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THE RELIGIOUS CONDITIONS OF THE JEWISH PEOPLE IN THE 
GEORGIA REGION DURING THE FIRST QUARTER OF THE 
TWENTIETH CENTURY (DURING THE PERIOD OF THE SOVIET 
REPRESSION)

By Giorgi Sosiashvili

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This paper analyzes the condition of Judaism and of the Jewish people in the first quarter of the 20th century after Soviet authority was established in Georgia. The Bolsheviks annexed the independent democratic republic. Russian violence was not only political. The new authority expressed unprecedented aggression towards different religious confessions in the country. Among the persecuted confessions were also representatives of the Georgian Orthodox Church.¹ The Bolsheviks expropriated chapels from Jews living in Kareli, Surami, and Gori. It is a well-known fact that the Jews had lived in Shida Kartli for a long time. In 19th and 20th centuries 400 Jews lived in Kareli, where they had a Khakhami and Synagogue.² The Jews also inhabited Surami, Gori and Urbnisi³

The research includes the following issues:

- The social and political situation in Georgia in the first quarter of the 20th century after the Soviet annexation;
- The condition of different religious confessions in Georgia;
- The impact of the Soviet repressions on Jewish people as the result of the annexation of Georgia by Soviet Russia.

³ Ibid.

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Introduction

In October, 1923, the head of the Department of Internal Administration of Gori Executive Committee, S. Tskhovrebashvili, sent a letter to the head of Kareli Executive Committee with the question whether it was possible to return the chapel back to the Jews in Kareli, and if it was impossible, he requested to know the reasons.4

On November 3, 1923, according to the decision made by the commission of ecclesiastical affairs of the Gori Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union one Torah or a house to the Jews living in Kareli for prayer ought to be given back.5

On November 20, 1923, Jews living in Gori addressed a request to the head of Internal Administration of Gori to receive permission for meeting and praying and to establish a religious society (It is worth noting that that the registration date of February 1, 1929, for religious societies was set by the government). On November 25, 1923, a meeting of the Jews living in Gori was held. Its aim was to establish a religious society and synagogue for Jews. They elected a presidium, whose members were Ela Atanelovi, Mordekh Davarashvili, Meme Koenishvili, Abram Maghalovi, and Iokhai Krikheli. In the act it was written:

On November 25, 1923, a meeting was held for establishing a society for the Georgian Jews living in Gori, the representative of Gori Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union… (impossible to read G.S.), from a hundred of Jewish citizens Iokhan Krikheli was elected as the head, and Iskhak Mamistvalovi was elected as a secretary, the order of the day were the following questions: 1) establishment of religious society; 2) election of the presidium; 3) deciding the society’s regulations; 4) Synagogue… (The line is impossible to read G.S) the meeting by common consent expressed wish to… (impossible to read G.S.) religious Jewish society, for which there arose a solicitation to the government as according to the laws the government allowed us the establish the society and synagogue, in the presidium from the five members were elected… (impossible to read G.S.) with the majority of votes: Ela Atanelov (the name is impossible to read, it must be Meme G.S.)… Koenishvili, Mordekh Davarashvili, Abram Maghalov and Iokhan Krikheli; the presidium had to work out the society’s regulations. After completion the act the meeting was closed: the head Iokhan Krikheli; secretary Iase Mamistvalovi.6

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4 Gori State Archive Fund, #3, Case #27, Description, #1. p.22.
5 Gori State Archive Fund, #3, Case #37, Description, #1. p. 67.
6 Gori State Archive Fund, #3, Case #54, Description, #1. p.35.
A separate document was created regarding the presidium of the Jewish religious society, where the information about the members of the society (origin, social status, etc..) was stored. The Members of the presidium of the Jewish religious society were: Ela Atenelov, Mordekh Davarashvili, Meme Qoenishvili, Abraam Magalovi, Iokhai Krikheli. The Jewish religious society had 97 member believers. Bene Krikheli was named as a religious servicemen of the society. The Jewish religious society presented the regulations to the government for its approval.

In the regulations we read:

The Regulations of the Jewish Religious Society in Gori, the aim of the Society
1. The aim of the Jewish Religious Society in Gori is to give opportunity to its members to satisfy their religious requirements and feelings according to the Jewish religion.
2. With this aim it conducts prayers; religious-moral sermons and also with the help of servicemen to fulfill religious requirements and traditions to the members, such as: marriage, divorce according to the Jewish rules (after the procedure conducted according to the state laws), delivering meat to the society butchered according to the Jewish rules. Preparing “Matza,” arranging “Burial Brotherhood”, etc.
3. The religious society formed its own presidium in order to send a representative to the Georgian Jewish… (impossible to read G.S.) general meetings of the religious societies.
4. The society neither took part, nor interfered in the political sphere, though it obeyed existing laws and government.

The Society Membership.
5. The Jewish… (impossible to read G.S.) religious society unified all the Jews who addressed it for any religious purpose.
6. Any Jew living in Gori from the age of 14, both genders, who addressed the society for any reason were considered as plenipotentiary members of the society.

Administration.
7. The society from its members by the majority of votes (with open voting) elects the society presidium consisting of no less than five and no more than seven members for two years. They are: head, assistant, secretary, treasurer, and one member.
8. Duties of the Presidium: to take care of the internal affairs of the society, govern the property received according to the contracts from the organs of the local Soviet authority, sign private contracts for making religious objects, take care of financial condition of the society, appoint servicemen for cults and internal affairs and determine their payment.

Financial Resources of the Society.

7 Gori State Archive Fund, #3, Case #54, Description, #1. p. 22.
9. The only financial source of the society was free donations from members, which was gathered by the warrant of the society presidium.

10. The society had no obligatory membership payment.

Servicemen.

11. The society has the following servicemen: Rabbi, prayer, butcher, preacher, and also protectors of the society property (gardener, watchman, etc.).

12. (Note) All the above mentioned positions could be combined, at the same time one person could work in two positions, according to the society viewpoint a staff member could be removed from the position.

All the above mentioned religious officials were appointed by the presidium and they were authenticated by the society. Salaries were determined by the presidium according to the agreements made with the presidium.

13. The society presidium has a seal in the book-case, which is kept by the secretary of the presidium in the office.

Society liquidation.

14. When a society for any kind of reason decides to terminate itself, it chooses a liquidating commission, which liquidates all the acts of the society and announces to the corresponding organ of local Soviet authority about it.

Mordekh Davareshvili
Abram Maghalovi
Iokhai Krikheli

Afterwards the Jewish residents of Gori addressed the Executive Committee of the Gori Province with officially enclosed documents for the purpose of registering a Jewish Religious society in Shida Kartli. The address stated was as follows:

Please, register the Religious Society in Shida Kartli and also see the documentation enclosed, such as: 1) The list of the members of the society; 2) The list of the religious servicemen; 3) The list of the member of the presidium of the society and the charter of the society in triplicate. Please, consider the address and on legal grounds register the society. Chairman of the meeting, Iokhai Krikheli

Chairman of the Jewish residents meeting, Iokhai Krikheli, according to the letter of December 5, 1923, asked the local government to apportion, in particular to grant a certain amount of land for the Jewish residents in Shida Kartli.

The Gori Executive Commission and the Jewish religious society signed a contract according to which on January 17, 1924, the attorney of the Gori Executive Commission S. Tskhovrebashvili

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8 Gori State Archive Fund, #3, Case #54, Description, #1; p. 7.
9 Gori State Archive Fund, #3, Case #54, Description, #1; p. 16.
10 Gori State Archive Fund, #3, Case #54, Description, #1; p. 7.
had to pass to the Jews living in Gori a building and religious things for divine service for free and permanent use. In the contract we read:

We, the signers of the contract, representatives of the Jewish religious society, living in Gori, signed this contract with Sergo Tskhovrebashvili, the head of the Department of Internal Affairs of Gori Executive Commission that on January 17, 1924, from the Executive Commission for free and permanent use we received… (impossible to read G.S) located… (impossible to read G.S) a building for divine service and religious things with the following conditions:

1) The whole Jewish religious society takes responsibility to care for the received property and use all the things according to their function, also the society is responsible for their storage and for fulfillment of all the points according to the contract.

2) The society is responsible to use and let other believers use all the things for divine service only for the religious purposes.

3) The society is responsible to do its best to use the property properly and not to abrogate the 1st and 3rd paragraphs of the contract.

Namely, the society is responsible to prohibit the following activities in its religious building:

a) Hold political meetings against the Soviet government;

b) Spread and sell books, brochures, papers and epistles against the Soviet government or any member of it.

c) Preach against the Soviet government or any member of it.

d) Alarm the population against the Soviet government.

4) (Impossible to read G.S.) from their own financial resources pay expenses for the Synagogue (or any building for divine service) and the things in it, namely, repairs, heating, insurance, security, debts, taxes, etc.

5) The society is responsible to have inventory data of the property, which should include all the new religious things (donated or received from other sources), which were not private property of citizens.

6) The society is responsible to allow the representatives of the Executive Committee control and check the society property periodically, when there is no service held.

7) The society is responsible for the loss or damage of the property.

8) The society is responsible to return back the received property in the case of necessity, and all of the things should be in the same conditions as they were before.

9) If the society is willing to nullify the contract, it is responsible to apply with an official letter to the Executive Committee, after which the contract will be valid for the following one week and the society is responsible for fulfillment of all the points; the society is also responsible to return the received property.

10) Every member of the society who signed the contract could exit the membership of a contract after applying with an official letter to the Executive Committee. But a member could not avoid responsibility for the loss or damage of property during the period of being an active member, prior to leaving the society.

The original of this contract was kept by the Executive Committee, and the copy was given to the society, to those representatives who had signed it, and who received the religious things for the religious purpose in 1923.
11) If the society does not do its best for fulfillment of all the points of the contract, the Executive Committee is responsible to cancel it; if the points of the contract are abrogated, the offender will be punished according to the criminal law. 
Iokhai Krikheli.11

The contract included the list of religious things:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>#</th>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Amount</th>
<th>Note</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Bible</td>
<td>one</td>
<td>“Birth”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Book-case</td>
<td>one</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Candlesticks</td>
<td>two</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Chairs</td>
<td>eight</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Table</td>
<td>one</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Baghdad's two</td>
<td>two</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>Lamps two</td>
<td>two</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>Table cloth</td>
<td>one</td>
<td>velvet.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>Book-case curtain</td>
<td>one</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The above mentioned things were given by S. Tskhovrebashvili
The above mentioned things were received by Mordekha Davarashvili
Iokhai Krikheli.12

Conclusion

Any kind of propaganda against the Soviet authority was prohibited at the Jewish Synagogue. The things given by the head of the Department of Gori Internal Affairs were received by S. Tskhovrebashvili and Iokhai Krikheli. Bene Krikheli, living in Gori, had to lead the divine service to the Jewish religious society. One more document proves that the Jews living in Shida Kartli had their synagogue returned to them: that is the extract from the act of the meeting of the Ecclesiastic Commission of the Georgian Communist Party held on December 11, 1924. It is clear that one of the questions of the meeting was returning of chapels to the Orthodox, Catholic,

11 Gori State Archive Fund, #3, Case #54, Description, #1; pp. 8-9.
12 Gori State Archive Fund, #3, Case #54, Description, #1; p. 13.
Gregorian and Jewish believers living in Gori, Kareli and Surami. The Ecclesiastic Commission ordered the Gori Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union to satisfy the solicitations of the believers and give each of them one church or one meeting-house.\textsuperscript{13}

The Executive Committee of the Province of Gori refused to give the shrines to Jewish residents and instead offered to set up shrines in the buildings where private houses were previously located. The Executive Committee wrote to the central government:

With regards to the Jewish residents in Surami, according to your permission they were allowed to establish a religious society. We gave permission to establish a religious society to the Jewish residents of Kareli and they were also permitted the Synagogue which they previously owned. The young members of the Communist Union intended to use the Synagogue in order to establish a club there. In our previous solicitation we asked you for a permission not to give the Synagogue to the Jewish community because the Communist Union wanted the building for their disposal. We received an answer from you informing us that the Jewish Community should have a shrine in order to conduct religious service. We issued an order that enabled the Jewish community of Surami and Kareli to have shrines at their disposal.\textsuperscript{14}

The anti-religious campaign of the Bolsheviks put a heavy mark on the members of the different religious confession residing in Georgia. Georgian Jews along with the members of the different religious confessions were in difficult spiritual situation due to the religious terror carried out by the atheist government at the time.

\textsuperscript{13} Gori State Archive Fund, #3, Case #52, Description, #1. p.11.
\textsuperscript{14} Gori State Archive Fund, #3, Case #27, Description, #1. p. 7.
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Gori State Archive Fund, #3, Case #52, Descri...