Machanaim: The Search for a Spiritual Revival of Judaism among Russian Jews

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The authors of this article are veteran leaders of Machanaim, a Russian-Jewish educational network in Israel. Machanaim started in Moscow in the late 1970s as a small group of people who met secretly to learn Jewish history and traditions. It produces Russian-language material on Judaism with special focus on the needs of Russian Jews in Israel as well as those still living in Russia. This article appears in issue 7 of Conversations, the journal of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

After the Six Day War there was a considerable renewal of interest in Israel throughout the world. At the same time, a Jewish national revival began in the USSR. Jewish identity started to acquire a new shape. Soviet Jews always had a distinct identity, but in many cases it was a "negative" one, caused by discrimination and persecution. Many people started investigating their Jewishness, learning Hebrew and thinking about going to Israel. But still more primary was the total rejection of the Soviet system, its regime, ideology, and values. This resulted in many Jews wanting to leave the USSR.

By 1980 many Jews had applied for emigration from the USSR. The official destination was Israel, but a majority used their exit visas to go to the USA. In the seventies many people were able to emigrate, but some were refused permission to leave, and the Refusenik phenomenon was created. After the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 Jewish emigration practically stopped. Refuseniks and people planning eventually to leave the USSR were already far detached from Soviet ideology or had never been adherents of it. Refuseniks' Jewish national consciousness was developed to some extent. But they were trapped in a cold winter of the late days of failing Communism. Some of them became Zionists; others joined the struggle for human rights (the dissident movement), some tried to study Jewish culture, primarily Hebrew.

Studying Jewish culture and traditions led some people to the Jewish religion. The problem they faced was that there were not many people left to learn from. Many had died, others had left. Some elders in synagogues remained, but the cultural gap between them and the newcomers was great. A small isolated group of ba-alei teshuva was born.

By 1980 a special entity inside this small group was formed. Later, only after their main activists' aliya in 1987, this group took the name of Machanaim. Most of its members had a background in math or science. These people tried to stay as far away from Soviet ideology as possible, and thus could not learn history or philosophy that under other circumstances would have certainly attracted many of them. The group soon developed into an underground independent Jewish learning network that taught and disseminated the Jewish tradition in various forms: celebrating of Jewish holidays, study of Jewish texts, including the Talmud, organizing activities for children. Sometimes a small Moscow apartment was packed, with 70-80 people participating in a Pesah seder, or 100-120 watching a Purimspiel. Machanaim members also translated, composed and prepared handmade booklets on Jewish holidays and Torah study. These booklets were typewritten, photographed, and then printed in 50-100 copies on regular photo paper. All these activities were strictly forbidden by the Soviet authorities and had to be thoroughly hidden.

The classes took place in private apartments, which frequently had to be changed because the KGB received information about them. These were usually apartments of Machanaim's main activists: Zeev and Tanya Dashevsky, Pinchas and Nechama Polonsky, Levi and Miriam Kitrossky, Yaakov Belenky, Yehuda Frumkin, Baruch Youssin, Michael Kara-Ivanov and Ira Dashevsky, Nathan and Chana Brusovani. There were others, less visible to the KGB eyes, who occasionally volunteered their apartments.

Machanaim's goal was to disseminate an understanding of Jewish tradition that would be close to the Russian speaking Jewish intelligentsia. This included translations of many Jewish texts. But the real trick was to translate these not just into the Russian language, but also to the modern mentality, specifically, to the mentality of Russian Jewry. This demanded a lot of learning and teaching. It was primarily directed to the group members themselves, but also to a broader circle of friends and acquaintances. Machanaim people first had to learn Judaism themselves, from scratch. At first they learned from the few elderly religious Jews still remaining in Russia who had once learned in the yeshivas and were willing to pass on, against all odds, the knowledge they had to younger generations (Rav

Avrum Meller, Chabad community). Michael Shneider and Zeev Shachnovsky were among the first Hebrew teachers, before the Machanaim group began its activity. They were our teachers for a long period of time. Some learned from Eliahu Essas and other Refuseniks. The community hardly existed, with only several dozens of families, scattered all over the gigantic city of Moscow, who were tied by friendship and common learning interests. By the beginning of the 1980 the underground Jewish learning network that included Machanaim had approximately 25 weekly classes and involved around 200 participants and about 15 active teachers. However, the Soviet authorities stopped letting people out, and the Machanaim people became "Refuseniks." This naturally led to the intensification of their underground Jewish activities, which now included not only learning Jewish tradition, but also Zionism and the struggle for the right to emigrate. At the same time the process of returning to religious values and observances involved more and more people.

There was also the more social and spiritual problem of finding one's place in modern society. The process of acquiring faith is described by Kierkegaard as a jump into darkness: one leaves a well illuminated place and comes into the unknown. The person feels threatened, stripped of convictions. Some people felt they must get rid of their "old" cultural baggage altogether. There were some who threw away their poetry or covered books of world classics with a screen. Machanaim members, however, had a different approach: they felt it was both possible and necessary to keep and use the cultural baggage that had been acquired in one's "previous" life.
The group would have been very isolated had there not been Jewish messengers coming from abroad. Jewish activists striving to promote aliya from the Soviet Union and to support the Jewish revival in the USSR started visiting Machanaim people (for example, Rabbi Michael Rozen z"l from London visited our group in Moscow in the end of the seventies). Rabbis, educators, youth activists and other highly motivated people would come from the US, Europe and Israel to help Jewish

Refuseniks, both materially and spiritually. They did what they could to help Jews in the USSR. It was impossible to transfer money to the USSR, but goods were sent for sale or use. They regularly gave lessons and brought books. The content and spirit of these clandestine meetings depended on the personality of the guest. They would bring kosher food or religious items such as Kiddush goblets, candlesticks and the like, but most importantly, they provided a connection with the Jewish world, which felt like a gulp of fresh air, and which served as a real window to the open free world and its vibrant Jewish life. The KGB kept watch on

what was happening and used intimidation from time to time against religious activists, although it was much busier against Hebrew teachers and emigration activists.

Among those who sent messengers to Moscow, the England-based group of Earny Hirsh ("Ginger") was especially active; he recently published a book called Refused - The Refusenik Community that refused to give up and the London Community that refused to let them, Technosdar, Tel Aviv 2004.
The foreigners' visits were critically important, although they involved some risk both for the visitors and for those who received them. For example, once a plain clothed KGB officer and a policeman came "to check passports" when a foreign guest was giving a Torah class. The participants pretended that it was a simple tea party where no religious activity was taking place. All those present were put on a list and received visits from a representative of the Committee for Religious Affairs at their work places or were called for questioning. This was a regular occurrence. Some families had their apartments watched permanently. But without these visits from abroad, the process of Jewish revival would hardly have been viable. In the best case, it would have been very outdated and distorted. As it was, when the Machanaim people arrived in Israel they still had many things to learn.

By 1985-86 the Machanaim group had already developed its own characteristic features. One of these was an interest in Jewish philosophy, both modern and ancient. This was absolutely contrary to the assumptions made by some groups in Israel about the needs and priorities of the Russian immigrants interested in Judaism. A story told by Pinchas Polonsky illustrates this lack of understanding. "In 1987, soon after my arrival in Israel," - remembers Pinchas, "I was invited to the steering committee of one of the publishing houses that printed books on Judaism in Russian. They wanted to consult me as a new immigrant active in the field of Jewish education. One of the members of the committee began introducing their publishing house, saying, ‘We have published a lot of important and needed books in Russian for the Jews in the USSR - on Shabbat, Kashrut and the Jewish holidays. One of our publications was, however, a mistake. A lot of work was invested in it, and it is highly questionable whether anybody will read it even in Israel - how can we expect Russian Jews to?' The book he was speaking of was The Lonely Man of Faith by Rabbi Joseph.B.Soloveitchik. I had to stand up and say, ‘Dear friends! To tell you the truth, your books on Shabbat, Kashrut and the Jewish holidays have not been so interesting for us - they are pretty simple, about basic things. And not everybody in the beginning of hazara be-tshuva process is interested in the laws of Shabbat and Kashrut. But the book that we multiplied in

hundreds of copies and disseminated all over USSR, the one that was in great demand, was this very book, The Lonely Man of Faith. What you considered your mistake was in reality your greatest success among Russian refuseniks.'"

People who knew nothing of Jewish tradition wanted to read Rabbi Soloveitchik. Why? Because he has an incredible ability to relate complex, deep philosophic issues of Jewish law and midrash, written in the arcane language of Jewish tradition, in a simple academic style understandable to educated Russian Jews. We felt that Rabbi Soloveitchik was close to us, and a number of his articles were translated by Machanaim from English into Russian and later published in a collection entitled Catharsis.

Another important author, Rav Kook, was not yet known to us at the time. Unlike Rabbi Soloveitchik, who writes in the academic language familiar to us, Rav Kook writes in a very difficult idiom of Hebrew mystical verse often not understandable by the Israelis. All our attempts to understand his works under the guidance of the students from different yeshivot who visited us in Moscow failed. We only started to grasp his ideas after our arrival in Israel. Later we published a major body of research - the first of its kind in Russian - on Rav Kook's philosophy, part of which was recently translated into English and published in the USA. It seems to be the only case when a modern work on Judaism has been translated from Russian into English, and not vice versa. One chapter of the English book was published in Conversations, the journal of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and ideals, in May 2009.

These two personalities, Rabbi Soloveitchik and Rav Kook, built the foundation of the modern approach to Orthodox Judaism, which works effectively for Russian Jewry. Their philosophy is widely seen as a turning point in the development of Judaism that gives us a new approach to many issues in Jewish life.

The strength of Machanaim is that its members came to Judaism possessing considerable cultural background, albeit not Jewish. The group's encounter with Jewish culture gave birth to a new understanding that might be of benefit to the world Jewish community. While Russian Jewry is usually perceived as an object for education, it may also be a community that can enrich the modern understanding of Jewish culture, tradition, and thought.

Current status of Russian Jews in Israel and the Diaspora

The peculiarity of Russian Jewry is that it combines an almost total lack of Jewish background with a high general intellectual level and corresponding demands. It

will not be satisfied with only "basic Judaism" - ethnic information and an introductory level of Jewish tradition. It often demands not "Judaica" and ethnography, but serious philosophical literature.

It was important for us to understand what underlies the Jewish laws and practices that we started to observe. The Pesah seder, for example, is for many an array of odd actions that people don't understand. We thought it was essential to explain to ourselves and then to the participants not just WHAT should be done, but also how it's done and WHY, what meaning it has. We published, while still in Moscow (in our illegal, handmade form) a book on the Passover Haggada with commentaries. One might say it was a Haggada for beginners - yes, for beginners, but it certainly was not a simplified Haggada; rather, it was an expanded, comprehensive Haggada.

The conventional way to address beginners is this: just show them what should be done -- the minimum at first -- and they will do it. When people grow up with traditions, this approach works. But when people start observing traditions later in their lives, their approach is different. They want to understand why they are supposed to do this and the meaning behind it. People who came to the USSR from abroad would ask, "What are the minimal necessities for the Passover seder?" Everybody cried: Pesah, matza, maror. Yes, it's true. But this is far from explaining what the philosophic meanings are of Pesah, matza, maror. A messenger from abroad who does not speak Russian cannot explain it. Even if he has learned some Russian he will not manage it. It had to be somebody brought up in the same culture and mentality. Only this way could the traditional actions acquire a meaning for these people. That is why Machanaim people saw it as their primary aim to compose and publish booklets on the Jewish holidays that would be written using their own approach. These books gave the readers, along with information about the history and customs of the holidays, an insight into their meaning and significance today. They were important guides for Holiday celebrations and gateways to the world of Jewish practice.

The current efforts of Machanaim to enhance the spiritual life of Russian Jews
In 1987 the core of the Machanaim group received their long-awaited exit visas and moved to Israel. Even though our initial intention was just to live a Jewish life in the Jewish State on the Jewish Land, we soon felt that there was a need here for the continuation of the same kind of educational activities we held in Russia. That same year Machanaim was established in Israel as an officially registered non-affiliated non-profit organization. Among the people who helped Machanaim in its initial stage in Israel, the renowned hero and Prisoner of Zion, Yoseph

Mendelevich, must be mentioned. Strengthened by new forces, among them Benyamin Ben-Yosef, the organization started its activities in two areas: educational work with new immigrants from the USSR, and those who were still in Russia. (At the same time, with the help of Avital and Natan Sharansky and Israeli political leaders, we continued our struggle for fighting for those who were still refused their exit visas.) The dual character of the work gave birth to the name MACHANAIM, taken from Genesis 32:3, meaning "two camps" - Moscow and Jerusalem. (We were aware, of course, of the classic reference to "the earthly and the heavenly camps," and meant it too, hoping for "siyata de-Shmaya"-heavenly help-- in our endeavors.)

At first, the "Russian" camp was the primary focus, with frequent trips back to the USSR to teach. In 1989, the President of Machanaim, Dr. Zeev Dashevsky was awarded the Jerusalem Prize for Torah Education in the Diaspora and the Henry Moore Award of the British Parliament for Service to the Jewish People.

Soon it became clear that Machanaim needed to utilize all media, technologies and educational forums, not just frontal teaching. We established a regular flow of Russian language material via mail, messenger, telephone and Kol Israel radio broadcasts from our new center in Jerusalem to our colleagues still in Moscow. Later, with the great wave of immigration to Israel, our emphasis shifted to work with newly-arrived Soviet Jews. In 1993, Machanaim was awarded the Yakov Agrest Prize of the Education Ministry. Of course these achievements would not have been possible without the continuous and devoted help of Rabbi Michael Melchior, Avital and Natan Sharansky and others.
We have found that almost all Soviet Jews coming to Israel are as unaware of their Jewish heritage as we were when we began studying in the seventies. At the same time, we saw that after uprooting themselves from their Russian homes and finding themselves in strange surroundings, many feel a desperate need for a sense of identity and belonging. Added to their initial concerns as they settle in the Jewish state -- finding homes, jobs, etc. -- are questions of what it actually means for them to be Jewish.

Few organizations have addressed these issues on a systematic basis. Various government agencies took on parts of the puzzle and their consequences, but no one looked at the whole issue from a cultural and educational perspective. Machanaim stepped into this void with a multi-tiered, multi-faceted open approach to teaching what being Jewish can mean to someone acculturated in the Russian Communist environment. As such, the main directions of Machanaim today include various learning programs: educational tours of Eretz-Israel, book

publishing, a multi-faceted Internet site, lectures and other educational activities for new immigrants, radio programs, and educational articles in newspapers. Machanaim has also built a unique Russian-speaking community in the Jerusalem suburb of Maale-Adumim.

The mix of high general education and ignorance in Judaism that characterizes many Russian immigrants demands very specific teaching methods and unusual learning aids. Few existing books and learning systems can meet their needs. Having been educated in the same system and having had the opportunity to learn Jewish texts, we have developed a special approach to bridge the gap between ignorance and knowledge without focusing on observance per se. We have programs designed to fit into a wide range of schedules, levels and learning styles - afternoon and evening programs for men, women and children and special programs for those studying for conversion to Judaism. Everyone learns Bible, Jewish history, Jewish philosophy and Jewish Law. Most activities are in Russian. Our teachers travel all over the country, and we have many more requests for our programs, especially outside of Jerusalem, than we have the budget to handle.

The problems Machanaim faces

The real challenge is, however, to attract youth to these activities. Machanaim has been active in several youth programs: Shir Mizmor le-bnei mitzvah, Young Leadership program, programs in Youth villages and the like. The particular goal of some of these programs has been to break the stigma that exists among Russian-speaking youngsters, who are still more sensitive to anything "smelling" of coercion than the adults. We focus especially on work with youth from underprivileged layers (single-parent and broken families, youth with criminal records, etc.), for whom the problems of integration in the Israeli society are still more acute.

These programs demand a lot of cooperation with formal educational bodies and, of course, their financial input, which is not always easy. Nevertheless, Machanaim continues its efforts to reach the young immigrant population. During Hanukka 2009 there was a gathering for about 70-80 immigrant children as part of Machanaim's Jewish Holidays Project.

There is still a lot of work to be done in this field. The problem is that youth are not usually interested in participating in educational activities. The most successful way to reach youngsters is through informal educational frameworks, which have their own limitations, and through their families at weekend seminars

and similar events.

Areas of success

One of Machanaim's undisputed successes is its conversion program initiated in 1990 by Ira Dashevsky. This program resulted in almost 100% of its students successfully undergoing conversion. The program is an unquestionable success with those who take the offered conversion preparation course. Those interested can be referred to Ira Dashevsky and Michael Kara-Ivanov's paper on the social and educational aspects of the conversion, published at "Hidushei Torah NDS. It can be seen http://www.nds.com/z/chidusheitorah/toc_10_hebrew.htm.

Machanaim is offering to create a pre-conversion framework to be implemented in absorption centers, municipalities, boarding schools, and maybe even in the countries that the olim are leaving, as part of an aliyah preparation process. Within these frameworks, every oleh (or a potential oleh) will be offered up to 100 hours of a basic Judaism course in Russian. The course will be taught by the senior lecturers at Machanaim in an engaging, informal manner.

Just as there are no pre-conversion activities, so too there is no organization that assists olim after their conversions. There are multiple challenges awaiting new converts, from the refusal of certain rabbinates to officiate at their weddings (claiming the invalidity of their conversions), to the lack of familiarity with their local community, nearby synagogue, rabbi, community functions, etc, to difficulties in finding their potential spouses.

Another undeniable success is the creation of a unique Russian-Jewish Machanaim community in the Jerusalem suburb of Maale Adumim. After overcoming many hardships, this project resulted in a beautiful neighborhood called Maale Machanaim with its own Russian language synagogue. (The prayers are, of course, in Hebrew, but the sermon is in most cases in Russian, while all the announcements, as well as the synagogue publications are in Russian and Hebrew, and sometimes even in English.) The Rabbi of the Synagogue is one of the Machanaim founders, Rabbi Yaakov Belenky, who started learning basic Judaism illegally in Moscow and has become an ordained Rabbi with a family of nine children. The community numbers about 100 families, and has a vibrant life. The cultural center organizes concerts, exhibitions, and other community events; varied activities for children are provided on a regular basis. It must be noted that the community is open to people of different life styles, and some come to Maale Adumim from other localities to celebrate bar/bat-mitzvas, just because they feel more at home there and know that they are always welcome.

One more area of success is Machanaim's work at Bar-Ilan University. Machanaim runs courses in Judaism for over 500 Bar-Ilan immigrant students. These students are obliged to take courses on Judaism, but when they took regular Bar-Ilan University courses together with Israeli students, the effect was in many cases negative: the difference of backgrounds created a gap between the students, and the immigrant students felt alienated from and even hostile to Judaism. Learning with Machanaim teachers who have a background similar to that of the students and manage to convey Judaism in an open, non-coercive atmosphere, helps to change the students' attitude. Machanaim lecturers also teach at various other University programs in Israel.

Areas where much more work needs to be done

There is a lot of work being done - still more is needed. Machanaim is trying as hard as it can to cope with existing problems but suffers from budgetary limitations. Still, we have been overcoming those problems for a long time and hope to continue to do so. A lot of work is accomplished by volunteers, including lectures by renowned Rabbis and University professors.

Another difficulty is a severe lack of teachers who combine real knowledge in Jewish subjects with methodological skills and the open, considerate approach so much needed for newcomers. Machanaim developed teachers' training courses and offered them in the past. This requires significant funds and a lot of time.

A still more ambitious project would be to raise young leadership who would lead young people after them, involving them in Jewish life and building communities around them. We are working on such a project and hope one day to be able to implement it.

One of Machanaim's new projects, guided by Michael Kara-Ivanov and Ira Dashevsky, is the creation of "Beit Midrash Leumi". The aim of this project is to build a tight collaboration between the various sectors of the Jewish people, who currently exist in separate universes. The project discusses ways to bring the ideals of European and Russian culture (Literature, Fine Arts etc.) closer to the world of Jewish traditional values (Talmud, Kabbalah, Midrash etc). Initial motives for this project are described in the following paper: Greatest Creative and Intellectual Masters of Nations on the Ladder of Jacob, http://www.nds.com/z/chidusheitorah/toc_9.htm, pp. 7-29, 2008 (Hebrew).

Machanaim has recently started a major project of translating their publications into English. The book Rav Kook's Religious Zionism by Pinchas Polonsky was

published in 2009. The review on it written by Rabbi Israel Drazin is posted on Conversations website, http://www.jewishideas.org/store/religious-zionism-rav-kook.

More details about Machanaim can be found on http://www.machanaim.org/ind_eng.htm