

## EVANGELISM AMONG RUSSIAN JEWS IN THE UNITED STATES

Sholom Aleichem created a character in his short stories which has come to be synonymous with our perception of the Russian Jewish experience at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Whether this characterization of all Russian Jews is justified is a debate for another paper; however, the characters of Teviah the milkman and the people of Anatevka are symbols of the struggles which Russian Jewish immigrants have experienced in the 20<sup>th</sup> and now the 21<sup>st</sup> centuries.

The Broadway and screen version of Teviah's story through song and dialogue visualizes the desperation of the people when they are told they must leave Anatevka. Anatevka was never a place of luxury and safety, but it was home. Living in Anatevka brought difficulties both from an economic and social perspective but life was comfortable and predictable. Yet now these people, my ancestors, were being forced to confront the unknown and with it the challenges and differing views of the outside world. Could this not be symbolic of the experiences of the Russian Jewish immigrants of today?

In light of growing anti-Semitism and the resurgence of nationalistic tendencies in other parts of Europe, the Russian Jewish population is once again facing the prospect of leaving home for the unknown and unexpected. Hundreds of thousands of Russian Jews have made *aliyah*. Communities like the 7,500 Jews who left Birobidzhan in the Russian Far East in the 1980s are typical of so many groups that found new life and opportunities in Israel.<sup>1</sup> However, for many, the option to immigrate to the United States is the more preferable of the two and this is the group on which we will focus in this brief paper.

This paper will be divided into six areas of analysis:

1. A statistical understanding of the Russian Jewish population in the United States (and specifically New York City as a model)

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<sup>1</sup> Lev Krichevsky, "Officials of Russian Jewish region say they want to help Jewish life thrive," *Jewish Telegraphic Agency* (4 April 1997). This information was taken from the Jewish Bulletin of Northern California and the San Francisco Jewish Community Publications, Inc. A brief history of Birobidzhan and Stalin's attempt to create a Jewish homeland near the area of Siberia can be found in Joseph Telushkin's *Jewish Literacy: The Most Important Things to Know about the Jewish Religion, Its People, and Its History* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1991), 447.

2. The history of Russian Jewish immigration
3. The history of evangelistic efforts to reach Russian Jews in the United States
4. A survey of present efforts in Russian Jewish evangelism
5. The unique challenges of Russian Jewish ministry
6. The goals which must be reached in the future to accomplish this Great Commission task

An unpublished study recently conducted by the American Jewish Committee in conjunction with the Research Institute for New Americans reports that the New York City metropolitan area is home to an estimated 400,000 Russian Jewish immigrants. They form the largest number of new arrivals to the United States.<sup>2</sup> The primary motivation for the preference of the United States (especially during the 1970s and 1980s) over Israel appears to be the desire for a more economically desirable environment accompanied by the perception of greater democratic freedom available in the United States.<sup>3</sup>

The descendants of Tevia the milkman are coming and have come to the United States in numbers unprecedented since the early days of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when escaping the pogroms and the rule of Czar Nicholas was a matter of life and death. The question which must now be asked by Chosen People Ministries, and by the ministries you represent, my brothers and sisters, is simply this – how can we reach this new dispersion of Russian Jews with the good news of the Messiah?

#### STATISTICAL UNDERSTANDING OF THE RUSSIAN JEWISH POPULATION IN THE UNITED STATES (AND SPECIFICALLY NEW YORK CITY)

New York City and its surrounding environs are the perfect laboratory in which to gather an understanding of the spiritual and social needs of Russian Jewish immigrants to the United States. The large concentration of Russian Jews in the New York City area provides the opportunity to make determinations on the strategies which could be employed elsewhere. Russian Jewish evangelism in New York City is a microcosm of what might and might not be successful in Miami, Dallas or Des Moines. New York City is a model for Russian Jewish ministry.

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<sup>2</sup> The American Jewish Committee, *Russian Jewish Immigrants in New York City: Status, Identity, and Integration* Unpublished (New York: The American Jewish Committee, 1999), 5. The report goes on to state that the increasing number of Russian Jewish immigrants in New York City has achieved “critical mass” opening the possibility for a sharp rise in institutional and social growth.

<sup>3</sup> Telushkin, 458.

### Educational Background and Achievement

A recent, unpublished study by the American Jewish Committee states that Russian Jewish immigrants are the most educated immigrant group in American immigration history. They are even more educated than American Jews as a whole.<sup>4</sup> This statement is attested to by statistics which show that 70% of the immigrant population, while in the former Soviet Union, received the equivalent of an associate's degree or higher with 7% having some college training, 53% having the equivalent of a bachelor's degree and 8% having the equivalent of an American doctorate.<sup>5</sup> Six percent of the total surveyed population has received their primary or additional education in the United States with 28.5% receiving a bachelor's or higher degree and an additional 10% involved in computer and professional training programs.<sup>6</sup>

The importance of an understanding of English and access to computer technology is also seen as intrinsic to success in the Russian Jewish immigrant community. Approximately 65% of the community see their English skills as acceptable or high and 17% of the total population have recently studied English. Additionally, 57% of the population either have a personal home computer or are in the process of attempting to buy one and therefore it could be assumed that by and large every person in the immigrant community has access to a personal computer.<sup>7</sup>

These statistics provide valuable information to ministries who attempt to reach out to the Russian Jewish community. First, the statistics illustrate that we are approaching a well-educated community in which simplistic methods might not be acceptable or appreciated. The organizations would be able to approach the communities with an understanding that, while their religious background might be limited, their intellectual capabilities are not. Secondly, the statistics amplify the sense that the Russian community is a seeking community which is interested in educational opportunities and being introduced to new challenges. Therefore, organizations should be able to challenge the Russian Jewish individual with the truth of the Gospel.

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<sup>4</sup> The American Jewish Committee, 15.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. This study consisted of a sample of 1,024 self-identified Russian Jewish Immigrants.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

### Influence of Jewish Identification and Religious Faith

An interesting dichotomy can be observed when one analyzes and evaluates the religious faith and character of the Russian Jewish community. While almost 71% of the community identifies themselves as Jewish, 40% place an additional nationalistic label on their Jewish identity (i.e., Russian Jew, Ukrainian Jew, American Jew).<sup>8</sup> There is loyalty to their Jewish heritage but this loyalty for many is equivalent to their loyalty to their place of birth or to the United States. In other words, while their ethnic heritage is important to them, it is not generally as important as it is to American Jewry. When asked if being Jewish was important to them, 67% of the Russian Jewish community stated that it was very important or important as opposed to 91% of the American community.<sup>9</sup>

Related to this issue of identification is the religious affiliation of the Russian Jewish community. Forty-nine percent of the individuals surveyed would state their religious affiliation as Judaism while 39% would state no religious claim and only 12% believe that to be Jewish means that one should practice/profess Judaism.<sup>10</sup>

As stated earlier, these statistics provide opportunities for the development of strategies and tools designed to reach out to the Russian Jewish community with the Gospel. Messianic organizations should foster and develop the sense of Jewishness which, while not paramount to the community, is still a part of their identification. For many, this was part of the reason they immigrated to the United States in the first place to escape the rising anti-Semitism which is growing in the former Soviet Union.<sup>11</sup>

Messianic organizations have the opportunity to fill the religious void left in the hearts and minds of many immigrants who were raised in Russia under atheistic rule and have not been influenced to follow Rabbinic Judaism. It has been said that there is a God-shaped void in all of us. In the Russian Jewish community, there is a collective void; they must have the Gospel presented to them to provide meaning and religious and ethnic identification in their lives.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 22-23.

<sup>11</sup> An example of this can be found on the website for immigration and nationality law attorneys Siskind, Susser, Haas and Devine. In the January 1999 edition of the *Siskind's Immigration Bulletin* is found a recounting of a December 1998 accusation against Russian Jews by Viktor Ilyukhin, a member of the Russian parliament and leader of the Communist party.

### Perceptions of Anti-Semitism

An interesting comparison is found when one analyzes how the Russian Jewish community and American Jews view the subject of anti-Semitism. When asked if anti-Semitism is a serious problem in America, 10% of the Russian community stated it was, compared with 33% of the American community.<sup>12</sup> The more a Russian immigrant identifies himself as Jewish, the more likely he is to believe that anti-Semitism is a serious problem in the United States.<sup>13</sup>

Three members of the Chosen People Ministries staff, Klaudia Zhelezny, Tanya Schlesinger and Boris Goldin, all Russian Jewish believers who immigrated to the United States in the last ten years, agree with this statement. When asked about the attitudes of the American Christian community, they used such words as never had a bad experience and surprised by friendliness.<sup>14</sup>

Two questions we must ask are:

1. What was it about the actions of the American Christian community which created the sentiments which seemingly are unique to Russian believers?
2. Could these actions be used in developing effective outreach strategies in the future?

Also, anti-Semitism is an issue which Christian organizations must address before true and lasting effectiveness for Jewish and Russian Jewish evangelism can be realized. The Russian Jewish experience in the former Soviet Union was shaped in the crucible of anti-Semitism.

Judson Shaver wrote for the church but this could be broadened to cover all Christian organizations that it must acknowledge the poor decisions of the past and foster an environment of community, and only then will the potential of approaching Jewish people with the Gospel be possible.<sup>15</sup>

### HISTORY OF RUSSIAN JEWISH IMMIGRATION

In 1882, Czar Alexander II's assassination was the instigation for a sweeping round of pogroms in Russia and these actions soon became the law of the land. These anti-Semitic laws and actions were the catalyst which

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<sup>12</sup> The American Jewish Committee, 34.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>14</sup> Interview by Amy K. Downey with both Boris Goldin and Klaudia Zhelezny.

<sup>15</sup> Judson Shaver, foreword to *The Oberammergau Passion Play: A Lance Against Civilization*, by Saul S. Friedman (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984), xxviii-xxix.

drove many Russian Jews to immigrate to the United States in large numbers at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>16</sup> Another large influx of Russian Jews to the United States occurred in 1914 at the outset of World War I but was stymied by government legislation which created a literacy test and set quotas for the number of immigrants allowed entry.<sup>17</sup> A final and more recent wave of Russian Jewish immigration took place during the 1970s and then in the late 1980s. This wave has resulted in approximately 140,000 Russian Jews arriving in the United States.<sup>18</sup>

These hundreds of thousands of immigrants—those who arrived by boat at Ellis Island at the turn of the century and those who arrived by airplane at JFK—experienced many of the same cultural shocks to their system. The language barriers and the social/economic expectations were full of promise but were vastly different from what they had left behind. Many of the immigrants of the 1900s arrived with no money and with skills which were better suited for rural and farming communities; however, they found themselves in the midst of skyscrapers and countless people who did not understand their customs or practices. The immigrants of the 21<sup>st</sup> century find themselves arriving with skills and education but with the same difficulties of adjusting to new expectations and new responsibilities which the communist and now-tottering capitalist economic systems were unable to emulate.

One of the major differences between the Russian Jewish immigrants of the past and present is the role which religion played or plays in their lives. Many of the immigrants of the early years resembled Tevya the milkman with a strong identity with Judaism and tradition. Today the Russian Jews have come from a system which was predominantly atheistic for most of their lives and which offered no faith on which to build any kind of spiritual foundation.

Even in the midst of this dissimilarity, there is a constant on which Christian and Messianic organizations can focus a plan of evangelistic action: despite the difficult conditions that existed in Russia, many Jewish people were somehow motivated to seek spiritual solutions to their earthly problems.<sup>19</sup> This is especially true when the Russian Jewish immigrants are forced to leave their homes and comfort levels and begin the journey to a new life and home. This creates opportunities for the immigrants to be exposed to new concepts, new employment

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<sup>16</sup> Hebrew Immigration and Aid Society, *The History of HIAS and Jewish Immigration to America* (New York: HIAS, 2000), website: [www.hias.org](http://www.hias.org).

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Mitchell L. Glaser, *A Survey of Missions to the Jews in Continental Europe: 1900-1950* (Ph.D. diss.: Fuller Theology Seminary, 1998), 106.

opportunities and new religious ideas. Likewise, these individuals have forever altered the face and objectives of evangelistic missions to the Jews in the Americas.<sup>20</sup>

## HISTORY OF RUSSIAN JEWISH EVANGELISM

Chosen People Ministries had a significant role in reaching out to the Russian Jews in the early and mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. The Mildmay Mission to the Jews also had a great ministry among Russian Jews through Bible depots in five different cities throughout the former Soviet Union. But even before the Revolution, Jewish evangelism was difficult in Russia because of the influence of the Russian Orthodox Church. The Revolution further inhibited the evangelization of all Russians, including the Jews. It is possible that the recent waves of immigration to the United States, and of course to Israel and other places, has created the most dynamic opportunities to reach Russian Jews that has ever existed. An excellent resource on the Mildmay Mission is Samuel Wilkinson's *Land of the North, the Evangelization of Jews in Russia*.

Missionaries to Russia included the Smoljars, who had established works in Riga and Ekaterinaslav and Mr. Gregory Guberman, who continued their work after the Smoljars were forced to leave Russia or face exile to Siberia.<sup>21</sup> Guberman's testimony of perseverance and love for his people can be seen in a letter stating:

Our work here is the only one in all Russia, and no matter how small the fire is burning, no one has any right to quench it. I am in full hope that some day this little fire will become a great one, and will light up many dark spots through the Lord Jesus Christ, Who is the light of the world. Dear brother, the time is very serious. . . . Many of those who were with us have now become our worst enemies, and are persecuting the followers of the Lord. Others have become weak and are staying away. Please pray that the dear Lord may give us much strength and courage to withstand all difficulties and troubles.<sup>22</sup>

While Gregory Guberman's testimony was vocal, his fate is one similar to Moses — only God knows — for this was the last correspondence ever received from him and he was likely exiled to Siberia or martyred for his faith.<sup>23</sup>

## OUR MODERN EFFORTS IN THE UNITED STATES

I can speak of this in the first person because I have been deeply involved in what was for me a life-changing opportunity to evangelize, disciple and plant congregations among this new generation of Russian Jews coming to America — the children and grandchildren of Tevia.

My own experience with evangelizing Russian Jews began in 1990 when I first arrived in New York City to lead the New York branch of Jews for Jesus. We had just completed a street evangelism campaign and it was my responsibility to organize the follow-up from this outreach. I was struck immediately by the number of names on contact cards that I could not pronounce. It was clear to me that there was a tremendous response from Russian Jews. I realized very quickly that some of these Russian Jewish people were recent immigrants who were looking

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 107.

<sup>21</sup> Harold A. Sevens, *A Rabbi's Vision: A Century of Proclaiming Messiah — A History of Chosen People Ministries, Inc.* (Charlotte, NC: Chosen People Ministries, Inc., 1994), 154-155.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 157.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

for North American friends, but also felt, based upon the reports of conversations on the street, that many of them were very interested in Yeshua.

Previously, Max Doriani, a colorful Russian Jewish believer who had served with Chosen People Ministries, had been coming to New York City to witness to Russian Jews. Max was a retired American Baptist pastor and former Moscow policeman and, as I said, a colorful character. Max helped with some of the follow-up of these Russian Jewish contacts but his efforts were limited because he could not come to New York often.

Max introduced me to the first Slavic Evangelical Church on First Avenue and the founder of that church, Rev. Pleshko, whose son was the current part-time pastor of the church. Many Jewish immigrants attended his church because they were coming to know Yeshua as their Messiah in Italy and Vienna, as well as in other midway points where the Russian Jews would stay on their way between the former Soviet Union and the United States.

A Conservative Baptist missionary, Joel Mcalreath, had begun an outreach in Italy to these immigrants, which he called the American Club. At the American Club he would show films, conduct Bible studies, visit the homes of Russian Jews and do whatever he could to reach them for the Lord.

For a long time he was assisted by Alex Deikun, a missionary with the Slavic Gospel Association. Alex and his wife eventually returned to the United States because they felt that the immigrants who came to know the Lord in Italy were lacking discipleship once they arrived in the U.S. Alex joined the First Slavic Evangelical church with Peter Pleshko, which he used as a base to disciple these Jewish immigrants.

Vincent Morgan, a Conservative Baptist home missionary to the Jews based in New York City, also helped Joel. Many of the contacts made in Italy were passed along to Vince, who began ministries among Russian Jews in both Brooklyn and Queens. Vince Morgan's ministry was distinct from that of Alex Deikun and Peter Pleshko. Eventually, the number of Russian Jews who were interested in the Gospel was so overwhelming that Peter, Alex and Vince could not provide me with the help that I needed for follow-up. Praise the Lord they already had their hands full!

In August of 1990 we held a seminar that was translated from English to Russian entitled An Introduction to the Bible. Dozens of Russian Jews came. We also had a luncheon to which we invited Max Doriani and a lovely Russian Jewish woman from Los Angeles who worked with Avi Snyder of Jews for Jesus. Her name was Elizabeth Terini. Elizabeth and Avi later went to the former Soviet Union to pioneer a work in Odessa.

Elizabeth was a manicurist at that time and was energetic and effective in her witness to Russian Jews in Los Angeles. She came to New York City to help with our follow-up of these Russian Jewish people and gave her



testimony at the luncheon. This was an effective event but Elizabeth had to go back to Los Angeles and, after the luncheon, we were not able to do much more to reach the Russian Jews.

At that time, I contacted Jim Melnick, a former missionary with the Slavic Gospel Association, who is now serving as a lay witness among Russian Jews around the world working in conjunction with the American Messianic Fellowship International. Jim had formed a ministry called the Friends of Soviet Jewry and was cataloging evangelistic and discipleship materials that could be used among Russian Jews. Jim encouraged me to continue my ministry among Russian Jews. He also helped provide some materials that we could use to reach these new friends.

I heard of other works among Russian Jews that were being conducted in various places. Emmanuel House in the Flatbush area of Brooklyn was having an effective ministry to Russian Jews especially to the youth led by Rev. Overton, formerly of the Bible Christian Union.

I also heard reports of God working among Russian Jews through Chosen People Ministries in the Ukraine. I met one of the Chosen People Ministries Russian young people as I was handing out tracts at a Jewish festival in Brighton Beach. The young man was Vladimir Pikman, who eventually emigrated from the Ukraine to Germany and now leads a dynamic ministry among the Russian Jewish immigrants to Germany.

Ella Ryklin was a Russian Jewish woman who was also reaching Russian Jewish people in Brooklyn and continues today in an independent charismatic ministry among the Jews.

In the fall of 1990, I conducted a Rosh Hashanah service in Brooklyn. It was held at an Episcopal Church in Park Slope, and over 100 people attended. However, what was surprising to me was that just before the service began, a group of about 20 or 25 Russian Jews arrived, many of whom were part of the First Evangelical Slavic Church. I recognized Greg Zhelezny with whom I had handed out tracts along with his young girlfriend now his wife and mother of their two children on the Brighton Beach boardwalk. I had not seen him for almost a year. Greg introduced me to his mother, Klaudia, whom I had met earlier at our luncheon in Manhattan, and to Vladimir, Klaudia's husband.

Since there were so many Russian Jews in attendance, we decided to translate my sermon into Russian a first for me . . . the first of many!

At the end of the service, when I gave an evangelistic invitation, a few of the Russian Jews raised their hands to receive Yeshua. However, we were not able to follow up on them because we did not have any regular workers who spoke Russian.

I asked Klaudia and Vladimir if they might begin a Bible study in their home. Since Greg was now attending university and spoke English quite well, I asked him if he might translate the Bible study. They agreed and we began a Bible study at Klaudia's home in the Bensonhurst section of Brooklyn.

The Bible study grew into a worship service, which eventually grew into a congregation and is now called the Hope of Israel. Greg Zhelezny is the full-time pastor and is supported by Redeemer Presbyterian Church, although the church is not officially part of the Presbyterian Church of America.

The weekly worship service was held every Saturday night at a Methodist church in Sheepshead Bay, Brooklyn. We also fed the people and distributed clothing and other necessities that would help the immigrants in their adjustment to the United States. But we soon realized that these efforts were not enough.

At that time, I was working on my doctoral degree at Fuller Seminary and was reading through old copies of *The Chosen People* magazine (I actually read every issue of the *Chosen People* magazine beginning with 1900 through the early 1980s). Little did I know at that time that the Lord was preparing me to become the leader of Chosen People Ministries. How wonderful are His ways!

As I read these old *Chosen People* magazines and studied the life and ministry of Rabbi Leopold Cohn, I noticed that he utilized varied strategies in reaching his fellow Jewish immigrants on the Lower East Side of New York City and Brooklyn. Leopold Cohn can be considered one of the greatest missionaries to the Jews of the previous century, for he was innovative, creative and bold. Rabbi Cohn understood the needs of the immigrants from his own personal experience. He imported sewing machines from Europe to teach the immigrants how to sew so that they could make a living and care for their families. Rabbi Cohn established medical clinics in Brooklyn because, at that time, immigrants were unable to get adequate medical care. He also taught English to the immigrants. He did this by employing volunteers from local churches who would teach them.

I began noticing then that the immigrants of my day also had a great need to learn English. Soon we began holding English as a Second Language courses before and after the Saturday night worship service. The attendance grew and we decided to try to establish a center where Russian Jews could learn English and study the Scriptures. At that time, I spoke with Roger West who, along with some other very generous Christian foundations, offered to help fund the center.

We began English classes utilizing mostly volunteers. Klaudia, Vladimir, Greg and others taught the Bible studies that were offered along with the English classes. Our little center at the corner of Avenue U and Coney Island Avenue in Brooklyn began to have an impact on the community. Everyone knew Jews for Jesus was there!

We saw dozens of Russian Jewish people come to receive the Lord, a credit to the vision and encouragement of Moishe Rosen, the leader of Jews for Jesus at that time.

Many of the new believers joined the Hope of Israel congregation and today, the core group of that congregation consists of many of those who came to know the Lord as a direct result of these English classes.

At about this same time, Sid Roth began making regular trips to Brooklyn to preach the Gospel. Sid would come to Brooklyn every weekend, witness at the Brighton Beach boardwalk and conduct services in Bensonhurst. Sid's work began to grow and many Russian Jews came to know Yeshua through his ministry. Eventually this work became a congregation and Sid attempted to place a Russian Jewish believer in leadership. He eventually moved on and work in Canada. Many of the Russian Jews that found the Messiah through Sid's ministry continue to walk with the Lord and serve as leaders in other congregations in Brooklyn.

Alex and Anna Deikun continued their ministry of evangelism and personal discipleship through their efforts with the First Evangelical Church of Manhattan. God used Alex and Anna to disciple many Russian Jewish believers who are now also leaders in various ministries in the New York area. The same holds true for Vincent Morgan.

By 1994, the landscape of Russian Jewish ministry in Brooklyn had changed and there were a number of active ministries reaching Russian Jews. Ariel Ministries had an impact on the Russian Jewish ministries in Brooklyn. Dan Rigney, one of the Ariel missionaries serving in Baltimore, Maryland, had an active ministry among Russian Jews. Because of his vision and the vision of Arnold Fruchtenbaum and the Ariel Board, they began holding a Russian version of Camp Shoshannah. During these weeks, Russian Jews could go up to the Adirondack Mountains and study the Word of God in greater depth. Many of the leaders of various ministries in Brooklyn, Baltimore, Philadelphia and other areas were trained at Camp Shoshannah.

There were also a number of small, independent, mostly charismatic groups that began emerging in Brooklyn in the mid-1990s. One of these, led by Yuri Popov, has grown into one of the strongest of all the Russian congregations in Brooklyn while others have come and gone and new ones have formed.

The Christian Missionary Alliance brought in a Baptist pastor from Latvia, Gennadiy Zavaliy, in the late 1990s to begin a congregation. This congregation also continues to grow in the Bensonhurst section of Brooklyn.

One of the most important aspects of Russian Jewish ministry in the United States involves the production and use of materials for Russian Jewish ministry. For obvious reasons, materials for both Jewish and Gentile ministry in Russian were quite limited. One of the bright spots on the scene was the Russian Jewish newspaper, *International Messianic Newspaper*. This was the burden of Anna Portnov, one of the early Russian Jewish immigrants who had come to faith in the United States. She is also Aliyosha's mother-in-law! The newspaper was available when we had nothing to give to interested Russian Jews. How grateful I am to Anna for her vision and drive! What a contribution she has made. Anna teamed with Jim Melnick and others to begin this work which continues today under the leadership of Victor Matveyuk. Victor Matveyuk now makes this excellent witnessing tool available to anyone involved in reaching Russian Jewish people.

In 1995, my ministry transitioned from Jews for Jesus to Ariel Ministries and much of my work during that period was focused on reaching Russian Jewish people. Alex Deikun, Boris Goldin and I began an outreach in the Bay Ridge section of Brooklyn which eventually emerged into a congregation now sponsored by the Evangelical Free Church.

The English as a Second Language program also transitioned and became an independent ministry now called the Russian Community Life Center (RCLC). The RCLC is an independent charitable organization with its own board, the majority of whom are Russian Jewish believers. They continue the English and Bible classes, citizenship classes and other types of ministries to the Russian Jewish community in Brooklyn.

In 1998, Del and Leslie McMillan came from Olympia, Washington, to serve on the leadership team of the RCLC. Leslie serves as the full-time Executive Director. This growing ministry now has two floors on East 12th Street and Kings Highway, in the heart of the Russian Jewish community in Brooklyn. Large signs on the outside of the building proclaim Messiah Jesus in Russian and English. They now have over a hundred students taking English/Bible classes. Each time the Russian Jews come to English classes, they also participate in half an hour of Bible study usually twice a week. Many have come to faith in Jesus the Messiah through these classes.

In Richmond Virginia, Jamie Cowen, the spiritual leader of Tikvat Yisrael Congregation (which is part of the UMJC) also began a work designed to meet the social and spiritual needs of Russian Jewish immigrants. I wish that Jamie were here and able to present his own paper on the subject. I am sure that he had many of his own incredible Holy Spirit adventures through his involvement with Russian Jewish ministries. Jamie, who is an

attorney, has provided legal and immigration counseling to the Russian Jewish community as well as food and clothing and the Word of God.

Recently, work has also begun through Ruach Israel, another UMJC congregation in the Boston area. Once again, I wish that Rich Nichol and others involved in that ministry were able to compose their own paper so we could hear all that God has been doing through their ministry. We need a few more papers, I believe, to help complete the contemporary history of this great movement of Russian Jews to Yeshua in the United States. And what about Canada? The significant work of Albert Israeli and others in Toronto should also be reported.

Another valuable work is the Russian Jewish ministry in Chicago, where an evangelistic and service-oriented ministry was begun in Rogers Park under the auspices of Bnai Maccabim, Chosen People Ministries, Adat Hatikvah and Jews for Jesus. Kirk Glibe has had an exceptional outreach among Russian Jewish young people in the Chicago area as well. Also, Helen Needham's work in the not so distant past must be mentioned.

Fred Klett of CHAIM, Ron Elkin of AMMI and Frank Potter of Chosen People Ministries all have wonderful ministries to the Russian Jewish immigrants in Philadelphia. The work of Friends of Israel in Atlanta is also quite effective. There are so many other excellent works throughout the United States, too numerous to mention in this short paper.

Missions to the Jews can list a great number of accomplishments in reaching the Russian Jewish immigrant population with the Gospel. However, focusing upon past achievements is tantamount to abdicating the responsibilities of the present and future. We must never stop advancing into the future and creating new opportunities and strategies. The words of Emma Lazarus found at the base of the Statue of Liberty are still true and are still being realized. Every day, more and more of the children of Abraham from the former Soviet Union are finding their way to us with emotional questions and spiritual needs.

#### PRESENT EFFORTS IN RUSSIAN JEWISH EVANGELISM

The present efforts of outreach to the Russian Jews seemingly have a dichotomous quality to them. Many organizations, such as Chosen People Ministries and others, still maintain a focus of evangelism and Gospel outreach, while others focus on removing the Russian Jews from areas of persecution, although sometimes at the exclusion of the Gospel message. Another facet which affects Russian Jewish evangelism is the growing anti-Messianic movement within the Jewish community. This movement has created organizations to assist in assimilation, in order to counteract the successes of such groups as the Russian Community Life Center in Brooklyn, which includes missionary staff members of Chosen People Ministries.<sup>24</sup> All of these various factors create a delicate tension and balance which must be analyzed in order to determine the effectiveness of today's efforts and the plans for tomorrow's dreams.

#### Organizations of Evangelism

Chosen People Ministries, along with other evangelistic missions to the Jews, face difficulties on every side: the stigma of political incorrectness, opposition from anti-Messianic groups, and the lack of spiritual foundation of many of the Russian Jewish immigrants. These difficulties are being addressed from several different angles, from creating Russian Messianic congregations to teaching English as a Second Language at community centers to small Bible study groups where the Russian Jews are allowed to make things feel normal for them.<sup>25</sup>

We at Chosen People Ministries are attempting to answer the needs of the Russian Jewish community by meeting the challenge on many different fronts. Frank Potter is the congregational leader of Beth Or Ha-Olam in Philadelphia, which is home to approximately 70,000 Russian Jews. Beth Or Ha-Olam is attempting to reach out to this community through citizenship classes, teaching English as a Second Language, and building a foundation for a future Russian Messianic congregation.<sup>26</sup> Chosen People Ministries missionaries such as Boris Goldin and Klaudia Zhelezny also incorporate a variety of methods and strategies when they reach out to their fellow Russian Jews, such as passing out tracts, ESL classes, and planting Russian-speaking congregations.<sup>27</sup>

Hope of Israel recently celebrated their seventh anniversary as a Russian Messianic congregation with pastor Greg Zhelezny. The congregation, which is independent of Chosen People Ministries but works alongside of

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<sup>24</sup> Information found in a brochure created by the Russian Community Life Center.

<sup>25</sup> Interview by Amy K. Downey with Klaudia Zhelezny. Glaser (p. 111 in dissertation) also notes that the most successful mission organizations are those who are dedicated to this particular task.

<sup>26</sup> Information gleaned from the website ([www.fishermansnet.com/beth\\_or\\_ha\\_olam](http://www.fishermansnet.com/beth_or_ha_olam)) of Beth Or Ha-Olam.

<sup>27</sup> Interview by Amy K. Downey with Boris Goldin and Klaudia Zhelezny.

us, has a potential outreach in Brooklyn of 300,000 Russian Jews. They have recently begun to develop cell groups with hopes of spreading across Brooklyn and creating many more opportunities for service.<sup>28</sup> Chosen People Ministries has adopted the idea which was expressed by Boris Goldin when he said that anything which reaches [out to the Russian Jewish community] is good. We believe that satisfaction with the status quo is an invitation to losing effectiveness.<sup>29</sup>

AMF International, in conjunction with Friends of Russian Jewry, reach out to Russian Jews by (1) sharing the Gospel, (2) encouraging the growth of believers and congregations, (3) training and equipping pastors and church leaders, (4) developing literature of evangelism and (5) providing a strategic link between themselves and other Russian Jewish ministries throughout the world.<sup>30</sup>

Menorah Ministries of Glendale, Colorado, works with Congregation Tikvah Israel which is a Russian Messianic congregation pastored by Anatoliy Odnorolov.<sup>31</sup> Jews for Jesus uses English as a Second Language classes as an opening to Bible study and opportunities to share the Gospel.<sup>32</sup>

The Christian Jew Foundation, through its project, Redemption 2000, while not focusing on the United States and its Russian Jewish population, does attempt to assist Russian Jews with issues of immigration as well as issues of salvation.<sup>33</sup> There are other missions to the Jews with outreaches to the Russian Jewish community of the United States which have not been included. These organizations are valuable and important, but gathering substantial information on these ministries was difficult and the writers would appreciate receiving any additional materials which would make this section more complete.

#### Organizations of Relocation

As mentioned previously, the Christian Jew Foundation includes a ministry of relocation as a part of its total ministry package. However, a ministry such as On Wings of Eagles is solely a ministry of relocation and is part of a greater organization, the International Fellowship of Christians and Jews.<sup>34</sup> The ministry's website speaks of saving Russian Jews by assisting in their relocation to Israel but does not speak in any terms of saving these same Russian Jews from the eternal consequences of not accepting Jesus as Messiah. The obvious concern is that these efforts are truly short-term in nature and not long-lasting and eternal in their effects. The need for immigration from Russia is important and Chosen People Ministries, along with other ministries, assists in immigration issues when necessary; yet we do not forget the primary motivation for reaching out to the Russian Jewish communities: giving them an opportunity to accept Jesus as the Messiah.

#### Organizations of Opposition

The Friends of Refugees of Eastern Europe is a Brooklyn-based organization whose sole purpose is to oppose all missionary activities to the Russian Jewish community. Their purpose statement, which can be found on their website, states: . . . to help the Russian immigrants settle into an authentically Jewish way of life.<sup>35</sup> This website includes a link specifically identified as anti-missionary by stating:

Soviet Jews' zero knowledge of Jewish tradition makes them sitting targets for Missionary propaganda. Yearning for spiritual content so sorely missing in their lives till now, Russian Jews can easily fall for these unscrupulous parasites' smooth talk. Especially when it's accompanied by material enticements such as 25-cent meals or ridiculously low summer-camp fees.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Russian Community Life Center brochure and Klaudia Zhelezny's March, 2000 prayer letter.

<sup>29</sup> Interview by Amy K. Downey with Boris Goldin.

<sup>30</sup> Information gathered from Friends of Russian Jewry, Inc. Website: [www.frji.org](http://www.frji.org).

<sup>31</sup> Information gathered from Menorah Ministries and Congregation Tikvah Israel. Website: [www.menorah.org](http://www.menorah.org).

<sup>32</sup> Information gathered from Jews for Jesus. Website: [www.jewsforjesus.org](http://www.jewsforjesus.org).

<sup>33</sup> Information gathered from the Christian Jew Foundation. Website: [www.cjf.org](http://www.cjf.org).

<sup>34</sup> Information gathered from the International Fellowship of Christians and Jews. Website: [www.ifci.org](http://www.ifci.org).

<sup>35</sup> Information gathered from Friends of Refugees of Eastern Europe. Website: [www.free.org](http://www.free.org).

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

While startling for its invective nature, this statement should also be seen as offensive to the Russian Jewish community whose educational background, as already stated, is often higher than that of their American Jewish family. Mission organizations have to recognize the opposition when confronted, yet not lower themselves to these standards. Mission organizations also have to plan the best methods for counteracting these anti-missionary organizations, because they can be effective when they are able to create a scandal and to stir up bad memories. <sup>37</sup>

## THE UNIQUE CHALLENGES OF RUSSIAN JEWISH MINISTRY

### A Lack of Mature Leadership

There has been a lack of leadership due in part to the fact that the Russian Jews are generally new believers and are untrained. I remember when we started the Hope of Israel congregation and realized that we had to turn the preaching over to a twenty-one-year-old pastor. He was the best person and, of course, we all now recognize that he was God's person for the job. On the other hand, the Scriptures warn us against laying hands on any man suddenly. The scarcity of Russian-speaking Jewish or Gentile leadership for Russian Jewish ministries in the United States has presented many challenges. But praise God, many of the Russian Jewish leaders who were novices some years ago are now growing, becoming theologically trained and entering into a more mature leadership.

### A Lack of Good Materials in Russian

There has also been a lack of good materials in Russian for both evangelism and discipleship. When I was with Ariel Ministries, we produced a videotape of five Russian Jewish believers giving their personal testimonies. We have now distributed thousands of these videotapes and dozens of Russian Jews have accepted the Lord through them which, by the way, are still available. Somehow, the videotape ended up in Australia, where a Gentile Russian doctor showed the video to her Jewish friends and a half dozen Russian Jewish people received Yeshua at her home. We placed a number of full-page ads in *Novoye Ruskoye Slava*, the largest and most well-known Russian newspaper in North America. We also placed evangelistic ads on subways and on Brooklyn buses offering the videotape. Once again, there were dozens of responses.

Jim Melnick's work of maintaining an up-to-date catalog of Russian materials has been especially helpful. Materials such as *Issues*, produced by Jews for Jesus, the *L Chaim* tract written by John Fischer and the book *Betrayed* by our brother, Stan Telchin, have all been translated into Russian. Victor Smadja of Yanetz Press and

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<sup>37</sup> Interview by Amy K. Downey with Klau dia Zhelezny.

Baruch Maoz of HaGefen Press have produced a tremendous amount of materials. Today, the prospect of having adequate Russian language materials for ministry to Russian Jews is far better than it was five years ago.

#### Metaphysics, the Occult and the Demonic

The influence of metaphysics, the occult and the demonic seems to be more prevalent among Russian Jewish immigrants than among American Jews. Perhaps this is true because the Russian government suppressed spirituality for so many years. Therefore, because of the often-described "God-shaped vacuum" in the soul of man and an innate search for spirituality, the average Russian has sought for the meaning of life in philosophy, the occult and through various forms of metaphysics.

I do not have time to explore this subject, but I must say that the spiritual warfare in reaching Russian Jews has been eye-opening for many. There has also been a tendency among Russian Jews towards mysticism, which I believe stems from some involvement many Russian Jews had with the Russian Orthodox Church, as strange as this might seem.

Establishing a solid biblical basis for faith has been one of the great challenges of working with Russian Jewish people who tend to gravitate towards a more experiential faith. It has also been a challenge to keep cultists from influencing the young Russian Jewish Messianic movement in the United States.

#### Ministry to the Social Needs of the Immigrants

Who among us ever thought that we would have to minister to the social needs of Jewish people in the United States? I used to joke about this at one time. For example, I might have said, "Who would send medical missionaries or educational workers to the Jewish people? Little did I know about the past history of missions to the Jews and little did I understand about the ministry opportunities that God would bring to our doorsteps.

Certainly, learning about American social services has been an important part of ministry to Russian Jews. I had to learn about every social assistance program available in New York City in order to be a responsible and effective minister to my Russian Jewish brothers and sisters. I learned a lot about immigration law more than I ever wanted to know. We had to organize social aid for Russian Jews, providing everything from food and clothing to furniture. I still remember our first offering at the Hope of Israel congregation. We received about ten dollars in money and another thirteen dollars worth of food stamps. I had to find out if it was legal to use these!

### Russian Jews and Jewish Identity

One of the great challenges we face in reaching Russian Jews involves the role of Jewish identity in their lives as believers and as new American Jews. The Russian Jews knew they were Jews, for their identity cards in Russia stated this, but they did not have much Jewish religious knowledge. They experienced anti-Semitism just like other Jews, they ate Jewish food and sang Yiddish songs or at least heard them from the grandmothers; yet their souls were devoid of any Jewish religious experience. Therefore, as messianic Jews and as missionaries to the Jewish people, we had to make decisions as to how much Jewish identity we should inculcate into the new Messianic faith of our Russian brothers and sisters.

How much liturgy should be included in the services? I had to teach the leaders of the Hope of Israel congregation all about the Jewish holidays and even how to recite the Shema. In this, my mother would be proud of me, for I was functioning like a real, genuine, authentic rabbi.

Some of the Russian Jewish people were quite resistant to accepting any kind of Jewish religious identity. This has changed and is changing as Russian Jews in general enter the American Jewish mainstream and as Russian Jewish believers mainstream into the Messianic Jewish community. Their desire to know more about their Jewish identity has increased. I view this as a very positive sign. Our worldwide movement will be far richer as our Russian brothers and sisters grow more identifiably Jewish in their lifestyle and testimony. Their identification with a more normative Jewish expression could be a powerful testimony to the Jewish community at large and provide greater opportunities for witness as they mainstream in North America.

### The Opposition of the Jewish Community

Another one of the great challenges we have experienced in reaching Russian Jews in United States is the opposition of the Jewish community. Certainly, we are used to being opposed, but now, along with the usual litany of accusations, we are being accused of taking advantage of unschooled and religiously untrained Russian Jews.

In my opinion, however, the Russian Jews are better educated and more critical than most people of others views, especially regarding religion. I have found that Russian Jews, because of the philosophical and technical training they received in Russia, are more adept at critical thinking than many American Jews.

The charge of taking advantage of helpless Russian Jews is blatantly false, yet we still face these charges all the time. In the early days of the Hope of Israel congregation, we often had dozens and sometimes hundreds of protesters outside of our services. When Chosen People Ministries conducted a Passover seder at Kings Highway

Baptist Church in 1993, there were more than 500 Orthodox Jewish protesters outside the church. The police came because the Orthodox Jews claimed that the missionaries had kidnapped a child and were holding him in the church. A Chosen People Ministries worker was physically attacked, and yet the Lord used this situation to bless the work with greater confidence and boldness. Also, the opposition helped many of the Russian believers understand the cost of walking with Yeshua.

At a recent Chosen People Ministries worship service, three Russian Jewish *Khane Chai* men came to protest. One of them poured a bottle of ammonia under the refreshment table and another began yelling at the crowd. A third thug threw a knapsack filled with live mice into the crowd. To their chagrin, they obviously forgot about the cheese, because the mice did not really understand that they needed to scamper out of the backpack and only a few began crawling around the floor. Greg Zhelezny bent down as he was trying to lead worship and quickly put them back in the backpack. Sometimes you need to see the humor in opposition. Nevertheless, opposition will continue as we reach Russian Jews.

There are many other challenges that can be noted in reaching Russian Jews and many of us could share our own concerns. But rather than continuing to look at the problems, allow me to take a moment and look towards the future of Russian Jewish ministry, particularly in the United States.

#### GOALS AND CHALLENGES FOR THE FUTURE

##### 1. Assimilation of Russian Jews into the Messianic community

This is one of the great challenges we face today. As the Jewish community has worked to assimilate the Russian Jews into the mainstream of Jewish life in the United States, so we also must incorporate Russian Jewish believers into the core of North American Messianic life.

We might need to provide translation services at our major conferences and even create Russian tracks within our conferences to include our *fellow heirs* within the Russian Messianic community. We have begun to do this at our SIMCHA conference every year and have had dozens of Russian Jewish believers attend and begin mixing with American Messianic Jews. We must create opportunities for Russian and non-Russian Messianic Jews to fellowship together.

##### 2. Respect and partnership on the part of the more established leaders and ministries

One of the reasons I am so proud to be associated with the RCLC is because it is a Messianic organization that is predominantly led by Russian Jewish immigrants.

As you can see, there is not much by the way of representation of Russian Jewish immigrants at this LCJE conference, nor was there at the conference in Long Island this past summer. We must make a special effort to include Russian Jewish Messianic leaders. Perhaps Mishkan and other papers should be translated into Russian and made available to our Russian-speaking brethren, as I believe there are hundreds of Russian speaking Messianic believers in the United States.

Providing song books and evangelistic materials are one thing, but embracing these brothers and sisters as fellow leaders, both in thought and deed, will only proceed when we become intentional about including them.

May I encourage all of us to invest in the development and education of Russian Jewish leadership. This is one of the great needs we have today within the Messianic movement in North America.

##### 3. Reaching those who are not immigrants who speak the language but are already hardened to the Gospel



I do not want to address this issue at length. Very simply, the Russian Jewish immigrant community is already changing in the United States, as reflected in the report from the AJC. We will need to develop a different approach to those Russian Jews who still speak Russian as their first language, but have seemingly assimilated into North American society. They, and their children, will be difficult to reach.

#### 4. Reaching the younger generation

We have initiated a specific outreach in New York City designed to reach Russian Jewish university students. They appear to be like other students, but are still very Russian. When alone with their friends, they speak in Russian. Their family values are Russian. They are often bi-cultural and struggle deeply with their identity as Jews. May the Lord give us wisdom in knowing how to meet their needs and reach them for Yeshua.

We face many other challenges in reaching Russian Jews. Today, there are areas around the United States that do not have any outreach to Russian Jews and many that will need Messianic congregations to meet the Jewish-oriented and community needs of the immigrants. Russian Jewish Messianic congregations need to be planted in Chicago, Los Angeles and in many other areas. I hope that some of us will take up this challenge.

I have one further suggestion to those of us who are involved with missions and church bodies that have a burden for Russian Jews. I believe that we need to have an international conference that brings together Russian Jews. I believe we need to be the ones to sponsor that conference. The conference should be in the Russian language with translation into English. The speakers should be Russian Jews and the program planned by Russian Messianic believers. Since most of the leaders are immigrants, they do not have the resources to plan such a conference. They need our help, but do not need our control. Are we ready and willing to do this for our brothers and sisters? We need to assist and step aside, so that this great movement of God among Russian Jews can flourish and develop. Perhaps Lausanne is the best vehicle for such an event. If not, please let me know if you would like to be part of such a conference. Where it will be held and when is another matter, but I think it is time for this type of international conference to be held.

The older must enable the younger — we must put away our sectarianism and lay our divisions at the feet of the Cross to encourage, edify and fan the flames of a genuine movement among the Russian-speaking remnant. We must stand together with our Russian Messianic brothers and sisters.

It is time for the sons of Tevia to come home . . . not to Anatevka, nor to the United States, nor even to the land of Israel. It is their time to come home to Yeshua the Messiah who loved each of us so much that He gave His life for us. And our gracious God has given you and me the opportunity not only to witness this modern miracle of Russian Jewish redemption, but even more, to have a role in furthering His work among our brethren. May the Lord give us grace, wisdom and power as we serve the Russian Jewish community.