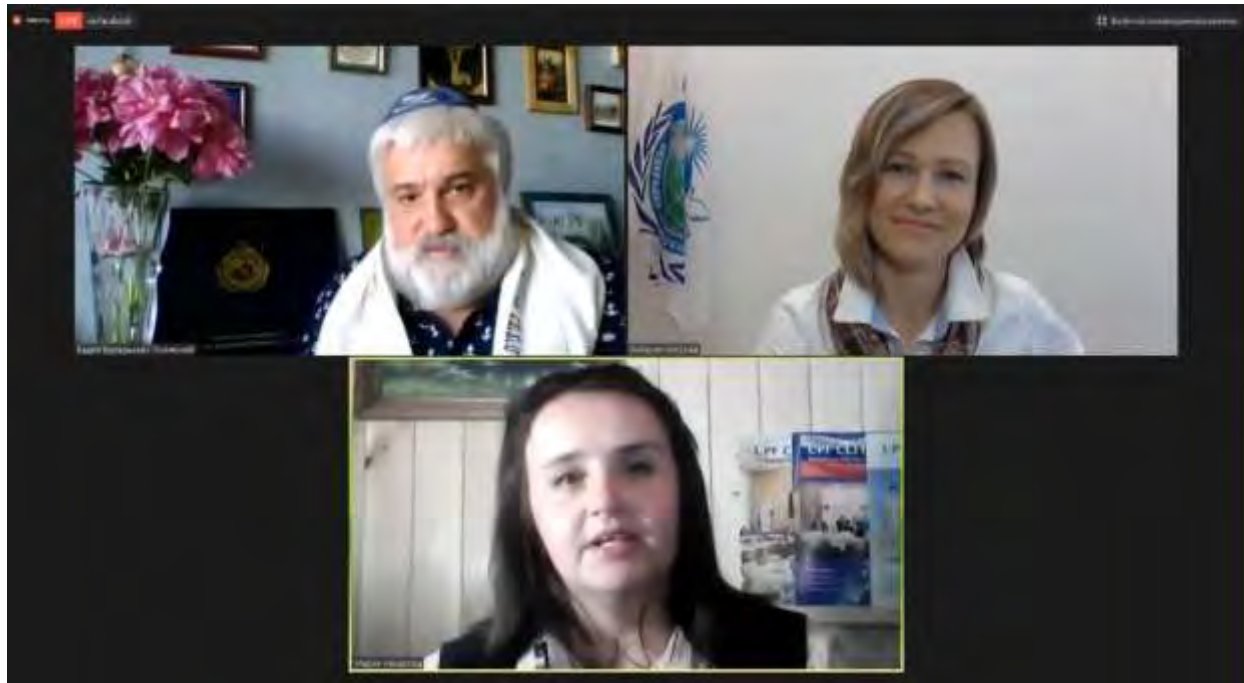


UPF Russia's Interreligious Association for Peace and Development project

Natalia Chigrina
July 2, 2020



St. Petersburg, Russia -- The leader of a Jewish group was interviewed as part of UPF's Interreligious Association for Peace and Development (IAPD) project.

IAPD is one of the recently established projects by which UPF reaches out to society's leaders in various fields of endeavor.

In recent weeks, UPF-Russia has held online meetings with representatives of Orthodoxy and Islam. On July 2, 2020, the guest was a UPF Ambassador for Peace whose professional and social activities harmoniously combine the quest for a healthy body and a healthy mind.

A sports coach and mentor, as well as a spiritual leader, Vadim Polyansky spoke about his path as a peacemaker and his experience of interethnic and interreligious activities. Since 1992, he has been the chair of the Community of Modern Progressive Judaism, and since 2002 he has led the Communities of Conservative (traditional) Judaism of St. Petersburg. He is a master of the Russian Union of Martial Arts.

Natalia Chigrina, head of UPF for Northwest Russia and an independent researcher with a master's degree in religious studies, conducted the interview.

Maria Nazarova, the secretary general of UPF-Russia, opened the program by reminding the audience that one day earlier, a nationwide referendum on amendments to the Russian Constitution had been held, and that therefore July 1 was an important day in the history of Russia. Mrs. Nazarova emphasized the significance of the amended Constitution honoring God.

She said that one can find many examples of decline in those states in which faith in God has been persecuted. Conversely, states in which faith in God has been defended and strengthened have flourished.

Although Russia for many years was based on a communist, materialistic ideology, faith and worship survived, Mrs. Nazarova said. The return of Russia to the origins of faith will help it overcome crises and build on the values of goodness and true love, she said.

She emphasized that this online meeting reminded one of the traditions of faith that are Russia's foundation.

The interview began with a question to Mr. Polyansky about growing up Jewish in Leningrad (now St. Petersburg). He said that his family was not very religious.

"At that time we all lived in communal apartments, about 25 people of different nationalities," he said. "During the major holidays, we treated everyone to matzo [unleavened flatbread] in the kitchen; at Easter everyone painted eggs and treated each other. And in the yard, the guys were of different nationalities."

Asked if he experienced anti-Semitism when growing up, he replied: "Anti-Semitism was a real problem

for Jewish families at that time. ... It hurt me very much, and it was most acute in Leningrad: at school, in the yard, on the street. I have been to many places throughout the Soviet Union, but I have never seen such anti-Semitism as in Leningrad. Although it is considered the cultural capital, it has its own flavor."



He explained: "In 1952, according to the stories of Leningraders, Jews were attacked on the street. They even attacked those who looked somewhat like Jews, such as the whipping up of anti-Semitism at that time, 1952-53, just before Stalin's death. ... For example, a man was sentenced to 10 years in the camps for the sole reason that he published a list of Jews who received the title of Hero of the Soviet Union."

Asked about the reasons for anti-Semitism, Mr. Polyansky replied that one of the main reasons has to do with the Jewish concept of being "the chosen people."

He read an excerpt from a modern Jewish prayer book: "The Jews considered themselves the chosen people not because of some racial characteristics, but because the Almighty entrusted them with the

task of ... convey[ing] the moral law to the world. Jews saw themselves as a people of the Covenant, a kingdom of priests, not supermen. Their union with God was, on both sides, an act of free will, driven not by fatalism or race, but by choice. And entry into the Covenant, as a matter of free choice, was at all times open to people of all races."

Mr. Polyansky continued, "Anyone can come to the synagogue, undergo [the rite of] conversion and become a Jew."

Mrs. Chigrina asked, "How is it possible to unite different cultures and religions? Is this even possible?"

Mr. Polyansky answered: "Looking at what is happening in the world now, I think this is impossible. But in his small environment, each person should try to do this, and only with love. With a stick, you can never make someone afraid -- and if they are afraid of you, they will hate you, not respect you. But only love, friendship.

"When I began to engage in the Jewish community, we created the House of National Cultures and visited each other. ... In addition, I always wanted to show people of other nationalities and religions that their stereotypes about Jews are wrong, because there are a huge number of wonderful teachers and trainers among Jews. And to our common family with whom we are friends, I want to wish, first of all, health, and secondly, that children bring them happiness and joy. And that we have a little bit of luck, because there were rich people on the Titanic, but they did not have any luck. May we be lucky so that we, as captains of our ships, can reach the goals that we have set for ourselves, and so that it helps other people and brings goodness."

Then Mrs. Nazarova presented some questions that had come in from the online audience.

How do you see the modern mission and destiny of Judaism, one of the oldest religions, in the modern world with its incredible challenges and changes?

"The role of Judaism is the same as that of all other religions. ... As a teacher, I can pass on something good to the children so that they continue to do good deeds. ... Doctors are now the number one heroes; they save us at the cost of their lives. There, no one asks what nationality the doctor or the patient is. We are all brothers and sisters on our planet; we all breathe the same air and drink the same water."

What do you think the Jews need to do today to strengthen world peace?

"Shema Yisrael. God is one and His Name is one. Amen. Let people believe in one God. Because everyone sees the Supreme in a different way. ... The main thing is that the Almighty is in every person's soul, heart and mind. The Almighty is good. If people want to do good to each other, then good will exist."