



Meet Israeli Reform Rabbis

Rabbi Gregory Kotler



Community Position: Rabbi of three congregations for Russian speaking Israelis : Shirat Hayam (Haifa), Shirat Hagan (Ramat Gan) and Shirat Habe'er (Beersheva).

Born: Donetsk, USSR

Ordination: HUC Jerusalem, 2001

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City/region: I work to promote the values of Reform Judaism among Russian-speaking Israelis throughout the country. We have established three regional centers for this purpose, in Haifa, Ramat Gan, and a new center in Beersheva. Russian speakers come to each of the centers from the surrounding metropolis, so that the communities I work in are actually regional rather than local.

Special activities in my community: The activities include Kabbalat Shabbat and festival services, Batei Midrash, conversion courses, and activities for children and young families. The unique aspect of the activities is that they are intended for Russian-speaking new immigrants, and accordingly they take place in Russian (the prayers are in Hebrew and Russian). We are the only Reform communities in Israel that hold communal Seder services on Seder night itself, because most of the members of the community aren't able to hold a family Seder in their home.

Formative event in my history: When I was about to complete my rabbinical studies at HUC, Rabbi Dow Marmor, who was the president of the World Union of Progressive Judaism at the time, suggested that I spend a week in Moscow examining the possibility of taking on the position for rabbi of the Reform community in the city. I arrived

in Moscow in 2001 around Purim. It was a life-changing encounter for me to meet Russian Jews after ten years away from the country. I realized how much I could help to revive and shape their Jewish identity, who had been denied access to their heritage and tradition for decades by the authoritarian Soviet regime.

Dreams for personal and professional future: As the first immigrant from the Former Soviet Union to be ordained at HUC in Jerusalem, I see my role as a bridge between the Reform movement and hundreds of thousands of immigrants. I dream of the day when every immigrant anywhere in Israel will be able to connect with Reform Judaism in their own language, without abandoning the cultural world they brought to Israel from their country of origin.

A place in the world which is special to me: Since I was born in Ukraine and lived there for 22 years, and then spent four years in Russia working as a Reform rabbi, I feel a strong connection

to both these countries. I still stay in touch with many friends and former congregants. Many of them have made Aliyah and now attend our communities here in Israel.

Unusual experience in the Diaspora: This year, as part of the Domim project, I visited Minsk, the capital of Belarus. I really fell in love with the city, and particularly with the people there, who welcomed me warmly and gave me a chance to see the best side of their city and country.

A gift I would like to give to my peers around the world: By way of a gift, I would like to offer my help to colleagues abroad. If you have Russian-speaking Jews in your city in the United States, Canada, Australia, or anywhere else, and you're wondering what the best way is to reach out to them – I'll be glad to help with guidance and Russian-language materials. This is a large and important population within the Jewish people, and it's very important that we bring them to our communities.