

**Paper to be presented at LCJE conference in LA on March 12<sup>th</sup> 2001.**

***The Challenge of Russian-Jewish Evangelism and the Transformation of the Messianic Movement.***

1. Introduction.
2. Demographic information.
3. History, missions and Russian Jews.
4. Relationship to earlier Messianic movement.
5. Nature of Russian Jewish evangelism (adjustment of paradigm).

I am a newcomer to this illustrious gathering, so let me begin by introducing myself: My name is Greg Zhelezny and I am the pastor of Hope of Israel Congregation in Brooklyn, NY. During the past 8 years I along with others have built a ministry to Russian-speaking Jewish people – my people in Brooklyn. I am here before you, as I have presumed, to share about some of the opportunities and challenges connected with a Russian-Jewish ministry today. I have immigrated to this country 11 years ago from the city of Kiev. When I left Kiev I was still a Jewish atheist. When I have arrived to NYC five months later I was already a believer in Yeshua. Shortly after my conversion God has called me to the work I do now.

I believe in the Holy Spirit. This might seem like a strange statement at a conference such as this one. However, such a belief is necessary in order to appreciate what will follow. Why? Because Holy Spirit, given by our Messiah Yeshua on Shavuot is God's guarantee of His continuing presence and ministry to His people and to their world. Recognition and experience of this marvelous reality of God's presence is (and has always been) crucial to the progress of missions. It will not take long for anyone, who examines what God is doing among Russian Jews today to recognize that Holy Spirit is moving in a important and special way. That is why I hope you believe in the Holy Spirit too, and we will together trust Him to lead us in his ways.

As of today, there are approximately 4.5 million Jews in the world who speak Russian as their primary language. Of them over 1.5 million live in the U.S.A., and of these about 600,000 call greater NY area their home. To these I have been called to bring the good news of Yeshua. Our ministry is called "Hope of Israel." We have learned much from our English-speaking brothers and sisters over the course of the ministry (8 years). However, there are distinctive ways in which our ministry has developed, and I am standing before you today to share some of these distinctives. I pray that you receive what I have to say as the prodding of God for a more effective and glorious ministry. I pray that I may be an encouragement to all of you.

Before 1870 approximately 5.5 million Jews lived in the "pale of settlement" - the portion of Eastern Europe, which included Hungary, Poland, Lithuania and Czarist Russia. Today, after two world wars, famines and pogroms most of those Jews, or rather their descendants live either in the U.S. or in Israel. This dramatic shift of the population is responsible for the formation of American Jewish community, and for much of the population of Israel. But we are not done with the "pale of settlement" yet. Russians

just keep on coming. There were many times around the beginning of the past century, when a work among Russian Jews was started, often spontaneously, such as work by Joseph Rabinovitz in Kishinev, or deliberately as the mission started by Rabbi Leopold Kohen in Brooklyn, or Rector street mission started by a young Polish Jew in the beginning of the past century. It has been nearly one hundred years since a vital Russian Jewish ministry was around. Now, after this time of silence, the ministry to Russian Jews is re-emerging again. Russian Jews have poured into U.S., Israel, Australia, Canada and now into Europe. This presents many ministry opportunities and challenges, which we must appreciate. Many have already taken advantage of this great opportunity. Take our experience in Brooklyn for an example. Hope of Israel has seen hundreds of conversions of Russian Jews in the past eight years. We have learned that as Russian Jews are most open to the gospel, they are also the most vulnerable to anti-Christian propaganda. We have seen also that discipleship is the key issue in Russian Jewish evangelism. Hope of Israel has now grown to 130 people and can exist on its own. Using the paradigm of ministry which we have developed, Chosen People Ministries had started three Russian-speaking congregations in Australia. I believe that in the future many major cities in the U.S., Australia and Canada will have at least one Russian Jewish congregation. I can see a great movement of the Spirit taking shape, and there's still time to hop in for a ride.

However, in order to catch the wave of the Spirit some adjustments will be necessary to our accepted ways of thinking about Jewish evangelism. Some of us can be uncomfortable with those adjustments simply because it is natural for us as human beings to resist change. Nonetheless so strategic is the Russian Jewish ministry at this time, that we simply must open our hearts and let God speak to us about it. Established pattern of Judaism in America has spilled over into Messianic Judaism. As a result American Judaism is enshrined as *the* way to be Jewish in the world today. This often provides Jewish missionaries with a set of blinders. In order to minister to Russian Jews it is necessary to remove or modify those blinders. It is necessary for us to get deep down to the very roots of what we believe in in order to do that. American Messianic Judaism can use some enlivening and reinforcement today. This can come through Russian-Jewish mission.

So much of what evangelism is simply winning a hearing. We don't want to tell people what we have to tell them, unless they are willing to hear it. "Hit-and-run" evangelism is not my most favorite evangelistic strategy to begin with, but with Russian Jews it has proven especially ineffective and even harmful. As with any people, here too a hearing must be first won, and then a speech can be delivered. There are five specific ways in which our evangelistic methodology has to change to address the challenge of Russian Jewish evangelism.

1. **A diversity needs to be appreciated.** Russian Jews are not like other Jews. Neither is American Judaism the only acceptable way of being Jewish. In the early church there was a tension between Hellenistic and Palestinian Judaism. Much of that tension can be seen in what preceded the martyrdom of Stephen. Palestinian Jews considered themselves "real Jews" while thinking of Hellenistic Jews as "compromisers." Much of that same tension was played out in a conflict which took place in Antioch. It was difficult for Palestinian Jews to understand a viewpoint of someone like Joseph from Cyprus and Shaul from Tarshish. Hellenistic Jews, on the other hand, considered Palestinian Jews to be self-righteous hypocrites and had much to say in criticism of

Pharisaical movement, the present temple worship (which they thought was conducted unfaithfully), and they were much more sharply aware of the problem of Dispersion. In the same way today, Russian Jews are a challenge to Western Judaism, and Western Judaism more than once proves to be too difficult to swallow for Russian Jews. This conflict can be either constructive or destructive. If we can learn to look beyond our traditions to the very root of our faith, we will find a common ground to stand on. However, if we choose to emphasize the differences, we will not win a hearing, and our efforts will be futile. We don't want to preach American Judaism to Russian Jews, we want to guide them to a relationship with Yeshua Hamashiah.

2. **Mercy ministry is one of the best ways to win a hearing.** Ministering to the needs of the body may seem like a small priority, but it is actually quite important. Russian Jews are not hungry for food. Soup kitchen is a weak tool of outreach and it often attracts people for all the wrong reasons. However, Russian Jews struggle with more typical immigrant problems, such as assimilation, and reinventing themselves in a new context. Whoever can meet them here will win their first hearing. Of course, once you have one it, you've got to have something important to say! That's where believers in Yeshua have an edge. Jewish community is great in winning a hearing, it is leaps and bounds beyond anything any of us have ever done. However, once it wins a hearing it has very few meaningful things to say. That is why Russian Jews will remain open even if they will go through a synagogue and a Jewish Center. We found that teaching English is one of the best outreach tools, and that is why we continue to do it. In our English school we have been able to reach out to hundreds of people, before they become lost in a melting pot.

3. **Relational Evangelism is the way to go with Russian Jews.** Relational Evangelism allows people to interact with each other, to be responsible for each other. It goes exactly opposite of the direction of "hit-and-run" evangelism. With "hit-and-run" evangelism the evangelist wishes to bear no responsibility (relationship-wise) to what will happen to the ones he addresses. Not so with relational evangelism. Here you become somebody's friend (at least for a short while), you invest yourself in a relationship in order to lead someone to Yeshua. This is more difficult, but in the case of Russian Jews will prove much more rewarding. Relational evangelism will show a genuine care and concern on the part of evangelist. Russian Jews are very suspicious of ideological questions after failure of Communism in Russia. Therefore anyone who presents anything ideological to them must be personal about it and sincere.

4. **Catalytic missionaries and indigenous missionaries.** I am convinced that anyone who believes in Yeshua is qualified to preach the gospel of Yeshua to anyone else. You can learn the language, understand the culture and find creative ways to bring in the Good News to those who will hear. Therefore, if you don't speak Russian, and aren't a Russian Jew like myself, you are not doomed in Russian Jewish ministry. However, the question I would like to raise is not about qualification, but rather about effectiveness and efficiency. How do we better allocate our resources? It is far better in my mind for our English-speaking brothers and sisters to be catalysts and undergirders, rather than pastors and directors. It is seemingly a less glamorous role, but it is the most crucial one at this particular stage. What we need is people equipping Russian Jewish ministers to serve their own people. This is how it has been done throughout history of missions. This is how it has to be in Russian Jewish work for it to be more effective and long-lasting.

**5. Hub Growth/Ministry Centers.** The idea of ministry centers is a relatively new trend in the church. However, the Jewish community has exploited this idea for at least 50 years now. Ministry center is basically the same as church, except that its emphasis lies heavily community outreach as opposed to just “worship” service. I put the word “worship” in quotes, because I happen to believe that worship entails entire life and being of man, not just his Saturday (or Sunday) service. The best church is the kind of church that can grow and sustain itself in hubs, and because outreach must be ultimately church-based, evangelism strategy must also be hub-oriented. These hubs can take any shape from small home groups to larger meetings (40-50 people). But the crucial role of these hubs is in their influence in the community, where they can minister. They are the evangelistic base of the church, the outposts in the enemy territory, as it were.

As my time draws to a close let me close with this. In the Jewish ministry today there are two possible venues. One – ministry to secular Jews. Another – ministry to Russian Jews. They are similar and yet different. A missionary can be tempted to transfer his acquired “tools” and “skills” without adjustment from one to the other. It is easier, but it is not better. A paradigm shift has to take place in order to account for new horizons and possibilities. Let us therefore take heed lest we may drift by a wonderful opportunity afforded by the Spirit in these days.