this deep sense of commitment to Judaism – to risk their lives for a tradition that was nearly forgotten? Ultimately, it is a mystery.

Most of the refuseniks live in Israel today. Some are professionals; many are Klei Kodesh. A lot have been in full time learning for nearly 15 years and some of these are significant Talmidei Chachamim today. A good number of them (Rabbi Eliyahu Essas - Aish HaTorah, Moshe Pontelat - Odessa and elsewhere, Yaakov Tipograf - Ner LeElef, Sender Uritzky -Belarus) and many, many others, are at the forefront of educating the next generation of CIS Jews.

1990 – 2005: Stabilization and Community

In 1991 a coup attempt that briefly ousted Gorbachev and sped the Soviet state's demise. Ironically the Soviet State died just when it was finally trying to correct its own errors. But the rot had gone too deep – the mighty Soviet machine had revealed itself empty of any future, the economy continued to decline precipitiously[2] and the people rebelled. Gorbachov was at the point of introducing a market economy, but, at the last moment, was not able to overcome his own Communist ideology. "Gorbachov seems not to have been familiar with a basic rule of politcs, first formulated by Alexis de Tocqueville, 'that the most dangerous moment for a bad government is generally that in which it sets about reform.' It did not occur to him that his reforms might unleash a chain reaction in Soviet society that he would not be able to control."[3]

From the late 80's and through the 90's, there was a huge immigration of Russian Jewry to Israel, America and Germany, about 1-1.5 million Jews still remain in ex-Soviet territories today[4]. Throughout the 90's, there was a pervasive pessimism

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[1] And later the founder of the Migdal Ohr school in Moscow. Tragically, after sending many hundreds of students to yeshivas, seminaries, Machon Lev and Torah high schools in Israel, this school was forced to close at the end of the last academic year. The building is now used for the IDT courses and community, as well as for the Ner LeElef training programs.

[2] In 1990, the net national product declined by 9%. Prices rose precipitately, some staple products such as milk, teas, coffee, and soap were hard to find, and in numerous regions the authorities introduced a system to rationing. (Abraham Ascher, Russia, A Short History, pg. 223-4)

[3] Abraham Ascher, Russia, A Short History, pg. 221

[4] The figure used by Ner LeElef is the lower figure.

on the part of those who were working in the CIS. The feeling was that things would always get more and more difficult, kiruv-wise, in the CIS. The average age in the Jewish population began to exceed the average age of the overall population in CIS. This is now changing to an increased optimism, as a new scenario unfolds, with smaller but viable Jewish populations in many tens of cities[1].

In the early 90's, those who stayed, defined themselves as 'not yet immigrated'. Their most usual theme of conversation centered around emigration: who had left now and how they were managing their new lives abroad. Offspring of mixed families, who had never thought of themselves as Jews, began to consider the possibility of emigration. Being a Jew became something desirable, as Jewishness opened a gateway to new possibilities.

Yet, by 2000, all this had changed. Today, most of Russia's Jews now see emigration as an undesirable solution. Those who do emigrate are mainly: 1) elderly Jews who leave to reunite with family members abroad and 2) youth and students, who have received scholarships to attend schools or universities in Israel. Jewish Agency figures show that just 2,703 people made Aliyah from the entire former Soviet Union in the first four months of 2004. Many of these are not Jewish. Germany, an attractive destination until now, has recently shut its doors to most immigration (based on refugee status) from these countries.

On the other hand, it is estimated that more than 20,000 repatriates had returned from Israel to the former Soviet Union[2]. Rabbi Weiss estimates that about 20% of those attending his wife's school in Moscow are returnees from Israel. Many would have gone to secular schools in Israel; but the need to connect to something more Jewish was aroused in them nevertheless and, back in Russia, this translates into more of a Torah education.

There are several reasons for this return to Russia, amongst them a lack of jobs in Israel, commensurate with their qualifications; a sense that they are not fully accepted by Israeli society; a strong sense of connection to Russian cultural life and improving economic prospects in Russia. The Intifada and the closing of American and other doors are also contributing factors.

Today, there are three cities with a Jewish population of 60,000 or more (Moscow, St. Petersburg and Kiev) and Odessa has about 40,000. There are tens of cities, however, with viable Jewish populations of between 6,000 and 30,000 Jews.

The stabilization of the population has meant many things. But primarily, it has meant the building of local communities.

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[1] The author has identified 60 cities in the former CIS where fully functioning communities are viable.

[2] One article appearing in the Jewish Press, put the number of returnees as high as 120 000, but this figure is not substantiated by the admitted circumstantial evidence by people in the field. Baruch Gur, of the Prime Minister's Department of Connection with the Jews of the Former USSR, told Ha'aretz. 9,000 Jews have returned from Israel to Ukraine, most of them to Kiev. What Jewish leaders in the former Soviet Union are beginning to notice, however, is that increasing numbers of those who are returning from Israel bring with them a heightened sense of Jewish and Zionist identity that they want to preserve. They're putting their children in Jewish schools so they won't lose their knowledge of Hebrew. They're affiliating with their local Jewish communities, showing up for holiday celebrations, joining Hillel, or even taking jobs with Jewish organizations where they are able to put their first-hand knowledge of Israel and Hebrew to good use. A lot maintain their dual citizenship so they can open businesses in Odessa and go back and forth to Israel. "In Israel they learned not to be afraid," one returnee says. "They want Jewish schools, they want synagogues, even if for ten years in Israel they didn't do anything" Jewish. "Once they leave Israel, they want it."

There is considerable local, Russian money pouring into the communities. For example, it requires one to donate $250,000, as a minimum requirement to join the Russian Jewish Congress's board. Since its founding in 1996, the RJC has raised more than $70 million from domestic donors to support various Jewish projects[1]. The Russian oligarchs, Bezezovsky, Gusinsky, Leonard Nevzlin, Geidemak and others all got involved, at some level or another, in providing community support.

5. DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE RUSSIAN POPULATIONS IN THE CIS AND THOSE LIVING IN OTHER COUNTRIES.

There are four main concentrations of Russian Jews today. There are about 1 million Jews living in the CIS, about 120,000 in Germany, a half a million in Israel from the last wave of Aliyah[2], and about 750,000 living in the States[3]. Each one of these populations has a different profile today, and the methodology of working with one cannot automatically be transferred to another. In Germany and Russia, for example, the populations are very spread out. Even in the larger cities, with higher concentrations of Jews, they are spread out over the entire city. These cities in turn – most notably Moscow, St. Petersburg and Kiev – are huge. Jews entering Germany have done so under a liberal refugee policy (recently tightened), and the policy of the German government was to spread these Jews amongst the wider population[4]. Only Berlin, with about 25,000 Jews (mainly from the CIS), can boast a sizable Jewish population.

In Israel and the States, the Russian Jewish populations are more concentrated. Although pockets of Russians appear all over the States, an enormous number are still concentrated in Brighton Beach with a strong spillover into Flatbush[5]. In fact, over 220,000 people live in Russian-speaking Jewish households in New York, comprising 50% of all Russian speakers in the country[6].

Other reasonable concentrations exist in the major cities and several outreach initiatives have been established[7]. In Israel too, Russians concentrated in certain

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[1] Though the common impression is that the vast Chabad empire in the CIS is single-handedly supported by Mr. Lev Leviev, this is not true. Besides other outside sources, there is considerable local money being contributed. Keroor, on a smaller scale, also reflects this trend, and certainly the largest donor to Keroor, Mr. Geidemak, is a local.

[2] There are another 500,000 Russian olim from previous waves of Aliyah.

[3] Rabbi Mordechai Tokarsky, who works with Russians in Brooklyn, puts that figure at 1 million. However, he counts a half a million in the NY area. Later, we bring a study which only counts half that number in NY. Other major concentrations are Los Angeles, Chicago, Baltimore and Philadelphia.

[4] Recently, Rabbi Aba Dunner of the European Convention of Rabbis solicited the agreement of the German Interior Minister to reverse this decision. However, the impact will be minimal, as the Germans have clamped down on their refugee policy, reducing immigration by Russian Jews to a trickle.

[5] Both of these are in Brooklyn, New York City.

[6] The Jewish Community Study of New York, 2002.

[7] The best known of those outside of NY are in St. Louis, Baltimore, Toronto and Chicago. However, San Francisco, with one of the largest concentrations of Russians, is completely unserviced.

cities, and in particular neighborhoods of those cities - Neve Yaakov and Kiryat HaYovel in Jerusalem, Ashkelon and Ashdod.

Another difference is the communal structure. Germany has a top down structure. Every German who declares a religion gets taxed by the German government to the tune of 9%. In the case of the Jews, this tax is then given to a national Jewish body, which divides it up to amongst the communities. Although Russian Jews comprise the vast majority of the Jewish population, they have little representation on the community boards, and the communities are not generally seen by them as being user friendly. The community is ironically poorer than those in the CIS, where there are, amongst the impoverished majority, tens of Jewish millionaires in each city[1]. The few who have money in Germany are not about to donate it, having paid their tax. Hence, the official structure is bulky and very conservative about changing. The chinuch situation is awful. There is little financing for independent outreach projects.

Having said that, there are some bright lights of Torah in Germany. For example, the Lauder Foundation is funding a magnificent yeshiva for men in Berlin and a seminary for women in Frankfort-en-Maine[2]. Kalev Krelin too, has an exciting operation in Heidelberg. Other good projects exist in Stuttgart, Bonn and elsewhere. It should be noted that the mass migration of Jews from the former Soviet Union to Germany likely will come to a swift end with the introduction of a new law which went to effect on January, 1, 2005. Now the Jewish immigrants will be allowed only if they are younger than 45, able to speak German and require no social welfare. Some sort of Jewish certification will be necessary also. This set of restrictions would have kept out almost all the immigrants who came. In Berlin, for example, almost 80% of the Jewish immigrants, most of whom are elderly, live on social help. The Israeli government actively lobbied the Germans for this change, rankled by the fact that more Russian Jews were choosing Germany over Israel in the last few years.

6. OVERVIEW OF ACTIVITY

Age

The average age of CIS Jewry is older than the norm for the broader society. Moreover, in most communities around the CIS, minyanim were originally comprised of primarily older people. Many communities in Russia are caught in a vicious cycle. Older people come to the minyan and in fact are paid to do so, making it an uncomfortable place for younger people. Often, Shacharis is at 10 am, ruling out any working person from attending. (In the winter, any earlier would mean davening Maariv, but that is fine.) Sometimes there is a soup kitchen in the Shul, as opposed to a separate building, completing the difficulty. Older people tend to be needier, are less likely to take an active role in the community, and are less likely to really grow in

[1] The problem in Russia is that there is hardly any middle class. People, including the Jews are mainly poor, with an increasing number of very wealthy people. The latter are often resented by the former.

[2] Until now, the Yeshiva has been run by Rabbi Josh Spinner and the seminary by Rabbi Binni Kruis. The latter is leaving however, for a rabbinic position in N.Y. In all probability, the seminary will also be moved to Berlin. See the appendices for a fuller description of Lauder activities in Germany and elsewhere.

their Judaism. The community, the minyanim included, become chesed-orientated, somewhat listless and without a sense of energy.

However, today one can count many communities that have a younger group of people as their core constituency, or at least an equal spread of ages. Such communities can be found in Kiev[1], Odessa, Kharkov, St. Petersburg[2], Moscow[3], Tula, Minsk and elsewhere. Often, these communities are comprised of young baalei teshuva who are beginning to marry each other and to form a new nucleus of Torah families in Russia.

Having a young person's community will ultimately make the place user-friendly also for older people, but not the other way around. The young in turn tend to reach out to bring others in.

Males & Females

The intermarriage in the CIS is so high, that it is a rarity to find a whole Jewish family intact. This problem is exacerbated by a high divorce rate and by the fact that families tend to take their identity from their fathers. If the father is Jewish, the children think that they are Jewish, which they are not. And if the mother is Jewish and the father not, then the children tend to think that they are not Jewish, which is not true.

There is one additional variable to consider here. Many of the most vibrant communities in the CIS today began first with schools and yeshivas. The parents of those attending these schools are generally single mothers or mothers married to non-Jews.

These women very often not only return, but become independent forces in outreach. Graduates of Ner LeElef women's training programs have gone into Jewish schools, communities and other positions as well as projects developed from scratch, often outshining their male counterparts.

Inter-Organizational Cooperation

Although Jewish Russia is infamous for its politics, the truth is that there is a high level of inter-organizational cooperation overall. For example, the Russian 'Ten Cities" project has involved the active cooperation of Keroor, the umbrella body for non-Chabad communities in Russia, the Canadian Foundation[4] and Ner LeElef, with the Lauder Foundation[5], the Joint[6] and the Jewish Agency all participating in aspects of the project. Even the Jewish Agency, the least cooperative of the bodies in the CIS

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[1] Kiev today has five daily minyanim comprising about 350 people daily. There is a good spread of all adult ages in these minyanim. The best example of this is Aish HaTorah in Kiev, which is almost entirely made up of people below the age of forty.

[2] Here a young, observant community is growing around the Migdal Ohr school.

[3] The best examples are the Dor Revii community in the old Migdal Ohr building and the Ohalei Yaakov community.

[4] Mr. Reichman as represented by Rabbi Shlomo Noach Mandel

[5] The Lauder Foundation established several nursery schools alongside these communities.

[6] The Joint is now working towards having all its kitchens in Russia go Kosher with money going to the Rabbis who will be appointed as the part-time Mashgichim.

until now, has helped here and there[1]. Others that have participated in this project are the Lishkat HaKesher[2], the Vaad Hatzalah Lenidchei Yisroel[3] and Migdal Ohr[4]

Similar stories can be told about projects in other parts of the CIS.

Types of Activities

The three largest activities which outreach organizations engage in the former CIS are schools, communities and summer camps. Several Israel-based organizations run summer camps and seminars as recruitment tools, e.g. Beit Ulpana. Shevut Ami brings in groups of students to Israel to study. A few cities, e.g. Odessa and Moscow, run orphanages. Communities require complete infrastructures in turn, which include provision of food for the hungry, kosher food stores, shechita and other hashgacha, kosher restaurants, student clubs, Sunday Talmud Torahs, shiurim, seminars, etc. When one imagines that almost all of this had to be initially funded from the outside, these are remarkable achievements.

7. Community Building

The present situation in CIS is that all organizations working with the Jewish community in the CIS see the future of Russian Jews in community building. Even the Sochnut (the Jewish Agency) made a decision that building the Jewish community in CIS is the best way to bring the Jews to Israel.

The very decision to develop communities in Russia was not fully appreciated at the outset. Until a few years ago, the most successful mosdos in Russia were focusing on getting people out of Russia, mainly young singles, to yeshivas and seminaries in Israel and elsewhere. But recently, there have been significant changes on the ground which has led to a new direction, that of community building.

Firstly, the Jewish population in Russia has now stabilized, with a trickle still going to Germany and a negligible amount to Israel. (The consensus is that the Aliyah to Israel of the last two years is at most 20% Jewish.) Toras Chaim Yeshiva, traditionally one of the best 'export' approaches, now finds that even after a bochur has learned in their yeshiva, they often marry and stay in Russia.

Having said that, community building is a complicated business, and it is a brand new concept for Russia. As mentioned earlier, children of the rabbis are going to require chinuch, which invariably forces some of them to drop out or become commuters. It is easier to run a school than a community based on commuting staff. Long term financial stability has to be secured, and the nurturing of a core communal constituency has to be pursued. In some cases the prior existence of a community of

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[1] The Jewish Agency is now paying for several ulpanim, runs Torah classes teaching Hebrew, under the auspices of the rabbis. Several rabbis have been invited to give shiurim on seminars run by the Jewish Agency.

[2] Two Lishkat HaKesher Schools in Samara and St. Petersburg, have participated, by inviting the local rabbis into their schools.

[3] Rabbi Naftali Zucker of the Vaad became a partner in Saratov (allowing for two families and a yeshiva)

[4] The community in St. Petersburg is being built around the Migdal Ohr School, and Migdal Ohr in Moscow has been helpful in many ways.

aged people may have actually complicated the process. Significant tensions exist between Chabad and non-Chabad.

Yet, despite these problems, communities all around the CIS are going forward. There are now several thousand Jews around the former Soviet Union who daven in a minyan every day, 350 in Kiev alone. Chabad aside, there are schools in 14 of these cities, and nursery schools in several more.

Observance

Most communities around the CIS comprise a majority of non-observant members. However, in several places, we are now beginning to see a new phenomenon, of communities whose core membership is shomer Torah U'Mitzvot. Outstanding examples of this include Kiev (Rabbi Bleich and Aish HaTorah), Odessa (Rabbi Baksht), the Dor Revii (IDT) and Ohalei Yaakov Communities in Moscow, Rabbi Becker's Beis Midrash in Riga and the community which has developed around the Migdal Ohr School in St. Petersburg.

But even in places which have yet to reach this stage of maturity, there are signs of growth and vitality in this direction. For example, until the mid-nineties, it was virtually impossible to form a minyan where the participants were not being paid to come and doven[1]. Many places today, Tula, Samara and Perm come to mind, do not make such payments, and yet have thriving minyanim. These places can boast a few new Torah observant people every year, with the average age of communal participation dropping steadily. Those actually doing Teshuva tend to be in the 20 to 45 age bracket, similar to other parts of the world.

It is our belief that all energies need be put into building not just Jewish communities but specifically, young religious communities. We believe that this type of community will be stable and ultimately financially independent as well. Most important, this type of community will grow despite the tough demographic situation in CIS.

Marriage

Most people are becoming observant while still single. A major challenge for these people is finding partners. There are usually only a handful, if that, of the other sex to choose from. Yet, we are seeing some very encouraging progress, in this regard Let us take as an example the organization the author knows best, Ner LeElef. Over a 1 ½ year period beginning with 2003, there were 26 shidduchim made through this organization alone.

Many of these couples come from different cities. Ner LeElef established a special project "Shadchan" whose purpose is to tap into the Ner LeElef network of participants and graduates in all Jewish Russian speaking communities. Each field director of a Ner LeElef course takes part in this project. Every one of them is in touch with the others, as well as with the "Main Shadchanit" Tzila Mironova from Ner LeElef's St. Petersburg program. Working on a voluntary basis, she arranges

[1] It is questionable whether paying for dovening helps as a long term strategy. The people being paid rarely make significant progress in internalizing the dovening process. It is perhaps too cynical to imagine that, were one to stop paying these people five years after payments were to begun, most of the recipients would immediately stop coming. Secondly, the average age of those being paid is high, making the place not user friendly for younger people.

trips from city to city for prospective couples, makes references about the candidates, and pushes the process. This is work that requires much Mesirus Nefesh and Siyata D'shmaya.

Imagine if you were a shadchan working out of London where you were trying to match up a few people who were spread over an equivalent radius. You would have two or three people in France, someone in Holland, maybe two in Italy, one in Bulgaria and even one in Turkey! (Actually in the CIS the distances between cities are even greater than that.)

Schools

The emergence of Jewish day schools in the former Soviet Union is one of the more remarkable stories of a Jewish revival in the CIS. In 1991, when the Soviet Union collapsed, there were only six Jewish day schools in the former Soviet republics, all created in the year or two before the fall of communism, when Mikhail Gorbachev's perestroika loosened restrictions on Jewish activities. Today, across the former USSR, there are nearly 100 Jewish schools with a total enrollment of some 15,000 elementary- and secondary-school students. Some of these are non-Jews attracted by the schools' reputations, or because they have Jewish fathers[1]. Many schools, however, particularly the non-Chabad ones, are strict to accept only Jews[2].

Several new schools continue to open each year. In general, to be successful, a Jewish school has to be strong in general studies, providing an average of two hours of limudei kodesh a day.

Schools vary in size, ranging in the many hundreds of students[3] down to a handful.

Most of the schools are officially municipal public schools, which entitles them to free use of school buildings, subsidized utilities and municipal salaries for general-studies teachers. Through its Ohr Avner Foundation, Chabad runs about 60

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[1] Chabad have opened up some schools in cities where the local Jewish population is simply not large enough to meet the government regulations that require a minimum number of children - often 25 - in each grade. Short of remaining completely private, which few of them can afford to do, they are then forced to accept non-Jews. An example is the school in Chernovtsy, the Ukraine. Because of the shrinking population, this 14-year-old school, one of the oldest in the former Soviet Union, had to begin to accept non-Jewish students a few years ago. Today at least one-third of the students are non-Jews, and the ratio is even higher in the primary school.

The non-Jews often have Jewish fathers, are attracted by the smaller classes, better education or simple convenience.

Officially, a government school has to accept non-Jews, though those schools which are absolutely committed to taking only Jews have gotten around the problem. An investigation of several schools in Moscow, Kiev, Odessa and Tula revealed no known non-Jews and a painstaking filtering process. Some non-Jewish parents try hard to conceal the fact that they have no connection to Judaism — a huge irony in a country where generations of Jews tried to hide their Jewishness in order to get ahead.

[2] Based on Lev Krichevsky in Teaching for the Future, a five part series in the JTA – April, 04.

[3] Levi Yitzhak Schneerson School, in Dnipropetrovs'k, the Ukraine and Ohr Odessa in Odessa, the Ukraine as well as Rabbi Bleich's school in Kiev, all have in the region of 600 students.

percent of all Jewish day schools in the FSU. A few schools have now begun to offer a more intensive yeshiva track[1].

Ohr Avner has about 55 schools, at a cost of more than $10 million a year. The Shema Yisrael Network under the Canadian Foundation has 14 schools, while World ORT is involved in 15 schools in the region, focusing on computer training and technological education to enable students to compete in the job market. About half of the Jewish schools in the former Soviet Union — mostly non-Chabad schools — receive some support from the Israeli Ministry of Education and the Jewish Agency, usually covering the salaries of a Hebrew teaching couple on shlichut. None of the schools charge tuition[2].

Most of these schools attract a disproportionate number of children at the lower socio-economic spectrum. These families are attracted by subsidized meals, free transportation, free summer camps and after-school activities, some medical services and even clothing and food aid for the neediest families. Often the wealthier Jews prefer to send their children to exclusive private or specialized schools[3].

More recently, these schools have also been attracting Russian Jewish yordim from Israel[4]. These start out more Jewish (though often more cynical about Israel), but quickly become enculturated into the local Russian culture.

The results are sometimes hard to tabulate. The better schools can talk of sending a few boys and girls to yeshivas and seminaries every year, with some others going to places like Machon Lev.

While many of the Jewish boys come into the schools without bris milah, it is rare that such a boy leaves without undergoing circumcision. A lot of the boys become quite comfortable wearing yarmulkes at least while in school, and often the children introduce what they see as the main chagim, into their homes, a tricky business when most patents are intermarried. Children who want to start keeping Kashrut and observe other mitzvos at home can sometimes face enormous opposition from parents who don't even remember their grandparents doing such a thing[5].

Some educators point out that just acquiring a positive Jewish identity is already in stark contrast to their parents' life experience. "Their Jewish identity is something they take for granted, unlike the generation of their parents for whom being Jewish could often turn into a lifelong trauma." The presumption is that such kids won't intermarry, though this is undermined in those schools which accept non-Jews[6].

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[1] Examples of this exist in Kiev, Odessa, Tibilisi and Moscow.

[2] Based on Lev Krichevsky in Teaching for the Future, a five part series in the JTA – April, 04.

[3] There is almost no middle class, as of yet, in the former Soviet countries.

[4] Exact figures are hard to come by, but as much as 10 percent of the students in Russian Jewish schools in larger cities across the former Soviet Union are believed to be from families that returned from Israel. (Lev Krichevsky in Teaching for the Future, a five part series in the JTA – April, 04)

[5] Based on Lev Krichevsky in Teaching for the Future, a five part series in the JTA – April, 04

[6] Jewish pride may have its limits. School officials don't like to talk about it, but at least some schools issue high-school certificates that don't list Jewish subjects unless the graduate explicitly asks for it. Anti-Semitism no longer prevents young Jews from choosing a college or career of their choice. Yet some prefer to keep their Jewish-school experience secret to avoid "complications" when applying for college. They fear that a Jewish-school background may not sit well with some college administrators. "If you go to a Jewish university or will study in Israel, then you need to show your Jewish grades," says Andrei Yegorov, a Jewish day school graduate. For that reason, Dolores, who graduated from a Jewish girl's school a few years ago, received two different high-school diplomas. In addition to her Jewish school

Schools versus Communities

Because community building in Russia is overall a fairly new thing, the pattern in many cities was to first build schools and yeshivas and then only later concentrate on communities (even if the shell of such communities already existed). This is the opposite of the way one normally would go about things, if one were building a community. Normally, we would expect the school to answer the needs of an already established community. In addition, a school is a very large institution – it takes an exceptional organization to have financial and other resources left over with which to build other institutions after they have already become school builders. More important, a school, if it does not have a dormitory, sends its students home to an environment which is usually hostile to Judaism[1]. On the other hand, when a community is built first, there is then a community of increasingly observant parents who want and demand Jewish education for their children.

However, in the late 80's and the 90's, few people saw that there would be any future at all in the CIS for Jews, and the hope was, that by attracting Jewish children to Jewish schools, a large number could then be filtered to mosdos in Eretz Yisrael and elsewhere. Today, as we have stated, the Jews are essentially staying, and the emphasis has changed somewhat. Some of the great early schools, Migdal Ohr of Moscow, for example have closed. Those that are thriving are doing so because the community around them is thriving. Often the community rose out of the school – Migdal Ohr of St. Petersburg comes to mind – but now serves to bolster the school in turn. Odessa is the best example of this[2]. In Odessa Rabbi Baksht has built what may be the best example of a synergy relationship between school and community. True, many students in the school come from their orphanages, but over 50% come from the local community. As the community grows, the results of the school grow as well.

Bris Milah

Most Jews from the CIS have grown up without Bris Milah. Put in different terms, most CIS Jews who have had bris milah had it done after the age of 13, many as an adult. It is therefore a special simcha when an 8 day old child has a bris. In early 2005, a mohel, Rabbi Chaim Rubin was invited to perform a bris on the 8-day old son Efraim of the Volman's of Minsk[3]. This was coupled with a drive to do milah on many adult or older Jews who hadn't undergone the mitzvah yet. In the end, 13 Bnei Yisroel from different places of Belarus fulfilled this big mitzvah on the same day as Efraim's bris. The mohel, not expecting this, ran out of operating materials, and had to return for the others.

Rabbi Aba Dunner once saw a line of such adult Jews at the central Moscow shul, all waiting for a bris. He wondered why it seemed to come so naturally to them when for Avraham Avinu it has seemed to be such a nisayon. His father, the great

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certificate, she received one from a non-Jewish high school where she was allowed to take exams.

[1] For this reason, the most successful schools until now were boarding schools in part or in whole – Migdal Ohr and Rivka Weiss's school in Moscow, Rabbi Bleich in Kiev etc.

[2] Here too, the original institution was a set of schools, founded by Ohr Somayach.

[3] Yosef Volman is an avreich in Rabbi Sender Uritzky's yeshiva in Minsk.

Dayan Dunner, Shlitah, answered that once Avraham Avinu has been moser nefesh for this mitzvah, he gave this idea, as a natural spiritual inheritance, for all the generations to come. Hence, it is much easier for any Jew today. But make no mistake – each time an adult Jew makes a decision to undergo a Bris Milah, he is taking a brave and giant leap of faith.

Orphanages

CIS Jewry suffer from widespread poverty, increasing divorce rates and many social problems. This has lead to a situation where there are many orphans, either lacking one or either parents, or lacking parents who are capable of taking care of them[1]. It estimated that there are more than 1,500 Jewish children trapped in state orphanages across Russia and the former Soviet Union[2]. Conditions in these places are abysmal[3], with an almost total loss of Jewish identity[4]. In addition, there are well over 5,000 parentless Jewish children, who aren't even in the care of orphanages at all[5]. There are a handful of organizations running Jewish orphanages, notably Tikvateinu (Rabbi Baksht)[6] in Odessa, Pinsk (Rabbi Fima), as well as two in Moscow[7]. Many orphans are taken in by institutions which have general dormitory

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[1] Between 80-95% of children (mainly non-Jewish) who are cared for by CIS government orphanages, in fact, do have parents. However, their parents have given up all rights of guardianship. Reasons for parents giving up their children include: parent alcoholics, parents who are in prison, teen mothers, and parents who are infected with AIDS.

[2] Russia: 1,000
Ukraine: 200
Belarus: 130
Georgia: no data available
Kazakhstan: no data available

[3] Suicide rate of alumni: in excess of 10%
- Drug & alcohol addiction of alumni: in excess of 40%
- Alumni with criminal records: in excess of 40%

[4] Jewish Babies are being adopted by Gentile families, both in Russia and for export to other countries.

[5] Russia: 3,500
Ukraine: 1,300
Belarus: 400
Georgia: no data available
Kazakhstan: no data available
TOTAL: 5,200 (minimum)

[6] Tikvateinu run 3 orphanages, one for infants, one for boys and one for girls, with a total of about 240 orphans.

[7] Rabbi Goldschmidt has just acquired $3 million for a new building for the Moscow orphanage, the Waxman Orphanage. The head of this orphanage is Mr.Hocholashvily. The children from this orphanage are currently being absorbed by Rebbetzin Dara Goldschmidt's Eitz Chaim Schools.

facilities, such as Rabbi Bleich's school in Kiev[1]. However, only Odessa currently has an orphanage that takes children from birth.

[1]

	City	cc	Number of kids	Ages	Description	
	Russia					
1	Moscow	m/w	35(18/17)	9--19	Orphanage	
2		m	25	12--16	Dormitory	
3		w	60	12--16	Dormitory	
4		m/w	45	3--15	Orphanage	Chabad
5		m	120	12--17	Dormitory	Chabad
6		w	25	15--17	Dormitory	Chabad
7	St.Petersburg	m	10	9--16	Dormitory	
8		m	30		Dormitory	Chabad
9		w	30		Dormitory	Chabad
	Ukraine					
10	Berdichev	w	20		Dormitory	
11	Chernigov	m			Dormitory	Chabad
12	Donezk	m	35		Dormitory(Orphanage?)	Chabad
13		w	25		Dormitory(Orphanage?)	Chabad
14	Dnepropetrovsk		10--15		Orphanage	Chabad
15		m	65		Dormitory	Chabad
16		w	45		Dormitory	Chabad
17	Kharkov	m	15		Dormitory	OU
18		w	15		Dormitory	OU
19		m/w	20		Dormitory(Orphanage?)	Chabad
20	Kiev	m	35		Dormitory	
21		w	35		Dormitory	
22			5--10		Orphanage	Chabad(Tzai)
23	Korostyn	m	25		Dormitory	Chabad
24	Lugansk				Dormitory	Chabad
25	Odessa	m/w	28	0--6	Orphanage	

These orphanages are all associated with local Jewish day schools and often other communal structures. The children grow up in a totally Jewish environment. The majority, (60% - 80% depending on the place), continue to be Torah observant after they depart. It is quite likely that a person from such a place would marry another Jew. These orphanages serve to strengthen the day schools and communities in turn. They provide a concentration of students that provides a critical mass for these institutions.

A difficult aspect of the recruitment in any CIS country is the confirmation that the children are indeed Jewish[1] and the orphanages have to be run at a level of medical and other professionalism challenging to achieve[2]. They require high staff to

26		w	73	16	6-- Orphanage	
27		m	80	16	7-- Orphanage	
28		m	12		Dormitory	Chabad
29	Zaporoje	m			Dormitory	Chabad
30		w			Dormitory	Chabad
31	Zitomir	w	10		Dormitory	Chabad
	Khazachstan					
32	Almaty				Orphanage	Chabad
	Azebarzjan					
33	Baku	m	7		Dormitory	Chabad
	Moldova					
34	Kishinev	m	20	15	11-- Dormitory	
	Belarus					
35	Pinsk	m	26	18	11-- Orphanage	
		w	24	19	11-- Orphanage	
		m	25	20	11-- Dormitory	
		w	25	21	11-- Dormitory	

[1] The recruitment cost of each Jewish child is $300. This includes a background check focusing on the child's Jewish background.

- [2] 10% of children housed in medical orphanages were born with physical handicaps.
- Psychological illnesses that exist in the children of orphanages are found 3x as much as it is in children of corresponding ages in the regular population.
- Physical illnesses that exist in the children of orphanages are found 2x as much as it is in children of corresponding ages in the regular population.

orphan ratios[1]. Average running per child are $4 000 - $5 000 per older child (ages 7 – 18) and $6 000 - $7 500 per child from between birth and seven years[2].

Adoption[3] inside the CIS is not an option as there are not enough Torah families to serve as host families. Adoption outside of the CIS is theoretically an option in Russia and the Ukraine, though not legally permitted in Belarus.

The question in Russia and the Ukraine is whether the orphanage can pre-select for families that are Jewish and Torah-observant. Currently, the Moscow orphanage does find outside adoption for the few babies that come their way, though these are Jewish but not Torah families. The situation is a fluid one but the tendency in both countries is for increased state control to rest control from private adoption agencies. This does not portend well for pre-selected adopting families as State agencies tend towards "neutral" criteria.

There is an additional problem of significance. In these countries at present, a private orphanage is in constant danger of losing its children to the state who remove them to local adopted families, who will almost certainly be non-Jewish. To avoid this, the local orphanages appoint guardians, who may be a parent, a relative or very often themselves. They have to go to court on for every single child. The rights of the guardian or to veto any attempts at adoption of the child through the state. The guardian however, cannot put the child up for independent adoption.

There does, however, appear to be a major difference between Russia and the Ukraine. At present, the results of Torah observance from graduates of the orphanages in Russia are lower than that in the Ukraine. The Moscow orphanage we visited does have comparable results, but it may be difficult to sustain this level if a project was done on a broader scale. This is because the surrounding atmosphere of schools and community is less well developed in Russia than in the Ukraine. The overall outreach atmosphere in the Ukrainian schools is higher, and the educational continuity from kindergarten through university is more integrated, especially in Odessa[4]. Therefore, children adopted by Torah-observant families would emerge with a higher percentage of observance.

Russia has no Jewish orphanages for new babies. The per percentage availability of orphanages is relatively low compared to the Ukraine. This is especially so when it comes to Jewish orphanages. Therefore, Russia relies on

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[1] For children between the ages of 0-3, the ratio of educators to children should be 1:4. The ratio for children aged 3-18 should be 1:8-10. In addition, it is imperative that faculty should be caring and concerned for the wellbeing of the children.

[2] Younger children have higher food costs – their diet has to be more closely regulated, and they also require a higher staff-child ratio. Currently, Jewish private funding provides most of the funding. Governmental funding is 10% (at most). The Sochnut and the Joint each fund a few orphanages.

[3] Adopting families are generally only interested in babies up to the age of two. Only 15% of all the children in the orphanages entered at this age. Therefore, this would be a partial solution at best. However, in such cases it is questionable whether this is the way to go, as per the details below:

[4] In Russia, Chabad want to build a cradle to grave type system but only on a secular or semi-observant basis. The percentage of observance from Chabad graduates is very low, a fact that I just checked into again for Mr. Wolfson.

adoption as a solution. Officially, one can adopt children from Russia to other countries. However, it is a traumatic process for to adopting parents[1].

SECTION TWO: TOMORROW

Overview

The situation in the CIS is a fluid one, and it is therefore difficult to project needs beyond the immediate future. Any change in Anti-Semitism, the local economy, economic opportunities in Israel, or other factors could change the way communities develop in the CIS. We also do not know how reachable the unaffiliated are, how generous the nova-riche Russian Jews are likely to be and many other factors.

On the face of it, the generation of the idealists was long since over. In Moscow most clearly, the current generation has been brought up to respect nothing but raw materialism and the power and honor which it generates. Like the tribal South African black who urbanized, losing his tribal culture but failing to acquire a new set of values, the Muscovites, and to a lesser degree those from other cities, are brought up in a cultural vacuum. They have lost Communism, but no real value system came to replace this. Such an analysis might have led to the conclusion that this generation was finished when it came to spiritual values. Yet we see just the opposite: There is an ever-growing yearning for Jewish roots, for substance to fill the emptiness of their lives. No-one knows where the broader culture is headed, really, and no-one can predict what its impact will be on the Jews who are surrounded by this culture.

Despite this, the last 15 years of experience has produced certain clear lines along which the future work needs to concentrate if the next level of Jewish development in the CIS is to be reached. Some of the things mentioned below are sure to happen sooner or later. The growing population of observant Jews will eventually lead to an increasing supply of kosher products, for example, is only because of the laws of supply and demand. But other issues, such as those of Jewish education, will require completely new organizations, or significantly different ways of 'doing business' by the old ones. We are not guaranteed that this will happen, though the future of the Jewish community very much depends on these things being put in place.

It is clear that the time of establishing institutions in isolation is over. It is essential that more comprehensive visions of total communities need to be pursued.

At the same time that more standardized and professional ways of community building are required, a deeper understanding of local differences, and the precise way to address these differences, is also required. It is not just a question of

1. [1] One Catholic woman I was in touch with in Atlanta, had successfully adopted a child. The child at the time was 18 months old and already had been adopted by a local Russian couple who then abandoned the child when they discovered multiple medical problems. The cost was a $30 000 cash payment, all money in advance and required the woman to fly to Moscow, and appear before a judge, amongst other things. The woman was allowed to choose her child on the basis of pictures, but no other information. The whole affair was very traumatic. However, it was clear that the Russians do have a clear system of doing this. It does seem, however, that the setting up of an adoption agency could considerably ease this process.

Ashkenazim and Sephardim; today there are the super-wealthy and the super poor; there are progressive Moslem countries like Georgia and those that are still stuck in the old ways of doing things. Even the casual visitor will notice the obvious differences between the more slick urbanized Kiev and its Jews and the more homey, Jewish tasting Odessa, both in the same country. The same can be said when comparing Minsk to Mogilev, both in the Belorus, and so on. These observations are ready to come by, but they have yet to be translated into precise strategies for outreach, education and community building.

Marriage & Intermarriage

Perhaps the greatest challenge is the intermarriage rate. It is difficult to find two Jews married to each other today. The assimilation rate in Moscow, Odessa and elsewhere is about 90%; 70 years of Communism has done its work. New, all-Jewish families have to be built up couple by couple, as is indeed now happening all over, especially in the nascent observant communities in Moscow, Kiev, Odessa, St. Petersburg, Tibilisi and Minsk, amongst others. The 'IDT' Dor Revii community in Moscow can boast 23 weddings of Torah keeping couples in its 3 ½ years of existence and now such a community has approximately 15 children of kindergarten age.

But, for the most part, the vast majority of the population will remain intermarried for what appears to be decades to come.

One problem which arises out of this is the desire by many families with Jewish fathers and therefore halichikally non-Jewish children to send these children to Jewish schools. It is standard in Russian families for children to identify their religion with their father's rather than their mother's[1]. In Tashkent, over 60% of the SSC school is currently non-Jewish, though identified with being Jewish[2]. Even schools that claim to accept only halachik Jews are often not able to keep to that standard[3].

Some have proposed a more user-friendly system of geirus as a solution. No-one is suggesting a drop in halachik standards. But, other than through the Moscow and Kiev Batei Din, there is no way for someone to currently convert[4]. It is clearly

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[1] For this same reason, in many families where the mother and therefore the children is Jewish, but the father is not, the children do not consider themselves Jewish.

[2] Part of the problem in this particular case rose out of fact that the SSC took over an existing school with a local population. In 2005-6, the SSC hopes to open a kindergarten of 25 only-halachik Jews and, as they rise through the school, to drastically change the above ration thereby.

[3] An example is the school in Tula

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[4] The government of Israel and the Jewish Agency have not been helpful here. Although the Kiev Av Beis Din is the venerable Rabbi Brodbekker, the Israeli government does not recognize his conversions until they are authorized by the Israeli Rabbinate. But to do this, the convert has to get to Israel. However, the Israeli embassy will not issue such people with visas, considering them high risk for staying in Israel illegally afterwards. These Jews are then trapped, with no possibility of making Aliyah. Hence the government and the Jewish Agency are responsible not only of facilitating thousands of non-halachik Jews to Israel, but of preventing many halachik Jews from reaching Israel. Another grouping that find themselves so discriminated against, are those who are clearly Jewish, but cannot, for some technical reason, bring all the documentation which the Israelis demand.

not viable for school aged children to move to Moscow for the period of conversion. It is believed that there would be hundreds if not thousands of geirei emes, from these 'patriarchal' Jewish families, were the opportunity to be provided.

Perhaps because of this the divorce rate amongst those coming to programs (and to some, degree, in the broader population) is so high. Single mothers face all the challenges of divorce, working full days, and emotionally stressed children, all the challenges of becoming frum, plus all the challenges of bringing up children into a frum life.

This makes community building, outreach to parents of children in Jewish schools, and confirming authentic Jewish halachik status significant challenges. On the other hand, newly returned Jews are marrying each other in increasing numbers, and a whole new generation of Torah families is now growing apace.

The Stigma of Observance

Long after Russian Jews are exposed to Judaism, their sensitivity to anything institutional, including 'religious institutionalism' remains. Their distrust of Communism gets transferred to a distrust of any belief in any ideology or religion[1].

Schools

- The results from many of the schools are low, given the enormous efforts invested in running these institutions. The core problems are the lack of sufficient kodesh teachers and the low number of kodesh hours (usually two per day). The enormous investment in having to recruit, maintain secular standards, buildings, funding, and a broad range of other problems often reduces the energy available to address the issues of kodesh. The children themselves do not see their future coming through an investment in the kodesh. Some places, which now have kollelim have a larger teaching staff to draw on. Orodessa, Eitz Chaim in Moscow, and the Vaad school in Tibilisi have all seen how such kollelim can raise their standards overnight. However, these staff are untrained as teachers and require great input to compete with the overall professional standards of the private schools in the larger cities.

- In some ways, things are expected to get more difficult over time. In the Ukraine, for example, the liberalization of the country means that government schools are rising constantly in their standards of education, the quality of their buildings, transport, etc. This means that the Jewish schools have to keep on progressing as well, to remain several steps ahead. The Russian-Jewish emphasis on education is such that even as immigrants to Israel, they established their own school system, Mofet[2]. They took over a chain of schools[1], and also

[1] In Israel, Russian newspapers have ranked amongst the most virulently anti-religious. Russian-speaking Jewish households in the New York area are more than twice as likely to self-identify as "no religious denomination" or "secular" as other Jewish households (58% versus 19%) (The Jewish Community Study of New York, 2002.)

[2] Mofet was founded in 1992 by a group of immigrant teachers from the former Soviet Union. Most of them had taught in elite schools and gained wide experience in nurturing talent and

established supplementary classes in other schools[2]. These Russians express sentiments that school is a place for working hard and achieving excellence. The average Russian Jew, in Russia and in Israel, stresses discipline and excellence rather than stimulation and creativity, maths and science rather than art and social issues, effort and push rather than pacing and not wearing out the child[3]. These Jews are perfectly happy with non-egalitarian schools that have entrance examinations to maintain the standards. They expect the best teachers with high academic standards to be employed. They certainly do not perceive the current Jewish day schools in the CIS as providing these things[4].

- Unlike in the USA, where Jewish Day Schools are often the schools of choice amongst the most upwardly mobile and successful of parents, Jewish schools in the CIS are usually for the more impoverished elements of the population. In fact, as families "make it" financially, they tend to pull *even those students already in Jewish schools,* from those schools, and place them in private schools[5]. The schools are perceived by these people as being weak both in the secular studies (which interests them more) and the Judaic studies. The need to project an image of academic excellence and of selectivity, so difficult for a Jews school open to all, needs to be addressed. It is difficult to see how these problems will be solved as long as the current schools remain officially government schools, which is the case with almost all the non-Chabad schools[6]. It is also difficult to imagine these schools making the leap into being completely private, since this would require the acquisition of new school buildings or purchasing their current buildings, an investment that in the larger cities is in the millions of dollars.

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educating award-winning pupils. In Israel, they established a non-profit organization and jumped into the cold waters of the local educational system.

[1] The first school they took over was the Shevah school in south Tel Aviv, once considered one of the city's lowest-level schools and today seen as one of the best schools in Israel. Within a few years, they had developed into a chain of schools, known as the Shevah-Mofet system.

[2] Three times a week, from 4 p.m. on, children study math, English, biology, music, drama, chemistry and Russian. The average tuition is close to NIS 400 a month per child. The Jerusalem branch has attracted 700 children for 2005. The two chains split in the mid-1990s, apparently over the issue of admitting native-born Israeli pupils. Today the Mofet afternoon chain maintains 22 schools with more than 2,000 children. They also offer special auxiliary classes in the regular schools, such as the well-regarded Boyer School in Jerusalem, where Mofet has been invited to tutor sixth- and seventh-grade pupils in math and English.

[3] Dr. Marina Niznik, an education expert at Tel Aviv University, observes: "When we were kids, back then in the FSU, our parents didn't ask us if we were tired or we wanted to play instead of studying. The idea was that the child has to make an effort so that he could become someone when he grows older."

[4] Two notable exceptions are the Chabad school and the traditional school (Simon Dubnow) in Riga.

[5] This has been true even of some prominent communal leaders, for example, Mr. Anatoli Pinsky, head of Keroor.

[6] Chabad schools in the main are private. It is standard practice for a Chabad shaliach to purchase a building for a school as one of his first acts upon entering a city.

- The Tula School - the school has developed a unique model. They are planning on sending the kids to a high quality, non-Jewish school in the mornign for the secular studies and to come to the community center for the afternoon. Officially, they will belong to a Jewish school and the afternoon is to be considered an integral part of their schooling and not just an afternoon cheder. This solves a problem plaguing Jewish schools in the CIS - they cannot compete with the level of chol in private schools and so they land out servicing mainly the poor. It does introduce an element of danger – that the Jewish kids will mix with non-Jewish ones during the secular studies, though both sides are aware that the Jewish kids have registered for the Jewish school, leave for special Jewish education in the afternoon and have declared themselves as being different.

- There is little understanding, after all these years, of what a comprehensive Torah school-syllabus should be like and there is not much by way of educational materials. The Torah schools are working in relative isolation from each other, as far as syllabus development and teaching materials is concerned[1].

- There is a need to increase the level of Torah education in the major cities. This will prevent the current phenomena of the Klei Kodesh moving to Israel the moment their children reach school age. The compromise will be for them to live in Moscow, Kiev, etc. – a much more practical commute allowing for more time in the city, more connection with the overall scene, lower financing, etc. Indeed, Kiev, Moscow and Odessa all have nascent Cheder and Beis Yaakov programs[2]. The kollelim that recently moved to Tibilisi, Odessa and Moscow fueled this need, since a large number of Chareidi families moving to a city supplied not only the students but some of the manpower to service them as well.

- There is a dramatic difference in the results of schools that have dormitories or orphanages attached to them as compared to day schools. An attempt should be made by every major school to put up a dormitory.

- The normal development of a community around the world would be for there to be first a group of Jewishly involved adults who then perceive a need for schooling for their children. The school emerges out of the developing needs of the community. However, in the CIS, the order was often reversed. The first institutions to be established in communities were often schools, which then became stand-alone institutions. Sometimes communities developed out of or around these schools, but this was role-reversal that had its price. The

[1] The issue of a standardized syllabus is a complex one, though it is hoped that the recent formation of the Shema Yisroel School network will contribute to the development of this undertaking.

[2] In Moscow, the cheder is currently being run out of the Eitz Chaim School, though it is an independent project under the broader auspices of Rabbi Goldschmidt. In Kiev, the project is under R Bleich and in Odessa under R Baksht.

opportunity lies in the future to build things in the right order – schools that emerge out of communities and not the other way around.

- *Kindergartens:* We can expect another ten or so kindergartens to open in the CIS over the next 5-10 years, in the main with the financial assistance of the Lauder Foundation. The impact of the kindergarten extends far beyond the children it serves. The parents and relatives of the participants are very happy to participate in Jewish tradition programs. In the city of Tula, the kindergarten was the springboard for opening a Jewish day school. These day schools can be most easily established within the government framework or can sometimes be built in the framework of the existing school in the community.

Communities & Rabbinic Training

- The spread of the Jewish populations over many cities and over large areas makes community building very challenging. Ways of concentrating populations are being sought by some of the more imaginative people in the field: paying for moving and settling costs, establishing more dormitories and orphanages in locations with existing infrastructures, and creating satellite communities as magnets.

- The klei kodesh manpower needs are extensive. Slowly, as time moves on, more and more locals are taking over jobs currently held by rabbis who are commuting or altogether non-Russian[1]. In addition, although funding is scarce, new jobs are being created all the time. For example, the United Communities of Belarus comprises 16 communities, only three of which have a rabbi[2]. In the Ukraine it is better, but at least ten communities are not serviced by a rabbi. There are currently in excess of 50 rabbinic, teaching and other paid positions waiting to be filled[3]. With more funding, hundreds of

[1] The great community builders, both within Chabad and in the broader community have so far been non-Russian. Rabbi Goldschmidt of Moscow is Swiss, Rabbi Lazar of Chabad is Italian; Rabbi Baksht of Odessa is Israeli, Rabbi Bleich of Kiev is American and Rabbi Fima of Pinsk is English. However, some notable local community builders have begun to emerge. Rabbi Musalitin of Tula, Rabbi Shostak of Moscow (IDT), Rabbi Reichenstein of Kiev (Aish HaTorah) and Rabbi Levine of Tibilisi come to mind. In addition, Ner LeElef has been running rabbinic training programs in Moscow, St. Petersburg, Kiev and Odessa. The Moscow program, already in its second cycle, has seen over 40 graduates placed in the field. The Kiev and St. Petersburg programs saw similarly high rates of placement. (The Odessa program is still in its first cycle.) Recently, the Toras Chaim Kollel in Moscow, comprised of graduates from the Toras Chaim Yeshiva, changed its syllabus from Yeshivishe Masechtos to learning Yoreh Deah with the specific purpose of preparing rabbis for the field. The Tibilisi and Odessa Kollelim are made up mainly of locals who went to learn in Israel and have now returned. The principal of Rabbi Bleich's schools, as well as many teachers in many Jewish day schools (for example Eitz Chaim in Moscow), are locals. Rabbi Goldschmidt is of the opinion that even today, larger, more challenging cities require a non-Russian to run them.

[2] Admittedly, funding in this country is currently rather scarce. However, recently Chabad, Ner LeElef, HaMesilah, the Canadian Foundation and the Vaad Hatzalah LeNidchei Yisroel have all begun to pay greater attention to Belarus.

[3] As of writing, Keroor was offering six jobs.

other communal positions can be filled. In short, we are currently far from saturation point in the CIS.

- Secondly, there is a great need to increase the backup we give to rabbis in the field. This includes more Torah materials in Russian, more communication between the rabbis and a better understanding of what works and what does not in the field.

- Much needs to be done by way of upgrading the professional skills of those already in the field. Many of the Russian rabbis started out not used to concepts of goal setting, problem solving, fund-raising and many other concepts that are appropriate to their level of responsibility. Yet, we see great progress in this area all the time.

- There is a need to publish a compilation of halachik decisions applicable to the CIS and outreach there, as well as to produce or reproduce articles, transcripts of discussions and record relevant experiences in different places, thereby enabling the sharing and exchange of ideas which would enhance planning for the future.

- There is a need for a master plan of the larger cities, mapping out where to put new communities and other institutions. Attempts should be made to create hubs, neighborhoods that will attract those Jews getting more involved with their Judaism.

- Despite the enormous progress that has been made in the area of regaining synagogue buildings, renovating them and often putting up new buildings from scratch, it goes without saying that there is a huge backlog of synagogue buildings to be built and renovated, schools to be put up and especially mikvahs to be established.

- The small but growing number of Shomer Shabbos communities needs an enormous infusion form the outside. Most of these are being run by old-time Russian baalei-Teshuvah for people, many of whom have never witnessed Judaism practiced outside their own parameters. Experience in other countries indicates that, for normative Judaism to emerge from such a situation, such communities require their core body to be Bnei Torah. It is difficult to imagine such a core other than through the establishment of numerous kollelim, though this is a complicated and expensive undertaking. However, as more and more Klei Kodesh are absorbed by the major centers, this too helps to provide a core.

- Such communities have to establish many things an outsider would never consider or take completely for granted. The Dor Revii community in Russia is sending one of their women on a course to become a sheitel-macher. They established a gym, since all Russian gyms are mixed. They started gemachim, and rabbinic advisory hours advertised in the local newspapers, and run a monthly religious newspaper. They run a dormitory-hospitality service, used

by an average of 40 – 50 people every Shabbos, since most of their members are not within easy walking distance of the Shul.

Lay Leadership

In order for a community to be sustainable it needs a certain threshold of lay people not only involved but taking responsibility in various ways. In the beginning, it is expected that everything has to be imported from the outside – the ideas/vision, the money and the rabbi. If any of these are withdrawn, the community collapses. In time, the community begins to take care of itself. Should the rabbi leave, for example, the community forms a search committee to look for a new one. Should the finances be inadequate for something, they go looking, inside the city, for the money themselves. Should a new need arise, such as the schooling or a mikveh – they recognize the need and take responsibility for its implementation.

Today, there are only a handful of examples where this takes place[1]. Should the rabbi leave, they might appeal to Keroor or Ner LeElef, but that is as far as they will go. Lay initiatives of projects and self-funding exists only in small amounts. Chabad provides a model of rabbis consistently taking responsibility, but this is not a perfect model for non-Chabad rabbis, where we are still dealing with a turnover in most cities every few years.

A few years ago the Joint ran a course to train gabaim, and this was an excellent idea, though only a handful of graduates returned to their cities to take up these posts. What we are suggesting are leadership courses for laymen, not to be a gabbai, but to be develop a broader perspective and involvement in communal affairs. Such courses should involve men and women and are better done in the form of one to two day seminars, rather than longer courses. Of course, dealing with "professionals"

Who have no Torah background creates significant dangers as well. We have already see the results of the presidents of various communities who determined to rule over their rabbis. This is especially so because, in the CIS, the concept of Daas Torah is missing. The image of Rabbis Goldshmidth, Lasar ,Shaevish is close to that of being a businessmen or to officials, not to Torah persons. All of this has to be a part of the educational process involved in empowering the laypeople more.

Kashrus & Religious Infrastructure

Around the CIS, meat is generally taken care of, though Russia could do with a few more regional shochtim. Chalav Yisroel is a much bigger problem, though, whenever we have looked into things, supervising milk does not appear to be more than a minor technical challenge, and could be easily done on a far wider scale. Kosher restaurants exist in Moscow, Kiev and Odessa and could easily be established elsewhere.

What is lacking in many places is an organized infrastructure for importing of kosher products as well as any attempts to build up local hashgacha. Rabbi Baksht in Odessa actually has a purchasing agent to stock their kosher store, and this would be a

[1] Tula is the best example.

model to duplicate elsewhere. (Kosher stores also exist in Moscow[1] but they are not well supplied.) There is enough traffic between Moscow and Israel to keep such a store supplied with cheeses and yogurts. There is no reason why frum people in Moscow should live an almost milk-free diet. In Kiev, for example, several milk products are received from Donetsk. There is no reason why the continuous traffic from Israel should not be better harnessed as couriers and there is no reason why the local kosher-observing population could not sustain a few batches a year of certain products. The same is true of Tibilisi, Minsk, Odessa, Riga, Baku and Buchara. What is lacking is a bit of seed money, a little organization, and the selection of some people who stand to make a little valuable money from the whole thing. We suggest the following first steps:

- The appointment of a regional kashrut expert, with logistical and management skills and some seed money
- An plus an Israeli purchasing agent.

- An Israeli bochur to co-ordinate the purchase and delivery of perishables.

Shabbos

The CIS has a 6-day working week, and keeping Shabbos is a real challenge. Most people manage to find a solution for Saturday itself. Friday night, especially in the winter, is a much bigger challenge. In most of the CIS, the working day starts and ends later than in the States. (9 am is considered a sprightly hour in Moscow.) In Moscow, there are really only two firms run by frum people, the IDT companies under Michael Leibov, and the companies run by Sasha Rabinowitz. Even then, those working in such firms found their direct superiors sometimes quite unsympathetic to their needs. Many Shomer Shabbos people simply work extra hours every day, to as late as 9 or 10 pm daily, and/or on Sundays. We can only hope that the 5 day-week makes it to the CIS in the near-future, though there are no current signs of that.

In the mean-time, we suggest:

1. The hiring of a part-time lawyer, who can inform people of their rights and the obligations of the employer towards them. He will also deal with cases where the employees are too intimidated to deal with their bosses.
2. It would seem that, at least in Russia, some of the problems can be avoided if the employee informs the employer at the outset of his religious needs. At least some cases can be dealt with in this way.
3. Sympathetic businessmen such as Vladimir Rabinovich in Kiev, Alexander Feldman in Kharkov and Geidemak in Moscow should be approached to see what employment possibilities they could provide.

[1] In Moscow, there are at least four such stores: In the main synagogue, in the Dor Revii community, in Toras Chaim and in Chabad. However, these are, in the main, nothing more than a fridge plus.

Miscellaneous

- There is a need to further upgrade inter-organizational cooperation, for example, in the area of bringing out lecturers; to bring out Gedolim from time to time, etc[1].

- For the most part, there is not enough communication between major bodies running projects. In the Ukraine in particular, cities are run by 'stand-alone' organizations, who are often not even aware of the resources available to them or the ideas that could help them. Keroor does better with annual conventions run for its rabbis run together with Ner LeElef and some of the more major bodies are in constant contact with each other. However, there is clearly room for more coordination and also for more coordinated positions vis-à-vis the Joint, the Jewish Agency and other outside bodies.

- I-Mok, Ner LeElef, Shevut Ami and others have shown, through video-conferenced shiurim in several cities, how effectively technology can help to bridge the lack of speakers in the field. We need to apply these ideas more effectively and on a wider scale.

- These Shomer Shabbos families have certain needs which are special to the situation. An unusual number of them have never witnessed a normal marital relationship, even a secular one, and there is high need for Shalom Bayis input.

- The overall professionalism of outreach in the former CIS is, over-all, way behind that of the United States and elsewhere. The level of creativity, programming, goal-setting, follow-up, fund-raising and other needs a significant boost up.

- The Russian speaking community has failed to produce speakers of the stature of the first and second generation of speakers. Rabbis Esses, Grilius, Pantelat, Burstein etc. have seen no-one join their ranks in the last ten years. Potentially good speakers have to be identified and nurtured.

- The initial wave of curiosity about Judaism by Jews in the CIS has now passed. In the beginning, many Jews came to hear speakers just because of the radical idea that such a thing was permitted. To day, something more substantive, yet still highly attractive is required.

The Political and Economic Landscape

[1] Several Gedolim do come to the CIS. However, this is usually in the framework of servicing specific organizations. Thus, Rav Shmuel Kaminetzky Shlitah comes to Moscow for the Open Curtain and Rav Matisyahu Solomon, Shlitah comes for the Vaad Hatzalah LeNidchei Yisroel.

The Jewish nation is not subject to the natural laws of politics and economics, but whether their sojourn in this country or that has a future does hinge, in part, on whether the country has a future for them, viewed in this-worldly economic and political terms. This in turn requires the development of an independent judiciary, a drop in the level of bribery, an upholding of minority rights, etc.

In this regard, the Baltic countries (Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia) are doing well. They have joined the economic union and are now have to uphold certain standards in every area. So despite the traditional anti-Semitism of these local populations, things have gotten much better for the Jews there. The Ukraine, which has ambitions of joining the EU, is not far behind. The economy is growing, laws are being modernized though there is still a lot of bribery and the court system is still very beholden to political power[1].

The southern, Muslim countries are all going forward, though at a slower pace[2]. They have so far kept Muslim fundamentalism at bay, sometimes through extreme measures. Belorus remains the most Soviet of the CIS countries.

The big question is the future of Russia itself. Russia's overall profile, is one of falling population[3], poor medical care[4], rapidly increasing AIDS[5] and, outside of the major cities, great poverty. The military is a shambles and corruption is endemic[6].

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[1] These changes were greatly speeded after the 'Orange Revolution' in 2005, when Victor Kuchma was replaced by Yuschchenko. Foreign businessmen still feel that the investment climate is weak in the Ukraine in part because a contradiction between the Commercial Code and the Civil Code allows the state to interfere in the economy in a Soviet way. May laws, such as a laws on joint-stock companies to protect the rights of minority share holders, have yet to be passed. (Joen Marone in the Ukrainian Observer, September, 2005).

[2] Azerbaijan and Kazakjstan, which both hold huge unexploited oil riches, are about to become very rich. Azerbaijan has just completed a new oil pipeline. Both are rules by autoctrats who would like to force a strategic partnership with the USA. Both have now scheduled elections for the end of 2005, and, although these are still far from being truly democratic, there have been significant improvements in allowing opposition parties to exist and compete. Uzbekistan, on the other hand, recently broke its strategic partnership with the USA, ironically over its too harsh treatment of Moslem militants. However, it too, is making steady economic progress, and the Jews in all three countries feel safe with their rights well-protected. We have talked about this more under the profiles of the individual countries in Section C, below.

[3] Because of a low birth rate and some of the world's highest incidences of heart disease and other illnesses, Russia's population dropped by 4.5 million in the first dozen years after the fall of the Soviet Union, a number unseen since the Stalinist purges and the famines of the 1930's.

[4] One in five Russian hospitals has no running water. (William Grimes, NY Times, July 1, 2005, reviewing "Kremlin Rising," Peter Baker and Susan Glasser.)

[5] Russia, which had virtually no AIDS problem under Communism, now faces the possibility that by 2010, 250,000 to 650,000 people will die from the disease each year. The government has ignored the problem.(ibid)

[6] From the traffic police who openly solicit bribes to the members of the Duma, or parliament, whose votes sell to the highest bidder. A defense lawyer, when told that juries in the United States must reach a unanimous verdict, can hardly believe his ears. That means, he says, "You only have to buy one!" (ibid.)

The judicial process is still poor[1]. Yet, at least in the major cities, where nearly all the Jews are, the signs of new wealth for the common man are all over. In 2002, eight new malls opened in Moscow, their supermarkets, restaurants and shops aimed at a broad swathe of the local population[2].

After the chaos of the Yeltsin years, people have found attractive the trade off of gaining security and more national pride at the expense of democracy and speaking as freely[3] as one might in the West. "Putin is probably not a liberal or a democrat, but he is more liberal and more democratic than 70 percent of the population," Mikhail B. Khodorkovsky, the owner of the Yukos oil company and one of Mr. Putin's prime targets among the oligarchs, commented[4].

As long as the economy continues to do well, the Russian will be happy[5]. For two years, 2002-04, after the Yukos affair, foreign investment slowed, worried about the safety of the investment climate in Russia. But, foreign investment bounced back in 2005, and the staggering rise in global oil prices around the same time meant that Russia is now awash in petro-dollars.

Should oil plummet, or any other factor trigger a downturn in the economy, the middle class, now used to a certain standard of living, would look for a scapegoat. That bodes ill, Leonard Nevzlin[6] holds, for minority groups, especially for the Jews who are already on thin ice in Russia – especially since the government is already stirring up nationalist sentiment throughout the country[7]. Nationalism and a general botched policy has already contributed towards a Islamic militancy amongst the 23

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[1] When a lawyer for Igor Bortnikov, accused of strangling a man and stealing his car, questions the police investigation, the judge snaps, "To doubt the investigation is illegal." (ibid.)

[2] When Mr. Putin took office, the city had 2 million square feet of mall space. This year, the figure reached 21 million square feet. (ibid)

[3] Peter Baker and Susan Glasser, the authors of "Kremlin Rising," point out that Vladimir V. Putin, Russia's president, is "a K.G.B. colonel in a modern suit," a reactionary in his instincts and coldly realistic in his assessment of what the Russian people want and will tolerate. Since taking office at the end of 1999, the authors write, he has, in the name of "managed democracy," returned supreme power to the Kremlin, smothered regional autonomy, marginalized the democratic opposition, turned television into a propaganda tool and defanged the billionaire oligarchs who run Russia's largest companies. In March 2004, he won re-election with just over 71 percent of the vote. (William Grimes, NY Times, July 1, 2005)

[4] Mr. Khodorkovsky was recently sentenced to nine years in prison for fraud, embezzlement and tax evasion.

[5] Russia still depends on the West for its economic stability and much of that stability rests precariously on the price of oil.

[6] Leonid Nevzlin is a major shareholder in Yukos, the oil company the Russian government broke up for so-called tax evasion, after which the shares plummeted. He now lives in Israel, one of three Russian Jewish oligarchs living in Herzlia Pituach. He has begun once again to speak up against the totalitarian direction Putin seems to be moving in. For several years, Nevzlin was actively involved in Russian Jewish affairs, in deed and in money. He once headed the Russian Jewish Congress and is today chairman of the Diaspora Museum.

[7] Interview with the Jerusalem Post, printed March 25, 2005.

million Moslems in the Caucasus regions[1]. Nobody quite knows if this is true, and not too many Jews seem to care enough to pack their bags and leave. The "managed democracy" of Putin, including the loss of many democratic rights, does not seem to bother them much. Putin made Russia less democratic and less capitalistic to a degree. Most disturbing, Putin seems to have restored some of the unbirdaled powers of the security services leading to government involvement in high profile assisinations and other crimes to achieve political ends[2]. However, the main the reforms introduced under Yeltsin remained in place.

It should be remembered that the totalitarian and bureaucratic aspects of Communism were no aberration for Russia. For centuries, even the best of the Tzars acted in ways that hardly seemed designed to build a great civilization[3]. Many historians can only make sense of this by saying that Russia is simply not a part of Western civilization and has to be understood in different terms altogether. Often is seems that the sheer size of the country, the number of its people and the vastness of its natural resources is what allowed it to bludgeon through another era.

Putin judges everything according to whether it provides stabilization. Putin insists that this is the best strategy to follow after the turbulent years of the late Gorbachev and Yeltsin eras, when the average Russian citizen lost his security. There was enormous money to be made now, but that was only for the lucky few. In the olden, Communist days, everyone had a roof over their heads, however small and uncomfortable, and everyone had food on their table. Today, no-one is guaranteed anything, and many resent what they see as the oligarchs' grab for power. The oligarchs had made their money in such a short time that the people believe that they had done it dishonestly, and therefore Putin's move against this class were enormously popular.

In the same way, he would argue that it was necessary to eliminate oligarchic control of the media. As he saw it, the oligarchs were using the media to fight their own commercial and personal battles as well as to exercise naked political ambition, undermining the stability of the government[4]. It was also necessary to reassert

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[1] This is a mountainous region between the Caspian and the Black sees. It includes Chechenya.

[2] The assassination of Moscow journalist Dmitry Kholodov was traced to the 45th Airborne Forces Brigade; Vladislav Listyev's murder was linked to a super-secret FSB-/URPO (Federal Scurity Service – Organized Crime Directorate) subdivision. Sergei Yushenkov's assassination fits the same pattern. Analysis of poisoning-related deaths of some prominent Russian politicians and businessmen shows that this could only have been done by structures possessing special capabilities. The government has not set up special-op stations, including SO units designed to perform special missions, with various public foundations and associations used as a front. These special missions in particular include physical elimination of persons "posing a threat to society." (Igor Korolkov, PGO's Reply Raises More Questions Than It Answers, The Moscow News, 5-11 October 2005)

[3] Their decisions were too often based on personal greed, naked ambition, palace intrigues and even base lust. They saw the Russian people as there to serve them, rather than the other way around.

[4] The best example of this is Gozinsky, a supporter of Jewish causes who ran an independent television station critical of the government. Gozinsky showed naked political ambitions of his own. In about 2000, the government television tower caught fire, shitting down the state television for several days. Gozinsky, who used satellites, then embarrassed the government by offering the government to run his station through his satellites. Soon after that, Gozinsky was forced to flee on tax charges, the usual mechanism the Russians use to pursue its

government control of the country's strategic assets, particularly its energy resources[1]. Most countries of the world have state control of their energy resources. So what is wrong if Russia does the same? The US is one of the few countries that do not.

In addition, Putin believed that the Yeltsin years in particular ceded too much power to the regional governors.

In Putin's mind the first priority was to recentralize power in the Kremlin, both politically and economically. For that reason, he justifies the abolition of the elections for governor and increasing the minimum number of votes needed to qualify for political party status in the Duma from 5 percent to 7% of the votes cast.

In his mind, what led to the Rose Revolution in Georgia and the Orange Revolution in Ukraine was that the governments were unstable, the economies were producing far below their potential, which led to economic unrest, and also there was too much corruption. There was a strong feeling in Russia that the revolutionary unrest in parts of the Commonwealth of Independent States was provoked and stimulated by Western, including American, financial support for such efforts[2].

Some of these developments do not directly effect the Jewish community. But others are quite ominous for Jewish communal life. For example, in November, 2005, the Russian Parliament passed the first of three necessary readings to impose greater government control over charities and other private organizations, including some of the world's most prominent, in a move aimed at restricting foreign support for political activity in the country. (After this, the legislation must still pass the upper house.) Russian organizations would now be restricted in their ability to accept donations or hire foreigners and prohibit foreign organizations from opening branches in Russia[3].

The legislation was aimed at preventing foreign efforts to support political opposition movements, like the one that swept to power after the "Orange Revolution" in Ukraine last fall.

The law would put Russia in line with countries like Turkmenistan, and mentions that even Kazakhstan tried to impose such restrictions, but was ultimately blocked.

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wealthy ‘enemies’. Gozinsky was subsequently briefly detained in Spain on an extradition request by Russia, settled for a while in England and now in the United States. He is to this day a supporter of Jewish causes in the CIS.

[1] This led to the government dismantling most of the oil-giant Yukos, which government-run countries then bought. Kordarovsky, who has a Jewish father, and who has political ambitions, was sentenced to 8 years in prison on tax-evasion charges. One of the major share-holders in Yukos was Leonard Nevzlin, who was once very involved with the Russian Jewish community, become president of REK, the Russian Jewish Congress and a strong supporter of Keroor. Nevzlin now lives in Herzlia, Israel. He recently became chairman of the Diaspora Museum.

[2] Based on Marshal Goldman, The Jerusalem Post, Oct. 2, 2005.

[3] The legislation, as now written, would force organizations like the Ford Foundation, Greenpeace or Amnesty International to close their offices in Russia and reregister as purely Russian organizations. But even that would be difficult. Earlier this year, the director of the Federal Security Service, Nikolai Patrushev, accused Western organizations - including the Peace Corps and the British medical charity Merlin - of being fronts for espionage. (Reported in the NY Times, Nov. 23, 2005 by Steven Lee Meyers)

Even if the restrictions on foreigners are removed, the main components affecting Russian organizations are likely to remain. Leaders of Russian groups said the legislation would subject them to constant scrutiny by officials, who would have new powers to demand documents at any time proving they are not engaged in political activity or other work not specifically allowed in their own charters.

For three months at the end of 2005, Moscow's chief rabbi, Rabbi Pinchas Goldschmidt was denied a visa for what the Russians stated absurdly were national security reasons and which may have included a strong component of internal Jewish politics. Goldschmidt, a Swiss citizen, has led Moscow's central synagogue for nearly 15 years. The issue comes as Russia's commitment to human rights is increasingly being questioned around the globe. It is not known whether local Jewish politics, in particular Vladimir Slutsker, a former president of the Russian Jewish Congress, was behind the visa scandal[1]. What is known is that the government is now making attempts to minimize foreign participation in non-profit and religious sectors. Minority religious groups, including Jewish groups, have remained calm, as the proposed measures may not affect their activities directly.

The facts are that Putin is very popular amongst the broader population, though far less so amongst the Jews. Putin provides some kind of fantasy that he will be able to restore the average man's stability and security.

In foreign policy, Putin has also returned partially to old Communist doctrines of supporting evil countries against the West. Despite good relations with Israel, Russia has gone back to supplying Syria with arms, including those that are highly dangerous to Israel. They have helped Iran build its nuclear reactors, and have refused to support UN Security Council resolutions against Iran's failure to commit against developing nuclear arms. They attempted to interfere in Ukrainian, Georgian and other internal politics, always on the side of the less democratic candidate, and the one more likely to stay within the Russian orbit. They routinely fly air force planes over the Baltic states and Finland. Officially, Russia is on the side of the Americans in their war against terrorism. They have their own problems with Chechen (Moslim) terrorists. Yet, in practice, there have not been of any help in the global war against Moslem fundamentalists. They are trying to get closer to the Chinese to form a kind of a coalition against the Americans, It is difficult to understand these positions of the Russians except in terms of the old Cold War mentality, of us verses them, of spheres of influence and staking out territory.

[1] Shortly before Goldschmidt was banned from Russia, he and Slutsker were involved in a dispute over a piece of property owned by the Moscow Jewish Religious Community, Goldschmidt's group, but used by the RJC.

SECTION THREE: JEWISH PROFILE OF MAJOR CIS CITIES

Below we have attempted to give an overview of the major countries ad cities in the CIS. We have left out some significant cities, most notably Samara and Yekaterinburg in Russia, Dnepropetropsk and Kharkov in the Ukraine, all places where Chabad is doing a fabulous job and Minsk (Belarus), the latter because of current complications in the communal arrangements.

A. BALTIC COUNTRIES (LATVIA, LITHUANIA & ESTONIA)

Of Latvia's 10,000 Jews, 9,000 reside in Riga[1], capital of Latvia, comprising the majority of all Jews in the Baltics. Riga, a beautiful city with a total population of about 2,580,000 has an unusual Jewish community. Riga has always been more cosmopolitan than its famous neighbor, Vilna (Vilnius), in nearby Lithuania. Hence, it was also a center of Haskala. Perhaps the Communists knew what they were doing

[1] Resekne, Kraslava, Ludza and Dugavpils in Latvia support small Jewish populations. Chabad puts the population of Riga at 12 000.

when they chose Riga as one of the few synagogues which they allowed to function throughout the Soviet era.

Rabbi Barkan, the chief Rabbi of Latvia, died in 2004, and the Shul now has two official rabbis[1]. The community is slightly better off financially than most other communities, as Latvia is a part of the EU and is a fairly rapidly emerging economy[2]. Like most major, former Soviet cities, the price of real estate in particular and the cost of living in general is skyrocketing[3].

The Latvian Jewish community is very organized in the sense that almost everything is under one umbrella[4] with a secular, lay board of sophisticated and concerned, but Jewishly ignorant businessmen calling many of the shots and giving some of their own money as well[5]. There is fine Beit Midrash, in which many tens of people participate in shiurim daily[6], and a reasonably well-functioning synagogue in the Old City[7]. There is also a small Yeshiva[8]. The Jewish communities in Latvia run two day schools and three pre-schools[9]. Riga itself maintains a community center out of which the Alef society for young adults runs, a matzah factory, a Jewish newspaper and the only Jewish hospital in the former Soviet Union. There is a center for Center for Judaic Studies at the University of Latvia, out of which Rabbi Eizensharf runs shiurim for the students and which houses a Jewish library. There is a holocaust memorial at Rumbula, the site of Nazi massacres[10].

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[1] Rabbi Aryeh Becker and Rabbi Mordechai Glazman, the latter of Chabad. Rabbi Becker has now moved back to Israel, and shows no interest in this position, concentrating instead on his Beis Midrash. (see below).

[2] Besides the usual cadre of oligarchs, there are a number of people who are middle to upper middle class, a phenomena largely absent in Russia.

[3] A 2 bedroomed apartment would now be on average $600 rent a month.

[4] This includes the community center, the Aleph institute the synagogue, and several other organizations. It appears not to include the schools or R Becker's beis Midrash.

[5] The chairman, Yeshurenko, who owns a bank, donates well in excess of $100 000 a year. One of the board members is now frum.

[6] This is funded jointly by Rabbi Aryeh Bekker, a banker-businessman who until recently lived in the city. The main teacher is Rabbi Shlomo Nachat, who is there for two weeks of the month, and whose salary is paid for by Ner LeElef. He teaches and learns with people round the clock. About 20% of those attending the shiurim are females. One couple sent their kid to Lakewood this year and several have been frum for a few years now, finding one of the few places in the CIS where they can keep on growing.

[7] The location is inconvenient for most people, since almost no-one lives in the immediate area. However, this is the old synagogue building which has been renovated and it is unthinkable to the locals to establish the synagogue anywhere else.

[8] The Rosh Yeshiva died a few years ago and after being reduced two bochrim has now climbed to five students.

[9] In Riga, the two primary school systems are the Dubnov elementary, middle and high schools, a secular-orientated school system in which Rabbi Israel Eizensharf teaches kodesh and the Chabad schools. Both are vibrant with relatively large student populations.

[10] A second location was the site of general massacres of not only Jews, but the local, non-Jewish population as well.

Rabbi Glazman, the Chabad rabbi, is the official rabbi of the city and its only synagogue (officially shared with R Becker who shows no interest in the position today), and therefore deals with all the broader communal issues, running the minyanim, counseling, worrying about the elderly, the chevra kadisha and others. The local Chabad runs a school including a nursery school comprising about 160 students in all. The classes are generally mixed, the building of the highest quality and both the Kodesh level much higher than the average for schools in the CIS[1]. (By contrast, the secular school, the Simon Dubnow School which has gone down from a peak of 400 students to 250 or so today[2].) The Chol is in reasonable competition with other private schools in the area, something quite exceptional for Jewish schools in the CIS. Mrs. Glazman seems to be a great secret here – for it is she who runs the school.

Chabad also has a Sunday school and summer camps. Its Café LeChaim provides subsidized pastries and meals, in a very tastefully decorated environment[3]. Dozens of challahs are sold each week-something unheard of just a short time ago, and kosher meat is sold at cost. Chabad has a beautiful mikvah, one of the nicest anywhere in the former CIS, and there are about 50 couples keeping Taharas Hamishpacha today[4]. Their soup kitchen, is very tastefully done and they run a "Meals on Wheels" program. The Joint also runs such services, on a larger scale and with a wider range of services, but these are not kosher.

The Glazmans are a dynamic couple. and is active in adult education, which includes seminars, tours and classes of the mikvah, women's clubs, lectures, and ongoing learning classes, on many levels, fill the social and educational needs of the community.

Contrary to the myth that Chabad in the CIS receive most of their funding from Leviev, Rabbi Glazman's sources of income appear to be on a healthy footing. He has several types of sources of income: Donations from overseas, local supporters and school fees. The local sources of income are on the rise and are not insubstantial. He is also gradually pushing up school fees as the overall financial situation in Riga improves.

Another force in the town is Rabbi Aryeh Becker, though now greatly reduced as he has relocated to Israel. Rabbi Aryeh Becker is unusual in that he is self-employed (a bank manager[5]), while functioning in a rabbinic position[6].

The Beis Midrash which Rabbi Becker runs is about three years old, and has learning throughout the day. It is certainly, from a Torah point of view, the most exciting institution in the city. Four businessmen learn every day from 6:30 AM until 9:00 before they go to work. Others come in at different times during the day, either

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[1] One of the teachers, Mrs. Kot, has developed and Hebrew syllabus which integrates Judaism and Hebrew into a clear syllabus, together with workbooks, words translated in Russian, etc. – a level of professional that is truly astounding for that part of the world.

[2] It's kodesh is taught by two traditional people today. Until recently, Rabbi Eizensharf was invited into the school as a volunteer, but he stopped doing this when the school stopped ordering kosher food.

[3] When I visited, around lunch time in Dec. 05, there were about 6 other people in the place.

[4] A second mikveh, attached to the synagogue is unusable.

[5] His father is a very well connected banker and Aryeh is officially the manager of the Riga branch. Rabbi Becker's official position is Deputy Chief Rabbi of Riga & Latvia.

[6] Officially, he is the co-chief rabbi of Latvia, though he shows no interest in this position.

to learn with a chavrusa or hear a Shiur (usually in Gemara). Ner Le'elef supports Rabbi Shlomo Nachat as the teacher-Rabbi of this flourishing Beis Midrash, which is funded, in large part, from R Becker's own pocket. (Rabbi Nachat lives in Israel and spends half his time in Riga.)

Rabbi Nachat spends the whole day giving shiurim and learning bechavrusa with people of all different ages, totaling about 150 different people on a weekly basis. Unlike many other cities where the Shiurim remain at a basic level many of Rabbi Nachat's students have grown significantly in their level of Torah learning over the last year. Many spend several hours a day studying. New people are continually joining the groups which are divided by age.

Rabbi Becker uses internet videoconferencing for Shiurim given in Israel.
The secular Jewish school, the Simon Dubnow School Currently this school, with 350 students (down from a peak of 600) is on the edge of town in an oldish building. The hope is that, with the help of a Lauder foundation grant, a new building wiil go up in the center of town, which is likely to significantly upgrade the school and increase its numbers.

Rabbi Israel Eisensharf is a general resource for the community. Rabbi Eisensharf also gives shiurim to Jewish students in the University of Riga and in the Alef Center in the beautiful Jewish cultural center of the community which also serves as the offices of the official community[1]. The cultural center has plays, social events, an Ort-computer center and such like things. The Alef Center is separately funded by the Joint and runs out of the same building, having as its target audience students until age 35[2].

The remaining countries, Lithuania and Estonia are, Jewishly speaking, much more modest affairs. The capital of Lithuania is Vilnius (Vilna), with a general population of about 3,700,000, has a Jewish population of between 5,000 and 6,000 Jews. The Nazis decimated over 94% of Lithuania's Jewish population. Vilnius has two Jewish communites, the official Jewish community[3] and Chabad, as well as a Chabad school of over 400 students, including a dormitory faciltiy[4]. Estonia has a small (2 500 – 3 000) well organized community in the capital, Tallinn[5]. A day school, a pre-school and four supplementary schools operate in Estonia serving close to 400 students. Tallinn itself has a small synagogue[6].

B. BELARUS

Belarus is the home to several of the most famous pre-war European cities,

[1] The Umanovska, Gita - Executive Director Riga Jewish Community is Gita Umanovska, a flamboyant, resourceful and highly intelligent woman, who is pro-Judaism though not practicing in any way. She is an invaluable source of powerful insights into all aspects of the community.

[2] The head of the Alef Center is Victoria Gubatova, a very intelligent lady with traditional leanings.

[3] The rabbi of the official community is Rabbi Chaim Burshtein.

[4] The Chabad rabbi is Rabbi Krinsky

[5] The rabbi, Rabbi Kot, is Chabad, a brother of the Rabbi Kot in Riga
[6] http://www.amyisrael.co.il/cis

Jewishly speaking. Here one can find Volozhin, Radin, and the Mir, amongst others. Yet, there are no Jews in most of these former citadels of Torah. However, Belarus still has a population that, despite seventy years of Communism, is closer to Judaism than most Jews from Russia. On the other hand, from a communal point of view, it is one of the least developed of the CIS countries.

The president of Belarus, Alexander Lukachenko, is a very charismatic and inflexible man. He is attempting to drive Belarus back to communism. The laws of the state are not flexible and all activities, both business and community, are under strong government supervision. This fact creates difficulties for religious activities, too. There isn't a law of restitution and therefore it is very difficult for Jewish communities to find appropriate places for their activities. (Most of the old synagogue buildings are now used by the government and are not in Jewish hands).

Belarus has seventeen communities, some of them with sizable Jewish populations, though only three at present have rabbis, and most of them function only on Shabbat[1]. The first of these is Minsk, the capital, which is quite well developed Jewishly, compared to most other CIS cities. Pinsk is also vibrant, with a community and a well run school. The third of these communities, Mogilev, was started by Ner LeElef in coordination with the Vaad Hatzalah LeNidchei Yisrael.

Belarus is the most Communust of the former CIS countries. It still uses the term 'KGB' for its secret service.

After Russia and Ukraine, Belarus is the third-largest Jewish community in the CIS. Minsk has 20 000 or maybe even 25,000[2] Jews while significant other communities live in Bobruisk, Mogilev, Gomel, and Vitebsk. Most Belarussian cities with a large Jewish presence have synagogues and schools. Two day schools, two pre-schools and eighteen supplementary schools operate in Belarus, serving the needs of over 1600 students in 13 cities. In Minsk, the Lauder Foundation also established a day school run by Chabad. Minsk has two synagogues, the main one run until now by Rabbi Sender Uritzky and another Chabad synagogues run by Rabbi Yosef Gruzman. Minsk also has a community center, a Jewish People's University, a Center for Jewish National Culture and two small yeshivas, one in the main synagogue and a small Lubavitch yeshivah. Many cultural groups exist as well as a Jewish press that publishes several papers and journals[3]. A consortium comprising the Vaaad Hatzala LeNidchei Yisroel, Ner LeElef and Shevut ami (using Canadian Foundation funding) funds the community in Mogilev, while Ner LeElev and Hamesila (Rabbi Yeiseal Taub) funds Gomel.

Mogilev

After Minsk, Mogilev has the largest community in Belarus[4]. Despite a certain level of interest in Judaism, there has been no rabbi or proper community for decades.

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[1] These are Bobruisk, Baranovichi, Borisov, Brest, Gomel, Grodno, Kalinkovichi Minsk, Mozyr, Molodechno, Mogilev, Orsha, Pinsk, Polotsk, Shutsk, Vitebsk, Rogacher. After Mogilev and Gomel, the next largest community is Pinsk, with a Jewish population of between 800 and 2 000. Pinsk has a large well-run school, headed by Rabbi Moshe Fima, with large dormintory facilities including many orphans.

[2] Chabad put the figures as high as 45 000.

[3] http://www.amyisrael.co.il/cis

[4] Population figures for Gomel differ between 2500 – 7 000 people.

A graduate of Ner LeElef's Kiev program, Rabbi Baruch Shlain, was chosen to re-establish the community. Overnight, tens of Jews came to services, meals, and the shiurim scattered throughout the week. All ages, including the crucial student and young married groups participate. Within a few months, he was able to take what was formerly a secular Jewish Kindergarten and introduce kosher food and Torah lessons.

There is now a well-used Jewish lending library, a women's Rosh Chodesh club, sports and a Sunday school. The latter includes Torah lessons, English classes, and developmental classes for a group of between seven to fifteen children.

Several students from Mogilev have already gone to Yeshiva and the prognosis for further growth seems very good. A Chabad rabbi has now also moved into the community. Towards the end of 2005, Rabbi Shlein left for America to get his green card, He was replaced by Rabbi Zilbershtein.

Gomel

Gomel is a famous city with a rich Jewish history. Before the Communist revolution, there were more than 25 synagogues. Many famous Talmidei Chachamim lived in Gomel and the surrounding areas. The father of Rabbi Eliashiv was the rabbi of Gomel and was called "Gomel Rov." Rabbi 'Lazar" Shach also spent some time in Gomel.

Gomel is one of the big industrial centers in Belaruss. The general population of Gomel is 480,000 people. The Jewish population of Gomel is hard to know. Estimates range between 3,000 - 7,000[1].

Yet despite that, an old Hassidic synagogue serves as the facilities for all segments of the community. This building was bought by JOINT in 2000. It has two floors and is about 500 meters squared. It was built in 1890. Until 1940 some Jewish activities were held there, but after the Second World War it was used solely by the government. Since 1992 this building has been rented by the local Jewish community.

With the exception of the Chabad representative and EZRA, all of the Jewish organizations are situated in this building: the Orthodox community, the Joint, the Sochnut (the Jewish Agency), the Reform community, and a Youth organization.

The Jewish population in Gomel is relatively intelligent; friendly and not anti religious. The orthodox community, called "Beit Yaakov," consists of 65 permanent members: both men and women. This community is under the umbrella of IRO, the general communal umbrella for Belorus. Even before Rabbi Kurtzer arrived there in 2005, there were Tefillot three times a week (Monday, Thursday, Shabbat), with at least 30 semi-observant, mainly elderly people.

Gomel has a secular Jewish School & Kindergarten, though with only a small minority of halachik Jews[2]. There are 40 kids in the Kindergarten, and 80 students, ages 6-11, in the school. The School is well managed and has a good reputation in the city. Many non Jews want to send their kids there Officially, all the Jewish lesions are non- religious lessons, but they based on Jewish tradition. The government forbids them to carry out Tfillot and no rabbi or religious representative is allowed to enter there. They celebrate Chanuka and other Holidays as if they were traditional events. All pupils, even the non-Jews, wear Kippot.

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[1] Chabad tends to use the higher figures as they do all over the CIS

[2] There are about 50% of the pupils that have Jewish parents or grandparents. Only 15 pupils (10%) are Jewish according to Halacha. 40% of the teaching staff is Jewish.

Although the school is closed to the Rabbi, it does allow him to target their parents as well as the Jewish teachers. In addition, one can reach the children over Shabat, during vacation and holidays.

Ezra, the youth movement has about 20 members, ages 8-18, with a very pro-Judaism orientation. 70% of them are Halachik Jews, and has a number of past EZRA members now learn in Israel in religious schools, one in the Minsk Yeshiva. There are several other smaller youth groups, and these are more secular by nature.

There is a relatively big reform community, based in the second floor of the community building. There aren't any activities during the week, but on Shabbat and Holidays up to 130 people participate (not only seniors). The reform leaders in Belaruss are intelligent and well prepared leaders. However, in the CIS, unlike in the States, the Reform movement is also moving the Jews towards Judaism. They simply stop too early. A good and dynamic Orthodox rabbi would finish the job which Reform begins.

The Joint supports a non religious community called ACHDUT[1].

The Joint also has a kosher-style soup kitchen. Gomel is near Chernobil. Since the Chernobil desaster, the health situation in Gomel has been terrible[2].

In September, 2005, Rabbi Yosef Kurtzer arrived in the city, in a project jointly funded by Ner LeElef and HaMesilah. With the arrival of Rabbi Kurtzer, the level of activity increased dramatically. He began a broad range of shiurim, Chevra Kadisha services,and work with the youth, a woman's club,

C. OTHER COUNTRIES

1. Moldova

The capital of Moldova is Kishinev with a general population of 4,400,000 and a Jewish population of 12 000, half the Jews of Moldava. Jews have lived in Moldova since the 15th century. Before World War II, the Jewish population reached more than 250,000. A civil war in 1992 forced many of Moldova's Jews to relocate[3].

There is a synagogue in Kishinev as well as two day schools, two pre-schools and nine supplementary schools teach over 1100 students[4]. Until this year, the Vaad Hatzola LeNidchei Yisroel used to operate a set of schools and the community. However, this has now been taken over by Rabbi Baksht of Odessa.

D. RUSSIA

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[1] Gershanok Vladimir Borisovich is the head, and Volynskaya Anna is the coordinator. There are 200 permanent members, 40% of which are Halachic Jews. We do not know how many of these actually attend events.

[2] Many of the people have health problems such as cancer, blood problems and so on. "Hesed Batya" tries to help them, but there isn't enough money. They need wheelchairs for the disabled, diapers, medicines, etc. For several years after the disaster, Yeshivat HaNegev in Netivot had a project to bring young Jews from Gomel to their yeshiva.

[3] http://www.amyisrael.co.il/cis

[4] http://www.amyisrael.co.il/cis

Few Jews lived in Russian cities until the mid-1800's. Most of Russia's Jews were forced to reside in the "Pale of Settlement," an area that included present-day Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, Lithuania and Poland. During Soviet rule, many Belarussian and Ukrainian Jews settled in Russia for the prospects of better educational and professional opportunities.

They came into these cities which, although they all had Jewish communities, were not deeply rooted. The Communists did the rest, as we have explained elsewhere**.** Today, Russia can boast seventeen day schools, eleven pre-schools and 81 supplementary schools with almost 7000 students as well as four Jewish universities[1].

Russia is the largest country in the world, spanning seven time zones. In talking of Russia, one really needs to talk of areas or zones. Some of the primary areas are Moscow and surroundings[2] and the Volga region (Central Russia)[3], where Jewish populations are significant. These are closely followed by the Urals, which has about 70 000 Jews today[4]. The main cities here are Eketeringburg[5] and Perm[6], cities which are 3-4 hour plane rides from Moscow. The Jewish population of the Urals is more spread out than other areas. There are lots of towns with small Jewish populations in the Urals. Siberia[7], famous for its gulags is home to Irkutzk[8] and the Jewish Atuonomous region of Birobodjan, both of which we discuss below as well as Omsk, Novosobirsk and others, for a total of at least 70 000 Jews. There are many other cities besides those we talk of in detail below. In the Russian Caucasus, the area of southern Russia that borders the Caucasus states, an area rife with poverty and crime, there are some 65,000 Jews[9]. The area is also on the border with Chechnya, and it has been a refuge for a substantial number of Chechen Jews[10]. There are at least 25,000 Jews in other, more remote areas, stretching as far as Vladivostok in the Far East, and Murmansk, Arkhangelsk and Appatity in the Northwest, which is bitterly cold and inaccessible for most of the year. St. Petersburg (see below) is the second largest Jewish city and is located close to the Finnish border and Varonish is well to the west

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[1] http://www.amyisrael.co.il/cis/russia.htm

[2] Including Tula and Yuroslavel

[3] This includes Samara and Saratov

[4] Tens of thousands of Jews settled in the Urals during and after World War II.

[5] Euketeringburg has a strong Chabad presence. The attempt by Rabbi Moshe Shternberg to establish an alternative community there failed, due to a lack of a building. He is now the rabbi of the Shevut Ami community in Carmiel, Israel.

[6] We discuss Perm separately below.

[7] Thousands fled to Siberia to escape during the Nazi era.

[8] In 2004, the synagogue was burnt to the ground.

[9] The main center in this are is Rostov-on-Don which has a JDC, a Hillel and a JCC .

[10] JDC web site

of Moscow[1]. However there are Jews scattered in the northwest, in Kaliningrad[2] and in the Far East as well[3].

Birobidzhan

In 1934, Stalin established the (Jewish) Autonomous Region of in Russia's Far East as a secular Jewish homeland to divert Soviet Jews from Palestine. The Jews of Birobidzhan, the capital city of this Autonomous Region, never became particularly observant, though the place did become a center of Yiddish-Jewish culture[4]. The lack of Torah observance is partially because Birobidzhan was created as a Jewish community from scratch. In other cities there were always one or two families who were well established in the city who were able to provide some Torah-core around which community life, however tenuous, would continue and to which newcomers might be attracted. But Birobidzhan was a new migration that came to an empty core.

In 1948-49 — two decades later than in the rest of the USSR — the Yiddish schools were closed, the theater was shut down and many actors executed, and the state library's extensive Judaica section was burned. The last synagogue burned down in the 1950s.

Yet, Jews in the region continued to mark Jewish holidays, and the older people remembered their Yiddish. Jewish cultural life was revived in Birobidzhan much earlier than elsewhere in the Soviet Union, with the opening of Yiddish theaters in the 1970s. Yiddish and Jewish traditions have been required components in all public schools for almost 15 years, taught not as Jewish exotica but as part of the region's national heritage. Observance was something different, however. During the last 40 years of the Soviet era it was limited to a handful of older Jews who met twice a year — at Passover and during the High Holidays.

Birobidzhan has just built a new, Chabad-run[5] synagogue, to which the regional government contributed $112,000 toward building costs. There is a second, older community which since 1986, runs out a small wooden hut on the outskirts of town[6], supported by Keroor and by the JDC. A Jewish day school is planned for 2006, and it now has a kosher soup kitchen.

It also has a Jewish (cultural) community center, reflecting its strongly secular-Yiddish theatre past. There is still a Yiddish teacher in the town, Belyaeva. Many of

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[1] Varonish, in turn, has six small communities surrounding it. It is run by Rabbi Ariel Turovsky, who is led the community to steady growth. He replaces rabbi Noson Virshuvsky who has now become the rabbi of Cracow.

[2] Kaliningrad is a little enclave disconnected from the rest of Russia and is just north of Poland. It used to be the German city of Koningsberg and has something of a European flavor to it. The Dunner dynasty of London and Bnei Brak come from there. The Lauder foundation have invested in renovating a building there, and a Keroor rabbi (Rabbi Yisroel Taub) is due to go out shortly. There is also a small Chabad.

[3] This includes Vladivostok

[4] In 2005, the city unveiled a new Sholem Aleichem statue

[5] In 2003, Rabbi Mordechai and Esther Scheiner arrived in the town as Chabad emissaries from Israel.

[6] For 10 years they shared their building with half a dozen women, who follow a kind of Seventh-day Adventist religion that considers Saturday the day of rest.

the region's elected officials are Jewish, (including the governor, Nikolai Volkov) though only a few are interested in developing the region's Jewish identity from a carefully preserved memorial to a bygone era into a living Jewish community.

The city's Jewish population — depleted by the large aliyah wave of the 1990s — hovers somewhere between 2,000-6,000 out of a total population of 80,000[1].

Moscow

The history of Moscow Jewry does not go back as far as other places, for Jews were forbidden to live there. Under early Communism, Jews poured into Moscow, and too full advantage of the educational and career possibilities offered by the Soviet Capital. At the same time, the repression of Judaism was greatest here, aided by the assimilatory urges of the Jews themselves. In 1936 Soviet regime closed the last Jewish school in Moscow. During 1937-38 the biggest part of educational and cultural Jewish organizations were closed too. In 1948, the Soviets voted for the Israeli state and Golda Meir, the first Israeli ambassador to Russia arrived at the Moscow Synagogue. The narrow street was filled with people, the white and blue flags fluttered all over the crowd, and national songs were heard. However, at the end of 1948 anti-Semitism became the main focus of Stalin's domestic policy.

Today, Moscow is a huge, modern European city, with an official population of eleven million though there are four to five million migrants in the city as well. Moscow has by far the largest Jewish population in the former Soviet Union. Although figures are hard to come by, a conservative estimate of the Jewish population is in the region of 225,000[2]. This population is now growing, due to immigration from many of the southern former Soviet countries and elsewhere. Moscow Jews are about 80 - 90% Ashkenazi, 5-10% Gruzini (Georgian) and 5–10% other Sephardic Jews.

This would make Moscow the second largest Jewish city outside of Israel and the USA. (Paris is the largest.) Originally, the Jews were all Ashkenazi, but in the last two decades, many Georgian, Bucharian and other Sephardic Jews have moved to Moscow. With their higher levels of Jewish affiliation, the Sephardic Jews, about 10–12% of the total Jewish population, have made a disproportionate impact on the Moscow communal scene, contributing four new communities[3]. There are an additional eight Ashkenazi communities. There are three mikvahs in the city, one in the main Shul[4], one in the main Chabad center, and one in Rabbi Kogan's shul.

The Jews of Moscow are spread throughout the city and, in most parts of the city, there is no synagogue, and, in fact, no Judaism of any sort. Moscow has 100 Jewish institutions[5]. The Jewish institutions are mainly concentrated in the center of

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[1] Adapted from an article by Sue Fishkoff in the JTA, Sep. 20, 2004

[2] Rabbi Pinchus Goldschmidt holds that the population is in the region of 400.000

[3] Two of these are on the grounds of the main synagogue, one, a Kafkazi community, takes place in the Lipman school. The Bucharim have their own synagogue near the main Chabad Center, Marina Rosha.

[4] This mikveh is currently undergoing extensive renovations as a part of the overall renovations of the shul. Mr. Arkadi Geidemak has been giving $100 000 a month towards these renovations.

[5] http://www.amyisrael.co.il/cis/russia.htm

the city – there are at least five daily minyan in the center today. However, only those already owning apartments in the center or the very wealthy can afford to live in the center of Moscow[1].

Moscow is now seeing, for the first time, Orthodox couples who are marrying and staying in the city. There are now four Torah-observant communities, one Sephardi, the Dor Revii community under Rabbi Gedalyah Shostak run out of the old Migdal Ohr building[2], and the community developing around the Ohalei Yeshiva and the Open Curtain-Ner LeElef kollel contained therein. There are four Sephardi synagogues[3]and Rabbi Zelman.

In Moscow today, there are about twenty Jewish learning institutions, including schools, yeshivas and seminaries. Some of the schools accept students who regard themselves as Jewish, but are not. There are five school systems[4], two half-day Torah – half day-university options, four small yeshivas and two seminaries for older boys and girls respectively. Chabad is well represented in this list of institutions.

Moscow has two orphanages, one run by Chabad. The non-Chabad orphanage provides a voluntary learning program every night, attended by about 80% of the children. The fact that these institutions provide a fully Torah atmosphere means that a high degree of their graduates are Torah-observant, fully 40% from the non-Chabad orphanage.

There are many additional Jewish institutions in Moscow, including the Israeli embassy, the Joint, the Jewish Agency, a Chabad community center, Chabad's Moscow University of 21 century and another major community center being built

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[1] The two kollelim, Toras Chaim and Open Curtain-Ner LeElef have to rent apartments at a very high rate, using up valuable funds. The issue of whether to move out to the suburbs is currently being debated.

[2] This community, started in 2001, now has about 70 members and it is growing by leaps and bounds. The community has established most things that a functioning religious community would have, including gemachim, a sheitel-macher, a kosher store and even a gym. The fact that it has taken over the Migdal Ohr school, gives it dormitory space to host families/singles every Shabbos and Chag. The future of the building, however is in doubt. It belongs to the Moscow municipality and it is designated for a school. The building is also at least twenty minutes by foot from the nearest apartment buildings. To the west, these apartment buildings contain upper-class apartments, but the community would have to present its building and its approach with a much smarter-more modern look to attract these people.

[3] There are two Synagogues on the grounds of the main, Choral synagogue. A third one is the Synagogue of Bukharian Jews, which is located near Marina Roscha of Chabad. The Kafkazim have a community out of the Lipman school.

[4] Moscow has three Orthodox school systems and two non-Orthodox schools with a total school population of well over 1000 students. The Orthodox schools are Chabad, Eitz Chaim of Rebetzin Dara Goldschmidt, and Rabbi and Rebetzin Weiss's Beth Yehudith School for girls and now for boys. One of the historic schools of Moscow, Migdal Ohr, closed this year due to lack of funds. In addition there is a Mesorati school (The National Jewish School or Lipman's) and Ort, which is secular. Mr. Lipman is the product of Chabad parents, the Shabbos minyan in the school is Orthodox as is the rabbi of the school.
All the school buildings are of reasonable to high quality, and are, in the main, government schools. The schools compete effectively with high quality alternatives in the area of secular education. The Jewish education in these schools have been a combination of the core Chareidi staff, local teachers, Lishkat HaKesher Shlichim and, more recently, Kollel wives.

opposite the main (Choral) shul[1]. The Choral shul itself is an impressive building with a fascinating history[2]. It has recently been renovated to match if not surpass its former splendor.

A listing of such institutions sounds impressive, but these institutions do not impact on more than 10% of the population. The total synagogue attendance runs about 1% of the population. Many of the institutions were set up at a time when the whole approach was to get people out of Russia. Therefore, there is no presence in the city by their successful and committed graduates. At that time, the Rabbis working in these cities were focused almost exclusively on school and Yeshiva age.

But Moscow Jewry is more settled today. Moscow is a modern city. The stores are full, the people well dressed. A small apartment in the center of Moscow goes for $1,200 a month today, (though on the edges of Moscow the same apartment costs only $400.). Israel, on the other hand, lost its allure, both because of the Intifada and the financial situation. Germany, the only other available allure, is beginning to tighten its immigration policy and, as the Russians are finding out, is not a panacea of prosperity for them either.

Perm

In 1996, Rabbi David Weiss became the Chief Rabbi of Perm[3], in the Urals area. He organized a daily minyan in the synagogue, a kosher kitchen, a Chevrah Kadisha, circumcisions and more. Many of his students have become religious Jews who moved to Israel. Some later returned to work in Russia while yet others have remained in Perm.

In 2001, Rabbi Eliyahu Habi moved to Perm with his family to act as the Rav of the Central Synagogue[4]. The presence of a local rabbi, has dynamically changed

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[1] This center is a project of the Choral Synagogues itself.

[2] The Web Site http://www.ticketsofrussia.com/religion/judaism/mcs/Hiseng.html reports:
In 1886 the chairman of Jewish community Lazar Polyakov had purchased some grounds in Spasoglinischevsky Lane (Archipov Street), where a new building of the Choral Synagogue was erected in 1891 under the direction of Architect Simon Eibushitz. The synagogue was assumed to be ready for March of 1891, but the new Moscow General-Governor Prince Sergey Aleksandrovich had decreed the expulsion of the Jewish population from the capital. For two years, Moscow Jewry was reduced ten times and in 1893 it numbered only 7 thousand people. The revolution of 1905 changed the situation. The tsar's manifesto of October 17, 1905 proclaimed freedom of religion and at the beginning of 1906, Moscow authorities permitted to open the Great Choral Synagogue on Spasoglinischevsky Lane for prayer. The community board had conducted necessary restoration works, in which the well-known Moscow Architect R. Klein was involved. He introduced to the decoration of the large prayer sanctuary the refinement of modern art. The solemn opening of Moscow Synagogue was held on June 1, 1906. Yakov Maze was the rabbi of the Moscow Choral Synagogue, a strong spiritual leader, who defended the interests of the Jewish community for 30 years. After the revolution of 1917 the Evsekzia demanded to convert the synagogue into a workers club. Rabbi Maze raised his voice to protect of the temple and succeeded in achieving the right to save the synagogue. During the hardest years Jews had prayed here, addressing to G-d with faith and hope.

[3] Rabbi Weiss is originally Israeli. He lives with his wife, Rebbetzin Rivka Weiss in Moscow where they also run a fabulous girls school and more recently a boys school as well. Rabbi Weiss travels to Perm one to two Shabbosos a month.

[4] Due to the educational needs of his children, Rabbi Habi will unfortunately, not be staying in Perm beyond the coming year.

the city. The number of visitors to the synagogue has considerably increased, as has the amount of people wishing to participate in the Jewish holidays and communal actions. During Rabbi Habi's time, a wide range of programs at a highly professional level were implemented, doubling the community membership. These included a Beis Midrash to which 150 people attended weekly involving a range of shiurim separately targeting all age groups and men and women. In the summer of 2005, Rabbi Habi left Perm[1] and was replaced by Rabbi Koren.

Perm also boasts both a Lauder and a Chabad gan, a Chabad school, a Hillel and other activities.

Saratov

Saratov is on the Volga River, a two hour plane ride south-east from Moscow[2]. The city has a high academic level (the Soviets moved a lot of their industry there to be safe from the Germans). It has a Keroor-run shul as well as a Chabad shul. Chabad has now acquired the large original main Shul, closed in 1939, while the Keroor community is now building a wonderful new building.

Saratov has a more vibrant Jewish history to tell than most Russian cities. Even after the World War II, when all shuls were closed, there were still about 300 Torah observant families in Saratov. They would gather in private homes for Shabbos and the Chagim. In the early years of Toras Chaim Yeshiva in Moscow, Saratov provided the second-largest contingent of bochrim, after Moscow itself, a fact that mystified the Toras Chaim rabbis.

In Saratov, Ner LeElef, Keroor and The Canadian Foundation were joined by the Vaad Hatzalah Lenidchei Yisrael. This allowed for the hiring not only of a Rabbi, the locally born Rabbi Fromin, but also for a second resource, the Rosh Yeshiva, Rabbi Schuster. The latter is in charge of ongoing Torah-study programs and shiurim throughout the day, with the result that Saratov has sent tens of students over the last few years to yeshivas and seminaries.

In 2004, these two rabbis organized a Russia-wide seminar on all aspects of running a Chevra Kadisha, so that each Russian town with Jews could purify and bury its dead according to Halacha.

A sign of the vibrancy of the community is the fact that there is significant local funding of the community budget.

St. Petersburg

St. Petersburg, Russia's 'second capital'[3] At various times during Russian history, St. Petersburg was declared the capital in favor of Moscow. is the second largest Jewish community in the former Soviet Union, numbering between 80,000 and 100,000 Jews (around 80,000). When the Nazis invaded Russia, 200,000 Jews lived in St. Petersburg (then called Leningrad). Most escaped the Holocaust thanks to the

[1] Rabbi Habi became the director of outreach for Shaarei Torah, Rabbi Mordechai Tokarsky's organization in Brighton Beach, Brooklyn, New York.

[2] The very short runway hugging the city means that only a certain type of formerly military aircraft (designed also for civilian use as was Soviet custom) can land there.

[3] From the beginning of the 18th century until 1918, St. Petersburg was declared the capital in favor of Moscow.

city's legendary resistance. While most Jewish life was suppressed during the Soviet era, an important kernel of Jewish consciousness remained. It was St. Petersburg that provided the impetus for the refusenik movement. These activists were also among the earliest to make aliyah. Ironically, their emigration left the city's approximately 100,000 Jews with the need to train new leaders who could help them reconnect to Jewish life and rebuild a strong community[1] .

Today, there are three communities[2] and four (seven Jewish schools) Jewish school systems in Petersburg, two (three) of which are totally irreligious and Jewish in name only. The other two are the Migdal Ohr School[3] Founded on Wolfson money (and by Mr. Wolfson's initiative) by Rabbi Eliezer Nisdatne (Rabbi Elazar Nezdatny) (who still runs it to this day), the school has, for the last few years been partially supported by the Vaad Hatzola LeNidchei Yisroel. Its sister school, Migdal Ohr in Moscow, has closed, which had a fabulous track record of sending tens of its graduates to yeshivas and other study programs in Israel (and abroad). Chabad runs a small yeshiva, while Migdal Ohr has an afternoon kollel which has an intensive Torah track in the afternoons and evenings. The best Torah school in St. Petersburg is Migdal Ohr, while the Chabad school, though large and excellently run (the major problem of all the Chabad schools in the city is that they are not so well run), has been less intensive from a Jewish standpoint.(Recently, Chabad has opened another Jewish school to compete with Migdal Ohr jewish-wise, but so far they haven't become such a serious competitor.) Although the results of the Migdal Ohr School are amongst the best of any school in the CIS, it is however, struggling today with recruitment, and, in 2005, did not open its girls school at all for that year.

In 2005, the Jewish Community Home, a 7,000-sq meter (8,400-sq yard), building was opened. The center, paid for mainly by the JDC, will house Jewish charitable, family, student and educational programs, though not necessarily Orthodox.

There are several outreach initiatives, most of which are being conducted by graduates of the Ner LeElef training program in the city. Ner LeElef directly funds a student outreach project and started a Jewish nursery school.

There is now a slowly growing community of committed, observant people around the Migdal Ohr School. In addition to a core of several young families, there are a few dozen young married ladies (whose husbands are not yet interested) who are coming to the ladies club,

There are now about 30 - 40 young professionals, in various stages of observance, who form the core of this community, and an increasing number of these are marrying (mainly each other) and bringing up families in the area. The community has now opened a small gan, one of several in the city, whose core will be children coming from religious homes.

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[1] From the JDC website.

[2] The main, Choral Synagogue, is run by Chabad. A second small but dynamic Sephardic synagogue is under Rabbi Rashi. The third, Migdal Ohr Community, we describe below.

[3] Founded on Wolfson money by Rabbi Eliezer Nisdatne (who still runs it to this day), the school has for the last few years been partially supported by the Vaad Hatzola LeNidchei Yisroel. Its sister school, Midgdal Ohr in Moscow, has closed.

The fact that the majority of the community is comprised of people in their twenties and thirties is a vital development. Many communities in Russia are caught in a vicious cycle. Older people come to the minyan and in fact are paid to do so, making it an uncomfortable place for younger people.

Chabad has a strong presence in the city. The main Beit Knesset, under the leadership of Rabbi Menachem Mendel Pewzner[1] (This title is contended by others. It's better to call him the Rabbi of the main shul), has been beautifully refurbished, thanks to a large donation from Mr. Safra of Sao Paulo. The Chabad yeshiva (is not located) on the same grounds (but it is a 5 - 10 minute walk away), is under different auspices. The yeshiva services a broad catchments area, including Belarus, some of the Ukraine, and the greater St Petersburg area.

The Joint now works out of facilities provided by a businessman who has kosher food factories and a kosher restaurant. There is a Jewish community center funded by The Cleveland Federation. This is purely a cultural center though, and has nothing to do with Judaism.

Overall, the St. Petersburg community has made steady progress. (However, recently there were some setbacks when both the girls' Migdal Ohr school for girls failed to open for the 04-05 year due to a lack of recruitment and the Neve Yerushalayim university program for girls closed.)

It is hard to do outreach in St. Petersburg. Given its proximity to Finland, it has some of the flavor of a North European cultured but cold intellectual city. Yet, despite this, more and more Jews are coming out of the woodwork and the full range of Jewish communities is quite extensive with slowly increased participation.

(Unfortunately, I don't know anything about Hillel activities, except that they are sometimes makes discotecs in different places. In general, the information presented reflects the situation correctly.We can also mention that there is a Maccabi sports club, which is rather active and tries to cooperate with the various other Jewish institutions. The chairman is Vadim Polansky, a sportsman associated with the Reform movement, although recently the Reform movement distanced themselves from him as he is not so cooperative with them.)

Tula

A three hour drive south of Moscow, Tula is one of the most successful communities in Russia. Together with the locals, Rabbi Ariel Musalitin has expanded the community, opened a nursery school, the first few grades of a school, and a night kollel of ten local men. Due to the cohesiveness of the community, the Joint runs one of the few kosher kitchens they have in the CIS.

Tula has an excellent Rabbi, Ariel Masalitin. He is married to a woman from Tula, has been active there for many years, is closely integrated into the existing community structures (there is a community in Tula, in the real as well as legal sense), and splits his time between Moscow and Tula. This is viable as Moscow is some two hours drive from Tula. This is an outstanding city. The Ronald S. Lauder Foundation runs a kindergarten and school (currently up to 5th grade and adding a grade per year) in the city[2].

[1] Rabbi Pewzner is the Chief Rabbi of St. Petersburg.

[2] As reported by Rabbi Josh Spinner of the Lauder Foundation.

Currently there are five to seven observant families and more than ten other Shomrei Mitzvot in Tula, with a significant group of other people growing in their interest and observance. Every Sunday there is a three hour long women's study session of Judaism and Hebrew. Rabbi Musalitin gives many shiurim during the week and in Shul on shabbos. Once a year he runs a three day intensive seminar. He is targeting all ages, children, university students and adults.

Tula has a serious, daily night kollel, with three hours of study. The kollel is comprised of successful, local people, mainly engineers and computer people, (Tula is a military-industry town).

The Jewish education in the school is possibly the best in the CIS. It is better than the average Jewish community school in the States. The parents seem really happy that their children are getting a Jewish education. The teachers are all locals. When one considers that this whole initiative is almost entirely local, the whole thing is a miracle.

Tula is currently building a four story Community Center which will house the Shul, a Mikvah, the Soup Kitchen and several shiur–events rooms.

E. SOUTHERN (MOSLEM) COUNTRIES

Armenia

The Jewish presence in Armenia began after the destruction of the First Temple. Most Jews living in Armenia today are Ashkenazim from European backgrounds who settled in the area during the Soviet period. The majority of Armenia's Jews have emigrated to Israel and other countries during the last decade. About 500 Jews remain, mainly in the capital, Yerevan. After 70 years, there is today a synagogue, run by a Lubavitch rabbi[1].

Azerbaijan

Located on the southern edge of the Caucusus, and bordered by Russia, Armenia, Georgia, Iran, and the Caspian Sea, Azerbaijan has a population of 7.5 million. The majority of its inhabitants are Turkish speaking Shiite Muslims, though there are also a lot of Armenians and Christian Lezgins.

The new Azerbaijan constitution grants religious freedom and asserts that there is no state religion. There is little or no anti-Semitism in the country[2]. The Jewish community has enjoyed warm relations with the Azerbaijani government. Jewish organizations assist the government in caring for the thousands of refugees (mostly from Nagorno-Karabakh) within the country.

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[1] http://www.amyisrael.co.il/cis/armenia.htm

[2] The one exception is the many cemetery desecrations that have occurred in Azerbaijan. In October 2001, 47 tombstones in the City Cemetery, one of Baku's two Jewish cemeteries, were desecrated. After the discovery of the attack, which reportedly occurred the day after the installation of Israel's current ambassador to Azerbaijan, the Prosecutor General launched a thorough investigation and the Baku Mayor's Office began repairs on the cemetery.

Azerbaijan has about 16 thousands Jews[1]. There are three Jewish communities on the territory of the present-day Azerbaijan: (Caucasian) Mountain Jews (11 000), Ashkenazi Jews 4 300, most of whom are in Baku) and Georgian Jews (about 700). The most ancient is the community of Mountain Jews, which appeared here more than 1500 years ago (possibly as old as 2000 years). 11 thousands, among them in Baku – more than 6 thousands, in Kuba - 3,6 thousands, in other regions of Azerbaijan –1,3 thousand.

These are really Persian Jews. Some claim that they are descendents of the Lost Tribes. Many of these Jews got reincorporated into Iran when it too over parts of southern Azerbaijan. They speak the Muslim Tat language, in a distinct Jewish dialect called Judeo-Tat or Judeo-Persian.

After Russia occupied part of Azerbaijan at the beginning of the 19th C century, Ashkenazik Jews also began to settle here. This was fueled by the oil industry, and in general, by the lack of anti-Semitism and availability of opportunities. Ahseknazi Jews are generally professionals such as engineers, teachers, doctors, lawyers.

Even under the Soviets, there was little anti-Semitism here. Consequently, during this period, the Jewish population tripled. Many Ashkenazim came to Azerbaijan during World War II to escape the Nazis. Even after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Jews did not leave here in as great a proportion as elsewhere[2].

Baku

There are three Jewish newspapers in Baku (all monthly). Articles about Jewish life and interviews with representatives of the Jewish community often occur in the central republic newspapers[3]. In 1999 and 2001, the Art Museum and Museum of History in Baku held exhibitions intitled “The Jews of Azerbaijan” and “190 years of the settlement of the Ashkenazi Jews in Azerbaijan”. Hebrew is taught in Baku State University. In April 2001 Azerbaijan Academy of Sciences held the seminar of the theme “The Mountain Jews of the Caucasus”, and at the turn of 2000 the head of the religious community of Mountain Jews of Baku Semen Borisovich Ikhiilov was conferred the “The Order of Glory” state declaration by the country’s president.

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[1] Some Jews, natives of towns Oguz, Gandja, Geokchai, etc., registered themselves in passports as Azerbaijanians, and others from Kuba and Baku – as tats (Mountain Jews speak tat language), making exact population figures difficult. Some put the figures as high as 25 000.

[2] About 65% of the total community has left. In January 1990, just before the fall of Communism, the Armenian-Azerbaijan conflict led to Soviet forces entering Baku and, as a result, many innocent Jews were killed. This led to a wave of Aliyah. However the conflict soon died down and with it, the aliyah rates.

[3] On the 18 September 2001 all republic newspapers published the greeting of the President of Azerbaijan Republic Heydar Aliyev to the Jewish community of Azerbaijan with congratulations on the occasion of Rosh-a-Shana. It states: “The Jews for centuries settled and living in our country never suffered from persecution, discrimination, they had preserved their national-cultural traditions and habits. At the present out citizens-Jews take an active part in science-cultural, social and political life of the republic, they devotedly carry out their civic duties in the process of creating of an independent state”.

There are memorial plaques on the buildings of famous Jews: Nobel Prize winner, physicist Lev Landau, Dr Solomon Gusman, the war hero Albert Agarunov[1].

The city boasts three synagogues[2], a Jewish kindergarten, and two Jewish schools.The Vaad Hatzola LeNidchei Yisroel runs a day school for grades K-11 wich serves between 180 and 200 students p/a. In addition they run a high school-Bais Yaakov for girls and a yeshiva high school for boys with combined enrollment of between 40 and 50. In addition, the Vaad established a yeshiva, and several locals have graduated to serve as gabbaim and communal leaders in the community[3]. The Vaad has also runs a schools in Krasnaya Sloboda (Kuba), with a total enrollment of more than 230 pupils.

Today there are two Jewish cultural centers[4], a youth club, "Alef" and a Chesed[5], financed by the Joint, a branch of the Jewish Agency and the Hillel with about 150 members[6].

There are two other small but fascinating communities in the village of Privolnoe. Privolnoe, a remote village in the northern part of the Talysh Mountains, is home to two small communities of Mountain Jews. The Gerim, or Gerei Tzedek, righteous converts, were ethnic Russians who converted to Judaism approximately 200 years ago[7]. The Sobbotniks (Sabbath-niks) are Karaites[8]. In addition, approximately, approximately 800 Jews live in the village of Auguz, wherea synagogue was recently returned to the Jewish community and renovated[9].

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[1] Source: Mikhail Agarunov

[2] The Georgian synagogue in Baku was closed in 1991, after many Georgians fled to Israel due to civil war. The shul was reopened in 1996. In 2003, a beautiful new 3-story synagogue was opened, replacing the former military-storage, semi-basement building, that the Soviet government had assigned the community in 1946. The building holds two prayer halls: the smaller one for Georgian Jews and the larger for Ashkenazi Jews.

[3] The yeshiva is also in constant contact with provinces – with towns Gandja, Sumgait, Kuba, Oguz, village Privolnoe.

[4] One, run by the Joint, runs theater-music groups, club "Mishpakha", a video-club, an intelligentsia club, etc. The other is an Israeli center.

[5] Beside Baku "Hesed-Gershon" has four branches in Sumgait, Gandja, Oguz, and in the village Privolnoe. These 5 centers of "Hesed-Gershon" maintain elderly people and invalids in other towns of Azerbaijan as well: Kuba, Khachmas, Yevlakh, Geokchai, Shemakha, Akstafa, Neftchala, Primorsk.

[6]There is also a Jewish Women's Organization, a War Veterans' Society, a Jewish newspaper, the Azerbaijan-Israel Friendship Organization, and the Havva Welfare Center for Women and Children.

[7] They came from the region around the Volga and Don Rivers, Central Russia, and the Northern Caucasus. Little is known about their conversion to Judaism.

[8] These two groups settled the region in the early 19th century, after being expelled from their homelands. They were granted land by the authorities of the region, who exempted them from taxation and conscription. Thus the area became known as Privolnoe, or free, and grew into the largest settlement of Gerim in Transcaucusus.

[9] It was built in 1906 and confiscated in 1930 by the Soviets and, until recently, was used as a warehouse.

The Gerim, who at one point made up 35 to 40 percent of Privolnoe, are Orthodox Ashkenazim, who are now down to 20 families[1]. The Sobbotnik community, though they have not experienced the same degree of decline as the Gerim have, have made plans to move as a group to the Northern Caucasus to establish two new Sobbotnik villages, due to economic problems in the region.

Kuba

Kuba was established in 1742 by Fatali Khan as a refuge for Jews throughout his *khanate*[2]. The small Gudialchai River divides the city in two: the Azaris, Shiite Muslims, live on the northern bank, and the Jews on the southern bank. The Jewish half is known as *Yevreskaya Sloboda*, or Jewish Settlement. When the Soviets took over, they renamed it *Krasnaya Sloboda*, or Red Settlement. The Jews of Kuba come from the highland and valley villages of Kulgat, Kusari, Chipkent, Karchag, Shuduh, and Kryz. In the 1780s, Jews from the Persian province of Gilan also immigrated to Kuba. Each new group established its own quarter, or *mahalla*, with its own synagogue named after its hometown.

In the late 19th century, 972 families of Mountain Jews lived in Kuba, running eleven synagogues and twenty Jewish schools. Free from the virulent anti-Semitism and pogroms of Eastern Europe, and living peacefully with their Muslim neighbors, the Jewish community flourished. Kuba became known as Little Jerusalem, as it was the only completely Jewish community outside of Israel. However, when the Soviet Union enveloped Azerbaijan in 1920, the Tat way of life was all but annihilated. In 1928, the Soviets forced the Mountain Jews to change the Tat language from its traditional Hebrew letters to the Latin alphabet. Then, in 1938, the Tats were made to adopt the Cyrillic alphabet and the Soviets closed down their cultural institutions and converted all but one of the eleven synagogues into storehouses and workshops. In 1937, the Communists banned the use of Hebrew, executed five rabbis, and exiled others to Siberia.

In 1933, under the Communists, Kuba's Jewish population peaked at 18,500. Today, Kuba remains an all-Jewish town of about 3 000 - 4 000 Jews, though the numbers continue to dwindle. In addition, a community of 3,500 Mountain Jews has maintained its historic way of life in the rural regions around Kuba as well. However,

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[1] The Geirim are well educated, teach their children Hebrew and send the young men to yeshivot in Russia and Israel. There were once two Ger synagogues, but they were closed down during the Stalinist purges of 1936. Despite having no synagogue and no rabbi, the Gerim, especially the women, remain observant.

The Ger community began to disintegrate in the 1960s, when young adults started leaving the community to study in Russian universities. The majority of these students did not return to Privolnoe, and the continuation of this trend has left the Ger population at 20 families. The average age today is 55 and the last Ger literate in Hebrew left the village three years ago.

[2] A number of Kuba residents came from the highland Tati village of Shuduh. An investigation found that one of the Tati Muslim clans is called Israili, and the Muslim Tatis of Shuduh believe that the Jews of Kuba are their kin, and treat them with special appreciation. Long ago, some Shuduh Jews converted to Islam, while others left the village and settled in Kuba. The Tatis of Shuduh and the Jews of Kuba have maintained a close relationship to this day.

the survival of these communities is uncertain, as poverty leads many to move in search of economic security[1].

During the Soviet power there was only one active synagogue. After 1996 the state gave back to the community another two buildings of the former synagogues, which have been beautifully renovated and a mikveh built[2]. The Ministry of Education of the Republic gave the permission to teach Hebrew as a second foreign language in secondary schools of the village[3].

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Azerbaijani President Haidar Aliev has returned three synagogues and a Jewish college nationalized by the Soviets, to the Jewish community. He has encouraged the restoration of these buildings and is well-liked by the Jews of Azerbaijan. Renovation has begun on seven of the original eleven synagogues, including the Gilah synagogue, built in 1896, and the large Kruei Synagogue.

Georgia

Jews have lived in Georgia since the 2nd century B.C.E. The Jewish population in Georgia today consists of native Georgians plus Ashkenazim whose immigration began in the early 19th century. Tbilisi, the capital has about 11 000 Jews. There are also communities in Kutaisi, Gory, Batumi, Oni, and Achaltische. Georgia escaped much of the religious oppression rampant in other parts of the Soviet Union.

Tibilisi

Tibilisi is proof that it is possible to achieve a fully functioning Jewish community in the CIS. Tibilisi has a total Jewish population of 10,000–12,000 Jews, 80% of whom are Sephardim (Gruzini in the main) and more affiliated than Jews in most of the rest of the Soviet Union. In Tibilisi there are two shuls, two Jewish schools (a larger one with over 100 students and a small Chabad school[4]), a small yeshiva, a Sunday school. Recently a Cheder was added to the list of wonderful mosdos. This town's thirst for Torah seems to grow daily. The Mikvah is used daily and there is shechita three times a week. There are well over 100 people davening in the two shuls, one of which is called the Ashkenazi Shul, a relic of a previous era. The Vaad Hatzalah Lenidchei Yisroel has heavily invested money and effort in developing this community.

Even under Communism, the Jews of Tibilisi never fully lost their connection to Judaism, and today there is a higher level of Jewish affiliation here than in almost any other CIS city. Even the head of the Hillel on campus is observant. It has

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[1] After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Kuba gradually fell into recession. Jobs were scarce and large numbers of Jews went abroad in search of better economic opportunities, immigrating to Israel, America, and Europe. The poverty-stricken community is dependent on financial support from relatives abroad and Jewish welfare organizations.

[2] One of these buildings is a six-domed synagogue of Georgian Jews, that goes back to 1896. It was closed by the Communists in 1930. It was used for food storage and by a sewing enterprise. It was returned to the Jewish community in 1995.

[3] Source: Mikhail Agarunov

[4] This school has announced that it will not be re-opening for the 2005-6 school year.

therefore been able to support a wide range of institutions. Until recently, many of the traditional Jews of Tibilisi had been slow to translate their feelings from Judaism into full commitment, and, most of those who did, made Aliyah. However, over the last few years, an increasing number have become observant, quite a number at the highest levels[1], and there are a hundred or more who can be said to be making real progress in their mitzvah-observance.

Recently an outreach kollel, funded jointly by the Vaad Hatzalah LeNidchei Yisroel and Ner LeElef, was founded. The kollel is unique in that it sets a high standard of learning. Its avreichim are mostly native Georgians who have learned mainly in Eretz Yisroel. The Rosh Kollel, Rabbi Yosef Manusharov, a real Talmid Chacham, is also a native. The Kollel includes a shochet and a sofer.

Outreach activities include an ongoing Beis Medrash and a women's group of about 40 participants who meet 4 times a week. There are many other shiurim during the week, targeting people of various ages. There is even a Hillel House, which cooperates fully with the local community. Shabatonim, seminars, Sunday school and summer camps all have their place in this remarkable town.

Presently, the boys school and girls school have classes K-11 in two separate buildings. These classes had 164 children for the 2004/2005 school year. There is an anticipated 15% growth in these classes, due to the success of the outreach. Thus, we anticipate the schools to have 185 children. Additionally, the school has a separate Sunday program which serves 75 children. During the week there are more than 20 Shiurim which are attended by more than 200 students and adults. The staff also reaches cities such as Gori, Batumi and Kutaisi and some cities along the Iranian border. These Piliot all include a school program three days a week with computers, Ivrit and Limudim. These programs reach 90 students per week.

In total the entire Tblisi program reaches over 550 each week.

Kazakhstan

Kazakhstan has a total population of 17,030,000. Chabad, which standardly estimates Jewish populations on the high side, counts 15,000 Jews, most of whom live in the capital city of Almaty[2]. There are active synagogues in Almaty and Chemkent. Fourteen supplementary schools educate close to 600 students. Over 20 different Jewish groups--both secular and religious--exist in Almaty, supporting such institutions as a library, senior citizens center, and theater. Chabad has recently built a

[1] As an example, we quote the following story from Rabbi Zev Rothschild, head of the Vaad Hatzalah LeNidchei Yisroel: Even though the Shochtim go at least once a week to do Shechita, they have not had a "Glatt" kosher cow for the past two months (numerous cows have been Kosher 100%, but not Glatt). The Shlichim and many other townspeople have not eaten meat in all of this time, even though kosher meat was available. We went and inspected a Shechita, and the cow turned out to be 100% Glatt kosher, with no sirchos whatsoever. The non-Jewish farmer was so happy, he almost started to dance. I decided that, since the Shlichim had no meat for so long, and since the Yeshiva needed the meat, I would purchase the entire top of the behaima, for our Shlichim for Yom Tov. I tried to negotiate a price, but I was told, no! It was not possible for me to buy the cow. Why? Since so many inhabitants of the city had not eaten meat for so long, and Yom Tov was coming, they were going to ration the 200 kgs. of Glatt meat to 3 kg parcels. (Not only had our Shlichim waited for the Glatt meat, but numerous families in the city were also waiting).

[2] However, there are also Jews Karaganda, Chimkent, Semipalatinsk, Urals, Kokchetav and Dzhambul. Almaty's and effectively Kahakhstan's chief rabbi is Rabbi Yeshaya Cohen.

new synagogue and community center[1].

Uzbekistan

Tashkent is the capital of Uzbekistan, a former Soviet country with a Moslem majority and a repressive government that is often in the news[2]. Tashkent is the capital of Uzbekistan. Uzbekistan is a fascinating country - still emerging from Soviet like bureaucracy, yet beginning to do well economically. The locals - with their slightly slit eyes, Yellowish skins and Asian looks, are diluted by so many Russians who were "imported" there during Soviet times.

Uzbek is similar to Turkish. Many of the local non-Jews in Uzbekistan are really Tajiks, who practice a moderate form of Islam. For example, a lot of women cover their hair with a light scarf, with a tefach or more in front sticking out.

After the advent of communism and its war on religion, Jews in Uzbekistan, like those in the other remote parts of the Soviet Union, found it easier to keep their traditions alive than did Jews in the European part of the Bolshevik empire. There, Jewish religion and traditions were subject to persecution.

Like other parts of Soviet Asia, Ashkenazik Jews, fleeing the well-organized machinery of repression in the "greatland Slavic republics, began to accumulate in Tashkent[3].

Many religiously observant Jewish families took advantage of the area's relative religious freedom, living Jewish lives and educating their children in Judaism. That was particularly true of the Lubavitch Chasidim who came to the area both before and after World War II, either because they had been sent into exile or because they had fled there to avoid Communist repression.

The community grew substantially during World War II with the arrival of thousands of Ashkenazi Jewish refugees and evacuees from Nazi-occupied parts of the Soviet Union. The two communities, Bukharan and Ashkenazi, still retain their distinctive features, and they rarely intermarry.

By the time the USSR finally collapsed in 1989, a mass exodus of Jews from Uzbekistan to Israel and the United States was already underway[4]. The region was now split between the newly independent republics of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the government of Uzbekistan pursued an unofficial policy of "Uzbekistan for the Uzbeks", making it difficult for ethnic minorities to advance beyond a certain level in government and academia. Increasingly marginalized in a land which has been their home for hundreds of years, concerned at the poor economy and the prospects of Moslem fundamentalism (which,

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[1] http://www.amyisrael.co.il/cis

[2] Uzbekistan President, Islam Karimov, has arrested dozens of political dissidents, shut down foreign charities, and asked the USA to close their military air force base there. In May, 2005, troops killed more than 500 people, quelling riots in the eastern town of Andizhan. The incident came in the wake of a people's revolutions in Georgia and the Ukraine, which Karimov is trying to prevent in his country.

[3] Howard Morly Sachar, *Diaspora,* pg. 385

[4] More than 70,000 Jews have left the country since its inception, and have moved to Israel and the United States. Large Bukharan Jewish populations are located in Jerusalem and Queens, New York.

so far has failed to materialize), Bukharan Jews emigrated in droves, mainly to Israel and the USA, where they have concentrated in Queens, New York. However, as in other parts of the former Soviet Union, the Jewish population has now stabilized[1]. On the one hand, there is a constant trickle of people leaving. However, some Jews, faced with increasing prospects of prosperity in their home country, are returning,.

Tashkent

The city is new – most of it was destroyed in an earthquake in the 60's. The quality of the new buildings is high - overall the city has a feel of Russian cities like Perm and Yekaterinburg. Economically it is taking off, slowly - One can buy things dirt cheap but housing prices are rising steadily - enough to give considerable optimism to the locals.

In a city of 3.5 million, the Jewish population is between 16 000 and 20 000 people[2]. The Jews are spread over the whole city. Although the original population was predominantly Buchari, beginning in the late 19th century, when the region fell under the Russian influence, Ashkenazi Jews from the European sections of Russia settled in the region as well. Many were engineers, doctors or lawyers, and they provided the area's first generation of local intelligentsia. Today, this Ashkenazi population comprises 60% of Tashkent's Jewish community.

While Bukhara is still Jewishly much stronger than Tashkent, it is clear that the Jewish future lies with the latter. In Buchara there are but 2000 - 3000 Jews left, though still enough to fill a school of 160 students[3]. In Samarkand there are another 1000. In Tashkent, the Bucharim themselves are down to 40 families. Uzbekistan is no longer "Buchara-land"!

About 60% of the population in Tashkent is Ashkenazi. These are generally well educated, working as professionals such as engineers, doctors, teachers, etc. The Sephardim are watchmakers, barbers and tradesmen in the main.

Tashkent has three synagogues: Klovar and Textil are Sephardic while the Chabad synagogues is Ashkenazi. (A fourth synagogue, in the old city, is barely functional.) Textil was burned down on Yom Kippur 1999, and was rebuilt. It, like Chabad barely has a minyan twice a day. Klovar does better, though it cannot be said to be vibrant.

In 2001, the Sehabar Sephardi Center of Jerusalem (the SSC), started a school to complement the Chabad school opened in 1992. Both schools have about 150

[1] The roughly 10,000 Jews remaining in Uzbekistan today hear regularly from relatives now living abroad in Israel and the United States. Upon learning how difficult it is to make the transition from a communist to a capitalist economy, from a predominantly Muslim society to a Christian or Orthodox Jewish one, they often feel torn between the wish to emigrate and the desire to remain in familiar surroundings.

[2] The figure of 20,000 is used by the Jewish Agency and hence the Israeli Embassy. However, this is according to the criteria of the Israeli "law of return" and does not reflect the number of halachik Jews.

[3] The school was started and is run by the Sehabar Sephardi Center of Jerusalem (the SSC), as is the case of one of the schools in Tashkent.

students, not all of them halachik[1]. The SSC is planning a kindergarten for 2006 to add at least another 25 children.

The town has a shochet (who serves Buchara and Samarkant as well) and has a mikvah which is not always operational. A new mikvah is currently being built. There are about 25 religious families. There is an active Hillel, that gets 20 – 30 students to its activities. The Joint has a lovely, three story-building full of activities and provisions for the elderly. There used to be a restaurant, but, due to a scandal, it closed in about 2004. There is now a treif resutuarant where you can order kosher, in advance, on disposable plates. (Samarkand has a kosher hotel.)

Buchara

Historically, the Jews of Uzbekistan were the Bucharians (Bukharans), who lived mainly in Bukhara. Buchara once had 70,000 Jews. There were 13 Synagogues before Communism. The Communists left one open. The oldest Shul is 400 years old, the second oldest is 210 years. Bucahara has a mikveh.

The Bukharian Jews speak Bukharic, a dialect of Persian, using Hebrew characters until the Cyrillic alphabet was imposed upon them by the Russians. Traditionally, Bukharan Jews specialized in silk weaving, watch-making and as merchants in local and international trade.

Throughout the centuries, Bukharan Jews remained traditional in their observance. However, they became increasingly ignorant. By the time that Yosef ben Moshe (Mamon al-Maghribi/ha-Maaravi) visited them in 1793, no-one even understood the Hebrew language any longer. (Ben Mamom was a Sephardic Jew born in Morocco, travelled from Safed to Bukhara to solicit funds for the reestablishment of yeshivot in Palestine.) They had also adopted a few Persian rites. Mamon stayed in Bukhara for thirty years, until his death in 1823. He recruited other teachers to Bukhara, greatly reviving the knowledge and practice of Judaism thereby.

By 1849, 2500 Jewish families were living in Bukhara, including many who escape the pogrom in Meshed, Persia in 1839[2]. Having been forbidden by the emir to build any new synagogues, wealthy Jewish families of this period set aside rooms in the privacy of their homes to serve as synagogues[3].

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[1] This is in stark contrast to the school in Buchara, where all the students are Jewish. The number of non-Jews in the Tashkent schools may be quite high, most of them with Jewish fathers.

[2] In March of 1839, a mob of Shiite fanatics attacked and burned the Jewish quarter in Meshed, Persia (now Masshad, Iran), and the entire Jewish population was forcibly converted to Islam. In the years immediately following, many of these oppressed Jews from Meshed sought refuge in the established communities of Bukhara and Tehran

[3] The opulent Rubinov House is one of the few remaining examples of such private sanctuaries.

F. UKRAINE

With about 200 000 Jews[1], Ukraine contains the fourth largest Jewish community in Europe[2] and the eighth largest Jewish community in the world[3]. The majority of Ukrainian Jews live in Kiev, Dnepropetrovsk, Kharkov, and Odessa. Dnepropetrovsk is a city of about one million and is the center of Chabad operations in the Ukraine. More than half the Jews living in Ukraine were murdered by the Nazis and by nationalist Ukrainian collaborators during the Holocaust. The repression of Jewish life under Soviet rule was harsher than any country other than Russia itself.

Yet, despite this, the Ukraine has led the most vibrant of Jewish communal rebuilding of all the former Soviet countries. There are today 250 organizations in more than 80 cities. Ukraine has 14 pre-schools, 14 day-schools and 74 supplementary schools, serving a total of 8100 students. The Jewish community publishes several newspapers and magazines, as well as producing a weekly television program. Nationalized Jewish property has been significantly returned to the communities.

The communities are divided under 3 umbrellas: Chabad-Leviev, Chabad-Rabinovich and Rabbi Yaakov Dovid Bleich. Each has its own chief rabbi[4]. Chabad-

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[1] Figures for the Ukraine differ markedly from organization to organization. Our preference is to think in terms of 60 000 for Kiev, 40 000 for Odessa, 30 000 for Khrarkov and Dnepropetrovsk and about 40 000 Jews spread out amongst the other cities. Some, however, give a figure for the Ukraine as high as 300 000.

[2] France is by far the largest followed by Russia and or Britain. Britain has a Jewish population of 270 000 and is probably larger than the Ukraine.

[3] After the USA, Israel, France, Canada, Britain, Russia and Argentina.

[4] The traditional chief rabbie is Yakov Dov Bleich, a U.S.-born rabbi and member of the Karlin-Stoliner Chasidic group, has been widely recognized as chief rabbi of both Kiev and Ukraine since 1992. Ukrainian Jews got another chief rabbi in 2003 when Soviet-born, Brussels-based Azriel Haikin, 75, was proclaimed chief rabbi by dozens of Chabad rabbis working for the federation in Ukraine. ReuvenAzman, who is the rabbi of the beautifully renovated Brodsky Synagogue in the center of Kiev, was elected in 2005 to increase media magnate Vadim Rabinovich's influence over President Viktor Yuschenko. The chief rabbi's post can lead to better access to Ukrainian authorities and international donors, and to government recognition in the process of restitution of former Jewish communal property. In Ukraine, the government views the chief rabbi as the representative and chief liaison to the Jewish community. Azman represents two Jewish organizations in Ukraine, the All-Ukrainian Jewish Congress and the United Jewish Community of Ukraine. Both are headed by Rabinovich. He was endorsed by a group of secular Jewish leaders attending a Kiev Jewish conference, but not by any rabbinical authorities. Azman, who also is Soviet-born, is a Chabad-ordained rabbi but not a member of the federation. During the "Orange Revolution" that elevated Yuschenko to national power, Azman opened the doors of his synagogue to give some protesters food and shelter, saying that he was politically neutral and merely was fulfilling a humanitarian mission. When Yuschenko emerged victorious in a second vote, he and his family visited Asman's synagogue, where he lit Chanukah candles and joined Azaman and Rabinovich in a traditional Chanukah meal. In contrast, most federation rabbis backed Yuschenko's rival, former Prime Minister Victor Yanukovich, the choice of former President Leonid Kuchma, with whom the federation enjoyed close ties. A Yuschenko adviser said the president has shown no preference for any of the chief rabbis. "President Yuschenko has equal respect for the different streams in Judaism and to the religious leader of each

Leviev declared Rabbi Azriel Haiken as chief rabbi in 2003. Validmir Rabinovich[1], a Kiev businessman who has for many years supported many communities declared Rabbi Reuven Asman of the Brodsky Synagouge in Kiev the Chief Rabbi. However, the traditional Chief Rabbi remains Rabbi Yaakov Bleich, who also operates an extensive network of mosdos in Kiev.

Kiev

The total population of Kiev is 2,700,000, of whom 60,000 – 80,000 are Jews. There are two successful school systems[2], and several other Jewish institutions. There are four communities, three small yeshivas, and a one year Torah study program run by the Jewish Agency. Aish HaTorah is very active in Kiev. There is a fairly large Chesed organization (JDC), primarily running soup kitchens and increasingly food parcels, but also acting as a community center for the elderly.

Kiev has today as many as 150 people attending Shacharis services every day (in 5 different minyanim), and many hundreds learning some Torah in the course of a week.

Odessa

Odessa is Ukraine's major port city in southwest Ukraine on the Black Sea, situated 487 kilometers south of Kiev. As an important port city on the Black Sea, 19th century Odessa became among the most open and diverse cities of the Czarist Empire. Since it was within the Pale of Settlement, Jews were free to join in the city's economic and cultural dynamism, and they thrived, rising to prominence in trade, banking and industry. By the century's end, Odessa's 140,000 Jews were the second largest Russian-ruled community.

Odessa became famous both as a city both of Torah learning on the one hand and as a center for the Russian *Haskala* and secular Zionism on the other[3]. Sadly, Odessa's Jewish life was largely smothered by Soviet rule, and ultimately, the remaining vestiges of Jewish culture were all but destroyed by Nazi occupation. While many Jews fled from the Nazis, most who remained perished in camps and ghettos. After the war, survivors returned to Odessa to rebuild their shattered lives under Communist rule—without religion and without community.

Today, out of a broader population of more than 1.2 million, there is a Jewish population: approximately 40,000 (3.5 percent of city's population). Both in the broader and in the Jewish population, Odessa is the second largest city in Ukraine,

There are seven day schools in Odessa, the network of Or Sameach and Shomrei Shabbos, ORT and the Jewish Agency for Israel. More than 4,500 members of the Odessa community are actively involved in Jewish education. Odessa has an

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religious Jewish community who was elected legally," Alexander Sagan, Yuschenko's adviser on religious affairs, told JTA. (based on Vladimir Matveyev in the JTA)

[1] Vadim Rabinovych, head of the All-Ukrainian Jewish Congress.

[2] Rabbi Bleich and Tzeirei Chabad. Recently, a competing group of Chabad, Ohr Avner, opened up yet a third school.

[3] Writers Mendele Mokher Seforim, Bialik, Ahad Ha-Am, and Zionist leader Vladimir Jabotinsky are among the many who drew inspiration from the city's rich intellectual environment.

two JCC's (and a third on the way), which offer, in a non-Orthodox setting, informal educational opportunities on Jewish themes, such as singing, dancing, drawing, drama, Hebrew, history and tradition. The JCC also run summer family retreats and a day camp.

Odessa's Hillel Center gets about 120 students through social events, educational programs, and volunteer welfare projects. There are two synagogues, a kosher restaurant, a Jewish museum, and a social services agency. There are two day-care centers to serve some of the more than 1,000 Jewish children who are considered in need of basic welfare and special needs assistance at any one time[1]. .An estimated 33 percent of the Jewish population of Odessa, some 14,000 people, are elderly. More than 90 percent of these older residents are in grave need. The overwhelming majority are Holocaust survivors. Gmilus Hesed reaches out to more than 8,500 needy in Odessa and surrounding areas[2].

The organization runs four communal dining rooms, delivers meals and distributes food packages; staff also provide home care and medical visits, medicine, winter relief and assistance with home repairs. Bayit Cham ("Warm Homes") allows mobile elderly residents gather in private apartments or Jewish institutions for social interaction and Jewish activities.

Odessa is far less cosmopolitan than Kiev, Moscow or St. Petersburg which makes outreach easier there. But it also has a long history of being a Torah center and that perhaps is the secret behind its greater outreach success. It is also a tribute to Rabbi Baksht, one of the most accomplished people working in all of the CIS. He has set up an entire infrastructure, which includes two orphanages, a shul, a complete boys and girl's school system, a Jewish university, a pedagogic center servicing schools in the whole of the CIS, many outreach programs to all segments of the population, a community center and a broad range of social services. There is also a Chabad presence. Odessa today has tens of young observant couples and recently (in 2005) received a kollel which has taken the whole town to a differenent level. Recently, a Kollel Erev was started in which the avreichim, the staff, and the hanahala all study. This creates a core beis Midrash which is joined by many members of the community as well as creating a closeness amongst all members of the staff.

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[1] Both centers are run jointly by Migdal JCC and Gmilus Hesed Welfare Center in Odessa. Established in January 2003, the Odessa Beitenu Center for Jewish Children and Families serves children who have normal physical and intellectual functioning but live in intense poverty and face other obstacles that put them at risk. Programs at the center include after-school activities, psychological counseling, homework assistance, visits to museums and other cultural programs.

A second day-care center, the Odessa Beitenu Center for Jewish Children and Families with Special Needs, serves children with a wide range of physical and mental disabilities. The center places special emphasis on helping these children acquire skills and tools to function more effectively.

In 2003, the JDC launched the Kids SOS program, which provides one-time emergency assistance to the neediest children. Through this program, Beitenu Centers have provided needy children ages 6 to 18 with physical, social and emotional assistance using a holistic approach involving the whole family

[2] Gmilus Hesed, the community's welfare organization, was established in 1994 by the Odessa Jewish Cultural Society and JDC, with support from the Claims Conference, the Weinberg Foundation and THE ASSOCIATED: Jewish Community Federation of Baltimore. It employs 287 staff members, including 180 home-care workers and 220 volunteers

There are tens of Jews who today are committed to coming every day to learn and to daven, and there is every expectation that, with hundreds coming to beginners programs, this number is going to expand quickly.

Recruitment for the orphanage is done, amongst other things, by Alexander Zhechev who has wide connections with non-Jewish children's homes, where he finds Jewish children abandoned by their parents.

As for schooling, Ordessa has a lower primary school which is attended by 120 children up to the age of six years. 25 of them live in the boarding school. Then there is a boy's school, which is divided into an elementary school (6-9 years old) and a secondary school (10-17 years old). 75 students live in the boarding school. There is a computer class and gym. The school for girls is divided into an elementary school (6-9 years old) and a secondary school (10-17 years old). 73 girls live in the boarding school. Chabad also has a school in the city.

In September, 2006, Ordessa hope too open two new dormitory buildings for girls, with a total of 175 places.

SECTION FOUR: MAJOR ORGANIZATIONS IN THE CIS

1. Canadian Foundation (CFEWJ1)

Represented by Rabbi Shlomo Noach Mandel, the Canadian Foundation of Mr. Reichman sees its primary role as the building and strengthening of existing organizations and communities. It is a partner in The Russia Ten Cities Project as well as in many tens of communities across the CIS. Recently, Rabbi Mandel formed an umbrella body of Eastern European schools - the Shema Yisroel Network which was created to foster mutual support, funding and otherwise, between the various Jewish educational institutions[2].

The Canadian Foundation has provided Kosher LePesach matza, wine and other foodstuffs in huge quantities[3] and has an arrangement with the United States Agency for International Development to send on average twenty five containers of food annually to this and other needy parts of the globe.

The Foundation has sent local teachers and rabbis to Israel to upgrade their Torah knowledge, and has matched dozens of organizations with donors and other interested parties in order to initiate new projects. It has supported dozens of local community initiatives as well.

2. Chabad

Chabad is so widespread in its activities across the CIS that it is difficult to give an accurate summary of its activities. Chabad now has permanent rabbis in 105 cities in the former Soviet Union, and circuit shluchim servicing 321 towns beyond that. Since last year's conference, Chabad shluchim welcomed 200,000 Jews to services, and energized American philanthropists into donating $35.9 million – earning a spot on the Chronicle of Philanthropy's annual "Philanthropy 400" list, where the group ranked 391. The single most powerful person with input into Chabad in the CIS is Mr. Lev Leviev, while Mr. George Rohr[4] has provided extensive funding

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[1] Canadian Foundation for the Education and Welfare of Jews in the CIS. The Foundation was chartered in 1989.

[2] The network comprises thirteen primary and secondary schools with close to 3000 students. These schools span the geography of Europe and Asia from Budapest to Tashkent.

[3] In partnership with other organizations, it annually sends over a million pounds of Matzo to communities all over Central and Eastern Europe and Asia.

[4] Mr. Sami Rohr of Miami, Florida, the patriarch of the Rohr family and his son, George Rohr established and head the Rohr Family Foundation, one of the most philanthropic forces in the supporting rebuilding, and revitalizing Jewish communities and Jewish life in the Former Soviet Union. Mr. Sami Rohr was a leading real estate developer in Bogota, Colombia for over 30 years. His son, Mr. George Rohr of New York, is general partner of New Century Holdings, presently the largest Western financial investor in the Former Soviet Union. Through his business involvement in the region, Mr. Rohr had the opportunity to see the struggle Jews were waging to re- establish Jewish communal life after decades of oppression, and felt that he and his family had a responsibility to try to help rebuild Jewish life in the region.

and vision for all these activities. Mr. Steinhard, a Conservative Jew who rarely gives to Orthodox causes, funded the establishment of a youth movement across Rusisa. Today the Rohr Family Foundation provides salaries and living expenses for nearly 200 Lubavitch rabbis and their families, not to mention dozens of building and other projects in which they it participates. Rabbi Berl Lazar is Chabad's Chief Rabbi of Russia. Chabad's seven story headquarters is in the Marina Roscha Synagogue and community center in Moscow.

Ohr Avner, generally provides a new rabbi with seed money to start a school, and around this a community develops, under the umbrella body for the Chabad Communities in the CIS, Feor[1]. However, there are numerous places where there are independent Chabad operations or operations running under other Chabad umbrella bodies. Examples of these exist in Kiev, Minsk, Moscow and elsewhere.

Feor currently claims a membership of 426 member communities around the former Soviet Union. There are also over 60 Chabad schools, of various sizes. These cities can vary in size of Jewish population, from a few tens to many tens of thousands[2]. Only a fraction of these communities is actually serviced by a Chabad rabbi. In Uzbekistan, for example, of eight communities, only one, Tashkent, has a Chabad rabbi, amongst the several other organizations working in the city. In Lithuania, the figure is one out of ten and so on. Still, it is estimated that there are 90 communities with Chabad rabbis today, an enormous achievement and Feroor continues to grow by leaps and bounds.

Chabad operates all around the world, but it has a special interest in Russia and other CIS countries. The second to last Lubavitcher Rebbe, the "Friediger Rebbe", lived and was imprisoned there, his life in great danger. When he relocated to the States, he continued to direct a clandestine network of Jewish education, through the handful of Chabad rabbis who remained. There is no question that Chabad had a major part in keeping the embers of Torah alive throughout the Communist period.

This work was taken up by the Rebbe's son-in-law, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson z"l, when he succeeded him as the seventh Rebbe of Chabad. Chabad would perform secret bris milahs, smuggle in haggados and matzos and do whatever Jewish life.

After the fall of communism, Chabad was well-poised to enter the field, and over the years developed a special relationship with local governments, including the President of Russia, Mr. Putin. Mr. Putin has appeared at Chabad functions on several occasions, including the lighting of the Menorah on Chanukah.

Chabad has had a particularly problematic relationship with non-Chabad frameworks across the former Soviet Union, though Rabbi Lazar insists that they are prepared to help, financially and in any other way, any community that comes under its umbrella, Chabad or non-Chabad. Feor, the federation, is today the dominant political force in Russia and several other countries, and is often recognized as the official voice of local Jewry by the heads of these countries3.

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[1] Feroor stands for the Federation of Jewish Communities of the CIS and Baltic Countries.

[2] The population figures Chabad gives for these towns, and for CIS Jewry in general, are much higher than the ones used by the author.

[3] The Chabad-Putin alliance is partially motivated, on the Kremlin side, by the desire to consolidate all Jewish organizations under a single umbrella as a part of its more comprehensive strategy to control all political parties and religious communities.

Chabad's activities operate both nationally, and in the individual cities. One expmaple of this are their summer camps. In the summer of 2005, over 8,000 Jewish children attended Chabad-run (FJC)summer camps. At these 'Gan Israel' camps, one can see children from the most assimilated Jewish families singing Jewish songs and sharing their new knowledge of Judaism and excitement of attending a Jewish camp.

As the rabbis and the community meet success, they outgrow their initial facilities and embark on building synagogues and community center, some of them very significant buildings. The Chabad central buildings in St. Petersburg and Kharkov for example, are major tourist attractions, and those in Moscow, Eketeringburg, Samara, Dnepropetrovsk and elsewhere are enormous and magnificent buildings[1].

As of writing, in September, 2005, there are more than fifteen synagogues, community centers and mikvaot from Novosibirsk in Siberia to Rostov-on-Don near the Black Sea are under construction, Jewish books in Russian in the tens of thousands are being printed, www.Jewish.ru is the largest Jewish website in the Russian language, and the Magen League fights counter- missionary work in the FSU. The Moscow-based 'Machon Chaya Mushka' Institute for Jewish women trains women teachers; Chabad runs several children's homes and orphanages and a number of yeshivot. The list goes on and on.

Chabad is huge in the CIS. There is hardly a city in the entire region which does not have its Chabad house and a school. Some cities have major Chabad buildings serving as synagogues and community centers[2]. When the author last checked, there were 57 Chabad schools around Russia alone. Most of the Chabad infrastructure falls under Mr. Lev Leviev's organization, Ohr Avner, run by Rabbi Beryl Lazar[3] out of Moscow[4] under the name of Feor. Mr. George Rohr provides enormous financial backing, vision and drive to these projects. Mr. Leviev is reputed to donate in excess of $20 million a year to this end out of a total CIS Chabad budget of $75 million per annum.

While recognizing the significant achievements of Chabad in the CIS, this issue of Nitzotzot Min HaNer has not focused on Chabad in the CIS. The scope and complexity of Chabad in the CIS is beyond the ability of the Nitzotzot staff to fully document. However, in the appendix dealing with major organizations, we have attempted to give some insight into the scope of Chabad activities.

3. Conference of European Rabbis (CER)

The Conference of European Rabbis has had a hand in building communities throughout the former Soviet Union[5]. Many of the local communities and/or rabbis,

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[1] These projects have been furthered, to a large degree, by the contributions of Mr. George Rohr.

[2] Examples of this are Moscow, St. Petersburg, Kiev, Samara, Denipoptropsk and Ekeeterninburg.

[3] Officially he is called by Chabad the Chief Rabbi of Russia and Chairman of the Rabbinical Alliance, C.I.S.

[4] In Russia, the Chabad communities appear under the umbrella body called Feor.

[5] Rabbi Aba Dunner, head of the Conference has played a hand in the development of virtually every community in Russia. The Conference has provided money for mikvaos, has

such as Keroor in Russia and Rabbi Becker in Riga, are under the umbrella of the CER. Rabbis Goldschmidt of Moscow and Bleich of Kiev sit on the CER executive board. The Conference head, Rabbi Aba Dunner is intimately involved in advising and assisting virtually every community across the former Soviet Union.

The CER has provided several mikvaos across the CIS, helped with funding for other projects, and sorted out kashrut, political and other problems. Rabbi Aba Dunner has been of invaluable help with his constant encouragement and inspiration, his networking skills and his ability to create shidduchim between various organizations. CER is a leading body in providing an overall vision for the future development of the entire CIS.

4. Keroor

Keroor (The United Synagogue of Russia) is one of the two umbrella bodies (the other being Feor, belonging to Chabad) under which all synagogues and Jewish communal institutions are subsumed[1]. Keroor, in turn, is a part of the Conference of European Rabbis, headed by Rabbis Aba Dunner and Yaakov Sitruk. At present there are 132 established synagogues and cultural centers under Keroor with another 66 informal groups. 59 of these communities are receiving active financial support from Keroor. Other projects include Sunday Schools in 12 locations and 17 "family clubs" as well as seven Lauder-funded kindergartens under the Keroor umbrella. .

In addition, Keroor supports a rabbinic court, numerous educational programs, publications, the provision of basic communal services and acts as an early warning watch-dog and responds to anti-Semitic outbursts. In 2004, Keroor opened up a Merkaz STAM, called the Sofer Center, in a large part to fix the numerous Sifrei Torah which were given to back to the Jews by the Soviets.

For several years, Keroor has had a strategic relationship with Ner LeElef and the Canadian Foundation to establish a network of new communities in targeted cities. These communities often involve a comprehensive infrastructure including a Synagogue, nursery school, charity initiatives and in some cases, new schools. In 2005, Keroor undertook a significant expansion of this project, both in its current communities and in the establishment of new ones.

As from May 2005, Keroor is in a position to regain communities throughout Russia and develop some 50 new centres/communities. The programme is to build community centres, including synagogues. A programme in conjunction with the Joint for 65 Chesed centres, where Keroor will provide the religious facilities. Whereas Keroor will organise Jewish presence in the smaller communities, they see their future in the larger communities. They want their Rabbis to have an addition to a communal function to also be able to undertake kiruv work, education of children and adults.

Keroor has preference for say a group of four Rabbis to reside in one of the larger cities, and thus service on a regular basis outlying communities. They want to identify young US or Israeli avreichim – idealists/personalities who would see their future in doing this work on a long term basis, and be enthused by the challenge. The ideal set up for a community would be a holistic one –

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successfully solicited several foundations for numerous projects, and has lent its prestige and expertise in spearheading multi-organizational initiatives of various sorts.

[1] Mr. Anatoly Pinsky, is the executive Vice President of Keroor, while Rabbi Pinchus Goldschmidt is the overall spiritual leader.

synagogue, kolel, kindergarten and what develops from there. Their aim is that such communities should be independent in 10-15 years time, whilst smaller communities will always need outside help.

There are several parallel organizations to Keroor in other CIS countries, most notably The Union of Jewish Religious Organizations of Ukraine under Rabbi Yaakov, and The Union of Religious Congregations in Belarus[1]. Recently Chabad set up competing umbrellas in both countries.

5. Lauder Foundation

One of the most significant emerging organizations in the field is the Lauder Foundation. The Lauder Foundation has increasingly funded projects which assist the Jewish Community in a pro-Torah fashion in the former Soviet Union[2]. The most notable of these are the chain of nursery schools and schools which it runs across

[1] Although the situation changes continuously, the last official information we had on the Union included the following information:

Name of City	Amount of people who come to Minyan	Amount of people who come to Minyan on Yomim Tovim	Number of People receiving humanitarian aid
Minsk	56	600	6200
Mogilov	28	400	1715
Bobriyosk	48	320	1800
Baranovich	16	80	300
Borisov	--	80	550
Slutzk	--	60	100
Molodechno	--	60	80
Orshe	45	160	620
Polutzk	--	120	810
Rogotchov	--	45	110
Zhloben	--	40	85
Pinsk	40	200	440
Grodno	50	150	580
Brest	--	200	550
Gomel	52	400	1820
Vitebsk	52	400	1700
Kalenkovitch	34	140	240
Mozir	--	200	720
Svetlogorsk	--	120	180

[2] All three elected officers of the foundation are observant as are a number of its board members.

many cities in Russia[1]. These they support in whole or in part. The projects are well coordinated with both local and international organizations.

The Lauder Foundation is currently financing a new building for the Shimon Dubnow school in Riga (a secular but increasingly pro-Orthodox school), the Chabad school in Minsk and the Eitz Chaim School in Moscow.

Rabbi Josh Spinner, the regional Lauder representative, has been invaluable in providing field information, evaluations and a comprehensive vision of future communal development for the CIS.

6. Local Organizations

There are several large local operations, sometimes operating entire infrastructures. Rabbi Baksht in Odessa, the Ukraine, runs three orphanages, and an entire set of girls and boys schools, from kindergarten to matriculation, a community, a kollel (together with Ner LeElef), students clubs, outreach activities, summer camps, and other things besides.

Large infrastructures of this sort can be found under Rabbi Bleich in Kiev[2], under Chabad in Dnipropetrovs'k, Moscow and elsewhere, under Rabbi Moshe Fima in Pinsk, Belarus, under Rabbi Ariel Levine in Tibilisi, Georgia, etc.

7. Ner LeElef

Ner LeElef is a relatively new organization in the field, entering this arena about eight years ago. Ner LeElef's main contribution has been the provision of klei kodesh manpower, and it has run many two year, part-time training programs both in Israel as well is in Moscow, St. Petersburg, Kiev and Odessa. These are usually in conjunction with other organizations, such as Aish HaTorah, Shevut Ami, Migdal Ohr, Rabbis Bleich and Baksht.

In addition, Ner LeElef was the catalyst of the "Ten Cities Project", which, together with several other organizations, began ten new communities in Russia. Ner LeElef has started several other communities, outreach projects and programs in various CIS countries, all in conjunction with other organizations. Its latest project is the establishment of four kollelim, together with Rabbi Baksht in Odessa (Ukraine), the Open Curtain in Ohalei Yaakov in Moscow, the Vaad HaHatzala in Tibilisi (Georgia).

Currently, there are seventy eight graduates of these programs in the CIS, fifty eight in Russia alone. There are another seven in Germany.

In general, the earlier training programs were run in Israel, while the later programs, with the exception of Shevut Ami Teachers' and Rabanus Programs, were run in the CIS. Programs in the CIS provided for easier and cheaper placement, and the graduates had a deeper commitment and understanding of their communities and projects. In addition, much more was asked of the participants during the training phase. The cost of living in former Soviet countries is such that a stipend of $250 is often enough to elicit a full day's commitment by the participants, and now the life

[1] Lauder projects in Russia are the Eitz Chaim School and Kindergartens in Moscow, kindergartens in Tula, Samara, Perm and Kaliningrad and a Pedagogic center for kindergartens in Samara.

[2] Rabbi Yaakov D. Bleich is the Chief Rabbi of Kiev and the Ukraine, heading the Union of Jewish Religious Organizations of Ukraine.

cost is comparable with Europe, therefore the stipend has increased. Since it was necessary for these participants to have a lot more general Torah knowledge, as most had only learned in Yeshiva for short periods of time, Ner LeElef, in effect found themselves establishing three yeshiva-leadership programs.

8. Non-Orthodox Organizations

The most notable non-Orthodox organizations in the CIS are the Jewish Agency, the Joint Distribution Committee (JDC), the Lauder Foundation, and Hillel. In addition, in Russia, there is the Russian Jewish Congress[1], generally a supporter of the non-Chabad Keroor and the Federation of Jewish Organizations and Communities of Russia, supporting Chabad.

Although Reform look impressive on paper, many of the claimed communities are virtual rather than real. The Reform communities operate under the general umbrella of Keroor. The JDC, Hillel and especially Lauder have worked well with the local community[2]. The Jewish Agency has less of a track record, though recently it has done better on this front.

The JDC (Joint Distribution Committee)

The scope of JDC operations is truly remarkable. The JDC works in over 1,300 towns and villages in the CIS. It actively supports opportunities for Jew to learn about their heritage, encourages the development of a local leadership, and provides for their physical well being. The JDC runs or funds 187 community centers, 164 libraries, 34 Jewish kindergartens (attended by over 1,600 children.) and a large network of adult education classes[3]. 145 JDC-assisted Chesed Centers provided meals for more than 235,000 Jewish elderly spread throughout more than 2,100 cities, towns, and shtetlach[4] and has dozens of other programs delivering food, hospitality, medical help and equipment. The Joint has helped to train basic manpower (gabaim and the like) and has often provided a building for a local community.

It is difficult to criticize an organization whose whole existence is dedicated, very successfully, at providing massive welfare and communal services across the

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[1] The current head of the Russian Jewish Congress is Vladimir Slutsker. Slutsker is a wealthy banker, enthusiast of Kabbalah and karate and a member of the upper house of Russia's Parliament. The group also aspires to represent Russian Jewry on political and social issues before the government, but its role has diminished in recent years, in part because it was headed by Vladimir Goussinsky, an influential Jewish media mogul who was outspoken in his criticism of Putin.

[2] The JDC has as its express goal 'community building', and indeed, some of the senior JDC operative in the area, such as Rabbi Jonathan Porat, share a common vision with others working in the field. The JDC is sometimes limited in this endeavor by its need to be multi-denominational, its tendency to work out of its own locations, its lack of commitment to Kashrut and other factors. Hillel depends on the local operators. In the CIS, many Hillel students and directors have felt quite close to the local rabbi. Examples of this are Tibilisi in Georgia.

[3] In the larger cities the Joint usually builds a center, often called the Chesed, which is then run autonomously on Joint funding. Besides food, these centers often provide medical treatment, shiurim and cultural activities.

[4] Most of these are not kosher, but, many examples of local initiatives have shown that these need not be so.

CIS. Yet, we must point out that most of the Joint kitchens are not kosher[1]. The current policy of the Joint, to provide food parcels, which contain portions that can be cooked at home, further encourages the lack of Kashrut[2]. In an era where virtually every major Jewish organization, in Israel and the Diaspora, is committed to Kashrut, we believe the Joint, though with the best of intentions, is violating a basic norm of Jewish ethics here.

An additional challenge is the Joints new policy to retain ownership of its communal buildings, attempting to run them from the top down. There are good reasons for this, on the one hand. On the other, the long-term future of the communities is a function of them being nurtured to independence, In addition, a lack of local responsibility can and does lead to those lower down on the wrung attempting taking advantage[3].

Finally, the JDC is strictly non-denominational or, more accurately, multi-denominational (pluralistic). This sometimes leads, to a lack of co-ordination with the local organizations, which are most often exclusively Orthodox[4]. Sometimes, the desire of the JDC to run independent community centers is even seen as competition or worse, negatively impacting on, the local organization[5]. However, overall, the relationship of the JDC with the local organizations, as well as with other funding bodies, is good, and the above criticisms need to be seen in their correct proportions.

The Jewish Agency

The Jewish Agency (Sochnut) has a slightly more spotty record. It is also heavily invested in the CIS, with offices or representatives in many tens of cities. The Jewish Agency has several programs which have been helpful to the local community. Sometimes, the local rabbi has been paid by the Jewish Agency to be Hebrew teachers, and to teach on their Jewish Identity programs. In Kiev, the Agency pays for a one year, completely Torah, seminar for males and females. Together with the Israeli Ministry of Education, the Agency sponsors, through its Cheftziba program, teachers in 48 schools across the CIS and this is probably it's most

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[1] The position of the Joint is that it costs more money, particularly in the CIS, to provide kosher services, and this would be at the expense of more people who need the food. The Joint is not ant-religious and numerous religious people work successfully in the organization. In fact, wherever the local community has been organized to bring the Joint kitchens into its own buildings, these kitchens have always been kosher. Examples of this exist in Tula, Perm and elsewhere.

[2] As we pointed out in the previous footnote, the police of the Joint is not rooted in any maliciousness vis-à-vis Judaism The Joint figured out that they could make their money go further, and at greater comfort to the recipient, if they provided more food parcels and less soup-kitchen meals.

[3] An example of this is Kharkov in the Ukraine.

[4] An example of this is Tula, where the all aspects of the community, including the JDC soup kitchen, have been exclusively Orthodox. Yet, when the JDC donated a community building, it demanded that one there be a Reform Temple as well. In fairness, the sources of funding of the JDC, including the particular case mentioned, come from sources that often demand that pluralism be applied.

[5] An example of this is Odessa.

outstanding contribution to the field. Most of those schools, in turn, are Torah schools.

The main criticism of the Jewish Agency over the last decade has been its insistence on running to its own drum-beat. On the surfaces, there may be some ideological tension between the Jewish Agency mandate – which is to encourage Aliyah – and other organizations that are now trying to build up the local community. But a deeper look will show that this is not so. For it is readily apparent that, as with all Golah countries, there is a direct relationship between how Jewish someone is and how identified with Israel. About five years ago, the Jewish Agency has come to recognize this and began their Jewish identity seminars. This led to the Agency using some of many of the local rabbis, and even making broader deals, as happened with Keroor. Moreover, in 2005, the Jewish Agency adopted, for the first time, a policy of actively assisting in the development of local community.

It would be helpful if the Jewish Agency were to actively solicit the input of other leading organizations as well as the local organizations in their planning and execution. Too often, the Jewish Agency sends someone as their representative who brings his knee-jerk, anti-religious baggage with him, attitudes that are totally inappropriate in countries where so much Jewish identity revolves around religion.

More serious is the insistence of the Agency to us non-halachik criteria to define Jewishness. This has led to many problems, not least of them the importing of over 300 000 non-Jews to Israel, a disproportionate percentage of whom have contributed to the recent increase in violence in Israeli society. Mass conversions in Israel have led to an increase in token Jews, while, in the field, many rabbis feel uncomfortable teaching on Jewish Agency ulpanim and seminars that more often than not have a non-Jewish majority.

The fact that the Israeli government defines the law of return as applying to anyone who has one Jewish grandparent or one who is married to a Jew, does not mean that these people need to be pursued as vigorously as the Agency has chosen to do. I have yet to see a single coherent argument in favor of this policy, and it smacks of an Agency trying to create artificial relevance and results for itself.

But the policy goes further, and here it becomes downright immoral. The Agency and the Israeli government have inflexible, beauracratic demands on what documentation anyone claiming to be Jewish has to provide them. Any Jew who lacks such documentation is not given the usual, alternative Halachik methods of proving Jewishness. Furthermore, there are many converts to Judaism in countries like the Ukraine who are clearly Geirei Tzedek. Yet, these conversions are not recognized by the State of Israel until these people appear in front of the Israeli Rabbinate to confirm and certify their conversions. In the mean-time they are considered not Jewish, and as such cannot get visas even to visit Israel. So they have no way of appearing in front of the Israeli Rabbinate and they are caught not being able to make aliyah.

Such is the way of the Sochnut – tremendous efforts to get non-Jews to Israel, and tremendous obstacles to prevent real Jews from coming.

The Sochnut also sometimes undermined its own good work in its Chefzibar program by choosing teachers unilaterally, without consultation of the receiving school and sometimes in active opposition to it.

In general, the Sochnut has done much good work, and was invaluable in helping the major waves of Aliyah, from the 70's to the 90's. Its major downside is its arrogance, its inability to adjust to local conditions, to work closely, as a matter of

basic policy with local organizations, and to realize the centrality of religion as a factor of Jewishness in the CIS.

Hillel

Hillel has been operating in the former Soviet Union for 11 years. Although not a Torah organization, Hillel in Russia has often worked well with the local rabbis, bringing students to them and helping to promote their ideas.

Hillel's presence in the region has been financed by support from the Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Foundation in partnership with the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee.

The movement has a network of 27 full-time centers and a dozen affiliated youth groups devoted to bringing Judaism and Jewish experiences to young and mostly assimilated Jews in seven of the former Soviet republics.

More than 10,000 Jewish students participate annually in Hillel activities in the region, but the number of those who participate regularly in the group's regular activities is only a fraction of that number.

HIAS

Some historic organizations in the saving of Soviet Jewry no longer have a role. The most significant is HIAS — the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, which helped perhaps hundreds of thousands of the former Soviet Jews moving to America, especially in Vienna, which was a half-way house for them. The operation peaked in 1992, when HIAS resettled 46,379 refugees But HIAS resettled only 2,305 refugees in 2004, including 1,339 from the former Soviet Union. HIAS now is focused on aiding Jews[1] but also non-Jews of religious minorities around the world, such as Africa, Kosovo and other troubled areas[2].

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[1] 80 percent of operational efforts are focused on Jewish migration. The organization remains concerned about the plight of religious minorities in Iran, including 30,000 Jews, and it is the only State Department-funded processing agency for Iranians arriving in Vienna. Last year, 183 Jews were resettled from Iran, as well as 19 Christians, 88 Bahais and 12 Zoroastrians. HIAS has also relocated Jews from Argentina — which has faced a severe economic crisis in recent years — to more than 20 different countries. The organization made headlines in June 2003 when Rachel Zelon, then its vice president for program operations, traveled to Iraq a month after Saddam Hussein's regime was defeated to meet with the handful of Jews that remain in the country.

[2] HIAS currently is working to aid emigrants from Kenya, the Ukraine and Ecuador. Some immigrant communities oppose U.S. support for Israel. The organization has built bridges to other religious minority immigration groups, including Asians and Hispanics. Its focus on immigration policy and the plight of non-Jews will strengthen Jewish ties with other religious groups and serves the biblical commandment of "helping the stranger," they say. (Source for the entire paragraph: Mathew E Berger for the JTS.

9. Operation Open Curtain (OOC)

Spearheaded by Reuven Dessler, OOC came into being at the Agudath Israel's convention in November 1991. It was based on an emotional appeal and a personal request from Rabbi Svei Shlita to rekindle the flame of Judaism in the Former Soviet Union (FSU) and to provide education "from the cradle to the grave" in Moscow, Russia.

Today, the OOC runs or has a significant part of a range of projects in Moscow. Most significantly are the Eitz Chaim Day Schools, whose current student body exceeds 400 students[1]. Headed by Mrs. Dara Goldschmidt, it is housed in three separate buildings in the center of Moscow. Several Eitz Chaim high school girls are now living with families in America and Israel while studying in Yeshivot and experiencing Jewish life first hand.

Ohalei Yaakov Yeshiva, has an enrollment of between 15 and 50 students, many of whom go onto regular yeshivas around the world. The yeshiva runs several seminars throughout the year. Apartments in the vicinity offer groups of kids the opportunity to spend an authentic Shabbos.

In 2005, Ohalei Yaakov partnered Ner LeElef in launching a community kollel of 6 families. These families not only form a beis midrash for the growing Torah community that is developing around it, but also provide an impressive list of shiurim around Moscow, and many other services besides.

For many years, OOC has been running its Eitz Chaim summer camps, which attract over 300 children annually.

10. Other Orthodox Organizations

It is impossible to mention all the wonderful organizations involved in the former Soviet Union today. Seventy years of Communist suppression con not be wiped out in a day and requires enormous resources that are spread out over many, many organizations. Take Moscow alone: Touro College set up a branch in Moscow, and were later involved with the IDT courses and community. Rabbi Steinzaltz ran the first yeshiva in Moscow, which got burned down. He later established a center for learning including a teachers training course. Rabbi Israel Zelman, also in Moscow, is a self taught Talmid Chacham who runs a full range of activities. We greatly admire many, many other organizations, which we were not able to mention here for lack of space and/or knowledge.

Worthy of special mention is the Shehebar Sephardic Center (SSC). The SSC is a dynamic international organization, with a fine yeshiva-headquarters in Jerusalem, which runs two schools and has placed many rabbis, in particular in the southern states like Uzbekistan and Azerbaijan. B'Mesilah, directed by Rabbi Israel Taub and YUSSR of Yeshiva University are both active in Belorussia.

Another fabulous project in Istok[2]. www.istok.ru is a comprehensive Russian language, Chinuch site offering educators, Kiruv professionals and parents high-quality Chinuch material. www.istok.ru offers a wide selection of Jewish material,

[1] Eitz Chaim is also supported by the Lauder Foundation and other sources of funding.

[2] This project is headed by Rabbi Shloimie Goldschmidt who is the father of Rabbi Pinchus Goldschmidt, the chief rabbi of Moscow.

including works in Russian by Rabbis Aryeh Kaplan, Aryeh Carmel, Esriel Tauber, Noach Orlowek, and more. In operation since September of 1999, the site is visited by more than 25,000 visitors from 25 countries monthly.

Recently, www.istok.ru launched its "RnT" ("Reach and Teach") program to assist dozens of provincial cities of the FSU which have thus far been devoid of any Jewish education for children, and lack the means to hire Russian speaking teachers from Israel. www.istok.ru has therefore opted for the second best alternative: live video-conference lessons from Yerushalayim into schools and community centers[1].

11. Shevut Ami

Under the auspices of the venerable Rav Kugel, Shevut Ami has been the largest of the Yeshivos servicing bochurim from the CIS. It has also been a major source of manpower for Klei Kodesh in the CIS, running a two year teachers training program-kollel, and a three year Rabanus kollel in association with Ner LeElef. Shevut Ami has been involved in many projects in the CIS, including Moscow, St. Petersburg, Kiev and elsewhere.

12. Vaad Hatzalah Lenidchei Yisrael

The Vaad Hatzalah Lenidchei Yisrael was one of the earliest organizations to be involved in developing Russian communities, running camps, a yeshiva, a kollel (together with Ner LeElef) and a host of other activities. Rabbi Neustadt, the founder and former head of the Vaad[2], first visited Moscow and St. Petersburg in 1976. He returned home determined to do something to help his Russian brethren.

Established by Agudas Yisroel, the focus of the Vaad has been on educational institutions, schools, yeshivas and recently a kollel. However, this has often flowed into taking full responsibility for other aspects of community infrastructure. Its activities include sending tons of food packages and religious supplies, as well as building mikvaos, yeshivos, and Beis Yaakov schools throughout the CIS[3]. Although its activities are presently legal, before Glasnost, the Vaad was forced to work clandestinely, smuggling tefillin, seforim, and other religious objects behind the Iron Curtain[4].

Rabbi Yitzchak Aharon Fischer, the Vaad's mohel, has performed thousands of brissim in the former Soviet Union[5].

Today, the Vaad supports major projects in St. Petersburg (the Migdal Ohr school), Tibilisi Georgia (Gruzia) (an entire communal infrastructure including a school, yeshiva and kollel), and the all-Jewish towns of Kuba, Baku, and Kishinev in Moldova. The Vaad runs a yeshiva in Saratov, Russia, a community (together with

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[1] The plan calls for scheduling on Sundays and during the week as well. A planned project is projected for dozens of children in Tula, Yaroslavl and Saratoga.

[2] In early 2005, Rabbi Neustadt handed over the reigns to Rabbi Zev Rothschild. However, Rabbi Neustadt remains active in the affairs of the Vaad.

[3] Avraham Zuroff , Reflections on 25 Years of 'Hard Labor', in Hamishpacha

[4] Ibid.

[5] Avraham Zuroff , Reflections on 25 Years of 'Hard Labor', in Hamishpacha

Ner LeElef and the Canadian Foundation) in Mogilev, Belarus, and several seminars and summer camps. It recently took over the Yeshiva in Minsk. It was also the founder of Ohalei Yaakov, a Yeshiva in Moscow today run by the Open Curtain.