

The Bukharan Jews in Post-Soviet Uzbekistan: A Case of Fractured Identity

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As the Soviet Union was forming, the culturally disparate groups of Jews who were scattered across the vast territory which was to become the USSR posed a dilemma for the policy planners. The ultimate goal in dealing with the Jews was “the extinction of the Jews and Judaism as an independent entity” (Orbach 1982:45). Given that goal, the question was how to achieve it. Should the Jews be treated as a singular group and be ascribed nationality status with the aim of bringing them - as national group - into rapprochement and fusion with the other Soviet peoples? Or should the Jews be denied a collective identity with the claim that they did not constitute a nation, that they would never reach the developmental stage of nationhood, and that immediate steps should therefore be taken to assimilate them into the surrounding peoples? (Pinkus 1984:11-15).

The first approach, ascribing national status to the Jews, would run the risk of tapping into Zionist national aspirations which ran totally contrary to the Soviets’ revolutionary plan. The second approach, denying the Jews national status, would run a different risk. By conferring upon the Jews the strange status of non-category - which, paradoxically, is itself a category - in effect, the Jews would become marginalized from all other Soviet national groups. Marginalization would lead to anti-Semitism which would, in turn, spark exactly that same group consciousness and identification that the Soviets were seeking to avoid (Blank 1995:52-53). The dilemma was resolved by conferring nationality status on the Jews and later, by granting them an autonomous oblast in Birobijan. Both were meager concessions.

Although Jews were given group status and a territory, the importance of their collective identity was de-emphasized. The Soviets provided them with little state funding for Jewish schools and Yiddish newspapers and journals. Their possibilities for Jewish national expression through literature, theater and art were limited. In addition to the fact that their national expression was restricted, Jewish religious expression was also severely restricted as part of the Soviets’ general anti-religious policies.

These policies which attenuated expressions of Jewish identity were furthered by macro socioeconomic forces. Industrialization and urbanization drew the Jews out of their small town *shtetlach* (neighborhoods), where all aspects of life were structured around traditional Judaism. New contact with the non-Jewish world led to an increase in intermarriage, a decrease in the use of Yiddish, and rising interest in Russian arts and literature (Gitelman 1988:163-169). Despite the Jews' acculturation to Russian culture and to Soviet ideals, they were unable to escape their Jewish identity. Their nationality, inscribed on their official documents as "Jewish," was a stigma activated each time they applied for housing, for employment, or for admission to university. The Jews of the Soviet Union were therefore said to have reached a state of "acculturation without assimilation" (Gitelman 1985:85). Culturally, they had achieved the Soviet ideals, yet their Jewish identity remained inescapable.

The Bukharan Jews

Before 1991, approximately 45,000 Bukharan Jews lived in the former Soviet Union. The overwhelming majority of them lived in the Central Asian republics of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, they have immigrated *en masse* primarily to Israel and the United States. Today only about 3,000 Bukharan Jews remain in Uzbekistan (primarily in Tashkent, Samarkand and Bukhara) and a few hundred in Tajikistan.

How and when these Jews of Central Asia began to be referred to as Bukharan Jews is debated. Historian Mikhael Zand explains that at the end of the 19th century, most of the Jews living in Central Asia were clustered within the confines of the Bukharan emirate. Accordingly, Zand reasons, Russian, British and Indian travelers who came to the region during this period began using the term "Bukharan" to refer to the local Jews (Zand 1988:49).

The Bukharan Jews themselves offer a different reason. They explain that many generations ago, the ruler of Bukhara invited Jews from Persia to join his court. In one version of the story, the ruler invited the Jews to weave golden carpets for his palace. In another, he invited ten Jews to Bukhara, each an expert in a different craft. In still another version, the ruler invited a Jewish doctor from Persia to his palace in Bukhara to treat his ailing wife. Upon curing his wife, the ruler requested that the doctor remain in Bukhara. The doctor agreed only on condition that ten Jewish families¹ be allowed to join him. Although the details of these stories differ, the basic theme is consistent. The ancestors of the Bukharan Jews arrived from Persia

many generations ago. They settled in Bukhara city which became the center of Jewish life in Central Asia, hence they acquired the name “Bukharan Jews.” Only later did they spread out to other cities such as Samarkand and Tashkent. Historians offer no corroboration for this folk-legend. However, the historical record, like the legend, confirms that the Bukharan Jews are a branch of Persian Jewry.

Today the term “Bukharan Jew” is used in Central Asia as a means to differentiate those who call themselves Bukharan Jews from and those who make up the other segment of the Jewish population in Central Asia, the Ashkenazi Jews. The Ashkenazi Jews are the newcomers to the region. The majority of them arrived in Central Asia during World War II, when they fled or were evacuated from their homes in Eastern European USSR.

Like the general Jewish population in the Soviet Union, the nationality of the Bukharan Jews was recorded as “Jew” on their official identification documents. For the Bukharan Jews, however, the *meaning* of this identity was different than it was for the majority of the Soviet Jews.

Because the forces of industrialization and urbanization were less pronounced in Central Asia than in Eastern European USSR, the majority of the Bukharan Jews in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan did not leave their Jewish *mahallas* (neighborhoods). Their extended family structure remained in tact and they continued to live patrilocally in multi-unit homes built around courtyards. The Bukharan Jews, therefore, had a much weaker tendency toward Russification than did the general Jewish population in the Soviet Union. Furthermore, they had a much weaker tendency toward Russification than did the Ashkenazi Jews in Central Asia, whose family and community structure had been totally disrupted during the war.

In 1979, 89.8% of the Ashkenazi Jews in Samarkand declared Russian to be their mother tongue, whereas only 17.3% of the Bukharan Jews in Samarkand declared Russian to be their mother tongue. (Zubin 1988: 177) Contrasting rates of intermarriage are also striking. In 1962, an estimated 33.7% of the Ashkenazi Jews in Tashkent married non-Jews, whereas an estimated 7.7% of the Bukharan Jews in Tashkent married non-Jews (Altshuler 1970:31).

In addition to the fact that macro socioeconomic forces in Central Asia differed from those in Eastern European USSR, Soviet policies in the two regions differed as well. Anti-religious campaigns were not as harshly executed in Central Asia, which meant that throughout most of the Soviet era, the Bukharan Jews were able to continue observing religious traditions.

They ate only meat which was ritually slaughtered and continued to observe key Jewish holidays. Additionally, religion continued to structure their rites of passage. For example, religious circumcision for Jewish males was almost universally practiced. Regarding weddings, accommodations were made to the Soviet ideals, but religion continued to play a most prominent role in marriage ceremonies. On the day that a couple registered their marriage at the ZAGS according to state law, they would don western style wedding garb, a white gown for the bride and a suit and tie for the groom. After the state ceremony, family and friends would join in a lavish celebration replete with food, drink, music and dancing. However, when the party was over, the bride and groom would part. She, still dressed in her wedding gown, would return to her parents' home and the groom to his. Although the couple had been married by state law, their family and friends would not recognize their marriage until a few days later when a rabbi would conduct the religious wedding ceremony.

The Bukharan Jews, like the Jews in the rest of the Soviet Union, had "Jew" inscribed as their nationality on their internal passports. However, for the Bukharan Jews, this was not perceived as a "negative nationality," that is, a status with restrictions and no content. (Pinkus 1984:16). Rather, their Soviet assigned nationality was laden with religious content. An unintended consequence of Soviet policy was that for the Bukharan Jews' the national identity which the Soviets had ascribed to them became linked to and intertwined with their religious identity.

To illustrate the powerful overlap between these two aspects of identity, I present an excerpt from a taped conversation that I had last year in Samarkand with Yura, a 38 year old Bukharan Jew. He spoke of the difference between his concept of Jewish identity and my concept of Jewish identity (as he understands it):

According to your faith, you are Jewish. But according to your passport, you are a citizen of America. So when you are at home, you are a Jew. But when you go on the street you don't think that you're a Jew anymore. You think that you are just a citizen of America. Among us it's not like that. Among us, at home you are a Jew and on the street you are a Jew. In every situation you are a Jew. With you it's not like that. For you, if you leave your house, if you are sitting in a bus or on a plane, you are not sitting there like a Jew, you are sitting there like a citizen of America. Among us, it is the opposite. Among us, everywhere you are a Jew. You fly like a Jew, you sit like a Jew, wherever you go, you are a Jew.

Yura explains that there is no overlap between my state-assigned identity (American) and my identity derived from belonging to a religious community (Jewish). For him, on the other hand, these two aspects of identity overlap. The aspect of his Jewish identity which is assigned to him by state authorities is intertwined with the aspect of his Jewish identity which is derived from his belonging to a religious community. Note, too, that Yura differentiates between nationality and citizenship. When discussing my identity, he emphasizes my status as an American citizen. When discussing his own identity, he places no emphasis on his own status as a citizen of Uzbekistan. Although his passport does indicate that he is a citizen of Uzbekistan, it is the national identity inscribed on the document which is most salient. Yura's civil identity is singular and coherent. He is a Jew, as defined by both his religious community and his state.

Multiple Perspectives On The Transmission Of Jewish Identity

Independent Uzbekistan inherited the Soviet policy of listing citizens' nationality on official documents. Accordingly, the nationality of Uzbekistan's Jewish citizens continues to be inscribed as "Jew" on their passports and birth-certificates. Uzbek notions of how national identity is transmitted, therefore, continue to have an impact on local perceptions of how Jewish identity is transmitted.

As a result of major changes that accompanied independence, Bukharan Jews have also been exposed to new ways of thinking about how Jewish identity is transmitted. In 1991, a number of Jewish organizations in Israel and in the United States began sending emissaries to the former Soviet Union. The emissaries come to Uzbekistan with tremendous financial resources with which they fund schools, informal educational programs, youth clubs, and special activities that are all used as forums to convey ideological agendas. Stipends are often provided to participants to encourage enrollment and attendance. In contrast, the dwindling number of Bukharan Jews in Uzbekistan who have not emigrated have lost most of their local leadership and do not have the resources to finance their own activities. The emissaries have therefore been able to exert great influence on locals' perceptions of Judaism and Jewishness.

Chabad Lubavitch and the Jewish Agency are two emissary organizations which have a powerful presence in contemporary Uzbekistan. They approach the issue of Jewish descent differently than the Uzbek state. Furthermore, the two organizations differ from one another both in their agendas and in their understanding of how Jewish identity is transmitted.

Policy and practice in Uzbekistan:

During the Soviet era, when a child was born to parents of the same nationality, the child was registered in census documents as being the same nationality as his parents. In cases where the parents were of different nationalities, the census administrator was instructed to give preference to the nationality of the child's mother (Altshuler 1987:16).

In Central Asia, where the majority of the population is Muslim, the nationality rule differed. In these regions, in situations of mixed marriages, the locals preferred to register according to the father's nationality. This makes sense for a variety of reasons. Patrilineal transmission of national identity was linked to the notion that Islam is transmitted patrilineally. It was also linked to patrilocal residence patterns. When a woman married, she would leave her family's courtyard and go to live in her husband's courtyard with her husband's parents and with her husband's brothers, their wives, and children. Her children, therefore, would grow up in their father's house, governed by the rules of their father's kin. Children in a sense belonged to their father's kinship unit rather than their mother's. So it is no surprise that the Central Asians came to understand national identity as being transmitted through the father's line rather than the mother's.

Although the Central Asian understanding of nationality transmission ran counter to the Russian understanding of nationality as primarily matrilineally transmitted, the authorities were flexible in accommodating local notions of descent (Altshuler 1987:245). Calculating nationality through the father was not instituted as official policy in Central Asia, however it did become the prevailing norm. The Bukharan Jews also accepted the notion that nationality is transmitted patrilineally. Hence, children's Jewishness was understood to be derived from their father's Jewish identity.

Jewish Emissary Organizations in Uzbekistan:

In recent years, the Jewish Agency, an Israel based organization, established four mission offices in the former Soviet Union. In 1997, a total of 350 emissaries were sent from Israel to work in these offices. The Central Asian mission has several branch offices in Uzbekistan, in addition to a branch office in each of the other Central Asian states. The branch offices offer Hebrew classes, as well as Israeli folk-dance and Jewish music classes to the local population.

Additionally, they run summer camps, Jewish identity seminars, and special events for Jewish holidays.

The goal of the Jewish Agency is to strengthen Jewish identity among all those who have the *legal right to immigrate to Israel*, and to encourage those individuals to resettle in Israel. According to the Jewish Agency, those who have the right to immigrate to Israel are delineated by Israel's immigration law, called the "Law of Return." It states:

1. Every Jew has the right of repatriation in the State of Israel. Those who are considered Jewish are: those who are born to a Jewish mother or those who have converted to Judaism.
2. Anyone who has a Jewish parent or a Jewish grandparent is also included in the Law of Return.

According to this law, only matrilineal descent is relevant in determining Jewishness. However, in the clause that specifies who is included in the Law of Return, both matrilineal and patrilineal descent are relevant. Accordingly, an individual who has a Jewish father and a non-Jewish mother is not considered Jewish by the Israeli State. However, that individual is allowed full rights of citizenship in Israel. Furthermore, despite the fact that she is defined as a non-Jew by the law itself, she is encouraged to "repatriate," or "return home." This paradox opens up the meaning of "Jewish identity" and "Jewish homeland" to ambiguous interpretation.

Chabad Lubavitch, another emissary organization with a strong presence in Uzbekistan, is a Jewish ultra-Orthodox Hassidic sect. One of the group's distinguishing features is their missionary work.² Chabad Lubavitchers are encouraged to venture out across the globe from their centers in New York and Israel to remote Jewish communities with weak religious infrastructures. Their goal is to help Jews maintain their religious practices and to bring them closer to Orthodox Judaism.

The six to eight Chabad emissaries currently in Uzbekistan fund and run religious schools that are attended by approximately 450 students.³ Now that the locally trained ritual slaughterers have all immigrated from Samarkand and Tashkent, it is the Chabad emissaries who insure that kosher meat is available in these cities. Chabad also assists in running and maintaining the

cities' local synagogues. Additionally, Chabad funds and organizes community-wide celebrations on Jewish holidays such as Passover and Purim.⁴

Chabad's understanding of who is a Jew structures their disbursement of resources and their interactions with the locals. For example, when individuals request admittance into a Chabad adult education course, (for which students are paid a significant stipend), their requests are denied if Chabad does not consider them to be Jewish. As part of the Orthodox movement, Chabad recognizes only matrilineal transmission of Jewish identity. Conversions to Judaism are recognized only if they are performed according to Orthodox Jewish law.⁵

In sum, the Bukharan Jews are now exposed to three different lenses through which their Jewishness is defined and transmitted:

- Legal national identity as defined by the Uzbek state which is transmitted patrilineally
- Legal identity as defined by the State of Israel which is transmitted matrilineally (but with much ambiguity)
- Religious identity as defined by Orthodox Jewish law which is transmitted matrilineally

In each of these three possibilities, Jewish identity is defined by blood ties. Recently, subjective measures (such as belief, will and practice) have been introduced as a new dimension to the definition of Jewish identity. The case of Lena, Arkady, and their son Sasha⁶ illustrates this point.

Lena was born to Russian non-Jewish parents. She and Arkady, a Bukharan Jew, studied together at the university in Samarkand and fell in love. Lena and Arkady were married in a Jewish wedding ceremony in the early 1970s.⁷ When their son Sasha was born, he was circumcised according to Jewish ritual. Until recently, no one had ever called into question Sasha's Jewishness, which was understood to have been inherited from his father. Last year, Sasha and Diana decided to marry. Diana is a Bukharan Jew who was born in Samarkand, as were her parents and grandparents. Rabbi Shaulov, a Chabad rabbi in Samarkand,⁸ said that he would not perform the wedding ceremony for Sasha and Diana because Sasha is not Jewish. Rabbi Shaulov told Sasha that if he wanted to marry Diana in a Jewish

ceremony, he would have to *convert* to Judaism. Sasha was told that to convert, among other things, he would have to show strict adherence to Jewish tradition and law.⁹ All involved were upset by Rabbi Shaulov's decisions and they decided to send Sasha's paternal grandfather to speak to him. He asked Rabbi Shaulov: "Why are you doing this? Sasha likes the Jewish laws, he observes the Sabbath. But that does not mean that he has to go to the synagogue to pray every day. After all, there are so many people who are Jews who do not even know anything about being Jewish."

"That does not concern me," Rabbi Shaulov answered. "That does not matter to me. They are Jews, and Sasha is not a Jew."

Rabbi Shaulov claims that Sasha is not a Jew despite the fact that Sasha is considered (by himself, his family, the state authorities, and perhaps even by Rabbi Shaulov) to be a Jew according to the state definition. Rabbi Shaulov also claims that Sasha, who was not born a Jew according to religious definition, can *become* a Jew by following all Jewish traditions and practices. In other words, Sasha can create his own Jewish identity through action. This notion constitutes a radical departure from Soviet nationality policy which hinged identity on blood ties and had no relation to belief or practice.

Fractured Jewish Identity

During the Soviet era, the structure of Jewish identity as understood by the Bukharan Jews was in accordance with local understandings. Due to severely restricted ties with Jews abroad, conflicting notions that could have been drawn from the wider Jewish world were sealed out. Since the dissolution of the USSR and the arrival of the emissaries, the definition of Jewishness has taken on new forms. Multiple authorities have opened possibilities that did not exist before so that it is no longer clear who is a Jew or what it means to be a Jew.

To examine how the Bukharan Jews negotiate this issue, I return to my discussion with Yura. As part of a survey, I presented informants with fabricated scenarios and then asked them questions about the stories. One such scenario was as follows:

Larissa's parents are both Jewish by nationality. However, they did not observe any of the Jewish holidays or traditions at home, and they never told Larissa that she was Jewish. When Larissa was 16 years old, she found out that her parents

were Jewish. Like her parents, she was not interested in religion and did not observe any of the Jewish traditions or holidays. When Larissa was 21 she married Yevgeny. Now they have two children. Yevgeny is Russian by nationality. Larissa and Yevgeny do not observe any of the Jewish religious traditions or holidays.

After presenting this text, I asked, “Are Larissa’s children Jewish?” In answer to this question, Yura replied:

Larissa’s children are not Jews. They were raised without the holidays, the practices, and the traditions and the Bible is very foreign to them. They will be considered Jews only if they follow the Bible one hundred percent. But by nationality they are Jews. Among us, among Jews, nationality goes by the mother.

This complex comment deserves careful analysis. Yura says that Larissa’s children are not Jews because the “Bible is foreign to them” and they do not know or practice the Jewish traditions. However, he also says that they are Jews because their mother is Jewish.

What are the implications of the fact that Yura understands Larissa’s children to be both Jews and not Jews at the same time? This question becomes even more difficult when Yura’s last statement is analyzed, “Among us, among Jews, nationality goes by the mother.” The term “nationality” as used in the former Soviet Union was generally reserved for state assigned national identity which, in Central Asia, was understood to be transmitted patrilineally. Yura, however, now perceives of another type of Jewish nationality, one defined by his own religious community (matrilineally). Had he continued his statement, he might have said, “Larissa’s children are Jews by our nationality, but by their nationality they are not Jews.”

The statement “they are Jews and they are not Jews” is a logical contradiction. Yet Yura does not perceive the contradiction because Jewishness for him has unraveled. The tight knot between religious and national identity has been undone. Accordingly, Yura can no longer respond to the question “Are you Jewish or not?” with a simple “yes” or “no.” Now his answer is, “It depends on who you ask.”

In light of Yura's new fractured sense of Jewish identity, we return to his statement: Among us, at home you are a Jew and on the street you are a Jew. In every situation you are a Jew.

In this statement Yura refers to Jewish identity as it existed before the Soviet Union dissolved and before the emissaries began to arrive. That was before the unraveling, when the Jews still saw their religious identity and national identity as intertwined. In those days, being a Jew "at home" and "on the street" meant that being defined a Jew by internal authorities (the local religious community) was the same as being defined a Jew by external authorities (the state). It meant that primordial Jewish identity, which was inscribed on the body,¹⁰ was the same as imposed Jewish identity, which was inscribed on the passport.

Interestingly, Yura's statement "at home you are a Jew and on the street you are a Jew" is made in the present tense, yet it refers to a time passed. Yura speaks here as though none of the emissaries' teachings have penetrated his consciousness. How is it that this is the same Yura who says that Larrisa's children are both Jews and not Jews?

Before answering this question, we turn to a few statements recently issued by President Islam Karimov during a formal address to a group of Jews from England:

. . . . Over the course of many centuries of living together with the Jews on the territory that was [to become] our country, there was never a single violent incident directed against the Jewish nation.

Judging by the manner in which the Uzbeks relate to the Jewish national minority, I believe it is possible to ascertain how [strongly] we in Uzbekistan uphold the rights of national minorities and the rights and freedoms of the individual (Karimov, 1998).

Although Karimov unequivocally claims that the Jews have been treated justly and have suffered no persecution, his very statement marginalizes them. They, a "national minority," are juxtaposed to "we in Uzbekistan" and are excluded from the category "Uzbeks."

Perhaps Yura is able to utter both statements:

"At home you are a Jew and on the street you are a Jew"

"Larissa's children are Jews and they are not Jews"

without perceiving the contradiction because he simultaneously views his Jewishness from within and from without. Through the eyes of the emissaries, he sees the distinction between Jewish religious identity and national identity. While through the eyes of the state authorities, he sees that there is still no distinction between the two. Which of these perspectives - that of the local non-Jews or that of the foreign Jews - is the view from “within” and which is the view from “without” is unclear. They seem to switch back and forth like an optical trick. The wine goblet which had been foregrounded slips into the background to make room for the facing profiles, and then suddenly reverses positions again.

Those Bukharan Jews who remain in Uzbekistan struggle to negotiate their Jewish identity as they continually contend with these oscillating perspectives. For those who immigrate to Israel and the United States, the problem takes on new dimensions as the next chapter of identity negotiation unfolds. In their new homes, the question “Are you Jewish or not?” becomes expanded to include a second part: “... and if you are, then what kind of Jew are you?”

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Endnotes

1. A quorum of ten are required for public prayer.
2. Their missionary work is only with Jews.
3. About 120 in Samarkand and 330 in Tashkent.
4. The approach of the Shehebar Sephardic Center, the emissary organization with the strongest presence in Bukhara city, differs from the approach of both Chabad and the Jewish Agency. The situation in Bukhara city, therefore, requires separate analysis.
5. The definition of "Orthodox Jewish law" is not always agreed upon by those who consider themselves to be Orthodox. This complex debate will not be addressed here. Simply note that Chabad generally does not consider the conversions that were performed in Uzbekistan during the Soviet era to have been in accordance with Orthodox Jewish law.
6. Names have been changed to protect the informants' privacy.
7. In cases of intermarriage, the Bukharan Jews would allow a Jewish wedding ceremony (*huppa* and *kiddishin*) to be performed between a Jewish man and a non-Jewish woman. After this ceremony, the woman was considered - by the local Jews - to have "converted," or more accurately, to have "accepted Judaism." It was expected that when she would move into her husband's family's home, she would observe the religious laws as they were practiced in the home.
8. Rabbi Shaulov is actually a Bukharan Jew himself. He was born and raised in Uzbekistan. In recent years he has been strongly influenced by Chabad. During the period of my field work, he was an important liaison between the local Jewish population and Chabad abroad.
9. Chabad understandings and local understandings of "strict adherence to Jewish tradition and law" are often not in accordance.
10. through circumcision.