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## Celebrating the Mountain Jews in Moscow



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This December, as we commemorated the Jewish festival of lights, Chanukah, we also celebrated another important event. The new community center of the Association of Mountain Jews of Moscow held its grand opening. The center was built in order to honor the traditions of the Mountain Jews of Azerbaijan and to preserve their unique culture. This milestone was the fruit of not only my efforts, but also those of my business partner and friend God Nisanov as well as STMEGI President German Zakharyaev. Zakharyaev is a fellow Azerbaijani and recently received the





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Order of Friendship from the president of the Russian Federation. After requesting support as community trustees, our efforts were backed by the Moscow government.

Located in the Sokolniki District, this center is a first of its kind in Moscow and a very exciting project for all Mountain Jews who reside in the area. Since the three of us are all originally from Azerbaijan, we were elated that we could successfully undertake this important project together.

## The Grand Opening

The grand opening began with the cutting of a ceremonial red ribbon after which God Nisanov affixed a mezuzah at the center's entrance. Mezuzahs contain scriptures from the Torah and are used to fulfill the commandment of writing the words of God on the gates and doorposts of Jewish properties.

The ceremony was conducted by Rabbi Berl Lazar, the chief rabbi of Russia. Guests at the event were given a tour around the center and were shown an interesting and informative film about Mountain Jewish culture. An energetic concert was then held with performances by numerous artists from Azerbaijan. Several speeches were also given by dignitaries who discussed the importance of having a place where members of the Mountain Jewish diaspora could meet and spend time together to preserve their heritage.

## A Prominent Guest List

The celebration was attended by several prominent and respected figures,





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such as Alexander Boroda, the president of the Federation of Jewish Communities of Russia; Veronika Kravchu, director of the Department of Management of the Russian Ministry of Education; Rabbi Pinchas Goldschmidt, chairman of the Council of Rabbis in Europe and Moscow's chief rabbi; Yacov Livne, chargé d'affaires of the Israeli embassy in Moscow; and Yevgeny Yerebin, from the President of the Russian Federation's office on Domestic Policy, where he serves as head of the Department for Relations with Religious Organizations.

## A Spiritual and Cultural Space

The center is made up of several purpose-built facilities geared to cater to all the cultural needs of the Mountain Jewish community residing in Moscow. There is a synagogue, a banquet hall, a library, and classrooms where traditional study programs can be held. In this exceptional facility, our community will be able to celebrate Jewish holidays together, study the wisdom of sacred texts, and keep our traditions and unique language alive. The center will also have a mikvah built later this year. A mikvah is a ritual bath used for religious purposes.

## The Importance of This Center in Maintaining Cultural Identity Despite the Odds

Over the years, many Mountain Jews have moved away from the areas of Azerbaijan and Dagestan from which they hailed. Synagogues were commonly found throughout those regions where Mountain Jews would gather together to pray and read the Torah. They were able to observe religious tradition and speak their ancient language Juhuri. Sadly, once





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they moved to sprawling cities places like Moscow where many of them now live, they were not able to maintain the same level of cultural activity. By opening the Association of Mountain Jews of Moscow, we hope that we have created a space in which Mountain Jews can come together to enjoy and celebrate their ancient culture and where younger generations can learn more about their heritage. We hope that this is a way in which we can become ambassadors of our unique and rich history and ethnicity.

<https://medium.com/@zarakhiliev2/celebrating-the-mountain-jews-in-moscow-cfabed4625d5>

