

Integration of Russian speaking messianic Jews in Israeli communities **Maxim Katz Missionary with Chosen People Ministries, Israel**

Definition of integration

As we begin to discuss "spiritual integration", we must first define the term "integration". I think that in general there are two approaches to understanding this term. Based on which approach will be chosen will determine our understanding of the spiritual integration of immigrants from the former Soviet Union.

Our first approach is the assumption of immigrant assimilation. This is the due process of immigrants becoming like native Israelis. Within the Jewish community, there are a minimum of four different potential integration paths. These are based on most influential groups residing in Israel. This first group, historically, is the most dominant one; this is the Ashkenazi community that established itself in Israel decades ago. The second group are secular people from Eastern European countries. This group in return is the most active and aggressive in influencing the spiritual and political lives of Israeli communities. The third group, are whom I call the "national religious" sector. They are the ones who carry on the Jewish traditions in their lifestyle. In the early years of Aliyah of Jews from the former Soviet Union, this group of people was very active in influencing their spiritual practices and integration into Israeli society. The fourth group is the most complicated as they are "ultra orthodox" and this group is sub-divided into smaller groups who often have differing spiritual views and divisions in their spiritual lives.

On the other hand, the second approach to defining integration is as a dynamic process. In this case, immigrants become a part of an existing community however, on the other hand, they influence and change the community they join creating a new structure and lifestyle. Seen from this perspective, the Russian speaking community may drastically influence all sectors of Israeli society.

Cultural aspects unique to Russian-speaking immigrants

As we begin to grasp the integration of Russian-speaking Jews into Israeli communities, we must examine what kind of spiritual and cultural "baggage" these communities carried with them from former Soviet countries. These Jewish people come from many different heritages and we will sub-divide them into three categories.

The first are the children of Jews, who were born in the XIX Century-the beginning of XX Century. These have usually experienced the cultural influence of pre-Soviet Jewish tradition, through their grandparents. Most of whom had a Jewish education, yet their cultural backgrounds varied. They were from different Jewish cities and villages. Some of them lived in territories that became a part of the Soviet Union after World War II: such as those which are in the West Ukraine, Lithuania, Latvia, etc. Unfortunately, most of these Jews died during the war. Those who managed to survive the Holocaust left or were exiled to distant places in Russia. Such families, like my own, have a different Jewish mentality from most Soviet Jews.

The second group is the most common and this is the group of children born to Jews in the 1920's and later. Most of these relocated to cities and as a result most Jewish

immigrants from the former Soviet Union were city dwellers. Some received a Jewish education, yet this trait diminished among this group.

The third group, are Jews from Middle Asia and Caucasus (Sephardic communities, not Ashkenazi). These Jews lived a traditional lifestyle and practiced religious rituals. We must take note that while maintaining a traditional Jewish lifestyle and identifying themselves as one community they also belonged to the communities in which they lived (for example Tajik or Uzbek in Asia, Georgian on the Caucasus).

Overall, we draw the conclusion that the Jewish community in the former Soviet Union had only one common tie and that was the Russian language. The language was common to all, yet the communities were divided. All of this can be seen to influence the Russian Speaking Jewish integration into Israeli communities.

Contemporary “Russian” communities in Israel

Immigrants from the former Soviet Union have now formed the biggest ethno-multicultural community in Israel. The Jewish Immigration wave of the 1990’s was foundational in this aspect. There are approximately 1,500,000 people belonging of this group. They were the driving force that pushed the traditional Israeli communities towards a more multicultural expression. This group represents a complex and large scaled sociological challenge for assimilation and integration.

As I’ve previously stated above, immigrants from the former Soviet Union countries are diverse in their cultural, ethnic and religious beliefs. Many factors can be observed to impact the integration of “Russian” Jews. Some of these are the immigrants' choice for where to live. As are education, occupation, army service, etc. One must take note that the most important influential and crucial factor for integration is the ability to know and speak Hebrew and even English. Nevertheless, these Jews are fully devoted to the Russian language. Most commonly, Russian is used with their families and every day communications with one another. The preservation of the Russian language seems to be a very important value.

As of today, the Russian speaking community in Israel plays a very influential role upon the every day life in Israel. There are movie theaters, publishing houses, radio stations, and television channels in Russian. There are even Russian speaking political leaders like the Foreign Minister, Avigdor Liberman, and Minister of Tourism, Stas Misezhnikov, and many other influential community leaders.

Regarding the internal state of the Israeli community, we must consider the second and third generation of this immigrant population. As the second generation was not born in Israel, but rather came to the country as children or teenagers, these groups are sort of “stuck in the middle” so to speak. Due to this fact, the second generation immigrants find themselves somewhere between the Russian and Israeli cultures. They may have a poor knowledge of both Russian and Hebrew and refuse to adapt to either one of the countries values. My thoughts are that the third generation, those who are born here, will have

different cultural values, a different lifestyle and mentality, and will certainly have a good grasp of Hebrew.

Messianic Jews: integration and perspectives

There is no exact statistic to state how many of Messianic Jews there are in Israel, yet it's estimated to be around 15-20 thousand. 60% of them are Russian speaking Jews. Today more Jews who emigrated from the former Soviet countries chose to follow Yeshuah. In the beginning of the last Century, when Messianic movement just began, many Jews adapted the Orthodox Christianity, and they were called "Cross followers". (As of today in Israel there are about 2000 Orthodox Jews, and from those 2000 only 400 are in Jerusalem). Back then, Jews obtained certain rights when converting to Christianity. Rights to have a chance to live outside prescribed areas, to study or to be a part of the Army, etc. Preceding the formation of the Israeli government, motives to chose and be a follower of Yeshuah have drastically changed. These days to be a Messianic Jew, you obtain no privilege. Furthermore, preceding the acceptance of Yeshuah a Jew loses his/her most privileged right and that is the "Right of Return" or in other word's, to make "Aliyah". Therefore, this step today is a very conscious one when receiving Yeshuah. There are many different congregations of believers of Yeshuah in Israel today (excluding Orthodox and Catholics). Some are noticeable and more expressed and some are less expressed and noticeable, yet all have one thing in common and that is all of them call themselves "Messianic Jews". In all other former countries when a Jew chooses to accept Yeshuah, he/she would give up all ties to the former Judaic religion of his/her ancestors or his/her people. In other words, he/she is switching religions. However, in Israel we observe a different model. Those Jews who accept Yeshuah, especially in Israel, don't leave behind their Hebrew heritage. Furthermore, they express it. Israeli teacher, Aleksand Zanemonecz stated in one of his lectures that "mikva" (baptism) of the Jewish people often leads them to be more spiritual and be more of aware of their Jewish heritage. This also awakes an interest to history and their Jewish background. Continued to help them to be more in tune with the Israeli government (Zanemonecz, 2004).

There are two levels to integration of the Russian-speaking Messianic Jews in Israel today.

The first level of integration is the integration to the local community. Most Russian-speaking Jews prefer to create their own congregations in which service is all in the Russian language. These gatherings are very similar to those of Evangelicals. People of such congregations have a harder time to integrate to the Israeli community. The most distinctive trait of such congregations is the age groups of its members. Most of them to be senior citizens and middle aged people who barely speak Hebrew and don't know any Israeli traditions. There also exist inter-mixed congregations. In such congregations we can find in addition to the Russian-speaking members, Jews from countries and even native-born Israelites. It's much easier for such people of these congregation to integrate into the Israel community. They speak Hebrew better and are open to multi-cultural communication and even manage to know and observe the Jewish traditional. These types of congregations have more members of youth.

The second level is the social integration in the Israeli community. As a rule, the first generation of immigrants identify themselves to belong to the “Russian” community. Their descendants, the second generational immigrants on the other hand identify themselves more to the native Israelites. As a result of this fact there are many conflicts between parents and children. The second immigrant generation that lives in the Israeli community identifies themselves to the Israel culture more and culture of their “Russian-speaking” parents is commonly foreign and misunderstood by this younger generation. This generation is influenced by the fact that it serves in the Army, gets an Israeli education and socializes in the Israeli community. Today’s Messianic youth more commonly identifies with the native Israelites. Many were not found to be Jewish according to the law of “Halachi”, yet they make a decision to undergo a “Gejur” ceremony to take upon Judaism and convert. All these discussed factors influence that Russian Speaking Jews have a niche in the Israeli community and their integration to the Israeli community will influence the future of Messianic congregations.

Do the Russian-speaking Messianic Jews hold any perspectives in Israel? Will they be able to preserve and pass on to the next generation their values or their descendants will be making a choice of their own ways in one way or another? The answer will depend on a few factors. First of all, it will depend on how the Israeli government and it’s people, especially the Russian-speaking community will treat the Messianic Jews. Second, it will matter much what position and community roles Messianic leadership would take.

To the testifying fact of social statistics, Russian-speaking Jews are more tolerant to Messianic Jews then their counterparts like native Israelis or American Jews. According to the studies of CZ. Hetelman, V. Chervyakova and V. Shappiro, only one out of five Russian speaking Jew has resentment towards Messianic Jews and only one out of three judges their choice to be a negative. Therefore, it’s hard to say how the Messianic Jews will be looked upon in the near future, yet overall the perception of Messianic Jews by the government and the local Israeli communities towards Christianity overall is becoming further and further negative.

As far as the leadership of Messianic Jews, more and more Russian-speaking Jews consider themselves to be a part of the Jewish community. They live, work, study among the Israeli, serve in the Army and often keep to the viewpoints of “righteous” political and internal affairs. Today most Russian-speaking Messianic congregations have their service in both Russian and in Hebrew as this aids to have more interests from the growing youth and grasps their attention. Therefore, in the near future most congregations will transfer to Hebrew only and this will open the door to more integration of the Messianic Jews to Israeli communities.

The fruits of labor from the Russian-speaking Messianic Jews can’t go unnoticed, as they’ve already influenced many. Russian-speaking Jews play a big impact on the congregations, yet they are also conforming and changing. For example, there are all Hebrew speaking congregations that have Russian-speaking leadership. Therefore, I believe that there will be a successful integration of Russian-speaking Messianic Jews

into the native Israeli Messianic congregations. This will aid in the additional much needed impulse to both communities as far as for growth and advancement.

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