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Teaching Talmud In Moscow

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Now that the Russian government permits the practice of religion, I often wonder what is happening to the Jews of Russia. This past May I found out. I spent the month in Moscow teaching Talmud at the Moscow State University for the Humanities.

I organized the course around three themes — Shabbat, Passover, and Jewish marriage. Even though the teaching assignment was academic and not "religious," knowledge of these subjects would give the students information on how to live Jewishly, should they ever choose to do so. To help them understand the texts, I brought to class items such as Shabbat candles, Havdalah spices, a miniature Torah, and a copy of a ketubah.

As a result of teaching these texts in English translation, I covered much more ground than I do at the Jewish Theological Seminary, where we study them in Hebrew and Aramaic. This was good, because the more text the students see, the better a sense they get of Talmud and of Jewish ritual practice. These students, who had never heard Havdalah recited at the end of Shabbat, were able to follow a debate between the Houses of Hillel and Shammai about the order of the Havdalah blessings, and then a debate among later rabbis as to what the Houses actually said, and finally a debate among even later rabbis as to which opinion to accept (Bavli, Berachot 52b).

The students loved discussing stories about the Sages, such as the Oven of Ochnai (Bavli, Baba Metzia 59b). Although a central point of the episode is that rabbis decide the law by majority vote, the students grasped that the post-script of the story, in which nature wreaks havoc with the crops, sides with the one rabbi who was outvoted and then ex-communicated. If so, they concluded, the story was presenting two opposite messages at the same time: that the majority decides the law but that sometimes the minority is right and it should not be mistreated by the majority. This was a fine insight for young people living in post-Soviet Russia.

On Shavuot, when making a public presentation on women in Judaism, I laid out the rather well-known arguments for affording women equality of opportunity in synagogue leadership roles. The students listened closely to what I was saying but did not ask a single question. Quite disappointed, I asked them the next day why they did not respond. They told me that Russian society is conservative, and so they are not ready to see women in roles traditionally occupied by men. Their comment caught me by surprise.

A few days later, when we were examining texts about Shabbat, I distributed to the students copies of The Jewish Week's Text/Context supplement entitled "Shabbat." Having just studied the relevant mishnays from tractate Shabbat, they were very interested in reading a modern take on the ancient texts. But one student, Alexei, was not fully persuaded by one author's interpretation of Mishnah Shabbat 7:2, about the 39 labors prohibited on the Sabbath. The next day he brought to class, printed out in English, a passage from the Talmud (Bavli, Baba Metzia 85b) that proved the author's point even better than the text the author himself had provided. I was flabbergasted that someone with no Talmudic background, but with an editing and fact-checking job at a Moscow newspaper, was able to locate a Talmudic database, type in a relevant search string, and find the perfect proof for an argument. He was not able to explain to me in English how he went about doing so.

It is standard Russian social custom not to be called by one's given name but by a nickname, such as Katya instead of Katherine, or Nastya instead of Anastasia. One day, Vladimir, who went by the name Dima, role-

played a rabbi in our dramatization of a Talmudic halachic query. When I told him that there was a Rabbi Dimi in the Talmud, he grew excited and took that name for himself from that day on, in class. This same young man, when we all went to a Friday night service at the Great Choral Synagogue, brought and wore his own knitted kipa and then started wearing it to class. His father is Jewish; his mother is not. What will become of his emerging Jewish identity? Hard to say, but things look good.

I gradually learned that my other students had either two Jewish parents, one Jewish parent, one Jewish grandparent, or no Jews at all in their family tree. So I asked a colleague, how large is the Russian Jewish population? He laughed at my naïveté. We cannot count, he answered. There is no easy way to define here who is a Jew.

This is a thrilling answer. It means that we have not lost the Jews of Russia, that there is a chance that we can still rescue them, often one at a time, and with great effort. The students I taught may rediscover their own Jewishness, or may, if they someday teach courses on Judaism at a university, help others come back to the fold. I returned to the United States full of hope.

Rabbi Judith Hauptman is the E. Billi Professor of Talmud and Rabbinic Culture at the Jewish Theological Seminary. JTS sponsors Project Judaica, which sends an American professor once or twice a year to teach Jewish studies at the Moscow State University for the Humanities. A video clip of her discussing a text with her Russian students can be found at <http://cbjs.rggu.ru/news.html?id=336982>.