

Seven rabbis and 16,000 families



Alex Shnaider, left, president of the Jewish Russian Community Centre, and Rabbi Yoseph Zaltzman.

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From a solo operation, the JRCC has swelled to include seven full-time rabbis, their wives and families, and a growing number of support staff offering everything from bar and bat mitzvah programs and holiday parties to immigration and legal assistance, clothing and furniture banks and interest-free loans.

The population served by the JRCC has also grown to 16,000 families, including many who came to Canada after living in Israel. More than half “use some kind of services of our centre on a yearly basis,” says Rabbi Zaltzman. Five or six hundred join in for Shabbat services alone.

The secret of the JRCC’s success is the rebbe’s dual conviction in “the unlimited wealth that is in the soul of every human being,” and the need to “help any Jew... in any way possible, to create Jewish continuity.”

Whether that means inviting 500 students and singles to a Lag b’Omer party or sending out 700 Passover food packages; setting up more than 10,000 High Holiday seats or buying finger paints for almost a hundred day care children, the JRCC intends to be there for every Russian Jew.

As for the many in the community born to Jewish fathers and non-Jewish mothers, they, too, “need dignity and respect.”

As reported last month in *The CJN*, that has even meant officiating at a funeral for a non-Jewish woman at her husband’s request (at a non-Jewish cemetery.) “This is the reality,” says Zaltzman. It wasn’t the first time such a situation had come up. “Because of our deep Jewish commitment, we do things that nobody else would touch.”

“Many... grew up in orphanages and do not know if they are Jewish or

not. One of our responsibilities is to help them figure it out. Then we introduce them to Jewish values, and help them embrace the religion.”

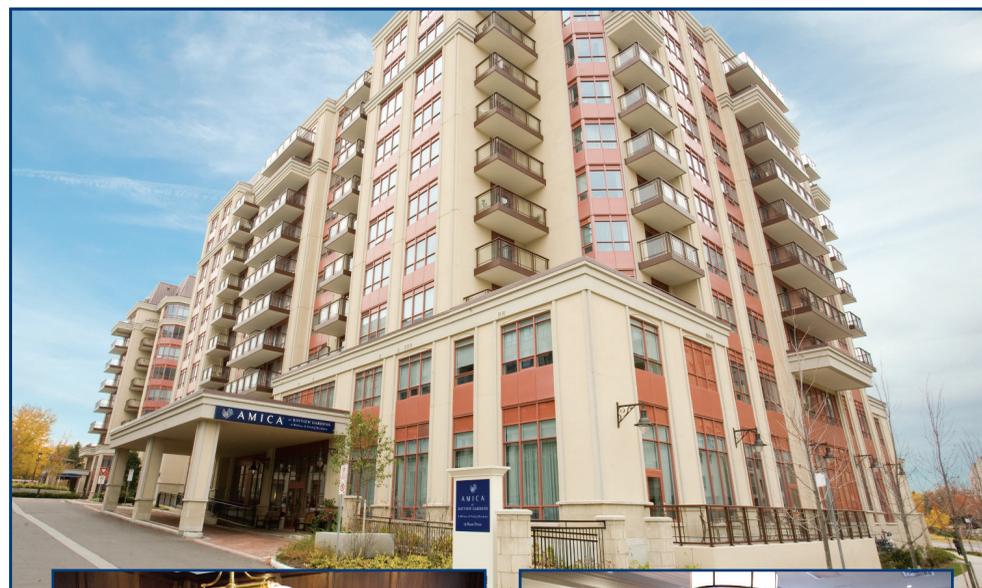
In terms of services and involvement of Russian Jews, Toronto ranks among the top two or three cities worldwide: the others are in Moscow and Ukraine. “The former Soviet Union in seven decades took away any real emotional, spiritual, intellectual connection to Judaism... Thank God, today a big percentage of them participate in the life of the community.”

Thirty years later, Rabbi Zaltzman looks back with satisfaction at the lives the JRCC has touched – but sees also the tremendous work ahead. He’s thrilled with the new locations and increased rabbinical staff, but says the community really needs a central location to serve as head office for services, programs and events like simchas.

Despite the JRCC’s ties to the worldwide Chabad-Lubavitch organization, there is no central structure to support Chabad houses around the globe, which must raise funds locally. Over 2/3 of the JRCC’s \$5 million budget is raised from within the Russian-Jewish community.

Though Hebrew-Christian “messianic” groups in the city often target Russian Jews, Rabbi Zaltzman isn’t worried. “Because of the former Soviet Union, they are not educated enough... [but] the way to fight darkness is through light; more knowledge of Judaism, more practice of Judaism... more excitement and pride of being a Jew.”

“If a Russian Jew doesn’t get our publication, or our weekly e-mail, or our birthday card or anniversary card, or any kind of service... in the hospital, in an institution, wherever he or she may be... please call us. We are here to serve every single one the best that we can.”



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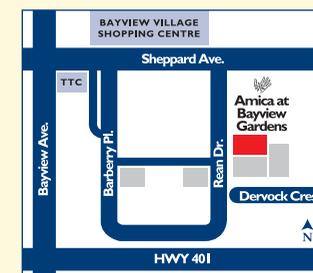
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