Lasha Mdzeluri

Local Rituals and Religious Practices among Georgian Jews (latter of 19th Century and early 20th century): According on Early Ethnographic and Archival Sources

Abstract

This essay explores the local religious practices and ritual life of Georgian Jews in the second half of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century, based on a close reading of early ethnographic accounts, periodical publications, travel writings and archival materials. Study of these sources offers insight into vernacular forms of Judaism as they were observed and described in Georgia during this period.

The study reconstructs several categories of practice: distinctive synagogue arrangements, embodied and dramatic ritual expressions, local Purim and Passover performances, funerary customs, and the widespread use of amulets and magical objects. These practices reflect a localized religious characteristic of Georgian Jews in which memory, identity, and communal cohesion were maintained through patterned, expressive acts.

Drawing lightly on ritual theory, the study interprets these practices as culturally embedded forms of religious action that shaped social space and affirmed group identity. While these traditions persisted into the late nineteenth century, they would later be affected by broader processes of religious standardization within the Jewish world. By documenting these local ritual forms, this article situates Georgian Jews within the wider landscape of Jewish diversity and highlights the significance of their distinctive religious creativity

key words: Jews, Georgian Jews, Judaism, Local Rituals, Rituals of Georgian Jews, Religious transformation.

Introduction

Despite the centuries-long presence of Jews in Georgia, the documentation of their cultural and religious life is limited, especially before the nineteenth century. With the

expansion of printed periodicals, travel writings, and local ethnographic observations in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a more detailed—though still fragmentary—record of their ritual world emerges. This article focuses on one dimension of that world: the ritual practices observed in synagogues, homes, and communal celebrations.

The wider project from which this article emerges investigates the cultural and religious transformations of Georgian Jewry during this transitional period. A comparative study of available primary sources reveals a rich repertoire of local ritual practices that, while fully within the Jewish tradition, developed distinctive forms.

Methodologically, this study approaches these practices as expressions of vernacular Judaism. Drawing lightly on Victor Turner's notion of ritual drama and Catherine Bell's understanding of ritualization as strategic, culturally embedded action, I interpret movement, sound, object use, and spatial organization as central to how Georgian Jews created meaning and expressed communal identity. These practices illuminate how biblical memory, local creativity, and collective emotion were woven into everyday religious life.

Although this article does not investigate their disappearance in detail, these localized traditions would eventually be challenged by broader forces of religious standardization in Jewish life. By reconstructing them here, the study seeks to illuminate a ritual universe that once shaped the religious experience of Georgian Jews and deserves recognition within the broader history of Jewish diversity.

Religious customs of Georgian Jews

In 1870, Konstantine Berdzenov described one of the Jewish holidays and rituals in his publication, titled 'Uriebis Tora and Sastsauli Dge' (Synagogue of the Jews and Miracle Day). He does not specify the region in which he was, but he describes arriving at the synagogue early and entering a completely dark prayer room where a young Hakham and several Jews were present. A few dozen other Jews soon arrived and the Hakham began the prayer by reading from a book. This lasted half an hour and, as he neared the end, the Hakham loudly recited the words, 'Baruch Adonai'. Upon hearing this, the other Jews also exclaimed, 'Baruchata', after which they lit candles in the prayer room, took their books in hand and

began to pray.[1] As the author notes, it was only after these candles were lit that light appeared in the hall. After this, he was able to see how the inner space of the prayer room was arranged: there, he notes, he saw three curtains on the western wall of the synagogue. The curtains on the sides were made of multicoloured fabrics, and in the middle hung a large curtain, which was also adorned with three-coloured silk: yellow in the middle, red on the left and grey on the right, and before it stood a throne on which was a lectern, on which the rabbi placed the book he began to read. At the spot where the rabbi stood, there were pillars leaning against the ceiling on both sides, and on each pillar was fastened a sheet of paper: two on the left and one on the right with Hebrew inscriptions. In the synagogue hall, long benches were arranged in rows.[2]

A description similar to that of a synagogue can be found in a 1876 publication by Z. Chichinadze in the newspaper Droeba, with a nearly identical title: 'Uriebis Tora da Mati Dgesastsauli'. According to this account, Chichinadze had also arrived early for the Jewish festival, at a time when the Jews were gathering in the synagogue courtyard. At this time, the rabbi and two hakhamim emerged from the synagogue and entered a house next door. The Jews did not enter the synagogue while they were there but waited for them to come out. When the rabbi and the hakhamim emerged from the house and entered the synagogue, the Jews donned colourful head coverings and followed them inside. The author of the article followed them.[3]

After entering the synagogue, Chichinadze describes its interior. On the western wall, many coloured pieces were hanging, and in the middle of these was a large curtain to which other pieces of various colours were attached. In front of this curtain stood a throne on which was a table, and on the table lay a book. To the left of the throne, slightly ahead, stood an ark, which must have been the Torah ark. Next to this ark, on the wall, hung a sheet of paper in the shape of an arch. On the other side, on the eastern wall, stood a table covered in soil with three candles stuck in it. On the adjacent wall hung a sheet printed in

---

[1] Konstantine Berdzenov - "*Uriebis Tora da Sastsauli Dge",* Tsiskari, N:8 (1870) p:61.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Chichinadze, Z. - "Uriebis Tora da Mati Dgesaswauli," Droeba, N:103 (1876), p:3.

Hebrew and Russian.[4]

In the ninth volume of the Proceedings of the Georgian Museum of the Jews, which discusses the synagogue interior, it is correctly noted that these two descriptions of the synagogue's arrangement are quite similar to each other. It is therefore possible that they are describing the same synagogue at different times, although there appear to have been some changes. The two pillars on the sides of the elevated place in Berdznenov's description of the Hakham's prayer place, to which two printed Hebrew sheets were affixed, are not mentioned by Chichinadze. Instead, the Hebrew-printed sheets are affixed to the walls, which may indicate that the synagogue's interior underwent changes over time. [5]

However, regarding the three multicoloured curtains with tassels hanging on the synagogue's western wall, the same work suggests that both articles mention the existence of three coloured curtains hanging in the same way on the western wall. Neither author notes that these curtains covered the Aron HaKodesh, the cabinet used to store the Torah and books written on leather. In neither description does it appear that any books were taken from there. Since the Aron Hakodesh is an essential part of the synagogue, it is argued that these curtains must have covered the cabinet where the Torah was kept.[6] However, it should be noted that these curtains may not have covered the Aron HaKodesh at all, since no author mentions a torahcase being covered. Furthermore, both authors observe that the Torah was stored in an 'ark' situated in the hall. Chichinadze specifies its exact location: it was placed to the left of the throne, on which a lectern stood. The exact location is not specified by Berdzhenov, but he does make the following note about the rabbi taking the Torah from the ark in the hall and which he describes as follows:

After that, the rabbi loudly exclaimed: 'Vehe Lakbin!' to which the other Jews also loudly replied: 'Hallelujah!' They then fell silent, folded their prayer books and sat down. The Hakham continued, bowing his head to his prayer book: 'Adonai baruchata', and the other Jews responded in kind. They too began to read from their books with the same gesture. Soon, the Hakham cried out again, 'Birqa Lakiym,' at which all the people in the synagogue jumped twice and covered their heads with white tallitot. They began to

---

[4] Ibid.

[5] Museum of History of Jews of Georgia - “Proceedings 9”, (2014), Tbilisi, p:24-25.

[6] Ibid.

stagger, groan and sway their heads about. After about five minutes, they took these white tallitot off their heads, and everyone fell face down to the ground. When they stood up, they took their round-headed cudgels, wooden sticks, and other similar items. They began to strike the floor. They began to strike the chairs hard. They used sticks.[7]

During this process, the rabbi opened the ark and took out the old book (most likely the Torah). Upon seeing this, the congregation at prayer erupted into a scramble. Everyone tried to get their hands on the scroll and snatch it from one another. "Not me! I should have the scroll! Not me!" In the ensuing scuffle, a fight broke out. The rabbi then took the book and handed it to the old Hakham. He waited until the people had calmed down and then began to read from and preach from the book.[8]

- At the end, the young people went to the curtains on the west side, bowed their heads towards them, and then turned back towards the doors on the east side. They went to a metal object with a pane of glass in the middle of it, which was fastened near the doors and filled with earth. They would touch the glass with two fingers, kiss their fingers, and then leave the synagogue. Upon leaving, the elders would lay their hands on five other elders, and thus they would leave the prayer hall.[9]

As can be seen from the above description of the ritual, certain local religious and ritual practices characteristic of Georgian Jews were observed here, as well as the changes that these practices undergo over time.

- First, in 1870, Jews did not put on the tallit when entering the synagogue, but rather at a specific moment during prayer, after which they took it off again. These tallits were white. However, a different practice is seen in a description of the 1876 festival, when the Jews, upon entering the synagogue, covered their heads with tallits, which were coloured.

---

[7] Konstantine Berdzenov - "*Uriebis Tora da Sastsauli Dge",* Tsiskari, N:8 (1870) p:63.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Ibid.

Although we do not know which festival the Jews were celebrating, local practices are clearly visible. When it was time to pray, they jumped up and down twice, prostrated themselves on the ground and then took up their clubs and sticks, striking them loudly against the chairs, floor and walls. It is also noteworthy that the use of sticks and clubs during prayer is mentioned in subsequent articles, suggesting that this may have been characteristic of the Georgian Jewish community at that time - “Ritual is one of the primary mechanisms through which social memory is transmitted and renewed.” (Turner, 1986, 81)

The use of canes and clubs is also referenced in issue No. 26 of Droeba, published in 1872. While travelling in Tskhinval, the author discovers that the Jewish shops are closed. When he asks why, a local child answers, 'Today is the Jewish easter (Ressurection) festival day.'

He decides to go to the synagogue and attend the festival. Upon his arrival, he sees women at the entrance who are not permitted to enter the synagogue. He remarks, "Those women are not allowed in." The women made way for him, and he saw the Hakham reading from a book on a raised platform.[10] As is clear from the author's narrative, this must have been the Book of Esther, because the names Amon and Mordecai were mentioned, which the author recognised when he heard them. After the Hakham finished reading and closed the book, every man and woman in the synagogue took out the clubs hidden under their coats and veils. This frightened the author somewhat, before everyone began to beat the walls and chairs so hard with their sticks that the synagogue shook -

- "Amon is here! No, Amon is here!" Shouts were heard from the Hebrews.[11]

When the process was finished, the author asked an old Jew what this story meant, and he answered that it was a memory of that day when Amon intended to slaughter the Jews, but by the power of the Lord, he himself fell into the pit he was preparing for them; and when the author asked the Jewish man a second question about the meaning of the beating, he answered that when Amon was hanged, the Hebrews came to his corpse and softened it with constant beatings.[12]

---

[10] Rafael Eristavi - *”Uriebis Aghdgoma”,* Droeba, (1872), p.3.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Ibid.

Accordingly, we can conclude from this article alone that the ritual described in Tskhinval involves the vigorous striking of sticks and clubs against walls and chairs to represent the Jews beating Amon with clubs and sticks. As this ritual was continuously recorded in 1870–72, we can assume that it was a characteristic ritual practice of Georgian Jews, which of course served its own function. “Each enactment of ritual is a reactivation of the community's historical consciousness."(Turner, 1974,53)

Torah Scroll Cases and Synagogue Curtains

As both the 1870 and 1876 publications describe the interior layout of the synagogue, it seems that the Torah was kept in an ark located in the hall, next to the lectern. On both occasions, the Torah was taken from the ark in the hall, rather than from the Aron Hakodesh. There is no mention of the Torah being returned behind the curtains to the Aron Kodesh. Consequently, it could be argued that Georgian Jews had different practices for storing their books at that time. In any case, this was certainly the case in the regions where the articles' authors were located. There could have been a variety of reasons for storing the book this way.

But what about these colourful curtains hanging on the west wall? They would have had some different symbolic meaning. Furthermore, it is interesting that the exit door is located to the east, where a small tin box with glass in the middle hangs. Described as resembling a mezuzah, the author states that it contains packed soil which people touch when leaving and then kiss their hand that touched it. Perhaps this object was not a mezuzah at all, but rather an interpretation of one, and the soil inside held some symbolic significance. It is also possible that this object containing soil would have been a kind of amulet, which was common among Georgian Jews at that time.

As the flow of travellers and envoys to Georgia from Israel and other countries strengthens during this period, amulets and similar items, whose significance was primarily connected to

Israel,13 are brought to Georgia. Therefore, this object could have been both local and imported, and the soil inside it has its own symbolic significance.

Towards the end of these two articles, it is also necessary to review another part of the prayer process described in 1876.

After the Jews had finished praying in the synagogue, they went outside and waited for the Hakham and the Rabbi to emerge. The Hakhams and rabbis soon came out as well; the rabbi was holding a small red piece of brass, which some people kissed. The rabbi then turned back into the synagogue and the people followed him. He went to the ark again, opened it and placed the small piece inside. He then ascended the pulpit and began to read the commandments. After dark, the rabbi took the book, left the ark and went outside. The people gathered around him and they all began to pray. Together. After a long prayer, the service ended and the people left. Last of all, the rabbi and the khazans went to their rooms.[14]

The final part of Chichinadze's article clearly shows how the rabbi takes the book out of the synagogue but does not show him returning it afterwards to either the Aron HaKodesh or the Torah ark that stood in the hall. Instead, the rabbi and the hakhamim go directly to their rooms after finishing their prayers in the courtyard. Accordingly, the function of the curtains as a covering for the Aron Hakodesh is not evident here, so it is more likely that these colorful curtains hanging on the western wall had a different symbolic meaning.

He adds at the end that it was a strange custom among European Jews in the Torah: Georgian Jews would not enter, and they in turn would not enter theirs.'[15]

The Birth and Ascension of the Jews

---

13 Plisetsky, M – *"Religion and Costums of Georgian Jews*", (*1931), Moscow., p.39.*

14 Chichinadze, Z. - *"Uriebis Tora da Mati Dgesastsaul*", Droeba, N:103 (1876), p:3.

15 Ibid.

In September 1877, the journal Droeba featured an article by Zakaria Chichinadze, who wrote under the pseudonym Z. Mtsmindeli. The article was about the Jewish holiday and was titled Uriebis Dabadeba da Amagleba (Birth and Ascension of the Jews).

The author states that the festival began on 13 September with the Ascension of the Jews and ended on 19 September, commemorating the birth of the Jewish people. During this period, every Jew sets up a small prayer booth in their courtyard and decorates it beautifully with plants, fruit, and flowers. They perform their rituals in these prayer places each day. On the final day of the festival, the day marking the birth of the Jews, they gather at their main prayer house, which has also been decorated. This main prayer place was a house. They visit it on the final day of the festival. The house was previously owned by an aristocrat.[16]

The author continues that, after the hakhams and rabbis arrived, they opened the ark and took out four velvet-and-flower-adorned coffins, each containing a single book of the Torah. They then took one of the coffins and paraded it around the Torah seven times. After parading it seven times, they placed it in the middle of the prayer house and began to pray and jump, which the author also refers to as 'performance'.[17]

The jumping part of the prayer, as seen in Berdzhenov (1872) and the article, was also present in Chichinadze (1877). Unlike the previous synagogue, where the ark containing the Torah scrolls was in the main hall, here it is in a cabinet called the Aron HaKodesh. This raises further questions about the function and symbolic meaning of the curtains in the synagogue, as discussed in 1872 and 1876. It is now clear that the curtains had a different symbolic meaning and were not a cover for the Aron HaKodesh. The Aron HaKodesh itself is not mentioned inside, nor is it clear if the synagogues had an Aron HaKodesh at all.

Moreover, since Chichinadze had already provided a description of the Jewish

---

[16] Zakaria Chichinadze. - *"Uriebis Dagabdeba da Amagleba"*, "Droeba", (1877), p.2.

[17] Ibid.

holiday prior to this publication, it is interesting that here he refers to the Torah case as a 'coffin' and not an 'ark'. This suggests that the different colour and shape of the case likely caused this discrepancy in terminology.

The author then moves on to a very interesting part. While observing the ritual process, he asks the Jew standing next to him, 'What does the sevenfold circling of the book's coffin mean? Do you understand the Hebrew that they are reading?" He doesn't receive an answer to the first question, but the second is replied to with the explanation that, although they don't understand Hebrew, they have no choice because their great rabbi, who is now the Rabbi of Russia, says that we are one people and must have one language. The use of the Georgian language in prayer has been abolished, even though there was a time when our forefathers translated books into Georgian, which are now just lying idle. In the past, we also celebrated this holiday in Georgian, saying, 'We have lived to see the birth; blessed is our joy', and our rabbis and hakhnim also preached in Georgian. Now, however, this has been forbidden to us.[18]

It is important to note that the spoken language of Georgian Jews was exclusively Georgian, both historically and in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Hebrew served as the language of the synagogue and was primarily used by rabbis and hakhamim.[19] Although, from the nineteenth century through to the early twentieth century, cheders and yeshivot were actively opening in Georgia.20

Nevertheless, Hebrew remained the language of the synagogue. Only a few Georgian Jews spoke it, mostly Jewish clergy and those who had been educated abroad. The reason for this can be found in several places. It is interesting to note Plisetsky's observation that, for Georgian Jews, the hakhamim and rabbis Hakhamim served primarily as ritual specialists rather than communal leaders, as was customary in Eastern Europe. There, they led not only religious life, but also social and daily life, within the community. However, in Georgia, this was not the case.[21]

---

[18] Ibid.

[19] Plisetsky, M – *"Religion and Costums of Georgian Jews*", (*1931), Moscow., p.41.*

20 Gershon Ben-Oren - "The History of the Jews of Georgia", (1992), Tel aviv.

[21] Plisetsky, M – *"Religion and Costums of Georgian Jews*", (*1931), Moscow., p.57,*

Yehuda Chorny also mentions something similar in his notes, observing during his travels that rabbis are often appointed in two ways: either by the Russian Empire with the corresponding documents, or elected by the community itself to perform religious practices. Among Georgian Jews, however, he does not have the same extensive functions as a rabbi who serves as the leader of the entire community.[25] Noticing this, Yehuda Chorny tries to intervene in the lives of Georgian Jews and introduce changes, such as appointing gabbaim, establishing tzedakah and setting rules for conversion in and outside the synagogue. He tries to do this in almost every location. 26

As is clear from the above-cited article, at one of the Jewish locations, the Chief Rabbi became a Russian Rabbi, most likely Ashkenazi, who openly interferes with ritual practices. Ritualisation is a way of acting that establishes a privileged contrast, producing and reifying distinctions in power, identity and space (Bell, 1992). As Plisetsky notes, the Ashkenazim who arrived mainly headed for cities and places where Jews lived in large numbers, opening synagogues there. Gershon Ben Or adds that they also tried to open Hebrew schools alongside the synagogues. On the one hand, the Ashkenazim spoke a completely different language to the Georgians, who spoke Hebrew and Russian, while the local Jews spoke Georgian. Despite the great differences between them, interaction still occurred. Not only was there a difference between Ashkenazi and Georgian (Sephardic) Jews, but various Jewish travellers, shaliachs, representatives of the Zionist movement and others also appeared in Georgia during this period

During his travels in Georgia in 1870, Yehuda Chorni encountered incomprehensible rituals and traditions among the Georgian Jews. At the same time, he sought to change everything that was local and strange to him, while also offering interesting insights into local religious practices in his writings.

Passover Ritual

On the second night of Passover, in Kutaisi, they pick out a young boy, dress him up as a traveller and send him outside. He goes to the door and knocks. Those seated at the table ask him, 'Who are you?' He replies, 'I am Jewish.' They ask again, "Who will believe that you are Jewish?" He replies, 'I have a tzitzit.' 'That's not a sign. Give us another sign."

He lists various other signs, but this is not enough and the people inside still do not believe. Then the boy standing outside says, "I am circumcised like you." They ask him, 'If you're Jewish, how did you get here? Don't you know it's the Feast of Matzah? How did you get delayed on the road?' He tells them he is from Jerusalem, that he travelled a long way to get there and that he was delayed. After coaxing him, they open the door to reveal a young boy in travel clothes with a staff in his hand. They burst out laughing at the sight of him.

A similar theatrical performance during the Passover celebration has been described by Yehuda Chorny in other places in Georgia as well, such as Breti and Tskhinvali. "The liminal phase is one of ambiguity and openness, in which ritual actors are neither here nor there, but in between" (Turner, 1969, 94). This theatrical celebration was apparently widespread, although minor regional differences exist — sometimes the traveller is sent out of the house, and sometimes he answers that he comes from Israel or Egypt. They won't open the door until he finally says, "I am circumcised like you," and sways his hips as a sign of it.[22]

Funeral Rituals

Yehuda Chorny describes the death and burial rituals. First, he notes that the local Jews must have had a custom whereby, if someone died before sunset, they had to be buried before sunset that day; likewise, if someone died after sunrise, they had to be buried before sunrise the following day. They observed this rule with the utmost precision. Yet, despite this, Chorny says he does not know why the Jews of Georgia acted in this way or according to which rule.[23] This burial custom is also noted in the 1875 issue No. 80 of the journal Droeba.

He describes the burial ritual among the Jews of Akhaltsikhe as follows: when burying the deceased, they do not dig the grave very deep — only to a depth of about half an arshin (one arshin is approximately 71 cm). First, they pile the earth on the feet, covering half of the body. Then, they cover the other half up to the head, leaving the body uncovered. Finally, they place wooden planks over the upper part of the body and pile earth on top to cover it

[22] Yitzhak David - *Writings, Volume 1*, (1976), Tel Aviv, p.199.

[23] Ibid.

completely. The astonished traveller-explorer asks why they do this, but the locals have no answer and they did not know the origin of the custom, though they continued to observe it faithfully.24

While travelling in Kutaisi, Yehuda Chorni describes the funeral of one person. He notes that candles were constantly burning at the head and feet of the deceased. On one of the days of mourning, he discovers that a bowl of flour has been placed next to the candles, with a stone next to the bowl. Next to the stone lies a broken raw egg. It turns out that the broken egg is considered a sign of mourning and the stone symbolises silence, as the body has fallen silent. The locals do not know the purpose of the flour, though they say it is their ancestors' custom. [25]

- "During the funeral ceremony, the deceased is followed from behind with candles in their hands. At a wedding, the procession follows the married couple in the same way. The only difference is that funeral songs are sung in one case, while celebratory ones are sung in the other," wrote Yehuda Chorny in 1870.

It should also be noted that Chorny observes that Georgian Jews believe in amulets, spells, miracles and magical objects, as well as miracle-working books. In almost every region, they have miracle-working Bibles and other such items. Some have visible details of the year of publication and origin, while others do not. This issue remained constantly relevant among Georgian Jews, as detailed in M. Plisetsky's research and visual materials.

Amulets, talismans, and Miraculous Books.

In his research, Plisetsky describes the amulets, talismans and miracle-working books that were widespread among Georgian Jews. The faith that Georgian Jews had in these items was quite strong.

---

24 Ibid.

[25] Ibid.

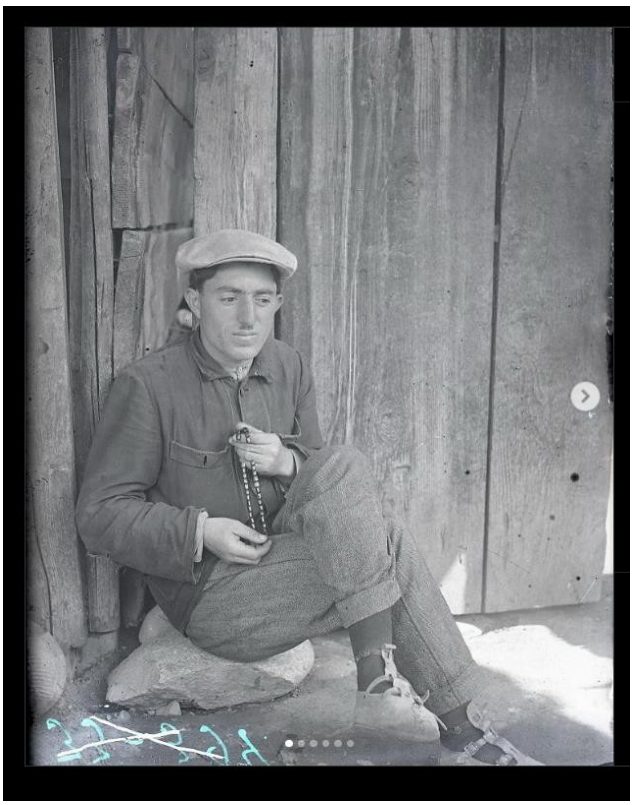
Among Jews living in the Akhaltsikhe region, it was common for local Jewish boys to wear amulet earrings, although these were not worn in adulthood.

In the first photo, there is a picture of a Jewish boy from Akhaltsikhe wearing an earring amulet.

Gall amulets, in which the gall of a sheep was wrapped in cloth and hung on a child's cradle for protection against the evil eye, were common in some places. Umbilical cords were also wrapped in cloth and hung on the cradle for the same purpose.

There were also 'Shaddai amulets', which were plaques engraved with 'Shaddai Yerushalaymi' that varied in craftsmanship. According to Jewish belief, all Shaddai amulets brought from Israel possessed special magical powers.[26]

An amulet called 'Shmirah La-Bayit', meaning 'Guardian for the Home', was used in Jewish homes. It was a small piece of paper on which the names of the four guardian angels — Uriel, Michael, Gabriel and Raphael — were written in the corners, with the master's name on each side and a Star of David in the centre. In Jerusalem, such pieces were placed in a frame and, along with decorations and pictures, were hung on the main wall. Stones with natural holes were also used as protective amulets for the home.[27]



There were also many different types of amulet, including a horseshoe and an ox yoke, an amulet made from drilled coins and amber beads. Photo 2 shows a Jew from the Oni, holding a beaded amulet that resembles rosary at first glance.

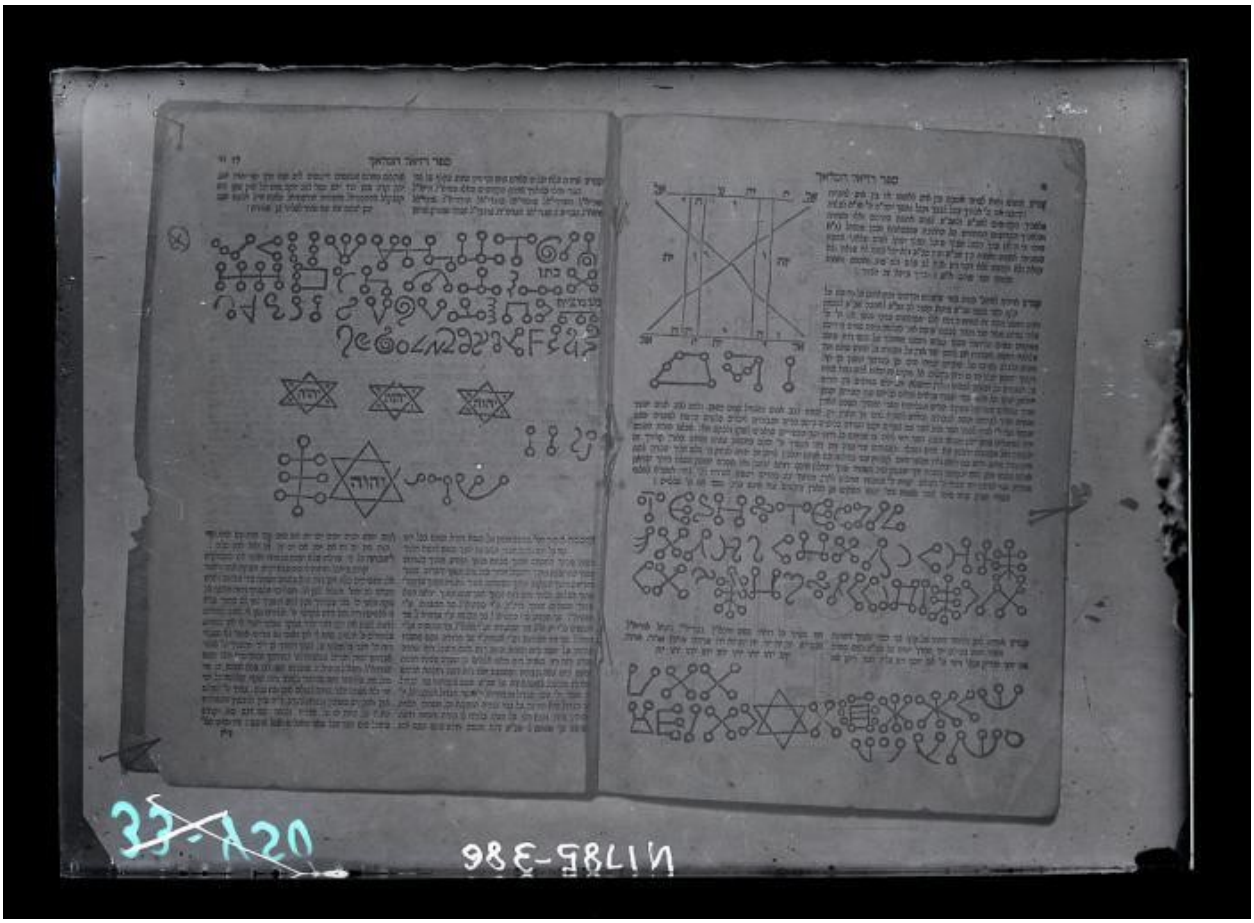
[26] Ibid.

[27] Ibid.

Such a belief was not only held by the Jewish people, but also by some hakhamim, who followed a similar practice. For example, in the Tskhinvali region, if someone fell ill, they would turn to the local hakham. He would take out the Arizal's book, turn to a page here or there to determine the cause of the illness, and then order the patient to buy a white rooster or hen, depending on the patient's gender. The bird would then be slaughtered and the hakham would write a prayer in its blood on a long strip of cloth. This strip would be rolled up tightly, sewn up and hung around the patient's neck as an amulet. Or it was attached to the cradle. In return for their services, the Hakham would receive the slaughtered bird, as well as other gifts on occasion. [28]

Photo 3 below shows an old illustration from the Book of Raziel.

Diagrams of amulets appear on the pages of the Book of Raziel, Georgia.



[28] Ibid.

Finally, the belief among Georgian Jews in miracle-working Bibles should be noted, as mentioned by Chorni and Plisemtsky, among others. Georgian Jews would proudly tell guests about these Bibles, and many other legends and tales about them exist. In Plisetsky's photo archive, there is a picture of two such Bibles that were kept in Surami. As mentioned, these are Bibles written on leather, with no indication of their place or time of creation.[29]

Conclusion

The sources reviewed in this study—periodical descriptions, traveler accounts, and anthropological materials—demonstrate that Georgian Jews preserved a distinctive set of ritual practices which were documented during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These practices included distinctive modes of synagogue performance, theatrical Purim and Passover reenactments, characteristic funerary customs, and an extensive use of amulets and protective objects. Rather than representing marginal or exotic curiosities, they provide meaningful evidence about the religious life of Georgian Jews. The material examined here shows how biblical memory was translated into lived ritual performance, how communal boundaries were strengthened through shared symbolic action, and most importantly, they reveal the ways in which Jewish identity was continuously preserved and expressed through local religious life.

Although this study does not examine the decline of these practices in detail, it is evident that local ritual traditions eventually came under pressure from broader processes of religious unification and modernization. The article has briefly outlined several of the influences and encounters—such as the arrival of new Jewish movements, external religious authorities, and shifting communal expectations—that contributed to this changing ritual landscape. However, the precise ways in which these local practices transformed, adapted, or disappeared remains a subject that warrants a separate, much larger study.

As religious models evolved and new frameworks for Jewish life emerged, many of these earlier local ritual forms gradually faded from communal practice. Documenting them, therefore, is essential not only for reconstructing the religious history of Georgian Jews, but also for acknowledging their place within the wider spectrum of Jewish ritual diversity.

By recovering and analyzing these practices, we gain a deeper understanding of how Georgian Jews shaped their religious lives, preserved communal memory, and sustained Jewish identity through locally inflected rituals that were consistently observed across generations. Religion functioned as the primary marker of identity for Georgian Jews. As Plisetsky notes, ethnographically and culturally the Jews of Georgia lived much like other Georgians, it was their religion and religious life that distinguished them from their neighbours and defined their sense of Jewish belonging.[29]

[29] Ibid.

Bibliography

Periodical Journals and Newspapers –

- Zakaria Chichinadze - *"Uriebis Dagabdeba da Amagleba"*, "Droeba", no.208 (1877)

  - National Archives of Georgia

- Zakaria Chichinadze - "*Uriebis Tora da Mati Dgesaswauli,*" Droeba, N.103 (1876)
  - National Archives of Georgia

- Konstantine Berdzenov - "*Uriebis Tora da Sastsauli Dge",* Tsiskari, N.8 (1870)
  - National Archives of Georgia

- Rafael Eristavi - *"Uriebis Aghdgoma",* Droeba, N.25-26, (1872)
  - National Archives of Georgia

- Teofile Kandelaki - "*Narevi", Droeba, N.25, (1872)*
  - National Archives of Georgia

Books and Research Publications:

- David, Yitzhak - *"Writings. Vol. 1".* (1976) Tel Aviv.

- Gershon Ben-Oren - *"History of the Jews of Georgia".* (1992). Tel Aviv.

- Eldar Mamistvalashvili - "*History of Jews of Georgia",* (2004), Tbilisi.

- D. Baazov Museum of Georgian-Jewish Culture - *"Studies, vol. 9*", (2014). Tbilisi.

Anthropological, Ethnographic and Traveling Studies

- Mark Plisetsky - "Religion *and Costums of Georgian Jews*", (*1931), Moscow.*

- *Yehuda Chorny* - Ketavim, vol. 1 (1870).

Photo Archives and Visual Sources:

- Mark Plisetsky - "Collection - И-1785-386" - Peter The Great Museums of Anthropology and Ethnography, (Kuntskamera), St. Petersburg. Russia.

- Mark Plisetsky – "Collection of Center for Jewish Art", Jerusalem, Israel.

Theoretical Works:

- Catehrine Bell - "*Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice",* (1992) Oxford University Press.

- Victor Turner - "*The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure".* (1969), Aldine.

- Victor Turner - "*Dramatic Ritual and Social Memory",* (1974), Cornell University Press

- Victor Turner - "*The Anthropology of Performance", (1986), PAJ Publications.***T**