

## Bringing Russians Into The Fold

How do religious authorities in Israel handle a Russian bar mitzvah, wedding or funeral when some members of the immediate family are not Jewish according to halacha, or religious law?

It's an increasingly common dilemma, with at least 20 percent of the million emigrants from the former Soviet Union not Jewish by any standards.

These situations call for empathy on the part of the rabbis, according to Rabbi Yosef Carmel, rabbinical dean of the Eretz Hemdah Institute in Jerusalem, who notes the numerous problems in this area since "many of the Russian newcomers have no idea how the religious system works and the system doesn't know them".

Rabbi Carmel, a large, friendly scholar with a strong commitment to Jewish unity, says his institute is seeking to bridge "the almost complete schism" between the Russians and the religious establishment by launching a program to train promising Russian leaders in religious matters. A first group of 40 men and women (from a pool of 300 applicants) recently completed a four-month course of instruction, with the cooperation of religious courts and the religious ministry.

This level of working together is "a miracle" according to Rabbi Carmel, who said that all parties involved recognized the need for such mutual support. The government subsidized the program, and the goal is to find part-time employment for the graduates, allowing them to serve as advisers and mediators between the Russian community and the religious establishment.

Rabbi Carmel explained that roles can be found for non-Jewish family members at religious events, such as having the person speak at the celebration of a bar mitzvah, for example, rather than being called to the Torah for an aliyah. "The point is to discuss this in advance with the goal of making the person feel comfortable, while not violating halacha," he said.

"These people have been away from Judaism for so long," he noted, "and we must be open-minded and find ways to be sensitive to them so they don't have bad feelings about the religion".