



2600 Years of Jews



"And when King Nebuchadnezzar destroyed Jerusalem, persecuted Israelites [escaped and] came to Kartli and requested Governor Mtskheta to allow them to settle there, above the Aragvi River in the place called Zanavi."

Even during the darkest days of Communism, when all vestiges of Judaism were vigorously purged throughout the rest of the Soviet Union, Jewish religious, cultural and communal life continued relatively openly in Georgia.

Thus the old collection of Georgian histories, *Kartlis Tskhovreba*, records the first organized arrival of Jews in Georgia 2600 years ago. The same source records a second wave of immigration centuries later when "the Caesar Vespasian destroyed Jerusalem, and the [newly arrived] Jews came to sit beside the old Jews." There they kept their ancient traditions for centuries. According to Moses of Chorene (5th century), the Bagrat family and many other Georgian and Armenian aristocrats were descended from Judean nobleman. Benjamin of Tudela reported that the Georgian Jewish community was still in direct contact with, and accepted the authority of, the Resh Galuta (Exilarch) in Babylonia, c. 1160 C.E.; and Marco Polo briefly mentions the Jews living in Tbilisi in 1272.

Bordering the Black Sea, sandwiched between the Caucasus Mountains of Russia and the feuding states of Moslem Turkey and Christian Armenia, Georgia has seen its share of conquest. When Russia wrested Georgia from oppressive Moslem rule in the late 1800s, it didn't enforce many of the anti-Jewish practices instituted elsewhere. This relative tolerance continued with the support of the local Georgian population. Even during the darkest days of Communism, when all vestiges of Judaism were vigorously purged throughout the rest of the Soviet Union, Jewish religious, cultural and communal life continued relatively openly in Georgia. Jewish emigration to Israel was also widely understood. As a result, much of Georgian Jewry's rich heritage has been preserved.

Georgian independence, after the breakup of the USSR, has led to particularly close ties between Georgia and Israel. In March 1997, Georgian President Eduard Shevardnadze, former Foreign Minister of the Soviet Union, signed a decree adopting the proposal of the Georgian Ministry of Culture, Georgian Academy of Science and the Jewish Republic Organization to formally celebrate the 2600th Anniversary of the Jewish Settlement of Georgia. President Shevardnadze himself agreed to head the subsequent State Jubilee Commission, and he personally invited the participation of Israeli and world Jewish leaders during his January 1998 visit to Jerusalem. He also personally participated in the 100th Anniversary of the Oni Synagogue, where he emphasized the contrast between the millennia of relatively positive Jewish experience in Georgia and Jewish persecution throughout most of the Diaspora.



Large signs and banners throughout Tbilisi ensured public awareness of the occasion.



in Georgia

Many prominent Jewish personalities have visited Georgia during this past year – Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, Edgar Bronfman (World Jewish Congress), Avraham Burg (Jewish Agency) – leading up to the major State festival in Tbilisi. The size of the celebration was impressive, with huge signs at the airport and public places (see photographs), special exhibitions, movies, plays, concerts, opera and ballet performances. Jewish notables from around the globe participated, and Georgia's five-year-old Jewish newspaper, *Menorah*, published special issues in Georgian, Russian and English.

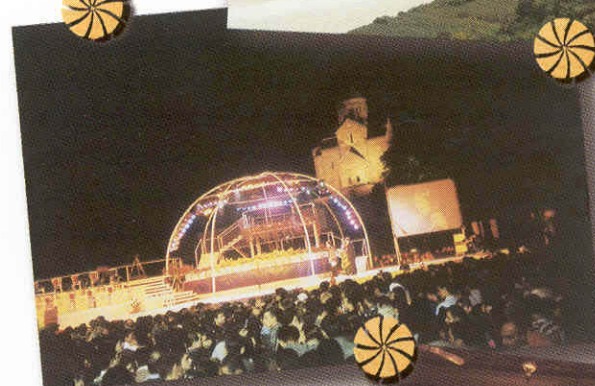
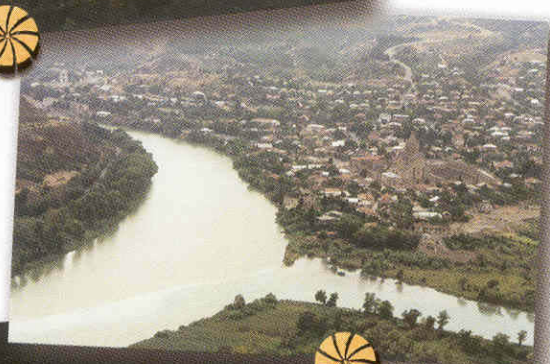
Perhaps, one of the most important and lasting events was the International Tbilisi-Jerusalem II Scientific Conference, at which over sixty Georgian and Israeli scholars delivered important research papers on various aspects of Georgian and Jewish history and culture and the linkages between them. Topics ranged from early (Stone-Age) contacts between the Trans-Caucasus and the Eastern Mediterranean, to Jewish-Georgian religious and ethnographic traditions, to the contributions of Georgian women to Zionism.

The Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities maintains particularly close ties with its Georgian counterpart, one of the main organizers of the Conference and the overall festivities. The Israel Academy's five-person delegation included the Academy's Vice President Prof. Hayim Tadmor, Prof. Shaul Shaked, Chairman for the Humanities, Bob Lapidus, Head, Division of International Relations, Prof. Haggai Ben-Shammai, Hebrew University and Prof. Constantine Lerner, Hebrew University. The Academy's representatives were warmly welcomed and participated in all activities.

In summing up Israel's active program of scientific cooperation with Georgia and its prospects for the future, Lapidus notes that "Israel and Georgia have much to learn from each other, and both parties can gain from strengthening their continuing cooperation."



A land of rivers, mountains and plains, Georgia's geographical diversity augments its scenic beauty.



The opening ceremony was viewed live, via satellite hookup, by participants at a parallel celebration in Jerusalem.

Inside Tbilisi's ornate Beit Knesset Hagadol Synagogue.



Israel's Chief Rabbi, R. Yisrael Meir Lau, and Prof. Shaul Shaked, the Israel Academy's Chairman for the Humanities, meet during a tour of historic Georgian-Jewish sites.