

## Young Zionist

### Russian Olim

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Last year I worked as the madricha of a group of Belarussian children visiting England as part of a tzedakah outreach programme. On conversing with two leading members of their community, I was horrified to hear that despite their Zionist beliefs, if given the choice of an open-ticket and visa to go and live in the United States or in Israel they would both choose the former. The number of Brits making aliyah each year is sadly quite low, and of the many reasons cited for such Zionist apathy, the lower standard of living in Israel is a prominent one. Yet it struck me that something must be seriously wrong with Israel if deprived former Soviet Jews no longer view Israel as a refuge. And these Jews are deprived, living on minimal income a month and continuously struggling against the restrictive and appallingly anti-semitic communist government of Belarus.

So what is dissuading these Jews from moving to their homeland? It is the reality of unemployment, crippling poverty, ghettoisation and racism that engulfs the one million strong Russian population of Israel. Prejudice against Israelis of Russian origin is prevalent throughout Israeli society. It would seem that people often forget the huge contributions to science, technology and culture that Russian immigrants brought with them, directing anger at these non-assimilated olim who often fail to move out of their Russian-speaking enclaves into mainstream Israel. It is upsetting that a number of these Russian immigrants in fact end up making 'yerida' and return to Russia, having been subject to crushing levels of poverty and antagonism from other sabre Israelis. It seems anathema to the values upon which Zionism was founded that one group of Israelis is so racially prejudiced against another.

A question that must be addressed is whether this exceedingly negative attitude towards Russian olim is entirely baseless. One cannot ignore the dirty money-laundering of the Russian mafia, the influx of prostitutes and the rise of alcoholism and vodka consumption brought to Israel by the Russian aliya. However negative aspects are associated with all of the aliyot from deprived countries, Ethiopia stands as a patent example. What seems to cause such strong animosity towards the Russian olim is that a growing number of them are not Jewish. As a pluralist Jew one can of course find many discrepancies when looking at who is considered a Jew, but for a number of these Russians there is no question. Not only do they deny they are Jewish but some actively practise Christianity.

As a response to the Nazis' definition of a Jew, (someone with at least one Jewish grandparent) the Law of Return was deemed an appropriate law to ensure that Israel was a refuge for all the World's Jews. This law is seen by the majority in Israel as a key weapon in the demographic battle. Scared that the high population growth of the Arabs living within Israel's borders will destroy Israel's Jewish majority, the government can rely on the Law of Return to ensure a large number of 'Jewish olim.' But this Law is outdated and is leading to a rift in Israeli society. By allowing such a high number of non-Jewish Russians to make aliya, it must be seen as a direct cause of the build up of prejudice against the whole Russian population of Israel.

Yet asking the question how these Russians came to Israel does not solve the current situation of a one-million strong olim group facing daily prejudice. It is evident that as a result of the Intifada security concerns are paramount to the Israeli government. But other critical issues are being ignored. The problem of non-Jewish Russian Israelis, and the stigma attached to the Russian Israeli community as a whole is already changing the face of Israeli society for the worse. A people aspiring to be an 'or lagoyim' (a light unto the nations) cannot be one whose children grow up with racism. Whether these olim are religious, secular, Jewish or not, they are citizens of the state of Israel and we, the Jewish people have a responsibility towards them and must act to stamp out this racism.