

# **The Relations of Russian Speaking Jews and Israel, and How to Keep the Gospel Alive Among Russian Jews**

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## **Introduction**

It is not by chance that the Tenth International European Conference of LCJE is being held in the Ukraine and the city of Kiev.<sup>1</sup> While I am writing these words demonstrations and tensions engulf the country. The Crimea has been annexed into Russia. These are difficult times for Ukrainians and particularly the Jewish community in the country. Changes will come. They are already here, whether we welcome them or not, and these changes create waves of consequences. In the past, Russian Jewry and immigration have changed the face of Judaism and in turn, the state of Israel. Ukrainian Jews have altered the makeup of Judaism. In this paper I will discuss, first, the role of Ukrainian Jews in the development of the Chassidic movement, the resulting wider impact of Russian immigrants to Israel and finally, how to keep the gospel alive among Russians. It is important to acknowledge the sovereignty of God over all things, including historical events that they all work together for his purposes, and the good of those who love him and are called according to his purposes.<sup>2</sup> In light of this, we need to anticipate how current events and unrest play into the hands of the Sovereign God for the advancement of his kingdom, even though this is often impossible for us to ascertain when in the midst of suffering and uncertainty.

## **The Place of the Ukraine in the Development of the Hassidic Judaism**

The Hassidic movement was born in the eighteenth century, right here in the Ukraine. Israel Ben Eliezer, who was a Ukrainian Jew and later became known as *Baal Shem Tov* (master of a good name), was the father of what is today known as Hassidic Judaism. He was born in c. 1700 in Okop, Podolia, and as a Jew in Eastern Europe, (especially in the Ukraine and Poland), faced great poverty and persecution. Israel was orphaned at the age of five, but even from childhood he was a man with many gifts. Apparently his father's last words to him was, "fear nothing and no one, but God." These words guided and impacted his life. At the age of 36 he began to demonstrate his extraordinary abilities. He received his title, *Baal Shem Tov*, because of his use of the divine name to work out miracles.<sup>3</sup> With time, he was able to gather many followers, being more of a mystic than a scholar. This was a paradigm shift in Judaism, since until then, most well-known and influential rabbis were scholars of the Torah. He emphasized maintaining a joyful relationship with God more than anything else. Eventually, this idea became the "trademark" of the Hassidic movement. These changes initially created antagonism and opposition from mainstream Judaism.<sup>4</sup>

The growth of the Hassidic movement slowed down significantly as a large percentage of them were slaughtered by the Nazis in the Second World War. Enduring many hardships survivors reorganized and continued the movement from its new base in America. However, Eastern Europe remains the birthplace of the movement and continued to exert

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<sup>1</sup> The decision was made long before the demonstrations broke out and Russia's invasion of Crime.

<sup>2</sup> Romans 8:28.

<sup>3</sup> Michael L. Brown, *Questions Christians Ask About Jewish Beliefs and Practices* (Minneapolis, Minnesota, Chosen Books, 2007, 2011), 25-30.

<sup>4</sup> The main opposition came by one of the greatest scholars of the era, Rabbi Elijah ben Shlomo Zalman Kremer, known as the *Gaon* (genius) from Vilna, that even pronounced a ban on Hassidic Jews.

its cultural heritage and other influences on its development. But it was in the USA that the *Chabad* movement outgrew all other Hassidic movements and became what it is today. The Chabad Lubavitch movement, born in Lyubaivh, Belarussia, grew rapidly in Brooklyn until under its seventh and so far, last Rebbe, Menachem Mendel Schneerson, died in 1994. He opened up the movement and its teachings of Judaism to the world. Today, their *Shelichim* “missionaries” are in the four corners of the world, bringing Judaism to Jews. The Rebbe saw the coming of the Messiah as imminent. As a result, he urged his army of followers to mobilize and work even harder in order to prepare the world for the coming of the Messiah. The Rebbe revolutionized the meaning and understanding of the Messiah, and for these reasons, some of his followers still believe *him* to be the Messiah. A very small minority of his followers even believe that he is still alive and active, though not necessarily in bodily form!

The significance of the birth of the Hassidic movement cannot be over emphasized, particularly in relation to the Messianic movement and the gospel. Hassidic Judaism places substantial importance on the role of the Rebbe, who is the grand rabbi of the Hassidic community. He is often seen by his followers as a very righteous and pious man, with the ability to do miracles and insert his influence on his disciples and beyond. The Lubavitch movement has brought the issue of a coming Messiah to the forefront of Judaism, and many believe that their last Rebbe will be the Messiah, and advertise him as such. Even this erroneous thinking has caused Jewish people to consider the concept of the coming Messiah more than before. The Chabad movement believes that the Messiah is not only a person, and a righteous one for that matter, but that he will die and yet continue to act. In this way, the movement has made the role of Messiah close to our understanding of the Old and New Testament teaching on the matter. In a way, they have built a bridge we ought to use, in order to show them that while they have some correct ideas about the Messiah, based on God’s Word, they have the wrong person!

Finally, it is worth mentioning two prominent rabbis, who were born in the Ukraine. The first is Rabbi Nachman of Beraslev, the founder of the Beraslev Hassidic movement, who was born in the city of Medzhybizh (transliterated Medzhibozh), Ukraine. In the not far past, thousands of Israelis traveled to visit his grave in Uman during Rosh Hashanah. And of course, the seventh, and the last Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, (1902-1994) was born in in Nikolaev, that today is part of the Ukraine and about five hundred kilometers south of Kiev.<sup>5</sup> He is probably the most phenomenal Jewish personality in modern days, and as mentioned earlier, has made the movement what it is today.

We see the importance of the Ukraine in the birth of the Hassidic movements, led by some of the most prominent rabbis who were born and raised here. That connection is something that we need to be aware of and use when bringing the gospel to the Russian speaking world. After all, the most well-known Rabbi of all times (Jesus) gave us the example of his followers spreading the gospel all over the world, with great success, and though he (Jesus) was not born in the Ukraine, he has many followers in this land. May we be able to encourage the church here in the Ukraine and see growth among the churches as well as the conversion of many Ukrainians and Russian Jews.

## **Russian Immigration**

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<sup>5</sup> The Secret of the Rebbe, by Yehiel Harari (Tel-Aviv, Miskal Yediot Ahronoth and Chemed books, 2013, 63), Published in Hebrew.

A second important phenomena occurred in the last decade of the last century when the fall of the FSU brought waves of Russian immigrants to Israel. This phenomena was not limited only to the Ukraine, but included people from all areas living under communism in the Soviet Union. Since 1948, there has always existed Russian immigration to Israel, but the end of what was known as the Soviet Union, triggered a mass immigration. Statistics on the number of immigrants to Israel from the FSU in various years can shed light on its significance for the purpose of our discussion.

Between the years 1948 to 1958 of the 936,082 immigrants to Israel, only 7,727 were from the FSU. However, in 1989 of the 24,050 immigrants arriving in Israel, almost half, 12,932, were from Russia. We see the biggest shift in 1990. That year, of the 199,516 immigrants to Israel, 185,227 were from the FSU. Close to 93% of the immigrants to Israel in 1990 were from the FSU. The shift in numbers came as a result of the fact that for the first time, Russian Jews could leave and migrate to the land of their fathers, to the Promised Land. And finally, the same statistical source shows that between 1990 and 2000, from a total of 1,016,520 immigrants, 874,597 were from the FSU. Even in 2011, some years after the big waves of immigration, Russia still had the largest number of immigrants to Israel, though the numbers went down considerably to only 3,678, compared to more than 185,000 in 1990.<sup>6</sup>

These statistics point to two conclusions. The first is that the official fall of the Soviet Union on December 26, 1990, ended the Cold War and enabled a great number of Russian Jews, living in utter poverty, persecution, and with little or no connection to their Jewish roots, immigrate to Israel. This turned some of the challenges of the Soviet Union era under which they had lived for centuries, into opportunities for change and hope for a better future. These changes for good can be summarized in three ways. First, the state of Israel, by opening its gates to the Russian speaking immigrants, provided renewed hope for many Jews and even some non-Jews, for better economic conditions. For years they yearned to come to Zion, and the prayer “next year in Jerusalem” seemed an unreachable dream, until like Jericho, the walls of communism came down, and they saw the opportunity to come to the motherland, *Eretz Israel*, Their dream came true! However, others saw an opportunity to improve their economical situation in Israel as a jumping off place to their real dream, not the Promised Land, but America. Secondly, Israel became a safe-haven for Russian Jews who for centuries lived under harsh anti-Semitism and anti-Israeli propaganda. Israel, as a Jewish state, became that place where they could live and practice their Jewish faith with no fear of detrimental consequences. They could live freely as Jews. And thirdly, many immigrants became more open to the spiritual aspects of life. After years of Communist propaganda telling them there was no God, and therefore nothing spiritual, they became open to the spiritual dimensions of life. They reconnected to their Jewish roots, and some embraced Jesus, the Jewish Messiah who alone is the Way, the Truth and the Life.<sup>7</sup>

Immigrants from the FSU not only became an important part of the state of Israel, but they have changed and challenged dramatically the very core of the Israeli society. In a short period of time, and because of their background and even their sheer numbers, they became a political, economical and social force, using their trades, traditions and talents. Their impact today can be seen in many areas of Israeli life, and they contribute much to the welfare of the State of Israel. The Israeli foreign minister, the speaker of the Knesset

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<sup>6</sup> Based on Jewish Virtual Library website at <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Immigration/FSU.html>

<sup>7</sup> John 14:6.

and the chairman of the Jewish Agency, to mention only three, are all Russian immigrants.<sup>8</sup> Today, Israel has the third largest Russian population outside the FSU, after the USA and Germany.<sup>9</sup> Looking beyond the borders of Israel we see that Regan and Gorbachev were tools in the hand of Almighty God to enable more than 1.6 million Russian Jews (and half-Jews) to leave the country and migrate to Israel, the USA, and Germany accordingly.<sup>10</sup> As a result, Jewish communities have strengthened in those lands and contributed to the prosperity and growth of all three countries.

### **The Bases of the Relationship**

Due to the scope to this paper, I will not make a distinction between different Russian speaking countries within what was once the Soviet Union.<sup>11</sup> The ethnic and nationalistic feelings and distinctions within them are strong; we are witnessing this presently in the Ukraine, Russian and Crimea crisis. Nevertheless, for the purposes of this paper, I will refer to them all as Russian speakers.

The relationships between the Russian speaking Jews and Israel remain strong due to some of the facts that were mentioned earlier. Their number in Israel remains high, as well as their influence in the society. Even now you can still easily find a Russian speaker in many public services, like banks, government offices, supermarkets and hospitals. In many ways the Russian speaking community in Israel has kept its distinct identity, though no doubt most of them see themselves as Israelis. In the past, Israel was often described as a melting pot, since it absorbed many immigrants from various countries, and many blended into the culture and society of Israel. However, in the last few years, it is often said that Israel is more like a mixed salad, where each ingredient maintains its distinct shape, color and flavor, while still contributing to the over-all taste of the salad. This can certainly be said about Russian immigrants, since in some ways they have remained Russian more than they have become Israelis.

### **How to Keep the Gospel Alive among Russian Jews**

The waves of Russian immigrants have brought many blessings to the Israeli society and particularly to the church. They moved the wheel of economics quickly as the government had to provide housing, jobs, health care, and many other social needs. Furthermore, they were sent to *Ulpans* (Hebrew language schools) in order to learn the language and be able to communicate and integrate into society. The role of a unified language was crucial, not only for their integration, but also for the cause of the gospel. Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, the father of Modern Hebrew was born in January 7, 1858 in the city of Luzhki in Belarus. He is yet another gift of the Russian speaking world to Israel and the Jewish people. Robert St. John, in his well-known biography of Eliezer Ben Yehuda, titled *Tongue of the Prophets*, remembers his experience in Jerusalem in 1948. He writes:

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<sup>8</sup> Avidgor Lieberman, who was born in Kishinev, is the head of Israel Our Home (Israel Beteynu) party and is the foreign minister. Yuli Edelstein, the spokesman of Knesset was born in Chernivtsi in the Soviet Union (now Ukraine), and Natan Sharansky the head of Jewish Agency was born in Donetsk, Ukraine is an author, prominent politician and human right activist.

<sup>9</sup> This is according to the NPR website (<http://www.npr.org/2013/01/02/168457444/on-multiple-fronts-russian-jews-reshape-israel>).

<sup>10</sup> According to the Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics, between 1989 and 2006 some 979,000 migrated to Israel, 325,000 migrated to USA and 240,000 to Germany.

<sup>11</sup> In light of the aggression of Russian president Putin, both in Georgia and in these very days in Ukraine and Crimea, some believe that he wants to bring back the Soviet Union!

In Israel that year I saw Jews from sixty or seventy different oriental and occidental countries creating a nation; people with different customs and costumes, different religious attitudes and levels of culture, different languages and dialects. I kept asking myself what the one thing was that they had in common. In addition to a burning desire for a land of their own, the great coagulating agent holding together these diverse elements was their common language.<sup>12</sup>

We can see the great contribution of a common language (in this case Hebrew), and the unity it brings to the people. The contribution of Eliezer Ben Yehuda can be compared to what Martin Luther did for the German language when he revived it. Eric Metaxas in his 2010 *Biography of Bonhoeffer*, which became a New York Times bestseller, writes these words about the influence of Martin Luther:

Luther's influence cannot be overestimated. His translation of the Bible into German was cataclysmic. Like a Medieval Paul Bunyan, Luther in a single blow, shattered the edifice of European Catholicism and in the bargain created the Modern German language, which in turn effectively created the German people. ... Before Luther's Bible, there was no unified German language. It existed only in a hodgepodge of dialects.<sup>13</sup>

This is another example of how God uses language as a means of bringing His blessing and His light to the nations. By translating the Bible into German, Luther took the Bible from the hands of a few and made it available to everyone in the German-speaking world.

The revival of the Hebrew language contributed much to the unity and conformity of the Jews particularly in Israel, but more so also to further the cause of the gospel. Now, for the first time, there is large number of Russian speakers from various parts of FSU who can be easily reached in the land of Israel using one common language. So the task of evangelizing them in some ways has become easier because of their concentration and common language. In fact, the restoration of the Hebrew language and the land of Israel together have paved the way for the restoration of the people of Israel back to their God and Messiah. It is now in this small land of Israel where Jewish people and a large Russian community live, and they both need to be reached with the gospel. For them, it is important not only to read material in their mother-tongue but also to hear and read the gospel in the Hebrew language. This is important so they will realize that faith in Jesus is not foreign to Jewish people, but it is as Jewish and Israeli as it is American, African, Indian, Middle Eastern and Russian. There are no geographical boundaries, but language boundaries do exist. For this reason, it is important to use Hebrew, and it also contributes in maintaining Jewish and Israeli identity.

We need to be aware of these factors in order to present a relevant gospel to Russians now living in Israel who speak Hebrew as well as to those who do not. There are still a relatively large number of Russians who do not speak Hebrew, or at least not comfortably enough to be able to understand spiritual terms or read books in Hebrew. For this group, it is still important in our church services to translate the service into Russian. It is our duty to help them feel as much as possible a part of the worship service. This is true, despite the fact that we want them to integrate and be a part of the church life experiences, and we

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<sup>12</sup> Robert St. John, *Tongues of the Prophets: The fascinating biography of Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, the Father of Modern Hebrew* (Hollywood, CA, Melvin Powers Wilshire Book company 1952), 9-10.

<sup>13</sup> Eric Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy* (Nashville Dallas Mexico City Rio De Janeiro, Thomas Nelson, 2010), 20.

have to find the right tension between the two pendulums. Some congregations in Israel now use headsets for their Russian speakers. This is a good solution, as long as we don't ostracize them from other church activities and continue to find a way to enable them to participate in the life of the church.

In presenting the gospel to Russian speaking Jews a danger exists when making distinctions between Judaism and Christianity or Messianic Judaism. At times, I believe we have failed in making that distinction clear enough, and as the result, we have lost some of our people back to Judaism, or even Orthodox Judaism. This is even more important when we see the vast "missionary" work that is being done by the Chabad movement, particularly in the Ukraine and other Russian speaking countries. This is no small challenge, as we try to find a way to help our Jewish friends realize that by becoming followers of Jesus, they do not lose their identity as Jewish people. When they put on Christ, they secure a higher citizenship, that of heaven and the millions of followers of Jesus of Nazareth.

### **Developing Leaders and Publications**

In the early 90's as Russian immigrants came to the land, some churches and organizations saw the need and spiritual potential to evangelize even those who could not yet speak Hebrew. Many of the immigrants who came were open to the gospel and were converted through various evangelistic efforts of congregations and organizations. These groups had the vision to reach out to these new-comers, and went out of their way to do so. As a result, the new immigrants, despite their language challenges, within few years brought real growth in the number of congregants in a number of congregations. In this way, they strengthened the struggling church in Israel, and in spite of some challenging encounters, they became a spiritual blessing to the land and the body of Christ. Today, we see their many contributions in the arts, music, sports and other areas in which they are making strong contributions to society, and particularly the church.

One example of that blessing and growth is seen in the Grace and Truth congregation in Rishon LeTzion where I have the privilege of serving as pastor. In 1989 the congregation consisted of 35 people, and within ten years we grew to more than 350! One out of the three elders in the church is Russian, and two of our three deacons, as well as our worship music director are Russian. Today, there are not only some Russian speaking congregations in Israel, but many of the Hebrew speaking congregations have a large percentage. Sometimes up to 80% are Russian speakers.

In my view, besides the need for evangelism, the church in Israel must train young leaders and provide them with solid biblical literature for discipleship. After decades of mass immigration of Russian speakers and massive evangelistic works, it is important for the church in Israel to continue to integrate the younger generation into church leadership. In many church congregations in Israel, this is the case, and we see well-balanced leadership between the Russian speaking community and the Israeli, non-Russian speakers. The church needs to make sure that the Russian immigrants are trained and able to take part in shaping the future of the church in Israel. It is crucial that the church in Israel does not discriminate against them in any way, but rather treats them as equals and with respect. This is especially important in teaching, training and equipping the younger generation.

The Russian speaking community is one that is characterized by a love for books and reading. In this electronic and social media era that we live in, it means we need to be

sensitive to their needs and cultural backgrounds and provide them with good biblical and solid literature in the area of evangelism, but also discipleship and leadership training. While Ha-Gefen continues to tenaciously publish books in Hebrew to provide a solid basis for the Jewish people to come to faith, we cannot and should not ignore the need to publish books for the Russian speaking Jews. Again, also here we need to find a golden formula because our resources are limited.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, in order to keep the gospel alive among Russian Jews, we need to work hard, prayerfully led by the Holy Spirit. We must recognize cultural backgrounds and be sensitive to the distinctive language needs of Russian Jews and bring them the gospel in accordance with the Word of God and their identity, Jewish in essence. We must challenge, train and guide new generations of Russians to eventually take the lead and help shape the church in Israel in the years to come. All to God's Glory.

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