

## VIEW



MARRISA BOTTI / For The Times

Yaakov Bleich: "If I were to leave, it would mean giving up all my ideals, my hopes, that things could be different."

A young Brooklyn rabbi goes to ancient Kiev to help rebuild his people's covenant with God. Two years later, he's presiding over . . .

## A Faith Rekindled

By DENISE HAMILTON  
TIMES STAFF WRITER

**K**IEV, Ukraine—At first it was only for three months, so the Brooklyn rabbi said.

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ancient covenant with God.

It was 1990, and perestroika was in full swing. But Kiev's ancient synagogue gaped empty, haunted only by elderly wraiths who had survived Nazi horrors and Communist-sanctioned anti-Semitism and were now beyond fear. By the time Bleich arrived, they were mostly ignored by local authorities with more pressing problems on their hands than stamping out religion.

The 25-year-old rabbi found thousands more Jews—mostly the young and able-bodied—making frantic plans to leave the Soviet Union, bailing from the gray streets and

There is the synagogue that the Nazis once used as a stable, its courtyard bustling with men wearing prayer shawls, skullcaps and phylacteries on their foreheads. Next door is a booming yeshiva, where hundreds of students study Hebrew and math, English and the Torah.

There is Bashy, a scarf wrapped around her head in keeping with Orthodox tradition, instructing local women in how to keep a kosher home.

And there, in the center of it all, is Rabbi Bleich, his black robes and long beard flowing like a biblical prophet's as he speaks in rapid Russian.

To the surprise of many—including

"Before Rabbi Bleich came here, there was nothing," says Levi Ziskind, 72. "He opened up a whole new world to us. He energized us. No one can ever understand what he did."

Bleich, 27, is busy from early morning until late at night, teaching classes in Jewish tradition, arranging a certificate to permit emigration, overseeing synagogue repairs, starting a meals-on-wheels program for senior

Please see RABBI, E9



The elderly, who never lost their faith, and the children, who are learning it for the first time, keep the rabbi in Kiev.