

*Russian speaking Jews all over the world in many cases combine high intellectual and general education level with almost complete ignorance of Jewish Tradition. Few organizations have addressed this issue on a systematic basis. Various government agencies took on parts of the puzzle and their consequences, but no one looked at the whole issue from a cultural and educational perspective. **Machanaim** stepped into this void with a multi-tiered, multi-faceted open approach to teaching what being Jewish can mean to someone acculturated in the Russian Communist environment.*

## FOCUS ON: "ONE PEOPLE" PROJECT

This program addresses the specific issue of integrating the Russian speaking community into the Israeli society. Today in Israel, there is a lot of noise surrounding the conversion crisis, and no wonder—out of more than a million Russian olim, a sizable proportion (estimated between 15% and almost one quarter) are not halachically Jewish. Many of them grew up thinking they were, and, given the opportunity under the Law of Return, came to Israel to join the Jewish people. Imagine their hurt and disappointment when they found that they were not considered Jewish by the very people they expected to welcome them!

This potential alienation can split the society and create a "people within people". To prevent this, all the efforts must be made to explain to these immigrants the importance of the unity of the Jewish people and to offer them ways of solving their own problems with Jewish society, among them a possibility of conversion.

### BECOMING PART OF JEWISH SOCIETY

**Machanaim** has led the way in educating the Russian-speaking community in general on the importance of preserving the Jewish character of the society, in a friendly, not paternalistic or coercive atmosphere. Instead of concentrating on who is and who is not halachically Jewish, we focus on offering no-pressure education about Judaism, without trying to impose ideas or observances upon anyone. Based upon our experience with the Russian community, both in Russia and in Israel, **Machanaim** understands that many of the real barriers are cultural and not halachic. Having been force-fed Communism and atheism for years, Russians are different from Israelis. Many Russians don't have the cultural models to understand religion, and automatically assume that "if the government thinks it is good and wants me to do it, it is bad."

**Machanaim** has created a broad platform of projects and programs, both social and academic, to attract a wide variety of Russians, each coming from their own specific perspective, to learn about being Jewish.

This project involves immigrants, Jewish and non-Jewish together, in joint attractive activities – **weekend seminars** – where they participate in discussions, listen to lectures and begin to get acquainted with the Jewish mode of life. The activities include a talk with somebody who was not born Jewish and decided to convert (preferably somebody who converted not in Israel, without any outside pressure, just out of his/her own free will). On Friday the participants are usually taken on **guided trip** to some place of interest, which helps them create a link to the land where they now live.

The project also includes **cultural and social events** that help them



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see the common denominator between themselves and Israeli society, joint activities around the notion of “mifgash tarbuyot” – meeting of the cultures that help to promote mutual understanding between the Russian-speakers and Israelis and thus helps unite various elements of the society.

There are also **meetings with public figures** to discuss relevant problems and possible solutions.

## BECOMING JEWISH

Conversion is not an automatic corollary of “Let My People Go.” It is a byproduct of acculturation. It comes as a result of the slow, deliberate process of “Let My People Know.” The natural next step for some graduates of this project is **Machanaim’s giyur programs**, tailored to non-Jews who decide conversion is the real solution.

In the last decade, **Machanaim** has helped over 1,000 people and their extended families convert.

The conversion groups study 12 hours a week in accordance with the Chief Rabbinate’s requirements. In addition to the frontal teaching, **Machanaim** provides these students with individual counseling, and shepherds them through the rabbinical courts with a smile. **Machanaim** helps them with the paperwork and the interviews, and all of the family issues that tend to arise. One hundred percent of those who sign up for **Machanaim** official conversion program make it through, but it can take some as long as seven years. This is a difficult sell in today’s education-is-a-business environment, where there is supposed to be some predictable and constant formula like 2x inputs = 3y outputs. For **Machanaim**, the bottom line is One People - not how long it takes.

## THEIR STORIES

### Genya, 33:

*I was shocked when they told me that I was not a Jew. Ironically, it happened during some seminar organized in Moscow... and I was just starting, for the first time, to feel proud of my Jewish heritage. I honestly thought it was going to become my new world... Is it possible that my Russian [non-Jewish] grandmother disconnected me from generations of pious Polish and Russian Jews?*

*I made aliyah to Israel with a firm decision to get converted. I don’t see my conversion as changing my nationality – but rather as making up for some missing or broken link in my family and in my personal identity.*

### Lyuda, 55:

*I came to **Machanaim** because I felt an emptiness - something was missing. My husband is Jewish and he belongs in Israel. I guess I do too; I certainly didn’t belong in Kiev where I got sneers and dirty looks from the other medical students because I had married a Jew; my son also suffered the taunts of the bullies. But when the traffic slowed on Friday night and the air changed in the street, I yearned to feel that I really belong, to feel that this country is my home. So I started going to classes. I didn’t want to convert because I heard all kinds of stories about rabbis asking embarrassing questions. I had a friend who was reduced to tears when the rabbi demanded she bring one more document she had never heard of. But no one at **Machanaim** asked for documents; the instructors didn’t ask me to prove anything. They said the classes were free and I could join any one I wanted. I learned about Jewish history, and then I thought I would try to keep Shabbat. And there I was, all excited and trying to get the family to get dressed up too, and my husband looked at me as if I was crazy. He said he would rather get a divorce. Eventually he decided to give me a chance and to be more tolerant of my observance. I waited two years until he felt less threatened and decided he could also give it a try. I converted and even had a chupah....*

### Masha, 25:

*My father is Jewish, my mother is not. My father sacrificed everything to bring us to Israel so we would have a better life. When he got sick, I was in high school. I had a hard time watching my strong father deteriorate because of the pressure to find a job and to make a life for us. I heard about **Machanaim** and I started going to the classes. The classes were interesting and no one pushed me—they let me ask questions, voice my doubts. They didn’t expect me to change one day and sign a bunch of papers. They let me pace myself. I started and stopped several times, and each time they welcomed me back with a smile and attentive ear. I tried to act Jewish in the army; I took **Machanaim** “Foundations of Judaism” courses at the university. It has taken me a long time; I look at some of my friends and realize that it is going to take them even longer. I’m lucky because at least my father gave me something - a heritage. Even though technically he wasn’t right, he insisted we were Jewish and we belong here. I have students in the **Machanaim** classes I teach now whose parents raised them with the idea that Communism is better than any religion and that science is God. I worry about how long it will take them; I bet my teachers at **Machanaim** worried about how long it would take me.*

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