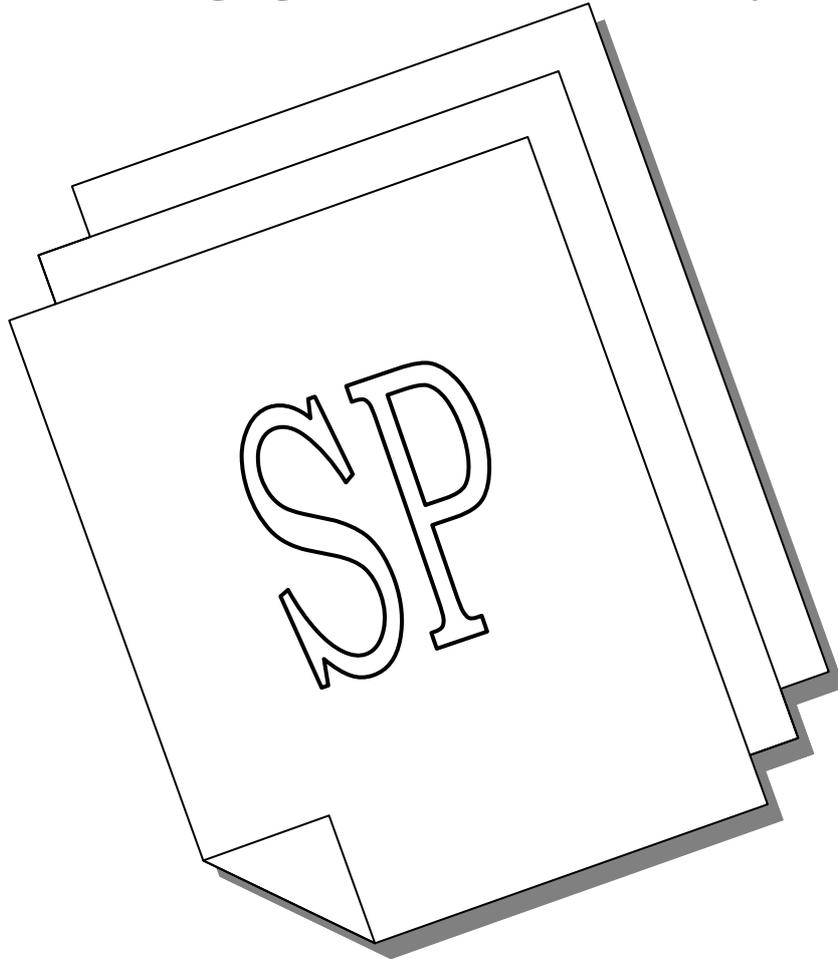


*Sociological Papers*

**Between Tradition and Modernity: The  
Plurality of Jewish Customs and Rituals**

**Series Editor: Larissa Remennick  
Managing Editor: Ana Prashizky**



**Volume 13, 2008**

**Sponsored by the Leon Tamman Foundation for  
Research into Jewish Communities**



**SOCIOLOGICAL INSTITUTE FOR COMMUNITY STUDIES  
BAR-ILAN UNIVERSITY**

# Immigrant Jews of the Caucasus in New York and Moscow: Ethno-Cultural Identity and Community Organization<sup>1</sup>

Chen Bram

Truman Institute  
Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Israel

## Abstract

This article brings together two case studies from a larger research project on collective identity, ethnic categorization and community life among Jews of the Caucasus who migrated from their homelands to Israel, USA and Central Russia. It shows how this distinctive group of Jews strives to preserve its culture, language and social ties by building community organizations and forging new relationships with the surrounding majority and other Jewish groups. Specifically, the author focuses on the encounter between Jews of the Caucasus with Russian Jews that challenges the accepted binary oppositions between Mizrahi/Sephardic and Ashkenazi identities used in the Israeli and American Jewish discourse.

## Introduction

*“It is impossible to forget who we are, the Jews don’t let themselves to forget... We, the Jews of the Caucasus, Thank God, are neither Sephardic (Oriental) nor Ashkenazi (European), and we have complex language of our own... And our children? In the past, because of the negative stereotypes, they felt a little ashamed of their origins, but today they say it with pride – “We ARE from the Caucasus.” (T., from Hinanit, a village established in 1982 by immigrants from the Caucasus in Israel).<sup>2</sup>*

Over the last twenty years, the ethno-cultural group that is called here "Caucasus Jews" (CJ) has experienced dramatic changes<sup>3</sup>. The majority left the Caucasus: tens of thousands emigrated to Israel<sup>4</sup>, and at the same time sizeable new communities have

---

<sup>1</sup> This article is based on the long-term anthropological research project analyzing ethnic categorization and collective identity, as applied to the case study of FSU Jewish immigrant, especially CJ, as they enter their new environment after immigration. The research supported by Ben Zvi Institute. I would like to thank Harvey Goldberg for his valuable comments, Vitaly Shalem, Nobert Yevdayev, Yuri and Bella Yegudiyev and Sergei Davidov for their assistance, and to Larissa Remennick and Ana Prashizky for their help in translating and editing the article for publication in this issue.

<sup>2</sup> About this case, see Bram (2001).

<sup>3</sup> The common name for the group is “mountain Jews” but the name Caucasian Jews, or “Caucasus Jews” is better as it carries less of Russian colonial load. The different names and labels of this group raise many sensitive issues and should be discussed separately (Bram, 2008).

<sup>4</sup> The statistical data are problematic. A small group of 15.000 had immigrated to Israel, US and Europe in the 1970s. The estimated number of immigrants to Israel in the 1990's is around 60.000. A few

emerged in Russia and North America – especially in Moscow and New-York, which are the focus of this article. The CJ try to reestablish their community frames while facing other Jewish groups, such as Jewish immigrants from Russia and Ukraine (Remennick, 2007), as well as mainstream American Jewry. This article explores the dynamics of establishing new synagogues by CJ in Moscow and New-York, and the emerging new identification labels in the course of their meeting with a new environment.

The establishment of synagogues is an interesting arena for research, especially due to specific features of religiosity among CJ challenging the binary opposition between the religious and secular. Life under Soviet regime has contributed to their secularization, but at the same time a performance of Jewish rituals of passage, celebrating the holidays, and other key markers of Jewish identity are still very important for most CJ, certainly more so than for the Jews of the Slavic Soviet territories. CJ also challenge the binary ethnic categorization regarding Jewish groups. The area CJ come from is characterized by extreme human diversity, as the Caucasus comprises a border between continents, religions and cultures.<sup>5</sup> They arrived from both 'European' and 'Asian' parts of the Caucasus (Russia, Azerbaijan), and as a group they are highly diverse, combining some characteristics and influences that are considered to be "oriental" and others perceived as "Russian." Their culture bears specific characteristics related to the Caucasus, along with influences from other centers of Jewish life in Persia, Lithuania and Russia. They are not "Sephardic" or "Ashkenazi" in the historical meaning of these terms, but their traditions carry both Sephardic and Ashkenazi influences, hand in hand with universal soviet cultural and mental legacies.

The study of this group and its encounter with other Jewish groups and with the wider society serves as a key to examine, “from the margins”, some broader questions about binary oppositions versus a multiplicity in the conceptualizations and perceptions of Jewish identities (Bram, 2008).

The division of Jews into *Ashkenazi* and *Sephardi* communities became commonly accepted as a specifically Israeli phenomenon, leading to a binary ethnic categorization of Jewish Identity within an *Ashkenazi/ Mizrahi* dichotomy (Goldberg & Bram 2007). Yet, as the article will show, this division penetrates the discourse on Jewish identity in various diasporas, causing tension among CJ trying to reconcile their previous collective identity with their new place within global Jewry. In this sense, the case of CJ sheds new light on that common binary divide and reasserts plurality of identities, reflecting the demand for recognition voiced by different social groups.

---

small communities still remain in the North Caucasus, in addition to those of Azerbaijan and in Pyatigorsk, Central-North Caucasus area. For the discussion of controversial statistical data see Bram (1999) and Tolts (1997).

<sup>5</sup> For in-depth discussion of the history of CJ see Altshuler (1990). For discussion of their language, culture and literature, see Zand (1982; 1985; 1991). For additional discussion on the Soviet attempt to identify CJ as “Tats” and to separate them from other Jews see Chleov (1998), Semyonov (2003), Bram (2007).

## **The Jews of Caucasus in New-York: “We and our Ashkenazi brothers”**

During post-soviet years, several thousand CJ immigrated to North America<sup>6</sup>. A few hundred families settled down in Brooklyn, NY and in the year 2000 the first synagogue of CJ was opened, with a small cultural centre for community activities attached to it. This is a traditionally Jewish area of New York, where many Russian immigrants of Ashkenazi origin live and numerous Orthodox Yeshivot (Rabbinical colleges) are also located, neighboring on different non-Jewish communities, including many other immigrant groups. A contact with this densely Jewish environment, found in the midst of diverse urban American milieu, influences the dynamics of identity formation among newly settled CJ.

### **The Brooklyn synagogue: “A place of our own”**

This discussion is based on the data collected during visits in 2003 and 2006, including observations and interviews with synagogue’s activists and visitors, and on a wider field work in different centers of CJ. The very establishment of the synagogue resulted from significant efforts by the members of the CJ immigrant community, engaged at the same time in the process of general occupational and social integration. It shows the importance of the common house of prayer and cultural activities for reconstruction of CJ identity in New-York. This common sentiment is expressed in the words of a community activist:

*When we came here we had no place for prayer... For the last three years, we have our own community synagogue. Today not only Mountain Jews are coming here, but also Yemenite and Turkish Jews... We did it without any external help. We approached different organizations, and in the beginning we were in the basement of the Lubavitch Yeshiva; then we bought this house, remodeled it so that it is appropriate for a cultural organization... We collected money by ourselves - some gave five dollars and others five hundred...*

The synagogue’s name declares that it belongs to a specific community - “Caucasian Jewish Congregation” (this name is written in English), and also, that it is “Light of East Synagogue – according to customs of *Edot Hamizrah*”<sup>7</sup> (this caption is inscribed in Hebrew). Both names circumvent the front picture showing a famous synagogue in Kuba (a town in Azerbaijan) with Caucasus landscape at background. When I asked one central activist of the community about the meaning of the names he stressed that there is no problem with it:

*The first name refers to us as a community, and the second one to the style of prayer which is according to Sephardic and Oriental Jews customs.*

His answer points to a separation between the specific ethno-communal identity and the term “customs of *Edot Hamizrah*” that refers to the liturgical tradition. This double sign simultaneously emphasizes the community identity of CJ and their connection to the Sephardic liturgical tradition. This is a declaration of keeping their cultural and communal tradition, but not the one that is self-enclosed. In this sense,

---

<sup>6</sup> Community activists estimate their membership at 12,000 or more. Back in the 1970s limited numbers of CJ immigrated to USA and Canada (especially Toronto), but the organized community never appeared back then, as opposed to the organized communities of Bukhara Jews.

<sup>7</sup> *Edot Hamizrah* - the communities of Oriental Jews (or Eastern Jews).

the term “Sephardic” (*Spharadi* in Hebrew) has an additional inclusive meaning – it invites every Jew who wants to pray in that style to come in. Indeed, during my visits of the synagogue at Sukkoth 2003, the central role in the Torah reading and prayer was played by Orthodox Jew of Turkish origin who lives nearby. He told me that in this synagogue he got a welcome opportunity to pray in a way close to the ways of his fathers, after many years he had to pray in the Lithuanian Yeshiva situated in area. He added that he is trying to teach Judaic traditions to the community youths, while previously asking them about the respective traditions of CJ, thus appreciating their meaning and value.

Names and categories form an important component of identity construction serving as a visiting card of the community. While the Hebrew name refers to the kind of religious practice, the English name points to the cultural identity. This name mediates CJ’s contact with their new Jewish environment, while in relations with non-Jewish New Yorkers it raises another dilemma, to be discussed below.

The picture of the Kuba synagogue on the façade points to the central role of the Jews from Azerbaijan, especially from Kuba, in its establishment. Yet, already at the outset the community had members from different areas of the Caucasus, such as Dagestan, and over the years immigrants from other areas, such as Kabardino-Balkaria, joined up. Those sub-groups have a different history and speak different dialects of the Caucasian-Jewish language, Juhuri or Judeo-Tat (Zand, 1991; Bram, 1999; 2008). Community formation, however, is a process of integration of various Jewish groups from the Caucasus that often involves conflicts and their overcoming (Bram, 2008).

The exposure to the multiple identities of New-York Jews created new dilemmas about expressing the community identity of CJ and its uniqueness in children education. While discussing this subject during Sukkoth of 2003, some community members said that they sent their children to Orthodox Yeshiva, with the goal of giving them traditional Jewish education. Others preferred public schools in their area. But even those who sent their children to Yeshiva, which usually offers some economic benefits, were not really interested in their religious indoctrination, but rather stressed the importance of future academic education. In 2006 it seemed that these controversial expectations brought about mixed results. On the one hand, the influence of Chabad (Lubavichi Hasidism) became dominant through the activity of young tutors of Russian origin who gave lessons in the synagogue, and through other sources of influence. Under this influences, Jewish-ness of young immigrants from the Caucasus changes and seems to become closer to that of Chabad. On the other hand, the tendency to stir adolescents towards academic education was enhanced: over the years, more youngsters from the community began their studies in academic institutions of the area and in New York in general. Community leaders try to foster this tendency. This was manifest, for example, in a conference organized by community leaders and the Brookline College about the CJ community and culture in the fall of 2007.

### **Between a synagogue and a website: Building a virtual community**

Different examples of dilemmas emerging from contacts with new counterparts and the dynamics around community’s identity came up in discussions on the internet website established by CJ. At the World Congress of Caucasus Jews I met the founder of the website, an engineer, who immigrated to Pennsylvania from North Caucasus. He told me that for him the establishment of the website was a way for keeping his original identity in the situation when he was the only CJ in the city.

Following this initiative, he was invited to several gatherings of CJ and to the first meeting of CJ's International Congress, held in Tel Aviv in 2002 (Bram, 2008). His invitation to the Congress, while the organizers (most of them from Moscow) did not know him personally, points to importance of the website and its function in the construction of immigrant identity. One topic of the chats and forums on the website is marriage and especially the question if and why the girls from the CJ community prefer to marry Ashkenazi men.

On November 24, 2002, the forum on Juhuro.com published an announcement inviting to participate in a social game taking place at the club near the Caucasus synagogue in Brooklyn. It is a popular knowledge contest between groups, so called "Intellectual Café" that is featured by television shows in Russia<sup>8</sup> and has a visible place in contemporary Russian culture. The next day, a reaction of the user nicknamed Sasha appeared on the site:

*I have an idea for the setup of Intellectual Cafe on Saturday. To compete between the groups – Nalchik vs. Baku vs. Kuba, vs. Derbent, vs. NBA (Nashi Bratya Ashkenazy) – Our Ashkenazi brothers. What do you think of my idea?*<sup>9</sup>

The acronym NBA (НБА) signifies the reference world of these immigrants. The suggestion spurred different reactions, most of them dealing with the internal divisions of Caucasus Jews, while Ashkenazi figure remains in the background, serving as a standard point of comparison. Marina, probably of mixed Caucasus-Ashkenazi origin, mused on-line about the division of identities:

*It is interesting to which group should I belong?... To NBA or to Nalchik, given that I was not born there and I think of myself as American (you confused me). And can girls even participate in the game? Or you are still with "bent" gender opinions, as was usual in the Caucasus???*<sup>10</sup>

The discussion about "our Ashkenazi brothers" in the reference to "Intellectual Café" is not accidental – this is a popular pastime among educated and smart Jewish youths, mostly of Russian-Ashkenazi origin. Thus this discussion raised questions about the "Russian" components of the CJ identity and their relations with other Soviet-Jewish immigrants. On one hand, it includes old historic hostilities reflecting Russian occupation of the Caucasus in both tsarist and soviet times, and one participant mentioned in this respect a popular edition of the comprehensive study on CJ by Mordechai Altshuler (1990). At the same time, there are many signs of the emerging connections between the communities of Russian and Caucasus Jews. In my 2006 visit to New-York I heard that there are fewer conflicts and negative stereotyping and more common dilemmas reflecting the contacts with the urban American environment. Since regular non-Jewish Americans perceive CJ as another variety of Russian/Soviet Jews, this highlights their attitudes towards all Jews generally and to Russian-speaking Jewry specifically. At the same time, in the wider American urban

---

<sup>8</sup> One version of it is the famous "What – Where – When?" (Что-Где-Когда) program .

<sup>9</sup> «У меня идея для Intellectual Cafe в субботу: [Разделиться на] команды: Нальчик vs. Баку vs. Куба vs. Дербент vs. (НБА) - Наши Братья Ашкеназы. Прикол, как тебе моя идея?»

<sup>10</sup> «Интересно, а мне в какую группу?... То ли я НБА, то ли я Нальчинская, не родившиеся в Нальчике, а вообще я считаю себя американкой (запутали меня вы). А девушки у вас принимаются??? Или вы ещё, как на Кавказе, с левыми понятиями???"

spacet where many communities stress their own identity, it is more legitimate for CJ to express their particular character, while maintaining relations with other Soviet immigrants.

Another interesting inter-group meeting was the one with Bukharian Jews. When I asked a community activist in Brooklyn about their contacts with other communities from the former Soviet Union, she argued that it might be good for CJ to consider teaming up with Bukharian Jews and encourage visits to their big community center in Queens. She told me that “in the American context, people from the small CJ community are concerned about marital partners, and Bukharian Jews, after all, are closer to us than other communities.” Her explanation does not suggest the existing connections between the two communities but rather an option to be tested. This relationship becomes possible because of the new community organization of the CJ; for individual “outsiders” it was hardly possible to join the extensive and established activities of Bukhara Jews in New-York<sup>11</sup>.

Another central issue of Caucasus identity often discussed at on-line forums is gender roles and relationships between men and women. Given conservative gender expectations of their parents, young men and women have a difficult time striking a compromise between the strict family traditions (ethnic endogamy and a ban on premarital sexuality,) and the surrounding norms of gender and sexuality in the American mainstream. The virtual meeting place between different Caucasus communities often encourages the shaping and the emergence of a pan-ethnic Jewish-Caucasian identity as a consolidated new group on the existing American Jewish landscape. The communal newspaper in Russian and English, which includes also parts in Juhuri - the language of CJ, expresses that consolidation against the external background of American ethnic diversity. For example, a poem expressing the pain of 9/11 was published alongside traditional poems and letters reflecting Caucasus culture, thus stressing common American civic identity and the traumas to be overcome by all New-Yorkers. An additional line of inter-group relations was with Muslims from the Caucasus. One reason for this is economic: some CJ advertise and sell famous silver crafts from the Dagestan village of Kubachi. Another example was cooperation with the consulate of Azerbaijan in organizing cultural events intended to foster cultural ties between U.S and Azerbaijan and present the Caucasus and its many cultures to American audience.

Another dilemma reflecting the search of the new place for the CJ community in the American context was reflected in the on-line discussions about the name to be used as an identity label of CJ in English. The participants played with the idea to translate the ethnic title Mountain Jews accepted in Russia or to choose another name. The common name of CJ in Israel was disqualified because in English the term *Caucasian* indicates the White race as opposed to the Blacks and other races. Many said it was difficult for them to explain to Americans the meaning of the term in their specific case. During my 2006 visit, community members expressed dissent with the inscription on the front of the synagogue – "Caucasian Jewish Congregation"; as they are living in the neighborhood with many immigrants from different places, they felt

---

<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, at the exhibit in the Jewish museum of New-York, CJ were presented together with Bukhara Jews as two Eastern communities from the former Soviet Union. This points to the fact that local U.S. Jews see these two communities as connected. The potential connection with the Jews from Bukhara is more recognizable in American context than in Israeli or Russian ones. Yet, other communities having a Sephardic style of prayer, such as Jews from Halab, are not mentioned by CJ as potential partners for social networking.

that the term *Caucasian* made an impression of racial exclusion and was thus insulting for the neighbors. The sensitivity to the reactions of diverse non-Jewish Americans to the inscription on their community building signifies the second stage in the adjustment process to the American mainstream. At the same time, it also continues a long-term pluralistic tradition of close ties and respect for different ethnic groups typical for most former residents of the multi-ethnic Caucasus.

The case of the American community of CJ demonstrates the importance of opening of a community institution (“our” synagogue) in forging lasting ties between the particular and general Jewish identity in an immigrant society (for comparison see Deshen, 1969). A vivid example of these ties is Hebrew-Gregorian calendar published by the community in New-York, which shows Jewish holidays with explanations in Russian. The picture of the synagogue in Brooklyn is on the front page, and every month of the year is decorated by a picture of a Caucasian Jewish synagogue in a different locale with additional explanation about this Jewish community. The pictures included synagogues from different towns in the Caucasus, as well as in Moscow and Israel, among them the new, richly decorated synagogue in *Tirat Carmel* in Northern Israel. As this calendar points out, Caucasian Jews see themselves as part of a single global community with a transnational identity. The synagogue, while being a local landmark, also becomes a symbol of global connections. Locality and transnationalism seem to be the opposites, but actually they can connect between worlds and places.

### **The CJ in Moscow: Dilemmas of Jewish identity in the light of colonial legacies**

The analysis of the experiences of the CJ in Moscow and other big cities in Russia is connected to the nature of their migration<sup>12</sup>. On the one hand, a passage from the Caucasus to Moscow entails many important changes in social and cultural surroundings. On the other hand, it is still an internal migration, from the periphery of the former Soviet Union to its centre, which does not demand the study of a new language and adaptation to the unfamiliar social rules and system of government.

It was also a gradual migration: some CJ living in Moscow continued to keep houses in the Caucasus (this situation is especially common among the Jews from Kuba, Azerbaijan). Their ability to keep in touch with their origins in the Caucasus is greater than in cases of immigration to Israel, USA or other countries. Still, it is immigration in the full meaning of the word that involved settling down in the new environment and reconstruction of collective identity. The Jewish identity of the CJ who immigrated to Russia, especially to Moscow, is shaped by the meeting with Russian Jews and other Jewish groups, such as Bukhara Jews and Georgia Jews. Another important factor is the internal diversity of their identity coming to the fore while meeting natives of other Caucasian communities in major Russian cities (Bram, 2008). Unlike their very marginal position in Israel, CJ in Moscow typically integrated in different social and economic fields, and some of them enjoyed success in commerce and business. The latter may be explained by their innate ability to mediate between different cultural worlds using connections with non-Jewish natives

---

<sup>12</sup> In addition to the synagogue in Moscow, there are Caucasian synagogues in Saint-Petersburg and Rostov. Rostov synagogue is called “Mishiv House.” This synagogue is open to all Jews of Rostov, of which Caucasian Jews are only a minority. In spite of that, the synagogue is called after the donor from the Caucasus and CJ hold central positions in the community. This situation is very different from that in Moscow and reflects a location of Rostov in South Russia on the border with the Caucasus.

of the Caucasus, many of whom came to be their trade partners and employees. “They know how to speak with everyone in his or her language” – said a young CJ, who grew in Israel, about his relatives, successful merchants in Russia. Yet, it is a very diverse community: Jews from different places in the Caucasus are integrated in different fields and to various extents.

According to field observations and interviews I conducted in Moscow during multiple study visits between 1996 and 2007, CJ are forming separate social networks according to their origin areas – Azerbaijan, Dagestan, and even Kabardino-Balkaria and Chechnya. Some attempts took place to create communal transnational frames, such as the World Congress of Caucasian Jews established in 2003. The Congress, as well as other international gatherings of CJ, created the meeting arena for Jews from different Caucasus communities who belong to separate social networks in everyday life. An attempt to create a common collective identity despite internal diversity is a long and uneasy process: during these integration-oriented meetings Azerbaijan natives (from Kuba and Baku) were very dominant because Congress organizer and financier originated from Azerbaijan. This local domination of one specific group was also expressed in Israeli arena, for example regarding information on and access to the first meeting of the Congress in Israel.

There are several functioning Caucasian religious establishments in Moscow. The central of them are a separate synagogue and Yeshiva of CJ, “Beit Tanhum” (“*Бейт Танхум*”- “*בית תנחום*”) <sup>13</sup> adjacent to the Big Synagogue of Moscow and located in a separate building in the synagogue yard. There is also a separate Minyan of different groups of Caucasian Jews at another level of the Big Synagogue building. An additional little synagogue is located inside the large open market of Izmailovo (Izmailovo Jewish community).

Construction of identities during synagogue meetings stands at the centre of Sascha Goluboff (Goluboff, 2003) research, which documented contacts between Russian Jews and other Jewish groups at the Big Synagogue of Moscow during the 1990s. A special place in this research is dedicated to discussion of the CJ. This meeting and its analysis by Goluboff is an interesting case for the analysis of forging of ethnic conceptions and categories<sup>14</sup>. Below I will relate to Goluboff’s research in the light of the materials I collected during my visits to Moscow and other cities in Russia, as well interviews with CJ, who spent significant part of their lives in Moscow, in Israel and in the Caucasus. This discussion centers on the problematic character of binary divisions between Ashkenazi and Mizrahi/Sepharadi identities that invoke a familiar White/Black division.

---

<sup>13</sup> The synagogue is called after Tanhum (Talhum) Gilelov (Gorshomov), the father of the brothers who donated to the building. Another synagogue under the same name was established in Tirat Carmel (Israel). These names point to the inter-language borrowings: there is difference between the spelling and pronunciation of the name in Russian and in Hebrew. Another difference is between the names of the donors written in the synagogue and religious material – Gorshomov, the original typical form of Caucasian Jews name (from the Hebrew name Gershom), in contrast with their name used every day – Gilelov, an accepted form in Muslim areas.

<sup>14</sup> For discussion of categorization of Jewish groups generally and in this case specifically, see (Goldeberg and Bram 2008; Bram, 2008).

## **New economy, historic legacies and inter-group relations**

Goluboff provides significant ethnography of racist stereotypes fostered by Russian Jews with regard to other groups in the synagogue, and especially of CJ. Her description points to the dialectics between aspiration to create a communal Russian-Jewish frame to tense relations between different groups contesting the “right way of Russianness and of Jewish-ness”, often being framed as a racial discourse (Ibid.:123). Goluboff explains these relations by the emerging tension between the new market economy and an old Soviet world in Russia. In the eyes of Russian Jews, CJ represent blunt and primitive forces of market economy, given that many of them succeeded in retail commerce and got rich (Ibid.:126-131). However, tensions along economic lines (newly rich vs. poor/modest) exist also among Russian Jews themselves and are not limited to inter-ethnic relations. Moreover, Goluboff’s analyses misses the nuances of the complex history that shaped the relations between Caucasian and Russian Jews already in the period of Russian colonization of the Caucasus in the 19<sup>th</sup> century<sup>15</sup>. These historic animosities were reinforced following the violent conflict in Chechnya during the 1990s, i.e. at the time of active migration of many Caucasians to Moscow. Over the 1990s, Caucasian natives of any descent came to be the most hated minority group in Russia on the background of allegations (heated by the popular media) of terrorism and taking over retail trade in the city markets, leading to fights between different gangs of criminals - immigrants from the Caucasus and local Russians, fostering crime, racket and inflation. It can be said that Caucasus natives have replaced Jews as chief hate object among the Slavs. In this situation the CJ were identified by their Russian surroundings as Caucasians, and this identification was used also by Russian Jews regarding CJ (Ibid.:127). Thus, the antagonism between Russians and local ethnics in the Caucasus was mirrored in Moscow, and CJ were influenced by this conflict. Different cultural tendencies, occupational venues and social networks of Caucasian and Russian Jews contributed to the sharpening of the borders between their communities. More generally, this tension alludes to the on-going negotiations on the meaning of Russianness today: as a civil concept including all Russian-speaking citizens (*rossiskii*) or as a nationalist/ethnic concept based on Slavic ancestry and skin color (*russki*) (Markowitz, 1994:335-336). The position of the Jews in this negotiation is generally ambivalent, and of CJ even more so.

Indeed, the colonial heritage of the past and nationalist discourses of today play a salient role in relations between Russians and Caucasians, while economic divisions of the post-Soviet years may readily augment these oppositions and hostilities between Jewish groups. However, an analysis focused on the colonial heritage is limited too. The post-colonial discourse tends to produce a binary opposition between wide ethnic categories that mirror the existing power structures, with specific ethnic and cultural identities attached. Observations of relations between Jewish groups in Moscow raise questions about inter-group versus in-group variability along social and economic lines and their relative role in shaping the tensions and conflicts. Moscow synagogue is a meeting ground of four groups – “local” Russian Jews, CJ, Georgian and Bukharian Jews. Goluboff’s analysis presents each group as relatively homogenous, with a clear and monolithic identity. In the case of CJ, the lack of reference to the distinctions between different origin groups in terms of educational and social background, language, cultural orientation, and Russian influence, is

---

<sup>15</sup> (Altshuler 1990:467-477). For a detailed analysis of Goluboff’s works (2003, 2004) see Bram (2008).

especially limited. Some time after Goluboff left this research field, the internal differences caused the split and the establishment of two separate Minyans of CJ: a separate synagogue was built with a donation from a rich Kuba Jew, and another internal Minyan appeared in the Big Synagogue, whose dominant activists are from North Caucasus. Moreover, Goluboff's description is limited to a group of less than ten CJ, mostly posed on the margins of the synagogue life. Her book offers very little background on CJ that would allow the reader to learn about their cultural world and lifestyle. As a result her analysis is one-sided, presenting mainly the views and attitudes expressed by her Russian-Jewish informants, which reinforces negative inter-group stereotypes and may actually affirm the stigmatization of Russian Jews and Russians generally among international readers.

### **The place of *Mizrahi* discourse in the construction of Caucasian-Jewish identity**

A meeting between different Jewish groups in Moscow highlights questions of social categories which are used to define these groups. Goluboff (2003) argued that Georgian Jews and CJ are Oriental or Eastern (*Mizrahim*), because their ancestors came to the Caucasus from Jerusalem through Persia (Ibid.:146). Bukharian Jews, however, are *Sephardic* Jews, because of the influence of Sephardic tradition on their communal life through the messengers from the Land of Israel. What stands behind the description of Georgian and Caucasian Jews as Eastern? Goluboff refers to their historic and geographic origins (Persia=East?), but at the same time she uses the term as a contemporary Jewish ethnic label (the Hebrew word *Mizrahim* in the English transcription), which is obvious to her. But this is a relative new pan-ethnic category, which emerged and took shape in the specifically Israeli social context. An adoption of this category for the Russian context suggests an uncritical transfer of this dichotomy to the discourses on the Jewish identity outside Israel. The use of this category in the case of Russia is not based on historic divisions of different traditions in the Jewish religious law. Yet, the cultural opposition of East and West fits well the Russian historic legacies of colonialism and chauvinism toward submitted ethnic groups. In this case, as in many others, the binary distinction characterizes the systems of power relations based on a colonial logic. The next step is to move from description of power relations to conceptualizing of collective identities in these terms. In Goluboff's description, the differences between the Jews of Soviet periphery (Georgian, Caucasian and Bukharian Jews), and specifically Georgian and CJ, remain vague. The main distinction is between these groups and Russian Jews, and the outcome is a binary opposition rather than recognition of multiplicity with reference to the different histories, cultures and collective identities of each group<sup>16</sup>.

Does the meeting in Moscow between these different groups lead to the merger and creation of a pan-ethnic identity of non-Ashkenazi Jews, or at least a discourse that stresses "Mizrahi" identity similar to the one in Israel? The answer is negative: in Moscow, at least at this stage, different Jewish communities preserve clear boundaries and do not create joint communal and religious frameworks, from which common Mizrahi/Sephardic identity may fill up with substance and meaning.

---

<sup>16</sup> Goluboff gives an interesting description of an attempt of one CJ to "unify" non-Ashkenazi Jews in the Synagogue under the title "Sephardim" (Ibid.:156). Her description gives an important account to the use of the term "Sephardi" as a source for power inside the synagogue, but she does not examine its meaning outside the very specific context and activity of one man, i.e. in regard to the community building of CJ in Moscow.

## **Conclusion: Meeting the “other” and identity reconstruction**

After their emigration from the former Soviet Union, important components of identity among CJ have been reshaped by their meeting with other Jewish groups. Contacts with the Jewish world outside the Caucasus attained different meanings in different contexts of time and place, but in all locations the encounter with Russian-Ashkenazi Jews has been influential. In the frame of this meeting, CJ were introduced to the categories of Eastern/Mizrahi/Sephardic vs. Ashkenazi/European in the Jewish world. External observers (including social researchers like Goluboff), often stress these categories, but at the same time downplay the unique background, language and lifestyle of each group, not letting enough place to the self-understanding of the collective identity.

Russian Jews have contributed to the image and self-identity of CJ after immigration to Israel, USA and Moscow. In their interaction with CJ and other Jewish groups from the periphery of the Soviet Union, Russian Jews seek to strengthen the distinctions between themselves and the minority groups by recreating the symbolic colonial borders and traditional hierarchy between the groups, emphasizing the superiority of their “European” identity. There are different components that tie together all FSU Jewish immigrants, but there are also clear ethnic boundaries between the different communities.

An interaction with Ashkenazi environment is common experience for CJ in USA and Russia, but the difference between the cases is prominent. In Russia, they are more subordinate to the lingering colonial discourse and new hostilities toward them (as well as other Caucasus natives), taking place in the Russian society generally and among Russian Jews. Yet, their success in keeping their Jewish identity and traditions came to be an important resource during their meeting with the Russian Jews, who were much more assimilated and less equipped for participating in Jewish religious and communal life. CJ in Russia are well integrated in the new post-Soviet economy, making their situation much better than that of their brethren in Israel.

In the USA, on the other hand, there is a larger space for the expression of a specific group identity of CJ in the pluralistic environment giving legitimacy to many diverse ethno-religious identities. However, this pluralistic environment also questions the continuation of any specific identity. This threat, along with the difficulties of social integration and learning new language, enhance motivation for community building that offers a familiar safety net.

There are other differences between the cases: in Moscow, the Russian component of CJ identity has an important place as a resource enabling new meaning of civic Russian citizenship and also confrontation with the lingering colonial discourse applied to all Caucasus immigrants. By contrast, in the USA there is a weaker link between the forging of American civil identity (that entails much variety) and continued connection with the Caucasian and also with Russian culture. This context enables greater flexibility and fewer inter-group conflicts, and, emphasizes, despite some tensions, the common ground with Ashkenazi immigrants from Russia.

From these two case studies, we can infer on the importance of “meeting with the other,” especially the one who is part of the same nation – the Jewish other. At the same time, the identity construction should be considered with reference to diachronic processes, the common past of the group, its internal variance and different cultural and social components. The encounter between Jews from different areas in the Caucasus, which is one of the most ethnically-heterogenic places in the world, also

has an important function in their identity reconstruction. In the context of global migrations and diasporic ties, this leads to the creation of the transnational community of CJ. Developments from below, such as establishment of internet sites connecting CJ across the world, and also initiatives from above, such as attempts to create transnational organizations (such as the Congress of CJ) are both contributing to these processes.

The importance of the synagogue in this context is in its being a site of ethno-religious continuity and renewal at the same time. The synagogue activities have a potential for expression of unique cultural identity together with connection to other Jews, because every Jew can potentially join and pray there. The synagogue enables the meeting between binary identity categorizations, through the distinction between Sephardic and Ashkenazi liturgical traditions that reinforces the community frame enabling plurality and variance. The establishment of ethnic synagogues exemplifies the wish to express a unique voice and identity that does not stem from self-segregation but from the need for recognition within a broader Jewish frame. The synagogue connects between the particular and the general in the Jewish identity of CJ and helps them build a new community based on the shared past, the common challenges they face after migration, and their wider Jewish identity, which connects them to other Jews.

## References

- Altshuler, Mordechai (1990). *The Jews of the Eastern Caucasus*. Jerusalem: Ben-Zvi Institute (Hebrew).
- Bram, Chen (1999). “*From the Caucasus to Israel: The Immigration of the Mountain Jews- Anthropological Perspective on the Communities in the Caucasus and Issues in their Integration into Israel.*” Jerusalem: JDC-Brookdale Institute (Hebrew).
- Bram, Chen (2001). “‘We Oppose Separate Settlements of Oriental Jews’- The Mountain Jews from the Caucasus: On Recognition, Integration and Identity.” In A. Mizrahi (Ed.). *Edot -Edut LeIsrael*. Netanya: The Association for Society and Culture (Hebrew).
- Bram, Chen (2007) *The Jews of Daghestan: Collective Identity and Community Survival*. Rappaport Center Publications (no.14). Bar Ilan University, Ramat Gan (Hebrew).
- Bram, Chen (2008). *Ethnic Categorization and Cultural Diversity: "A View from the Margins": Caucasus Jews between Europe and Asia*. Ph.D. Thesis. Hebrew University of Jerusalem (Hebrew).
- Chlenov, Michael A. (1998). “Oriental Jewish Groups in the Former Soviet Union: Modern Trends of Developments.” The Twenty First Annual Rabbi Louis Feinberg Memorial Lecture in Judaic Studies. Department of Jewish Studies, University of Cincinnati.
- Deshen, Shlomo (1969). Ethnicity and Citizenship in the Ritual of an Israeli Synagogue. *Proceedings of the Fifth World Union of Jewish Studie* 4 (August 3-11): 171-180. Jerusalem.
- Goldberg, Harvey and Chen Bram (2007). “Sephardi/ Mizrahi/ Arab Jews: Anthropological Reflections on Critical Sociology in Israel and the Study of Middle

- Eastern Jewries within the Context of Israeli Society." *Studies in Contemporary Jewry* 22.
- Goluboff, Sascha L. (2003). *Jewish Russians, Upheavals in a Moscow Synagogue*. Philadelphia: Penn.
- Goluboff, Sascha L (2004). "Are they Jews or Asians? Tale about Mountain Jewish Ethnography." *Slavic Review* 63 (1): 13-140.
- Markowitz, Fran (1994). "Diaspora with a Difference: Jewish and Georgian Teenagers' Ethnic Identity in the Russian Federation." *Diaspora* 6(3).
- Remennick, Larissa (2007). *Russian Jews on Three Continents: Identity, Integration and Conflict*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers.
- Semynov Igor (2003). "The Mountain Jews in the Caucasus: Certain Aspects of Ethnic Identification." *Central Asia and the Caucasus* 3 (21): 165-173.
- Tolts, Mark (1997). "The Interrelationship between Emigration and Socio-Demographic Profile in Russian Jewry." Pp. 364-388 in Noah Lewin Epstein, Yacov Ro'I and Paul Ritterband (Eds). *Russian Jews on Three Continents - Emigration and Resettlemen*. London: Frank Cass.
- Zand, Michael (1982). "Evrejsko-Tatskij Jazyk." Pp. 459-462 in Yitzchak Oren and Michael Zand (Eds.). *Kratkaya Evrejskaja Enciklopedija*. Second volume. Jerusalem (Russian).
- Zand, Michael (1986). "Notes on the Culture of the Non Ashkenazi Jewish Communities under Soviet Rule." *Soviet Jewish Affairs* 16 (1): 379-442. [also Pp. 378-441 in Yacov Ro'I and Avi Becker (Eds.) (1991). *Jewish Culture and Identity in the Soviet Union*. New York: New York University Press.].



Photo by Chen Bram, inside the synagogue of Jews of Caucasus in New-York



Photo by Chen Bram, outside the synagogue of Jews of Caucasus in New-York: synagogue's name



Photo by Chen Bram, outside the “Beit Tanhum” (*Beit Tanhum* "בית תנחום") synagogue of Jews of Caucasus in Moscow



Photo by Chen Bram, inside the hall of separate *Minyan* of Caucasian Jews in the Big Synagogue building in Moscow