

“ Rabbinical Infusion for the Former Soviet Union ”

HUC-JIR's new Rabbinical Infusion Program in the Former Soviet Union (FSU) began in September 2003 with Rabbi David Ellenson's participation in the JDC Mission to the FSU, headed by Lynn Schusterman, to witness the exciting rebirth of Jewish life in the FSU. A few weeks later, the HUC-JIR Jerusalem campus dispatched an exploratory team composed of Rabbi Na'amah Kelman, then Acting Dean, Rabbi Yehoyada Amir, Israeli Rabbinical Program Director, the World Union for Progressive Judaism's Rabbi Joel Oseran, and Rabbi Alona Lisitsa. The HUC team landed at a very cold (-15 degrees Celsius) and snowy Moscow airport. Their goal was to meet with representatives of Jewish organizations and academic institutions to explore the possibility of creating a Rabbinical School in Moscow for the Russian-speaking Jewish community. The combined Jewish population of Russia, Belarus and Ukraine is estimated at more than 1 million, making it the second largest community in the Jewish Diaspora after the United States. The trip was full of inspiring experiences, from praying *Shacharit* with the students of the Moscow Machon, a two-year para-rabbinical training program to meeting with young Reform Jewish leaders from all over the FSU who were so fluent and confident with their Hebrew prayers and so enthusiastic about Reform Jewish life.

For Rabbi Na'amah Kelman, an unforgettable moment was visiting Moscow's Choral Synagogue. In 1968 during the height of the Cold War, Na'amah's father, Rabbi Wolfe Kelman, in defiance of the Soviet Union's oppression of Jews, traveled from America to Russia to meet Refuseniks. When he visited this synagogue he

gave a sermon in Yiddish to inspire the Jews of Moscow in their fight for freedom. Now, 36 years later, his daughter found herself continuing the work her father had begun – helping the Jews of Russia to live Jewishly.

Invigorated by the February 2004 Moscow expedition, the HUC-JIR “Rabbinical Infusion” Program was born. Since the summer of 2004, three Russian-speaking Israeli rabbinical students – Moshe Navon, Stas Vasichovich, and Ilana Baird – and three Russian-speaking rabbis – David Wilfond, Alona Lisitsa and Yelena Rubenstein – have been making regular visits to Reform congregations in the FSU. Their goal is to provide rabbinical leadership to Reform congregations without rabbis.

Today there are more than 80 Reform congregations in the FSU, but only six have rabbis. The need for rabbis in congregations is tremendous. The members of the Rabbinical Infusion team travel about every two months to lead Shabbat and holiday services and educational programs. It is a transformative experience for a Jewish community to “have a Rabbi,” even if the rabbi only visits bi-monthly. Two more Russian-speaking rabbinical students are expected to join the team in the next few months. The congregations in the FSU look eagerly to each visit by “their Rabbi.”

After each trip, the rabbis return home to Israel full of inspiring stories about the drama of the renaissance of Jewish life in the FSU. In Odessa, Rabbi Wilfond's search for the grave of the famous Yiddish author Mendele Mocher Sforim (Mendel the Bookseller), yielded a revelation for the two young Reform Jews accompanying him. Sadly, today, this cemetery is an empty field, except for some people walking

dogs. Why did the Soviets destroy this cemetery? Nothing was built here. Probably, it was just to destroy the Jewish heritage. Wilfond recalls, “I asked Igor and Yulya (two young leaders of the Odessa Reform Congregation) if they thought the Soviets had succeeded in destroying Judaism. They hemmed and hawed, a stuttered response of uncertainty. I told them, ‘I have proof that the Soviets did not succeed. What is my proof? The two of you – young Jewish leaders, building a new Jewish congregation. You are the proof that Jewish life and hope is alive here, and you are re-building the Jewish future!’”

For American-born Rabbi Wilfond, the Rabbinical Infusion Program is the fulfillment of a dream. “For two years, 1997-1999, I was the only Reform rabbi in the FSU. It is so inspiring today to see six native Russian-speak-



Rabbi David Wilfond and Natasha Okoz lead Kabbalat Shabbat at Congregation Ner Tamid in Simferopol, Crimea.

ing Reform rabbis leading our movement. I am moved every time I travel to a Russian city and meet one of my former students from the Machon (our community leadership program) who are leading their native community with intelligence, spirit and conviction. We, the Reform Movement around the world, can be so proud of the growth and success of our native-led Reform Movement in the FSU.”

The Rabbinical Infusion team also partners with HUC-JIR's Year-In-Israel Program's “Pesach Project.” This Passover, more than 42 first-year rabbinical, cantorial, and education students, and Israel Rabbinical Program students traveled to 29 cities in the FSU to lead Passover *sedarim*. This student-led initiative is in its third year.

The Rabbinical Infusion project has found many other enthusiastic partners. Rabbinical student Ilana Baird has taught at two Hillel summer camps and worked with Hillel groups in Ekaterinburg for the High Holy Days and Minsk for Hanukkah. Rabbis Alona Lisitsa and Yelena Rubenstein have collaborated with Kesher, a women's educational organization, in Moscow and Charkiv.

Rabbi Wilfond has been teaming up with Netzer, the Reform Zionist Youth Movement, and led Hanukkah seminars in Riga and St. Petersburg. The team has also led leadership seminars for the World Union for Progressive Judaism in Moscow, Omsk and other cities in Russia.

With the help of the Rabbinical Infusion Program, more than 80 young Reform congregations in the Former Soviet Union are growing ever stronger. This program is made possible through an initiative of the Charles and Lynn Schusterman Foundation and by 186 gifts totalling \$45,000 from students, alumni, congregations, families, and friends of HUC-JIR. ■

Cantor Dima Kerpenko leads Pesach Seder in Baronovich, Belarus.



Rabbi Alona Lisitsa leads Torah Service in Kiev, Ukraine.



A youth proudly displays the flag of Netzer, the largest Jewish youth movement in the FSU.

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