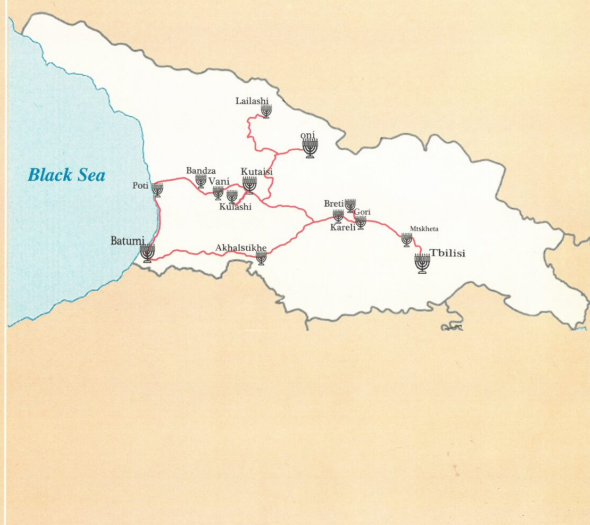


# The Synagogues in Georgia / Synagogen in Georgien / Синагоги в Грузии

*The Jews of Georgia are divided into two groups. Georgian Jews have a 2,600-year history in the region, while the Ashkenazim came to the country during the Russian annexation in the early 19th century.*



## THE SYNAGOGUES IN GEORGIA

### *Ancient History*

Georgian-speaking Jews are one of the oldest survived Jewish Diaspora communities. The origin of the Georgian Jews, also known as Gurjim or Ebraeli, is debated, but some claim they are descendants of the ten tribes exiled by Shalmaneser. Others say the first Jews made their way to Southern Georgia after Nebuchadnezzar conquered Jerusalem in 586 B.C. after the first fleeing to Babylonia.

The first Jews arrived to Western Georgia in the 6th century when the region was ruled by the Byzantine Empire. Approximately 3,000 of these Jews then fled to Eastern Georgia, controlled by the Persians, to escape severe persecution by the Byzantines. The existence of the Jews in these regions during this period is supported by archaeological evidence showing that Jews lived in Mtskheta, the ancient capital of the East Georgian state of Kartli.

The Ebraelies spoke Georgian and Jewish. The traders developed the dialect called Qivruli, or Judeo-Georgian, which included a number of Hebrew words.

### *Russian Annexation*

In the beginning of the 19th century, Ashkenazi Jews from Russian were forced by the Russian government to move to Georgia. The Ashkenazi Jews and the Georgian Jews began establishing contact with each other. Ashkenazim joined Zionist orga-

nizations and began to spread their ideas to the Georgian Jewish communities. In 1897, the first Zionist organization was established in Tbilisi. On August 20, 1901, the First Congress of Caucasus Zionists was held in Tbilisi. Rabbi David Baazov led Georgian Zionism during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In 1903, Baazov attended the Sixth Zionist Congress in Basel.

Since 1863, groups of Jews started aliyah, mostly for religious reasons. By 1916, 439 Georgian Jews lived in Palestine, mostly in Jerusalem near the Damascus Gate. Very few hakhams immigrated to Israel due to their strict Anti-Zionist position. Most Jews who made aliyah were poverty-stricken and worked as freight-handlers in Jerusalem.

The situation of the Jewish community of Georgia improved dramatically due to the end of the Soviet occupation. In 1994 a decree was issued to protect Jewish religious, cultural and historic monuments. In addition, the Jews of Georgia have successfully maintained their Jewish identity and traditions despite the oppression they faced under the Soviets.



A synagogue existed in Akhaltsikhe even in the ancient times. An inscription was found inside the Synagogue (1741 the building date).



The modern synagogue was built in 1880



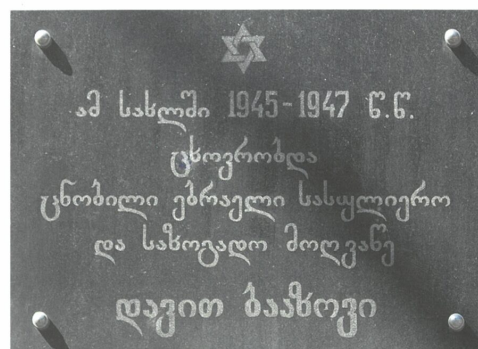
**David Baazov** (Georgian: დავით ბააზოვი) (1883–1947)

was a *Georgian-Jewish* public and religious figure who headed *Zionist* movement in Georgia. His program was an amalgam of moderate orthodox religiosity, enlightenment and Zionism.

He was born in Tskhinvali, Georgia (then part of the Russian Empire) in the family of rabbis. He was educated in Jewish philosophy and history at Slutsk and Vilnius where he became exposed to Zionist ideas. In 1903, he attended the Sixth Zionist Congress in Basel. Returning to Georgia, Baazov became a rabbi in the town of Oni and quickly emerged as the leader of Zionism in Georgia. His growing influence was opposed by a group of anti-Zionist rabbis and the so-called "assimilationist" Jewish intellectuals who put forward the thesis that the Georgian Jews were ethnic Georgians and "Israelites by religion." In 1918, Baazov founded the first Georgian-Jewish Zionist paper "Ebraelis Khma" ("The Voice of Jew") and helped to organize the All-Jewish Congress in Tbilisi which included representatives from every Georgian and Ashkenazi Jewish community in the country, except for Kutaisi, which had become the center of the Jewish anti-Zionism. After the Sovi-

etization of Georgia in 1921, Baazov aided by his son, the leading Georgian-Jewish writer Gerzel Baazov organized Jewish schools across the country and later founded the magazine "Makaveli" ("Maccabean") which was closed by the Soviet authorities during a crackdown on Georgian Jewish cultural institutions after the 1924 anti-Soviet August Uprising in Georgia. Next year, he managed to secure to several Georgian Jewish families free passage to the Land of Israel, launching the large wave of Aliyah from Georgia. During the purge of 1938, both of his sons were arrested by the Soviet NKVD and Gerzel was executed. Soon, David Baazov was also arrested and sentenced to death for "Zionist activities", the sentence was later commuted to exile in Siberia. In 1945, he returned to the Georgian SSR and chiefly engaged himself in education activities.

The main person to write about David Baazov and the main collector of his works was his daughter **Fanny Baazova** (1912–1980). The Georgian Jews' History Museum in Tbilisi was named after him.





The Jewish community in Batumi was founded in 1878. The community had no special prayer house during the first years of its existence. They gathered unofficially in a little wooden house.

In 1899 the Minister of internal affairs legalized the synagogue. This little place, accommodated only for 20 people, couldn't become the center of the community life.

The stone building of the synagogue was built by Simon L. Volkovich in 1900-1904. "It was built according to Hague and Amsterdam synagogues

Since 1992 the building became the property of the Jewish community. It became the Jewish center with library and consultation center where you can attend various lectures and lessons.



A skilful translation of the masterpiece of the medieval Georgian poet Shota Rustaveli, "The Knight in the Tiger's Skin" in Hebrew was made by 36 year old Boris Gaponov, the editor of the daily paper "leninets" the official party organ in the giant Orjonikidze automobile plant in Kutaisi, in the Georgian Soviet Republic

His rendering of the ancient folk classic was hailed as a masterpiece in its own right, far surpassing in poetic quality innumerable previous translations into many languages, including five into Russian. The Asian Institute of the Soviet Academy of Sciences devoted a special meeting in Leningrad to the evaluation of Gaponov's translation.



In the spring of 1969, at the peak of the Soviet propaganda: crusade against Israel, "The Knight in the Tiger's Skin" was published out in Israel by the Labor Zionist publishing house, Sifriat Poalim, in a lavish edition illustrated with colorful miniatures by the 15th and 16th century Georgian artists. The book won a prestigious literary award named after the great Hebrew poet, Saul Tchernichovsky. This unusual cultural exchange between the Georgians and the Israelis was welcomed by Soviet Jewish intellectuals as a hopeful sign that all the bridges between the Soviet Union and Israel had not been burned yet. That, however, was not the opinion of the dean of Russian writers, Kornei Chukovsky, when he was shown a copy of the book.



The ancient capital of Georgia Mtskheta is situated 25 kilometers westwards from Tbilisi.

It is mentioned in old Georgian sources of 4 and 6 centuries. The Jews lived in Mtskheta in 6 century BC. The old place of the Jewish settlement was found while archaeological excavations just in the middle of the modern town. There is a church there now. The names of the first Jewish settlements "Janavi" and "Tskharos tavi" came to our days



Some grave stones with inscription in Hebrew dating back to the 4 century were found there. Archaeologists explored the ruins of the old synagogue called "Getsemania"



Jews who lived in Gori has not built special building for synagogue, even nowadays their synagogue is inside the living house, Gori synagogue was founded in 1935.



## THE SYNAGOGUES IN GEORGIA



The architectural style of the synagogue of the city of Oni is Morsecque, and that is the style found in many capital cities of Europe. The project of the synagogue in Oni was brought from Europe by rabbi Eliahu Amshikashvili (the original project had decorated the wall of

the shul until recent years when unfortunately it was stolen) Built with tremendous efforts and sacrifice in 1890-1895, this spiritual temple became a unique architectural monument of Georgia.



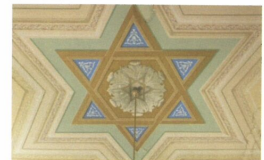
10

## THE SYNAGOGUES IN GEORGIA



Kutaisi is the capital of West Georgia, the Imereti region. The Jews settled here in the ancient times. You can find two 19 century synagogues, a big one and a small one, situated in the middle of the Jewish district, nowadays these places have memorial purposes. On the wall of the big synagogue the busts of the famous Jews can be seen.

One of them is B. Gaponov, the brilliant Hebrew translator of Rustaveli's "The Knight in the Tiger's Skin".



11

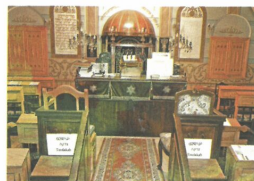
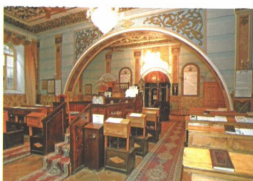
## THE SYNAGOGUES IN GEORGIA



"Akhalsikhelebis Lotzva" – "The prayers from Ahaltzihe" – even today this name is used for the central Synagogue of Tbilisi. The Akhalsikhe's Jews built the shul in the early 1900's, on one of the main streets of the city – named today the Leselidze street. It was founded at the beginning of XX century (1904-1905). Its opening date is 1911 year. In 2011 the Synagogue was restored by sponsorship of Mr. David Iakobashvili.

The structures of the shul's grounds include:

- Big Prayer House (main building)
- Small Prayer House
- Matza bakery
- Schechita (ritual slaughter) house
- Mikve (ritual bath)
- Storage space
- Guard's booth
- Bathrooms



12

## THE SYNAGOGUES IN GEORGIA



Ashkinazi Synagogue was built in XIX century. It was Restored in 2008-09 year with the sponsorship of Mr. A. Mashkevich, President of Euro Asian Jewish Congress, and was named in honor of his mother "Beit Rakhel".



13

## THE SYNAGOGUES IN GEORGIA

Urbnisi is a small place in West Georgia. Its name comes from Latin and probably was brought there by the Jews.

The written sources give the evidence of the Jews living here since ancient times. The archeological excavations confirm this, some artefacts with Hebrew inscriptions were found here.

The place is associated with the name of Saint Nino, The legend tells she lived in the local Synagogue. There is a church in this place now.



14

## THE SYNAGOGUES IN GEORGIA

Vani is situated in the place of an ancient settlement. On the right bank of the river Tchikhura there is a Jewish district called "Uriatubani". According to the old sources the Jewish population lived here in the middle ages. But now you can find very few Jewish people there, in the 1980 a new synagogue was erected on the place of the old one. Nearby you can find a much older small synagogue which existed many years ago.



15

## THE SYNAGOGUES IN GEORGIA



The pupils of Russian "jeshivas" more and more often became Rabbis in different towns of Georgia.

Avraam Khvoles, the pupil of the Koven rabbi Itskhak Elkhazan Spektor, known for his social activities, tolerance and sympathies to secular sciences, became the rabbi of Tskhinvali in 1891.

The only language of communication between the newly-elected rabbi and the people was Hebrew

Later, in 1906 Khvoles organized the first Talmud-Thora of the European type. There was a library with religious and secular literature there. Jews from East Georgia studied there.

Avraam Khvoles invited a woman, teacher of

Ivrit from Russia to teach the girls. This happened for the first time in the history of Georgian Jews. As the Jews were mainly tradesmen, he also began teaching boys handicrafts-tannery, soap-boiling, shoe making.

Avraam Khvoles, as his teacher Spektor, tended to Khvoles-Lion movement, and the teaching in Talmud-Thora was conducted in the nationalistic traditions. The leaders of the Zionistic movement in the Georgia, David Baazov and Natan Eliashvili were the disciples of Tskhinvali Talmud-Thora.

Avraam Khvoles was greatly respected both by the Jews and the Georgians in Georgia.

In a century, in 2006, a post stamp with his portrait was issued. This became the symbol of this respect.

Issuing a stamp with the portrait of a rabbi is a unique phenomenon on the territory of FSU.



16

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