

Life Of Oni Discussion Guide/Bibliography

Discussion Guide

I. Georgia - Location, History and Culture.¹

The Land

The land area of Georgia is only 69,700 sq. km., slightly larger than West Virginia. Georgia is situated at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, prompting Europeans to consider Georgia as Oriental, while Asians consider it European. The High Caucasus mountains form Georgia's northern and northeastern border with Russia, while the Lesser Caucasus mountains form Georgia's borders with Turkey (southwestern), Armenia (southern), and Azerbaijan (southeastern). Georgia's western border is the Black Sea.

The History

The Georgian people were besieged by their neighbors over the course of eleven centuries, from the seventh to the eighteenth. The late eleventh century saw Georgia besieged with invasions from a destructive

¹ From *Welcome to Georgia*, Embassy of the Republic of Georgia.

band of Central Asians called the Seljuk Turks. The reigning king of Georgia, King Giorgi II, abdicated the throne in favor of his 16-year-old son, who became King David IV, called "the Builder". With small, mobile army units, the young king regained Georgia's territory slowly and worked to return the land to its former fertility. The King then improved his army to sufficient strength and, in 1124, was successful in uniting most of the Transcaucasus region under the Georgian flag. King David died the next year, but his successors expanded the Georgian kingdom even further. This period of time, between the defeat of the Seljuk Turks through the Thirteenth century is known as the Golden Age of Georgia.

Around the end of the fourteenth century, the forces of Tamerlane ("Timur the Lame") invaded Georgia with the same ruthlessness as the earlier Mongols, but they did not assume political power over the Georgians. In 1453, the Ottoman Turks seized the Byzantine city of Constantinople which was the trade link between the Christian lands of Georgia and Italy. Georgia found itself surrounded by hostile Muslim neighbors, as Ottoman influence flowed into the northern Caucasus. After eleven centuries of mixed fortunes, the leaders of Georgia, looking for peace, turned

to their northern neighbor Russia which quickly annexed Georgia and in 1801 exiled the royalty. Despite the removal of the Georgian language by Russian decree, this did not prevent the development of Georgian culture. Georgia never gave up its fight for independence and finally regained its sovereignty in 1918, as one result of the end of WWI, only to be reclaimed by the communist USSR in 1921. After 70 years of Soviet rule, Georgia proclaimed itself a republic in April 1991, and struggles to remain free at this time.

The Populace

Georgia is currently the home of approximately 5.5 million people, which is about 1.9 percent of the total of the former USSR. Because of its location, Georgia is home to many different nationalities. Seventy percent of the inhabitants are ethnically Georgian, while eight percent are Armenian, six percent Russian, and six percent Azeri (or Azerbaijani). Countless others are represented in smaller amounts. About 56 percent of the population lives in the urban areas, and one-third of this number reside in the capital city, Tbilisi.

The Culture

In the 4th century A.D., Georgia adopted Christianity. Since then, the state religion has been Orthodoxy, from which Georgians receive their moral and spiritual values. At the same time Georgians have also been tolerant of other religions practiced within the country. The Georgian language is one of the oldest languages in the world, over 2,000 years old. It is a member of the Iberio-Caucasian group of languages, and has its own alphabet - one of only fourteen alphabets in the world.

The Capital City

Tbilisi is the industrial and cultural center of the nation. It is also one of the oldest cities in the world, being more than 1,500 years old. The city is located in a picturesque valley divided by the river Mtkvari. Tbilisi is on the same latitude as Istanbul, Rome, Barcelona, and Chicago.

II. Origins of Jewish Communal Life.²

There is one tradition among the Jews of Georgia (the "Gurjim") that they are descended from one of the Ten Tribes exiled by Shalmaneser, which they support by their claim that there are no *kohanim* (priestly families) among them. According to another tradition, their ancestors were the exiles from Judah in Israel at the time of Nebuchadnezzar's rule. Some scholars believe that Rabbi Akiva traveled as far north as Georgia. In any case Jewish settlements to Georgia have ancient origins. According to the "History of Armenia" of Moses of Chorene (5th century) the Bagrat family which gave kings to Georgia and Armenia was descended from one of the noblemen of Judah taken captive and exiled by Nebuchadnezzar. This source also relates that other families of the Georgian aristocracy were of Jewish origin.

The Georgian and Armenian traditions emphasize the role played by early Jewish rabbis in the initial introduction and spread of Christianity in this region. In the vicinity of Miskheta an Aramaic inscription

² From *Encyclopedia Judaica*, pp. 424-426, excerpts.

in Hebrew characters was found on the tomb of a certain Judah Gurk. It is possible that the Jews of Georgia took part in the anti-talmudic messianic movements from the ninth century on. At least one tradition which associates Abu'Imrān Mūsē al-Za'farānī with Georgia refers to him as Abu'Imtān al-Tiflisī. Kirkisānī testifies that in his day there were still members of the sect known as the Tiflisitos. The Georgian Jews were neighbors of the Khazars and there were presumably cultural relations between the Khazars, the Alans, and the Georgian Jews.

Abraham ibn Daud testifies to the faithfulness of the Jewish communities of Georgia ("the Land of the Girgasite and it is called Girgan") to Rabbanite Judaism. Benjamin of Tudela (after 1160) includes the Jews of Georgia "the land of Goron, known as Gargauin, they live along the banks of the Gibon River. They, the Georgians, are the Girgasites and practice the Christian religion" among those whom "the exilarch authorizes in all these communities to appoint over every community a rabbi and *buzzan*, because they come to him to receive *semikhah* and permission and they bring him gifts and presents". This indicates that by the second half of the 12th century the Jews of Georgia recognized the authority of the

Babylonian Tudela. Pethahiah of Regensburg mentions in his writings the small number of Jews in the towns of Georgia. Marco Polo, who passed through Georgia in 1272, reports that there were Jews living in Tufliis, though they were not numerous. The institution of *servi camerae regis* also appears to have reached Georgia. In 1428 King Alexander I conferred 27 Jewish families on the former Catholicos and the patriarch Diometius.

With the feudal disintegration of the kingdom and the general insecurity of the 15th century, the sufferings of the Jews became apparent. Their dependence on the landowners grew and they had to perform onerous duties. Some Jews were actually degraded to the status of slaves and Jewish girls were sold to the harems of the Muslim rulers. This situation continued until the beginning of the 19th century, when Russia annexed the country.

III. Highlights of the Documentary Program on Oni

Among the exotic Jewish communities in the farthest reaches of the Diaspora at this time, few evidence the fervor for their return to Zion as those descendants of an ancient Jewish people still living in the Caucasian mountains of Georgia. Isolated

from the experiences and practices of their co-religionists in Europe, America and in Israel, they have practiced their religious beliefs in a style which has varied little over the 25 centuries since the arrival of their ancestors, at the time of the exile of Israelites to Babylonia, following Nebuchadnezzar's destruction in 586 B.C. of the first Temple in Jerusalem.

The modern exodus of Georgian mountain Jews to Israel was set in motion in 1969 as a consequence of a demand expressed to the United Nations by a Georgian Jewish protest group. They portrayed their tradition of struggle and faith as the bedrock of their desire to break through the tyranny of Soviet repression which denied them safe passage to Israel. Georgia among all of the republics which comprised the Soviet Union at the time was the first to open its borders to permit the beginning of the emigration of its Jewish community. But "It was painful for the Jews of Georgia to depart from their beloved land, whose customs, culture and landscape were so interwoven in their experiences and memories. Their departure did not stem from a sense of alienation but from a long-term attachment to the Land of Israel."³

³ From In the Land of the Golden Fleece - The Jews of Georgia - History and Culture. Edited by Rachel Arbel and Lily Maga, Beth Hatefutsoth, the Nahurm Goldmann Museum of the Jewish Diaspora, Tel Aviv, Israel, 1992.

The film "*One Day in the Life of Oni*" provides us with some insight into many dimensions of this picture. It is not easy, as the father of one young man who emigrated with his family to Israel that day, stated in his interview. He is 60 years of age. His entire life has been lived in Oni. He doesn't know the Hebrew language. He doesn't know what kind of work he would do in Israel and he simply doesn't know if he could find his way in the new world which Israel represents. His uncertainties are balanced in the comments of young ladies and the Hebrew schoolteacher who see themselves as anxious to leave for Israel, for their own futures.

This film was made to commemorate three distinct occasions, first the community's celebration of the 100th anniversary of their Oni synagogue, second, the 2500th year of Jewish communal life in this area of the Caucasian mountains, and finally, the emigration to Israel of another of the dwindling number of the remaining Jewish families. It was an historic day in the life of Oni, marked as well by the visit to its community of distinguished guests from America, Israel and of the unique significance of the visit to them of the President of Georgia, Eduard Shevardnadze and senior members of his government. It was indeed a day of great importance for all of the residents of Oni, Christian and Jewish alike.

Diaspora, Tel Aviv, Israel, 1992.

The purpose of the film is to record for the Oni community, and for viewers in Georgia, Israel, America, and elsewhere in the Jewish Diaspora, the significance of the day, but equally important to share with viewers the personal reflections of the people of Oni whose lives were being touched by the significance of the day and its broader ramifications. In this regard, we meet the mayor of Oni who acknowledges with regret the departure of so many of its Jewish inhabitants but who holds on to the hope of their return when economic conditions improve. The theme of economic crisis is repeated by many as the prime reason for the Jewish emigration. We hear from the rabbi and his scholarly colleague that the essence of the Jews of Oni is first their Georgian roots, and as such it is not easy for them to anticipate the perceived migration of the few remaining families of their community within the next 5 years.

The overriding sense of the anxiety of the older generation is matched by the evident enthusiasm of the young for their departure to Israel. Few but the elderly are concerned about the traditions they will be leaving and the sanctity of the synagogue and the cemetery which also will be left behind. But even in this regard their strong attachment to Oni is seen in their projection that these aspects of Jewish history in Oni would be preserved by their Georgian Christian neighbors with whom they have experienced life without antisemitism.

It is important to note that the Jews of Georgia are by their historical antecedents, "Eastern". Yet unlike other Eastern Jewish communities, whose cultural milieu was the Moslem world, they have lived these many centuries in a Christian society. Situated at the crossroads of cultures which combine Eastern and Western influences, the Mountain Jews of Georgia also reflect characteristics typical of the Caucasian people with whom they have been living. Thus Georgian Jewish culture combines influences originating in the neighboring Eastern communities with later Eastern European Jewish influences.

It is clear that Jewish communal life in Oni is drawing to a close. The culture of this community and that of Georgian Jews in general will be passed on through its descendants in the libraries and museums of Israel and the United States. Perhaps within a few generations these institutions will be the sole repositories of a 2500 year experience. But at least for the moment, there still remain perhaps 15,000 Jews in all of Georgia, and perhaps 250 in Oni. This film will help to capture the emotions, beliefs and wishes of those still remaining in Oni who are struggling to define their own personal future. But the film will serve for the most part as a living tribute to the power of faith in sustaining the dream of return to Zion, the biblical prophecy of Israel.

Additional Recommended Reading:

1. "Descent of the Mountain Jews", Ehud Ya'ari, pp. 32, 33. The Jerusalem Report, July 13, 1995.
2. "The Literature of the Mountain Jews of the Caucasus". Michael Zand, Soviet Jewish Affairs, Parts 1 and 2, Volume 15, No. 2, 1985. Volume 16, No. 3, 1986.
3. Georgia, Roin Metrevski, Publishing House N. Soloda, Tbilisi, Georgia, 1993.