

Rabbis in Georgia and Uzbekistan during the Soviet Period

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This article deals with the activities of the two main republics in the Eastern Soviet Union: Georgia and Uzbekistan. Jews have lived in Georgia from the fifteenth century until this very day. The lives of the Jews in Georgia- mainly in the cities of Tbilisi and Kutaisi were wretched. There were no Jewish institutions, there was no organized Jewish community, and the rabbi had to fill all communal roles.

The most prominent figure of Georgian Jewry was Rabbi Avraham HaLevi Khvoles (1854 or 1857-1931), a native of Latvia who studied in Slobodka under Rabbi Yitzchak Elhanan Spector of Kovno (1817-1896). Rabbi Khvoles founded a yeshiva, contributed to the spread of Jewish studies, Zionism, and the Hebrew language in Georgia.

Another rabbi who contributed greatly to Georgian Jewry was Rabbi David Ben Menachem Baazov (1883-1947). Rabbi Baazov trained generations of students which then spread Judaism and Zionism; chief among them were Nathan Eliashvili, the three Dvarshvili brothers- Moshe, Gavriel and Yaakov, Aharon Kricheli, Eliyahu Papismadov, Chaim Mordechai Perlov, Yaakov Abramowitz Chovalshvili, Mordechai Shmelshvili, Yitzchak Michalshvili, Shalom Penikshvili, and David Pichchadze.

The Jews who lived in Uzbekistan were mainly concentrated in three cities: Bukhara, Samarkand, and Tashkent. For the most part, in Uzbekistan, there were no ordained rabbis but only laymen who were called "Talmud Chochum," who would organize the prayer services. The most worthy member of the community was chosen to fulfill this role.

Although the lives of the Jews were difficult, they were quite far from the eyes of the strict Soviet authorities on Moscow; this is what enabled the Jews to keep, if only an iota of Judaism. In Uzbekistan we know the names of religious leaders who contributed to the maintenance of Judaism: David Simantov Boisuni, Tzion Ben Menachem Sopichaiev, Nissim Ben Shimon Oviadov, Zion ben Yonai Avzebekiev, Avner Ben Zvulun Leviev, Mashiach Ben Yitzchak Borochof, and Yaakov Ben Avraham Borochof.

The antisemitism which was dictated by the Kremlin would leave its heavy footprint both in Georgia and Uzbekistan. The "Jewish Doctor" affair in the early 1950's, left its mark on Eastern Soviet Union Jewry, as well as in the European areas of the country. The Jews suffered from a myriad of expressions of antisemitism; from terminations of employment to murder. The Jews of Georgia and Uzbekistan were among the first to immigrate to Israel at the beginning of the seventies of the twentieth century.