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POSTS

Shvitz Exclusive: Why Chabad Excels in Russia, And Why Reform Judaism Doesn't

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By [David Shneer](#) / April 16, 2007

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Late last week, the *Jewish Telegraph Agency* proudly announced the near completion of Sha'arei Shalom, a new \$2 million Reform synagogue on the banks of the Neva River in St. Petersburg. It is the first building built by and for the Reform movement or, more broadly, Progressive Judaism, in post-Soviet Russia. But beneath the headline "[Hopes Rise for St. Petersburg Reform Synagogue](#)" was an undercurrent of disappointment that Reform and Progressive Judaism have not done more for Russian Jewry.

Rabbi Alexander Lyskovi, the Reform movement's Moscow-based head, lamented, "So far this is the only successful project of the Reform movement in the former Soviet Union." And later, readers learn that two young promising Reform rabbis, Michael Farbman, 33, and Nelly Shulman, 35, are leaving their posts.

Some Reform Jewish leaders also lament the fact that Reform Judaism has not invested its resources in post-Soviet Russia. Also pressing are questions like: Why are there so few Reform rabbis in Russia (6 at last count)? And when they do come, why do they keep leaving? As Russian Progressive Judaism limps along, Chabad Lubavitch, those emissaries of "black hat Judaism," continues to boom in Russia, dominating the Jewish scene in every Russian city.

Two years ago, while in Moscow doing research for a book on contemporary global Jewry, I attended sessions at the World Union for Progressive Judaism's congress. [Two things immediately struck me. First, even though we were in Russia](#), the language of the conference was English with only the rare translator in sight, a point noted by many Russian participants who felt slighted. And second, much of the event was dedicated to lambasting Chabad for the political and financial power that it holds in Russia. I heard stories about Reform rabbis being driven out of their synagogues by Chabadniks, about how Chabad uses its cozy relationship with the federal government to take over Jewish institutions around the country. To the Union of Progressive Judaism, Chabad sounded like Al Capone's mafia of 1920s Chicago.

Granted, it is true that Chabad has a very cozy relationship with the CEO of Russia Inc., Vladimir Putin, and uses it to gain access and influence. But are the success of Chabad and the failure of Reform to plant seeds in post-Soviet Russia only due to Chabad's nefarious use of political power? I think not.

As I and my co-author Caryn Aviv write in our recent book, *New Jews*, for most of the 1980s, while most American Jews were chanting "Let My People Go" in order to "save" Soviet Jewry, Chabad was already building an underground infrastructure for Jewish life in the Soviet Union. When Communism fell apart, Chabad was there ready to inherit a post-Communist Russia. While American Reform Jews were paying for plane flights and teaching new immigrants English, Chabad brought Judaism to Jews in the former atheist state.

Chabad's leadership and organization are also its chief assets. Chabad rabbis rarely leave the places to which they are sent—be it Astrakhan, Birobidzhan or Magnitogorsk. Why? Because Chabad rabbis in places like Russia see their *kiruv* work, bringing other Jews closer to "true" Judaism, as a mission. Chabadniks live modestly, work hard, and learn the languages of the places in which they work. Chabad's vision of a unitary, authentic Judaism (and of black hats)* is understandable to many Russian Jews, who might have been seeking a clear system of belief after the fall of Communism.

[Russian Reform leadership is trained on a western model of Jewish community and religious pluralism](#). Since there are no Reform seminaries in Russia all Russian Jews who get trained as Reform rabbis end up in one of three places—the U.S., Israel or England

(and recently the Reform movement began ordaining rabbis in Germany). This means that Russia's Reform rabbis are trained as western rabbis and then "sent back." Farbman and Shulman, for instance, both trained at Leo Baeck in London, learning the ins and outs of western Reform Judaism, including its vision of the rabbinate. Each returned to Russia for personal and professional reasons, and each has now called the Russian Reform rabbinate quits for [personal and professional reasons](#).

Reform rabbis are trained to be educators and to give pastoral care, but ultimately many of them see their primary role as CEOs of the Jewish community, appointed by wealthy boards of donors, and charged with the operations of the community. For Reform Judaism, at least in its American and British forms, the rabbinate is a job, not a calling.

Reform Jews should also not be surprised if they have a hard time building Reform Judaism in Russia, because the model of community and leadership simply does not fit. Nelly Shulman, whom I had the pleasure of meeting last year, couldn't afford to buy an apartment in Moscow on the meager salary she was paid as one of the young upstart Reform rabbis of Moscow (a city of 10 million with 200,000 Jews) and now she works for an investment firm. Michael Farbman is leaving the synagogue in Russia for a pulpit in the States with, I'm guessing, a near six-figure salary. More power to both of them.

But Reform Jews need to stop complaining that their movement isn't booming in Russia and just readjust their approach. There are three fundamental problems with Reform's [Russian](#) outreach.

First, American and British Jews still see Russia as a bad place for Jews, as a place Jews leave, rather than a place where they live. More Jews now move to Russia from places like Israel and Ukraine than the other way around, so this conception is dated and self-defeating.

Second, as long as Reform Jewish communities rely solely on *local wealth* to build synagogues, Russian Reform is going to have a hard time. Farbman built the St. Petersburg synagogue with funds from the West End Synagogue in London, at which he was an assistant rabbi before moving to St. Petersburg. Local Russian Jews in Moscow and St. Petersburg have a hard time fathoming paying hundreds of thousands of rubles in membership dues to build their communities. Chabad has a much more global funding model and gets people involved before it ever asks for money.

Finally, as long as Reform seminaries train rabbis to be CEOs of communities and spend too little time instilling a sense of mission and calling, very few new Reform rabbis are going to stay in Russia for the long haul. Reform Judaism must adopt the corporate model that its structure emulates, and start paying rabbis "combat pay" for "hardship placements." I have friends in Moscow working for western consulting firms who get paid double or triple what their colleagues back in New York get paid. Why shouldn't Reform rabbis be as well?

Rabbi Farbman's closing remarks to the JTA reporter are quite telling: "We should learn to think ahead. We should have more dedicated emissaries who can bring this community of highly intellectual and educated people a well-calculated model of the community you want to build."

Reform Judaism will have to change its model of community building and rabbinic leadership if it wants to compete with the much more sophisticated and more much driven Chabad.

**This article originally and inaccurately referred to Chabadnikim as wearing peis. They don't.*

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