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REBUILDING JEWISH EDUCATION IN RUSSIA

David Pur

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[Editor's Note: Should the Jewish people devote more resources to building Jewish educational programs and institutions in Russia or devote those resources to absorbing Russian Jews in Israel? David Pur, in charge of Jewish education activities in the CIS and Eastern Europe for the World Zionist Organization/Jewish Agency Joint Authority for Jewish/Zionist Education, outlines here the achievements and controversies concomitant with the blossoming of Jewish educational activity in the former Soviet Union.]

Fourteen Day Schools

An amazing and challenging phenomenon is taking place in the ex-Soviet Commonwealth of Independent States. Over the last three years there has been a remarkable revival of Jewish education, part of a general flowering of Jewish expression. Today there are 200 synagogues, 14 Jewish day schools, and scores of supplementary schools in the CIS and the Baltic republics.

A year ago I attended the opening of a Jewish school in Riga; today, in its second year, it has 500

children. In Vilnius there is a Jewish kindergarten of 45 children. In Kishinev there is a Jewish school with room for 300 children, which has had to turn others away.

As a veteran teacher, I enjoyed teaching in Russia because of the students' remarkable motivation. It is hard to imagine the strength of their desire for learning and knowledge, like parched earth crying out for rain.

Today, the republics that were most vehement in leaving the Soviet Union are the most supportive of Jewish schools. All the schools in Lithuania, Moldova or elsewhere in the former Soviet Union have been funded by the government. The government does not invest more money in Jewish schools than in others, but in the day school in Riga, for example, the children learn Russian, Latvian, English, Yiddish and Hebrew, and the school day lasts from morning to evening, with the Jewish studies segment of the curriculum financed by the Jewish people abroad. The Estonian Minister of Culture (a non-Jew) asked to have his son accepted into the Jewish school because it is the best one available.

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JEWISH DAY SCHOOLS, 1992

School	City (Republic)	# of Students
Jewish School	Moscow (Russia)	160
Migdal Or Yeshiva	"	40
Roitman School	"	220
Synagogue Day School	St. Petersburg (Russia)	250
Migdal Or Yeshiva	"	40
Jewish School	Tallin (Estonia)	300
Riga Jewish School	Riga (Latvia)	500
Jewish School	Vilnius (Lithuania)	700
Jewish Day School	Chernovtsy (Ukraine)	200
Jewish Day School	Lvov (Ukraine)	55
Day School	Dnepropetrowsk (Ukraine)	75
Day School	Vinnitsia (Ukraine)	30
Jewish School	Tbilisi (Georgia)	150
Jewish Day School	Kishinev (Moldova)	278

In addition to the day schools, there are scores of supplementary schools — Sunday schools, afternoon schools, ulpanim, and various learning centers, many of which are actively supported from Israel. Our goal at the Joint Authority for Jewish/Zionist Education is to supplement the Jewish education in these schools, with special assistance for teaching Hebrew and Jewish subjects.

Scope of the Change

What are the reasons behind this new awakening in Jewish education? First of all, a national-religious awakening is taking place throughout all the former Soviet republics, astounding to witness after 70 years of indoctrinative Communist rule. The Russian Orthodox churches are full of congregants and young priests. This national and nationalistic awakening is very much in evidence and is affecting the search for Jewish identity as well.

Secondly, all limitations and prohibitions on Jewish and Hebrew culture and education have, essentially, been removed. Today enormous amounts of Zionist and Hebrew material enters unchecked and is permitted distribution. Add to this hundreds of teachers and lecturers sent from Israel. The fact that it is possible today to operate undisturbed reinforces such an awakening.

Many Jews, and especially those planning to make aliyah, have a clear desire to learn Hebrew and Jewish subjects. There are 1,200,000 Jews who have requested to come to Israel. It is true that not all will come, but

there is a widespread desire to leave and come to Israel despite all the absorption difficulties.

While most of Russian Jewry could be described as economically well-off within the context of their society, they do live with the continuing danger of anti-Semitism, nurtured by the economic crisis and the political instability. In the non-Russian republics, the non-Jews consider the Jews outsiders the way they do the Russians, and these countries are today undergoing a strong process of de-Russification. While there have been few outright anti-Semitic declarations or demonstrations in recent months, there is still no doubt that anti-Semitism is alive and well. If the absorption conditions in Israel do not change, and if a serious crisis does not take place in the Soviet Union, the aliyah to Israel will continue at the present rate of about 3,500-5,000 olim a month, that is, about 40-60,000 a year, based upon a wide array of factors, one of which is the attitude of the local population.

Training the Teachers

There are hundreds of indigenous teachers of Hebrew in the Soviet republics and Hebrew instruction has become a business, sometimes even a lucrative one. We prefer to have these indigenous teachers teach the beginners, so this year the Joint Authority will conduct 25 seminars for teachers, both in the republics and in Israel. At one Moscow seminar last year, teachers from over 30 cities participated, with some having travelled three days to come. The Joint Authority sends teachers from Israel to teach advanced Hebrew and serve as advisors to the local teachers. Seminaries for local teachers are being established in St. Petersburg and Kiev. The best students from the teachers' seminaries are brought to Israel for a month for more thorough training.

The agencies involved are, first and foremost, the World Zionist Organization/Jewish Agency Joint Authority for Jewish/Zionist Education, as well as the JDC and the Israel Foreign Ministry, which now works with the Ministry of Education. Especially active as well are the various religious streams. The Reform and Conservative movements are largely funded by the JDC, as is the Steinsaltz yeshiva, where 80 percent of the budget comes from the Joint.

The prominence of ultra-Orthodox efforts among the new schools is striking. In Kiev, for example, there is a school operating under the influence of the Karlin Hassidim. The Wolfson Foundation also set up a school there recently, and a school is being run in the Lubavitch synagogue, with classes and students scat-

tered throughout the building. A yeshiva high school has been established in Moscow through the Wolfson funds with 45 top math and physics students. The boys all come to school wearing black clothes and yarmulkas. In St. Petersburg, a day school is run in a distinctly Lubavitch synagogue, and now the Wolfson Foundation is starting a yeshiva high school there. Then there are areas such as Georgia where the atmosphere in the Jewish community is religious. I am full of admiration for the dedication and sacrifice of those who work in the Chabad schools. For them it is sacred work ordered by the Rebbe.

The most extensive activity in support of Jewish education, in terms of budget and manpower, is carried out through the Joint Authority. The Agency's Machon Greenberg and Machon Gold hold seminars for groups of 60 teachers and principals at a time. Selected Hebrew teachers are also brought to Israel for more extensive training. Seminars are also being planned to teach kindergarten teachers how to instill a Jewish-Israeli spirit in the kindergartens. We are planning to hold a seminar in the summer for all the Jewish school principals in the former Soviet Union. Some of these activities will be held in cooperation with the JDC and the Foreign Ministry, in its connecton with the Ministry of Education.

Pedagogic Centers

In the past year a great deal of material has been prepared, mostly in Russian, for teachers, lecturers, counselors and students. Interestingly, books and cassettes are often stolen, simply confirming the extent of the shortage.

Ten pedagogic centers are being planned to offer all the materials existing in Russian in pedagogy, learning, Judaism, Jewish history, Jewish tradition, Bible, geography, Israel, etc. These centers will also eventually offer teachers' in-service training, guidance, counseling and demonstration of various teaching aids. In certain places the pedagogic center may develop into a community center where lectures, clubs, workshops and other activities could be held. Such a center will also be established in Jerusalem and will include all materials in Russian for teaching Hebrew.

In addition to Moscow, we have begun setting up a pedagogic center in Riga, which will also serve Tallin and Vilna, and a center in Tbilisi, which will also serve Georgia. We plan to establish additional centers in Lvov, Minsk, St. Petersburg, Kiev, Tashkent and Odessa. In the smaller places, there is a special thirst for material on Judaism, Jewish history and

Israel. With the establishment of this network of pedagogic centers we will be able to transfer all the materials we are preparing, as well as most of the current in-service training courses now held in Israel. Of course, there is a problem of manpower and funding to carry out this plan.

Curriculum Development

Good books on Jewish history have been prepared and printed in Russian, complete with teaching guides. Over ninety video cassettes on Judaism, Israel and Zionism have been produced and are used frequently in different forums. Teachers' seminars are based on these specially prepared materials, and after the seminars are over, the teachers use the materials and distribute them.

There are materials for different ages and frameworks, but they need to be improved. There is a bar mitzvah program which includes thirteen items, among them the Jewish calendar and the Jewish life cycle. Many subjects are treated briefly and are specially adapted for children and youth. All in all, we have a great deal of experience in Israel and in the West from which to draw upon in preparing these materials.

Who is a Hebrew Teacher?

As we rapidly expand our efforts to advance Jewish education in the former Soviet republics, we at the Joint Authority have had to deal with a number of complex dilemmas whose solutions are not always immediately clear. One example involves selecting the most suitable candidates for teaching Hebrew in Russia. The Jewish Agency sends only Russian-speaking teachers, because besides teaching Hebrew, the teacher's job is also to reach out to the people, to tell them about Israel, to answer questions that concern them. Unfortunately, the supply of Russian-speakers who are good Hebrew teachers is limited. The typical candidate is usually a math, physics or biology teacher, usually a teacher of the exact sciences, who made aliyah in the 1970s and is now being sent back to teach Hebrew. I have walked into classrooms and seen mistakes in Hebrew on the blackboard, for these are not Hebrew teachers. The students are an intelligent group and they realize that the teacher before them is not a Hebrew teacher. On the other hand, the Foreign Ministry and the Ministry of Education send Hebrew teachers who do not speak Russian. So you may find a charming Yemenite Israeli woman, who does not speak a word of Russian, teaching Hebrew, but she cannot talk in depth with her students. One solution would be to send pairs of

teachers in which one is a Russian speaker and the other a true Hebrew teacher.

Other dilemmas involve our desire to add to the Jewish character of the schools in the best way possible, while having to choose, for example, between sending a teacher to Riga for a year or sending teacher-lecturers periodically for short periods to work with the local teachers, or sending a Bible teacher or a teacher of Jewish tradition to stay for a few months. Objectively, seminars of only a few weeks in Israel are inadequate to properly train teachers to teach, but bringing teachers over and paying their room and board for longer seminars in Israel is very expensive. In addition, it is difficult to take teachers away from their work in the middle of the school year for more than 4-5 days. The great distances involved also have to be considered.

The Rise of Local Control

Another dilemma involves the question of local control. It may be inevitable that local Jews would want to take over control of these new Jewish schools which were initially established by outsiders. One example of this phenomenon could be seen in the Jewish school that opened in Moscow last year. Two years ago when I was working for the JDC, we were interested in setting up a school in Moscow, a city of 200,000 Jews. We found a principal and his assistant, who were spending a month in Israel on a kibbutz. We found a suitable building through negotiations with the city of Moscow, which we were able to purchase for a few thousand dollars since the value of the dollar in the Soviet Union is very high. Then a certain local Jew realized that the JDC and the Jewish Agency do not want to run schools, so when everything was in place he took it all over at minimal cost. Then he turned around and asked the Agency for assistance. We are usually willing to send teachers whenever requested because we feel we have much to offer the Jewish community there, especially the children. We also send him materials for teacher training. Today this locally-controlled school already has 300 children. It could have remained a Jewish Agency school and at minimal cost.

Is Israel Responsible for Diaspora Jewry?

As Tom Segev noted in his book *The Seventh Million*, before and after the Holocaust, the Jewish Agency — the pre-state government — dealt only with the Jews who would come to Eretz Israel, while the JDC and the other organizations took care of Jews in

general. Apparently, this dispute over which organization should take care of the Jews is not a new one. It is interesting how much or how little we have learned from the past.

In recent months the Joint Authority has been discussing these very questions. Why should we in Israel set up schools or other educational frameworks there? If we get involved in local Jewish life, are we not helping to build stable Jewish communities there when it is our hope that the Jews will leave the place? In answering these questions we first realized that even if one million Jews leave, Israel will have difficulty absorbing them and the process will take years. Even from purely a logistic point of view, bringing a million Jews to Israel will take years.

In the last Soviet census taken in 1989, 1,400,000 Jews identified themselves as such. Some estimate there to be 3 million or more Jews in the former Soviet republics. Generally, it appears as if there are a million Jews who want to make aliyah, if certain changes do not take place in their host societies; there are a million who are debating the issue; and a million who lean toward assimilation. Is our target population the million who want to make aliyah or the deliberating million? At the same time we must realize that we are talking about masses of people, hundreds of thousands of Jews, and a tie that has been severed for scores of years.

We must take advantage of the current situation, not knowing what will happen tomorrow in the former Soviet republics and what the future might bring. Furthermore, the Joint Authority for Jewish Education wants to be involved and not abandon the field to other agencies, for among those on the scene are certain anti-Zionist, haredi elements or groups leaning toward assimilation. Now is the time to influence the younger generation in the spirit of Zionism and enlightened Judaism. If we do not act today, we will see schools of an orientation very different from the Israeli mainstream becoming the dominant force in Jewish education in Russia.

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