

Beit Kharkov



Close your eyes and say, Soviet Union. What comes to mind? The Kremlin? Snow? Peasants toiling in the mud? Now close your eyes and say, Israel. What comes to mind? The Kotel? Palm trees? Tel Aviv? One last time, close your eyes and imagine yourself getting on a plane some place in the former Soviet Union and getting off the plane in Ben Gurion Airport. Imagine immigrating to a new country that is so radically different from the one where you grew up. New landscape. New food. New language. New rules.

In the last decade over a million Olim arrived in Israel of whom 90% were from the former Soviet Union. Of these, some 200,000 were between the ages of 5-19 years.

For the vast majority of these Olim, especially the teenagers, a traditional Jewish way of life is not part of their worldview. Furthermore, many Olim who picked up some understanding of the Jewish way of life in the former Soviet Union abandon whatever traditional practices they developed when surrounded in Israel by peers whose Judaism means nothing to them. Given the presence of hundreds of thousands of non-Jews in the ranks of these Olim, and the current free environment in the neighborhoods where the majority of these Olim live, it is no wonder that for most of these Olim Jewish identity is shallow.

The OU Israel Center's Beit Kharkov is an extension of the OU's projects in the Kharkov community in the FSU (former Soviet Union). And Beit Kharkov is our way of tackling the problem of the stresses and difficulties encountered by the young Olim from Kharkov and others areas in the FSU.

The overall purpose of the program is to accustom the teenage Olim to a Jewish way of life, based on brotherhood between Jew and Jew. Thus, the program features weekly meetings, discussion groups, Shabbatonim, holiday get-togethers and Tiyulim. All these activities strengthen the Jewish values previously acquired both in the Kharkov program and in Israel, and enable the participants to live a religious life, based on Torah and Halacha. At the same time, these activities facilitate the integration of the graduates into Israeli society while strengthening their ties with Am Yisrael and the State of Israel.

The success of the Beit Kharkov program is reflected in the fact that from time to time the Beit Kharkov staff is called upon to assist in the making of a wedding for two of the participants. These occasions are very special, for they are living proof that two young people are about to embark together on a new path. As they look toward their future together, they also look back to their experiences in Beit Kharkov and to the friendship and support provided by the Madrichim and Madrichot in Beit Kharkov.

