

# Israel-Ukraine 2022

*'My heart is in the East but I, I am at the edge of the West'*

• By IRINA GRITSEVSKAYA

I was born in Leningrad (St. Petersburg) at a time when it was part of the Soviet Union. My grandparents lived in Crimea. Every summer I would take the train, which passed through Ukraine, to visit them. My grandfather's family was murdered in 1941 during the Holocaust and they are buried in Vinnitsa, Ukraine. Even in my worst nightmare, I could not have imagined the situation today.

Midreshet Schechter, which I direct in partnership with Masorti Olami, is assisting our Masorti communities in Kiev, Kharkov, Odessa and Chernowitz. Most of these communities were established over 30 years ago, following the fall of the Soviet Union and until now, were thriving. Thousands of Jewish children and adults attended Midreshet Schechter's educational programs in Ukraine: Day schools and community Sunday schools, teacher training seminars and summer camps. Our communities joyfully celebrated Shabbat and holidays together up until a week ago.

What is the situation today? Joy has been replaced by fear. The Sha'alavim Jewish Day School in Kharkov, supported by Midreshet Schechter, has been transformed into a makeshift bomb shelter, even though it offers no real protection. Children, parents and teachers are sheltering there in crowded conditions, as they hear explosions outside. One of the children has a

fever, but it is impossible to get a physician. I hear what happens in Ukraine here in Israel and it breaks my heart. How can one help from so far away?

Nevertheless, we are assisting our Masorti communities in several ways. Midreshet Schechter and Masorti Olami have arranged to purchase food, which will be distributed together with a letter containing words of love and hope. My Masorti rabbinic colleagues also want to help. Rabbi Chaya Rowen Baker suggested organizing a group of Russian-speaking psychologists to treat Ukrainian Jews via phone and Zoom. Amazingly, in a short time the group was already active, counseling parents and children. So many people want to help!

In Kiev, home to the largest Masorti Jewish community, there is a curfew. Many community members managed to flee west to Chernivtsi and find temporary refuge there. Midreshet Schechter and Masorti Olami rented hotel rooms and apartments for families and our community center there is providing food and lodging for the refugees. The axiom all Jews are responsible for one another is now truly felt in Ukraine. The Masorti Community Center in Chernivtsi has become a transit point for all Jews and Israelis. Some stay, others continue to the border crossing into Romania. Rabbi Reuven and Lena Stamov are providing moral support and conducting Jewish activities at the center.

The war has produced numerous dilemmas. Inasmuch as men between the ages of 18-60 with dual Ukrainian-Israeli citizenship are forbidden to leave Ukraine, families are faced with a heart-rending choice of whether to separate or stay together. If the war reaches Chernivtsi, there might not be enough food and medicine for everyone.

The situation in Odessa is also difficult. Some members of our Masorti community were able to cross the border to Moldova. Others are stuck in the long lines at the border crossing. We try to help as much as we can with documents, contact people and money. Everyone pitches in.

Here in Israel, my heart is breaking, yet everyone is talking about politics: Who is guilty, what could have been prevented, what is the next step, how this is different or similar to World War II, and so on. These matters do not interest me now. What matters to me is helping a teacher from our Jewish school in Kharkov, who lives in an apartment close to exploding bombs; helping a counselor from Camp Ramah Yachad, who is in her fifth month of pregnancy and only has food for three more days; helping a mother, a member of our Masorti community, who has a daughter in Israel and is trying to get across the border and join her here; helping dozens of people in Chernivtsi, who hope that the fighting will not reach them; and helping every person caught in this appalling war. Thus, via



phone and internet, I am now operating a war room from my home in Tel Aviv: Connecting donors from around the world with those in Ukraine who need support.

Who could have predicted such a situation? I could never have imagined such a state of affairs. These circumstances makes me believe that we can only rely upon God in Heaven and generous, kind-hearted people who are willing to help. People are phoning me throughout the day and night, rabbis and members of Masorti congregations from Israel and around the world, asking what they can do to help. We are working together with Masorti Olami and its director to overcome numerous challenges. There are many good people in this world. Indeed, "all Jews are responsible for one another."

*The writer, a Conservative rabbi, is executive director of Midreshet Schechter, an NPO that sponsors Zionist-Jewish education in Israel and Ukraine in partnership with Masorti Olami. Some one thousand Jews belonging to the Masorti Jewish community in Ukraine and attend its synagogues, schools and summer camps, which stress Jewish tradition, history and peoplehood, and the centrality of Israel for the Jewish people, thereby strengthening Jewish identity.*

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(Itai Nadav)