

New York

## Young Russians Finding Their Way Back Home

Year-old program gaining traction for traditionally hard-to-engage group.



Annie Atlasman, left, with group of RAJE leaders at the Jewish Center of Brighton Beach. The Russian American Jewish Experience program has been "a life-transforming experience for me," Atlasman says. PHOTOS COURTESY OF RAJE

difficult personal issues, there are a lot of people I can turn to here ready to help me fix the situation."

Atlasman's enthusiasm for RAJE appeared to be widely shared by a coterie of several dozen orange-shirted madrichim like herself, as well as a new crop of nearly 500 first-timers who turned out last month for the opening session of RAJE's third Heritage Fellowship semester program. It was held at the organization's headquarters in the ornate but slightly dilapidated Jewish Center of Brighton Beach. An 80-year-old Orthodox synagogue that nearly closed its doors a few years ago when its old-line American congregation dwindled to almost nothing, JCCB today pulsates with RAJE activities day and night.

At the inaugural event, several hundred Russian-speakers in their late teens and 20s listened intently to a Scottish-accented rabbi, Akiva Tatz (one of several dozen affiliated with RAJE and its parent Jewish outreach agency, Gateways). He argued that while they are not at fault for their ignorance of a religious heritage their forbearers rejected, they should now make the moral choice to reclaim that heritage by learning a little more about Judaism every day. In the courtyard adjoining the building, several young men and women socialized while madrichim poured charcoal onto grills for a barbecue that would begin after the learning ended.

For years, leaders of synagogues and Jewish organizations alike have bemoaned their inability to get significant numbers of Russian Jews — who now make up about 20 percent of New York's Jewish population — involved in organized Jewish life. The culture was seen as just too secular and allergic to notions like voluntarism. Now it appears that RAJE may have divined the formula for getting young Russian Jews excited about Judaism and involved in community building.

Certainly, the bottom line has been impressive. Launched

last year as the Russian division of Gateways, RAJE, which had a budget of \$3 million last year, has already "graduated" nearly 1,000 Russian Jews from the two Heritage Fellows semester programs completed so far. Even as the new crop of nearly 500 start the program's third semester, 80 percent of the graduates have stayed involved in the program, many of them as madrichim who teach the newcomers leadership skills and guide them on the Europe/Israel trips they themselves experienced as first-timers only a few months earlier.

RAJE is the brainchild of two very different men named Mordecai who share a passion for Jewish outreach. Rabbi Mordecai Tokarsky, 38, is a gentle St. Petersburg-born intellectual with a broad smile and a rumpled appearance who first took over as rabbi of JCCB three years ago as the head of a previous Russian Jewish outreach effort known as Sha'arei Emunah.

Rabbi Mordecai Suchard, 43, is the suave, business-model oriented founder of Gateways, a rapidly growing Manhattan-based Jewish outreach organization created to help New York-area Jews of all ages and assorted backgrounds to reconnect to their heritage.

Both Rabbi Tokarsky and the South-African born Rabbi Suchard are Orthodox and committed to an open and accepting style of Jewish outreach that, while maintaining basic levels of kashrut, allows mixed seating at lectures and an easy camaraderie between the sexes that would be anathema in most Orthodox shuls.

According to Rabbi Suchard, "These young Russian Jews are like a clean slate in many respects. They are not familiar with designations like 'Reform,' 'Conservative' and 'Orthodox', and are therefore very open to the kind of nondenominational outreach that Gateways undertakes. The average American Jewish college kid reads the New York Times, iden-

Walter Ruby  
Special To The Jewish Week

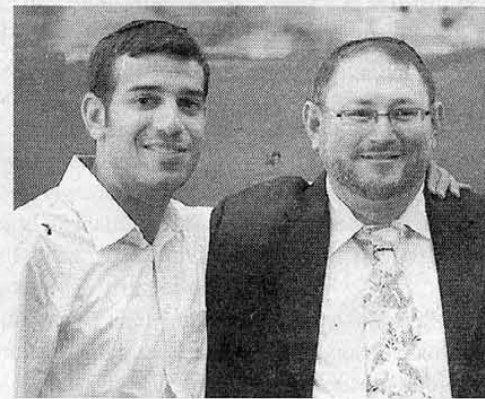
Annie Atlasman, a 27-year-old supervisor in a Medicaid office, had long wanted to connect to her Jewish identity but was unsure how to go about doing so.

Atlasman was born in Brooklyn to Soviet immigrant parents who endured anti-Semitism in their native Odessa. Perhaps not surprisingly, they played down the subject of Jewishness while raising her in Bensonhurst. "The message I got from my parents was 'You are Jewish, full stop,'" Atlasman said.

"Yet I wanted to know more," she continued. "I went on a Birthright trip to Israel during college, but it turned out pretty lousy. The kids that I traveled with were mainly from the suburbs and seemed to have a very different outlook on life than I did."

Then in the summer of 2007, a relative suggested that Atlasman look into a just-launched Jewish outreach program known as the Russian American Jewish Experience (RAJE). She applied for the competitive program and was part of the first group of over 400 between the ages of 18-35 chosen as "Heritage Fellows." The fellows are Russian-speaking Jews between the age of 18-35 who took a semes-

ter-long course — including 45 hours of study at the Jewish Center of Brighton Beach on Sunday afternoons — two weekend retreats at upstate resorts and a heavily subsidized 14-day trip to Europe and Israel for all participants who completed the program's exacting requirements. (One such requirement was completing a research essay exploring a topic in Jewish identity.)



RAJE co-founder Rabbi Mordecai Tokarsky, right, with a RAJE leader. Says the rabbi: "This is about building a Jewish community of our peers from the grass roots without pushing a narrow religious or ideological agenda."

For Atlasman, the course, a "wonderful" trip to Israel with Russian-speakers from Brooklyn and her present involvement as one of RAJE's growing coterie of volunteer leaders, or *madrichim*, has been "a life-transforming experience for me."

"I learned next to nothing about Jewishness growing up," she said. "But in RAJE I was given the green light to ask questions about everything I had always wanted to know — holidays, kashrut, Shabbos, lashon hara and why Orthodox men wear payes and women wear long skirts. As I learned I came to appreciate being Jewish more and more. I said to myself, 'Here is a culture with a 5,000-year-long history and I am part of it.' That's really amazing."

These days, Atlasman is at JCCB almost every evening taking part in educational programs or just hanging out with new friends. "If I am in a bad mood or dealing with some

ties with the Palestinians and sees Jews as occupiers, but that is definitely not the case with these kids. Russian Jews see all of Israel as a Jewish land and feel a natural connection to it."

Rabbi Suchard stresses the "networking component" of RAJE. "It's ideal for these young people in that it is not only about learning Judaism, but also a way to help them gain professional mobility by connecting them to internships and other connections available in the larger Jewish community."

For his part, Rabbi Tokarsky calls RAJE's style of Jewish outreach "a form of social engineering on a large scale." "This is about building a Jewish community of our peers from the grass roots up without pushing a narrow religious or ideological agenda," he explains. "Every semester we are educating 500 new people, while keeping 80 percent of our Heritage Fellowship alumni involved in ongoing programming. In a few years we will have thousands of people involved, an ever-larger slice of the young Russian Jewish population of New York."

Tokarsky believes that previous efforts at outreach to the Russian community largely failed because "Russian Jews were being invited to join existing structures for which they had no sense of ownership or responsibility. Here, we are creating our own institutions, our own communal structure from the ground up."

Simon Gandelman, a Brooklyn-born 24-year-old who coordinates business sales in a media company and is a newly minted Heritage Fellow, seemed impressed by his first RAJE learning session.

"Honestly, I joined this program because of the trip opportunity; I've never been to Israel before and it would be difficult to pay for on my own. But I want to experience my roots as well, and after listening to the speakers today, I realize I'm finally going to have a chance to do that." ■