

The communities of Russian-speaking believers – in Germany and Russia

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Germany

In the minds of the Jewish people and those with an understanding of history, Germany remains the country where the Holocaust was initiated, scrupulously planned and carried out, ending in the murder of 6 million Jews. Therefore, for many, it remains very strange to see how the Jewish community in Germany has revived over the past 20 years. Since 1989, about 230,000 people have come to Germany as “Jewish refugees” from the countries of the former Soviet Union. Together with Jewish immigrants from other countries (including Israel), they have caused the Jewish population to grow ten times as large, from 30,000 to about 300,000.¹ These very same “Russian Jews”² have not only brought about the revival of the Jewish community in Germany but have also brought back the issue of Jewish outreach and the messianic movement to this country.³ Thousands of Jewish people have become believers in Yeshua (with at least 5,000 integrated within various messianic and Christian groups) and more than 40 messianic congregations and groups have been established over the past 15 years. This put Germany back on the map of significant countries in this regard, while Russian Jewish believers still remain the majority within the messianic movement in Germany.⁴

The cultures of Russia and Germany, being very different from each other,⁵ result in a gap between German-speaking and Russian-Jewish believers. Russian messianic Jews are generally separated from German Christians, and both sides have difficulties even considering fellowshiping with one another. Even today, the messianic movement in Germany is considered to be Russian by both Christians and Jewish believers. The preconception is embedded within the minds of many Russian messianic Jews that if it is German and not Russian, it is not messianic.

“Russians,” in general, are viewed negatively within German culture. This is rooted in history, with Russians seen as “occupants” and “Soviets.” In East Germany, this is related to the Soviet regime, while in West Germany, it brings to mind memories of the Cold War. In Germany, the Russian language, the Russian accent in German and Russian origins do not give rise to any positive feelings toward Russian Jews. While Germans are very sensitive to everything Jewish, Russian Jews are seen more as Russians than as Jews. This creates distance on the part of Germans.

At the same time, the views held by Russian Jews toward Germans is typically very “Russian,” namely, generally negative. This is also generally due to the history, in which Germans were seen as those who started the terrible war and tried to occupy Russia. Memories of the Holocaust only contribute to these feelings.

Thus, the perspectives of Russian Jews and Germans as influenced by history thus only foster the deep separation between them.

This situation, however, has begun to change in recent years. We see more German Jewish people and German Christians starting to attend messianic congregations that were traditionally Russian speaking. In addition, the second-generation Russian-speaking Jewish believers speak better German than Russian. This makes the messianic congregations an extraordinarily multicultural place. It certainly brings new challenges for both Russian- and German-speaking participants. For many Russian-speaking believers, their messianic

congregations were a kind of comfortable cultural “ghetto” in that they could fellowship with those from their culture. Naturally, such congregations were resistant to integrating German-speaking Jews and Gentiles in their midst, unconsciously trying to defend this comfortable fellowship. However, not being able to find any reason not to allow German-speaking believers to join the congregations without compromising their biblical mandate, the former Russian-speaking messianic congregations are pushed to include Germans in their midst. Losing their Russian stronghold and being pushed to culturally adjust to the German newcomers is seldom a pleasant experience. It is especially frustrating for elderly people who are unable to fellowship easily in the German language and on German cultural terms. At the same time, the situation is also not pleasant for Germans who, being culturally very concentrated on their culture, are joining a culture completely foreign to them. It will take hard work to cultivate the unity needed within messianic congregations in the future.

Russia

The great revival among Russian Jews in the 1990s brought many thousands of Jewish people to faith in the Messiah. No one has been able to even come close to calculating the exact number. The number seems to be huge. The “children” of that revival immigrated to different countries along with other Jewish people, becoming members of local churches or forming their own messianic congregations. This revival, unfortunately, has been over for about 10 years now. However, in the past few years now, we have been able to see new pockets of revival in more unreached parts of Russia, such as Siberia and the Russian Far East, leading to the establishment of new messianic congregations in those regions. Even today it is difficult to approximate the number of Jewish believers and messianic congregations in Russia. It is probable that different people would provide different statistics. Russia is large and unpredictable, making it difficult to gain a general overview of what is taking place there. The best we can hope for in this regard is an accumulation of reports on the part of different mission agencies and messianic movements within Russia. Therefore, if you are interested in knowing more, I would encourage you to speak to conference participants who are directly involved in ministry there. Nevertheless, the number of messianic congregations within the country seems to be significant. We can see this mirrored in the examples of Moscow (with its eight congregations) and St. Petersburg (with its 14 congregations).

The situation of Jewish people in Russia is different from those in Germany. Jewish people in Russia are a part of the culture and thus do not face any cultural challenges. However, they are clearly distinguished from everyone else as soon as it becomes evident that they are Jewish. Anti-Semitism is very strong in Russia and the rest of the former Soviet Union.

Jewish identity is an issue for Russian Jews in general and messianic Jews in particular. In order to avoid danger, many Jewish people keep their identity a secret. Additionally, many of them are not interested in reconnecting with their Jewishness and the Jewish culture. As a result, not many of them are particularly interested in visiting a messianic congregation, and those who believe in Yeshua do not feel the urgency of joining a messianic congregation. Rather, due to anti-Semitism, assimilation, embedded Russian culture and fears of entering a sect, Jewish believers attend established churches, the churches attended by their friends, and even the Russian Orthodox Church, where many Russian Jewish believers can be found.

Jewish people are well aware of anti-Semitism and try to keep their identity secret if they are in churches. Messianic congregations often feel disregarded and rejected by the church. At the same time, we can observe a trend among some Christians to respect and appreciate Israel and the Jewish roots of the Christianity. This automatically leads to a greater respect for the Jewish people in general. It motivates some Christians to find out if they have Jewish

ancestry, and some even to convert to Judaism, either by becoming proselytes or by changing their names and documents in such a way that the documents indicate they are Jewish. This new trend may lead to a time when Jewish people will feel positive about being Jewish within the church sphere. This will take years to happen, however, due to the anti-Semitism embedded deeply within Russian culture and replacement theology within the church.

Anti-Semitism within Russian culture is expressed not only through blaming Jewish people for past and present problems but also through an absence of any feelings of guilt regarding all the evil things done to the Jewish people within Russian history. This part of history is either unknown or the Jews are blamed for reaping the consequences of their own actions. The same is also true in the case of the church and on the part of many Christians. This makes the necessary repentance for anti-Semitism impossible at present and complicates the life of messianic Jews and Jews within the church.

The situation is also similar in other countries of the former Soviet Union.

Common characteristics

Due to the reasons listed above and others as well, Russian messianic Jews are often isolated from other Christians in Germany and in the countries of the former Soviet Union. Being very zealous for the Lord, following Yeshua and reaching out to others, they are often left on their own within their communities. This sometimes leads congregations and groups to be more sectarian in nature. Not having enough access to solid education in terms of faith and ministry, they remain at best self-educated, that is, unrecognized by Christians and messianic believers of other backgrounds. Due to the lack of foundations, many Russian messianic believers have left their faith or developed strange heretical theological views in recent years. The absence of a uniting structure and fragmentation among the messianic movement and groups complements the feeling of loneliness and weakens the movement in general. However, the Russian messianic movement remains very Bible-based and oriented on righteousness, having a high regard for the biblical ethic and commandments (although we see many differences in what is understood by commandments). There are many things that messianic believers of other backgrounds can learn from Russian messianic believers and be blessed by. There is also a strong potential for the Russian messianic Jews in Europe to become a very strong and influential part of the messianic movement and Christianity in general. We are the children of the great “Russian” revival, and we have a great calling and role to play.

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¹ By “Jewish,” we do not necessarily mean members of an official Jewish community or those with a Jewish mother. In our understanding, a “Jew” is a person with a Jewish background, similar to a person who falls under the Law of Return in Israel.

² This term is used within this paper to describe Jewish people with origins in the countries of the former Soviet Union, where the dominant language, adopted by the Jewish people, was Russian.

³ For a long time, no one considered Germany to be a country for Jewish outreach, and no one was able to seriously speak about the messianic movement there because of its very small number of Jewish people.

⁴ We would be happy to provide more detailed written historical information (office@beitsarshalom.org).

⁵ We would be happy to provide a detailed written comparative study of the two cultures (office@beitsarshalom.org)