

Rekindling Jewish Souls in UKRAINE

Kinderlach at the Cheder Orach Chaim in Kiev proudly hold their handmade menorahs.



in the NE



BY DINI HARRIS

“Why are you taking children to the Ukraine?” the stewardess asked Rabbi and Mrs. Motty Neuwirth when they boarded the plane to Kiev in 1998.

Perhaps her question fomented the Neuwirths' own misgivings, but it was too late. They had made a two-year commitment to teaching Torah to the Jewish community in Kiev. With a three-month-old baby daughter and her “big” one-and-a-half-year-old brother, the Neuwirths were on the way to reignite *Yiddishkeit* in a city whose Jewish heart had been frozen by decades of Communist rule.

Both European-born, the Neuwirths had spent the first few years of their marriage in Yerushalayim, where they had participated in Ohr Somayach's Ohr L'Golah *kiruv* training course. After finishing the program, they looked

into a variety of exotic locations, including Hong Kong and Canada.

So why Kiev? Even now, fifteen years later, the Neuwirths aren't sure. Their reasons might have included stories they heard about the *mesirus nefesh* of Russian Jews under Communism and probably a chance meeting with an acquaintance who had contacts in Kiev. One thing is certain — the stewardess was right. Fifteen years ago Kiev was a difficult place to raise children, especially *frum* children. But despite the difficulties, the Neuwirths stayed on.

As the Jewish community has evolved, the Neuwirths' job descriptions and programs have changed, but they've remained dedicated to their goal of teaching Torah to Russian Jews. Like the flame of the *shamash* used to light the Chanukah candles, the Neuwirths have kindled the flame of *Yiddishkeit* in hundreds of Jewish *neshamos*.

Kiev 1998

"I remember the first *Minchah* I attended after we arrived," Rabbi Neuwirth reminisces. "It was just like the stories we heard about Russia. About forty to fifty old men came to the *minyán*; there weren't any young people.

"I left my wife in the apartment with the two babies, and then there was a power outage. She couldn't call me because there were no mobile phones. There hardly were landlines. We shared the phone line we did have with two or three neighbors. When I spoke on the phone, my neighbors couldn't. If we were on the phone and the neighbors needed it, they would knock on the heating system. We heard 'tik, tik, tik' coming through the pipes and knew we had to hang up."

Mrs. Neuwirth remembers the parks. "There wasn't a single normal playground for the kids outside, just a merry-go-round that didn't work and a slide that was dangerous because it was very steep. Not that playgrounds are so important, but it's nice to have a place you can take the kids when you want them to have some fresh air and a little bit of fun.

"Things are different now. When a

new playground was built, I couldn't get over it. 'There's a normal playground in Kiev!' I kept saying. These things have improved very much."

Obtaining kosher food was perhaps the most difficult aspect of living in Kiev in the early 2000s; there was none. Every time they visited Eretz Yisrael, the Neuwirths shlepped hundreds of pounds of food back with them. When people came to visit, they asked for food.

Rabbi Neuwirth has fond memories of the infrequent *shechitah* in Kiev back then. An occasional run of chickens was *shechted* and even more infrequently, beef. "Basically, they just hung the whole animal in an industrial-sized fridge, and everyone came with a knife, hacked off a piece, weighed it, and took it home."

Teaching in Russian

In 1990, after the fall of Communism, Rabbi Yaakov Bleich, an American Karlin-Stolin chassid, was sent by the Rebbe, *shlita*, to Kiev to revive the once-thriving Jewish community. He opened kindergartens, day schools, dormitories, and soup kitchens, along with a yeshivah, *cheder*, and Bais Yaakov. Rabbi and Mrs. Neuwirth's programs

are all under the umbrella of Rabbi Bleich's Orach Chaim Foundation.

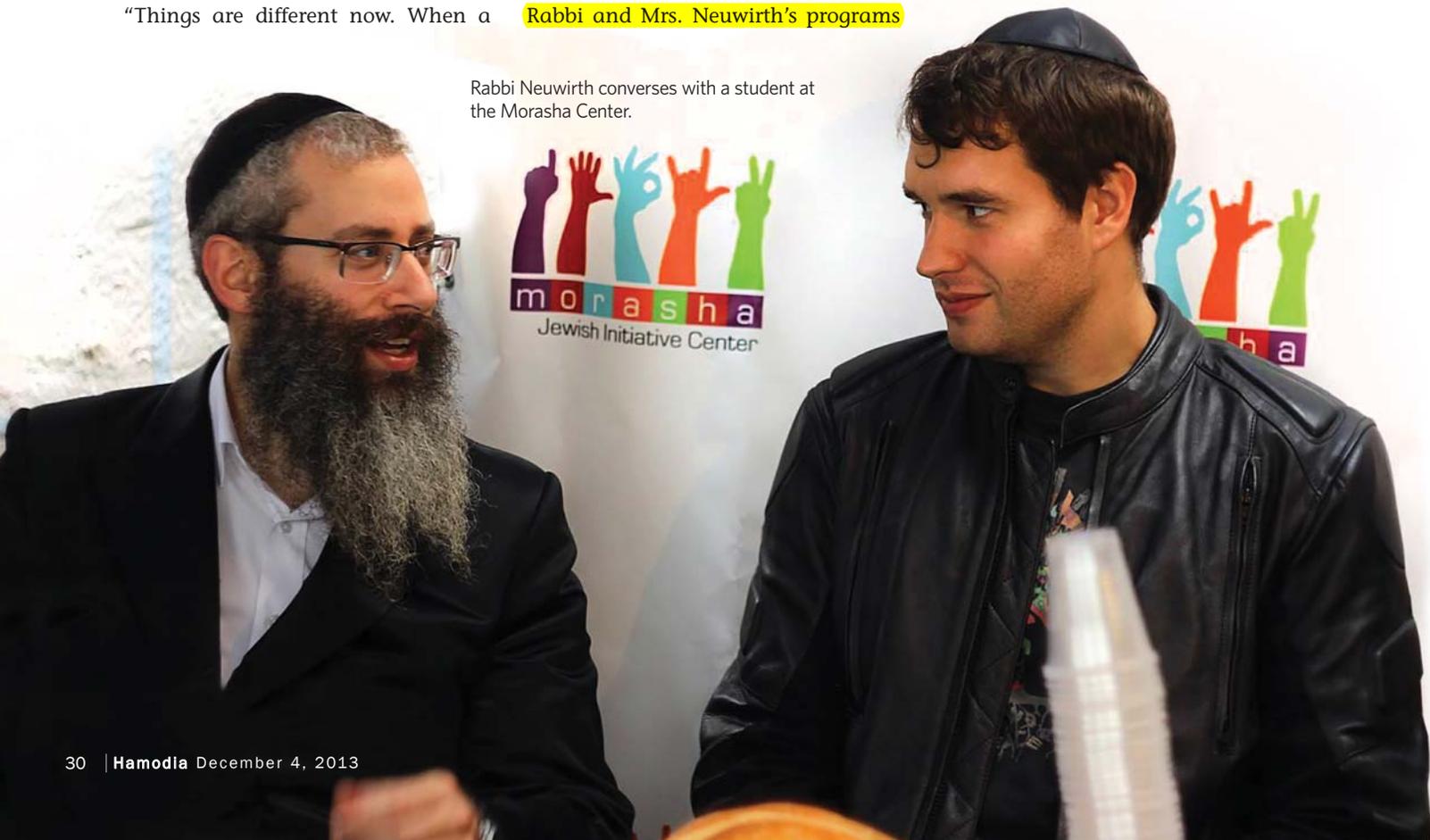
Rabbi Neuwirth's first job was teaching nonreligious students in the Jewish elementary school. Back then, he spoke Yiddish, Hebrew, and English, but no Russian or Ukrainian.

"I was told that I could speak Hebrew or English, and someone would translate for me. But three to four months into the job, I realized that it's impossible to relate to people if you can't speak to them. So I decided that I wasn't going to speak a word of Hebrew or English in class.

"I wrote out my entire lesson in Hebrew. Then I had someone translate it for me into Russian, transliterated using Hebrew letters. This way I was able to read out my lesson in Russian.

"Reaching the secularized Jewish students was a real challenge, and our resources in Kiev were very limited. People had so many misconceptions; they thought that *Yiddishkeit* was for old people and completely irrelevant. But *baruch Hashem*, we were successful. Today, one of the boys whom I taught *alef-beis* is teaching *alef-beis* to my son in *cheder*."

Rabbi Neuwirth converses with a student at the Morasha Center.



Kosher in Kiev

“About a year or two after I came, I taught a class about kashrus — its importance and information about what is kosher and what is not,” Rabbi Neuwirth continues. “The lesson went over very well, and then, at the very end, a kid waved his finger and asked, ‘If I want to keep kosher tomorrow, can I?’”

“It hit me like a rock. I was here from Israel with boxes of kosher food at home. But how could I tell this kid to keep kosher? I realized that there had to be kosher food available in Kiev, and not in a way that people had to come and cut off pieces of a dead steer in a fridge.”

Since then the average monthly salary in Kiev was \$60 to \$70, the kosher food store was initially subsidized. Bringing in food from Europe and Israel was challenging and involved asking guests and tourist groups to take along hundreds of pounds of food with them when they came to Kiev.

The first day the subsidized store opened, a woman came in, looked around, and started to cry. “I grew up in Kiev,” she said. “I remember the old days. I never dreamed that I would ever be able to buy kosher food again here.”

The store wiped out false impressions about kosher food. Residents learned that “kosher” didn’t have to mean the expired jars of gefilte fish that were sometimes distributed by humanitarian aid societies. Over the years, the demand grew and the economic situation in the city improved. Eventually the Neuwirths realized that it was time to give up this time-consuming project.

The store was taken over by a businessman who also began importing kosher food products and supplying them to local grocery stores. Today kosher foods are available at many supermarkets, there’s a local *shechitah* that sells ten different types of sausages, and there are locally manufactured kosher cookies and sweets.



Rabbi Neuwirth runs “Unlock Your Judaism,” a text-based learning program for beginners that covers the basics of *Yiddishkeit*.

“Shabbos Hosts reached out to me and offered me a Shabbos, but I didn’t want to go. I thought that Shabbos meals were for ‘black-and-white people’ who sat around and did uninteresting things...”



Rabbi Neuwirth gives a Torah class.



A former refusenik, Rav Tzvi Patlas, from Israel, is one of the senior lecturers at Morasha.

College Kiruv

In 2004, *kiruv* activist Jeff Seidel visited Kiev with a group of college students. The trip was meant to inspire his own students, but it also sparked a *kiruv* revolution in Kiev.

“Until then,” Rabbi Neuwirth explains, “there were *shiurim* for the people in shul; there were *minyanim* and schools that were reaching out to children. But we basically left the college students alone because we thought that it would be too difficult to reach them. Jeff exposed us to the idea of campus *kiruv* and student centers. He inspired us to open a center in Kiev.”

For a number of years, the student center in Kiev ran along the same lines as other campus *kiruv* centers around the world. It offered light social activities, usually based around Shabbos and Yamim Tovim, and a range of *shiurim*. The center also offered the first stipend-based program in Russia, where students earned money for attending

Jewish classes.

The program showed unaffiliated young Jews that *Yiddishkeit* was “cool” and fun, and it encouraged hundreds of students to become Torah-observant. More recently, ever in sync with the shifting moods in Kiev, Rabbi Neuwirth realized that the program had become ineffectual and counterproductive.

“Former students came to tell me that they couldn’t learn with me anymore because we gave stipends. That made me happy. People finally understood that we shouldn’t be giving them money for studying; they should be paying us for teaching them. It was time to shift our focus again.”

Shabbos Hosting Revisited

A Jewish disco? “No!”

Rabbi Neuwirth told the two young professionals in front of him that he couldn’t be involved in a disco event even if it targeted Jews, and even if the organizers hoped it would encourage

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Jews to attend shul and learning programs. He couldn’t be associated with the event, but he was willing to speak anywhere else that Jews congregated. The location — the most popular, expensive disco in the city — didn’t impress the rabbi, and neither did the yarmulkes emblazoned with the disco’s emblem that were distributed at the door.

But the attendance was impressive; close to six hundred young Jewish professionals showed up. In the world of *kiruv*, this career-climbing group is extremely difficult to reach. The event got Rabbi Neuwirth thinking. What appropriate, *Torahdik* program could he create that would appeal to this type of unaffiliated young Jew?

The Shabbos Hosts program was his creative solution to this challenge. It was

classy and unintimidating. The program was set to launch during Chanukah 2010. Sophisticated entertainment and a chic venue were used to attract the target population. The event wasn’t advertised; it was by invitation only, based primarily on the list of disco attendees.

It focused on Shabbos, but it wasn’t an open appeal for registration at a large, institutional *Shabbaton*. Instead, a number of high-profile community members spoke about their personal Shabbos experiences and invited people to their own Shabbos tables.

It worked. Each attendee had his or her own reasons to participate; the young professionals leaped at the opportunity to experience Shabbos with the host families. Some were interested in spending Shabbos with a particular person because he was influential in a specific industry; others were interested in spending Shabbos at a rabbi’s home.

Today, instead of the *kiruv* workers calling unaffiliated Jews and trying to convince them to experience a Shabbos, these people call and beg for an opportunity to participate in the Shabbos Hosts program. The project has been so successful that Rabbi Neuwirth plans on opening similar programs in three other cities in the Ukraine.



Entry Points

Rabbi Neuwirth calls the Shabbos experience an entry point, an activity that draws an unaffiliated person into one of his programs. His current project, the Jewish Initiative Center or Morasha, funded in part by the Wolfson Foundation, was designed to increase the potential number of entry points for the professional, sophisticated clientele discovered at the disco event and through Shabbos Hosts.

The Morasha building itself is a state-of-the-art facility, outfitted with a bar and other amenities appreciated by the young professionals. The activities that take place there high-quality and varied.

“Someone completely unaffiliated won’t come to a Jewish program,” explains Rabbi Neuwirth. “But he might be interested in a course in English. So we offer this course as a way of recruiting. Different people have different entry points; some people want to socialize, some want to play games, and some want to learn about meditation.

“We also encourage attendees to

take initiative themselves. If someone plays guitar, he can give guitar lessons in the center or organize a concert. Someone else can make a birthday party. We would even exhibit a coin collection. Every event brings more people through the door.”

Once the person comes through the door, the Morasha staff and local volunteers — *baalei teshuvah* who’ve learned about *Yiddishkeit* through the various programs of the Orach Chaim Foundation — encourage him or her to further explore *Yiddishkeit* by attending programs, participating in a trip to Israel, or coming for a meal on Shabbos.

While the programs are what draw the people in, Rabbi Neuwirth credits the personal relationships cultivated by the Morasha staff and Kiev community members as the ultimate catalyst for growth in *Yiddishkeit*.

Growing Community

“I was totally occupied by my work,” Akiva says about his pre-Morasha existence. “I was working and studying for my master’s, and I wasn’t doing

anything Jewish. Shabbos Hosts reached out to me and offered me a Shabbos, but I didn’t want to go. I thought that Shabbos meals were for ‘black-and-white people’ who sat around and did uninteresting things.

“When I finally agreed to go, I ended up at the Neuwirths’ and had a great time. There were lots of other guests my age, and the Neuwirth family is very special. Family was my biggest value, and I saw that the Neuwirths had it. I saw that ‘black-and-white people’ were



Rabbi Neuwirth (second right) preparing the documents at a student's *chasunah*.



The Jewish Initiative Center lecture hall is also used for Shabbos meals.

not as dull as I thought, and from then on I started going to different families. I made lots of friends and met the community.

"I learned that there's nothing unhealthy about tradition. One Shabbos a family offered me sleeping arrangements, and I kept the whole Shabbos. Before I knew it, I was keeping Shabbos myself. Then I did a *bris milah* and decided to keep kashrus.

"Four months ago, I had a kosher wedding, and now we are a religious

has a shul, a kosher hotel, *milchig* and *fleishig* restaurants, conference halls, and the Jewish Initiative Center. It is the perfect venue for *Shabbatonim* and community *simchos*.

Focus on Family

"I used to feel bad for my kids living way out here in Kiev," says Mrs. Neuwirth, "and I would compensate by buying them lots of toys and games. But I stopped that long ago.

"It was touch-and-go for so long,

stayed on.

A similar situation prompted the opening of a Bais Yaakov. The demands of the Bais Yaakov, and her daughters' education, are among Mrs. Neuwirth's primary concerns; she is the main teacher of two grades in the school.

Along with her full-time teaching position and taking care of her large family, Mrs. Neuwirth teaches *kallos*, teaches *halachah* to people in the process of conversion, cooks and bakes for large numbers of Shabbos guests every week, and maintains personal relationships with many community members.

The Neuwirths have had to make significant sacrifices to remain in Kiev. Three years ago, they were forced to send their thirteen-year-old son to yeshivah in Europe and their oldest daughter to high school in Eretz Yisrael.

The separation is difficult for both parents and children. In fact, the thought of sending their daughter away prompted their decision to leave Kiev at last. Last year's Purim *shpiel*, staged by local Kiev *bachurim*, was essentially a goodbye party for the family.

But before heading back, the Neuwirths, who are Lelover chassidim, went to their Rebbe in Yerushalayim for a *brachah*. He would not allow them to leave. They tried presenting their case in various ways, but the Rebbe, *shlita*, would not permit them to give up their work in Kiev.

The Rebbe appreciates the incomparable work that the Neuwirths have done, and will continue to do, in the Kiev community, *b'ezras Hashem*. *Neshamah* after *neshamah*, like a Chanukah miracle, they are reigniting souls that had lain dormant under the cold Communist rule. ■

For assistance or questions related to kiruv, please call the Oz Nidberu Kiruv Hotline at 1-800-98 KIRUV.

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couple. And this is not just my story; it's the story of a lot of people around me. I look around everywhere I go and think about who I can bring into the program. Now we're Shabbos hosts. It's not just about giving back to the community — it's also enjoyable. We have a good time with the people who visit us."

Akiva is just one of the dozens of *baalei teshuvah* who now comprise the *frum* community in Kiev, which is centered in the Podol neighborhood. Rabbi Bleich's shul is there, along with a *kollel* that has about forty members, and the newly built Podol Inn. The inn

because we never knew how long we would stay. But then I realized that you can't raise a family in temporary conditions. Kids need to feel that they have a home somewhere."

Rabbi and Mrs. Neuwirth's narratives both contain a strong focus on family. When they moved to Kiev, they recognized that they could stay in the city only as long as there was appropriate *chinuch* for their children. After a few years there, they told Rabbi Bleich that they were heading back to Eretz Yisrael because there was no *cheder* for their son. So Rabbi Bleich opened a *cheder*, and the Neuwirths