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A STUDY OF THE TRADITIONS AND CEREMONIES OF THE JEWS OF BUKHARA

Abstract. *This article studies the religious traditions and ceremonies of the Jews of Bukhara, one of the oldest Jewish communities of Central Asia. On the basis of field research and a wide range of Jewish, Russian, Turkish, and Western scholarly sources, it examines the Sabbath and daily prayers, the annual festivals, and the life-cycle ceremonies – circumcision (brit milah), the naming of children, bar mitzvah, marriage (kiddushin and ketubah), and the rites surrounding death – showing how the Bukharan Jews preserved normative Jewish practice while developing local features of their own.*

Keywords: *Bukharan Jews, Judaism, Central Asia, synagogue, Sabbath, brit milah, bar mitzvah, kiddushin, ketubah, ceremonies, traditions.*

INTRODUCTION

In Judaism, one of the essential requirements of the faith is to believe that the Creator will always communicate with His servants. The primary source of such communication is the Torah. Therefore, when Jews read and study the Torah, they enjoy divine revelation. The study of the Torah is inextricably linked with tefillah (prayer). Researchers claim that the word is derived from the Hebrew word which means “to judge.” In addition, Avodah (service) was used to denote prayers performed in public during the Temple period (Pilkington, 1999:204).

It is known that in the system of the main pillars of any religion, prayers, ceremonies and holidays have a special and unique place. In Judaism, prayer (“Avodah Shebalev” – “Service of the Heart”) is divided into two forms: daily prayer in the morning (shacharit), noon (mincha), and evening (maariv), and weekly prayer in the synagogue on Saturday (Vikhnovich, 2006:204-205). It should be noted that the celebration of religious ceremonies among the Jews of Bukhara depended mainly on the city, whether

there was a Jewish neighborhood in the city or the interests of the residents of the neighborhood. However, they often tried to perform their religious prayers, and although their numbers were small, most Jewish communities performed prayers in the form of a minyan (congregation) in the synagogues every morning. In addition, they tried to live in the Turkestan region, where they lived for a long time, by applying various religious duties and ceremonies to their lives from birth to death. In particular, they preserved traditions such as circumcision, marriage, weddings, and funerals during the early years of independence. These ceremonies contributed greatly to their unification and the protection of the Jewish identity (Dymshits, 1997). These ceremonies, which begin with the birth of a child, include funeral and posthumous mourning ceremonies.

The festivals held throughout the year, as well as ceremonies held in connection with one another, also played an important role in the life of the Jews, through which the Jews maintained their nationality.

When it comes to prayers, the first thing to note is the weekly prayer in the synagogue, the Sabbath, which begins at sunset on Friday and ends on Saturday. It is forbidden to light fires, work, or even use vehicles on Saturdays (Kitsur Shulchan Aruch, 1994). According to Jewish teaching, God created the universe in six days and rested on the seventh day. That is why the Jews dedicate the seventh day of the Sabbath to rest and prayer (Mukhamedov, 2007:38). Obeying the commandments of the Holy Sabbath includes two important aspects:

1. Physical rest of the body after working for six days;
2. Dedicate one day a week, i.e. Saturday, to the Creator. For, as the Jewish sages have said, "Those who follow the Sabbath are like those who obey all the commandments of the Torah. Those who do not follow it are like those who do not follow any of the commandments of the Torah" (Kitsur Shulchan Aruch, 1994).

Jews pray not only in the synagogue but also at home. Above the front door of the house are boxes with sentences from the Torah, called a mezuzah (Mezuza, n.d.), wrapped in a long tube. At the entrance and exit of the house, the Jews touch the "mezuzah" and kiss their fingers. According to Jewish teaching, the mezuzah protects them from the evil of evil spirits.

During prayers in the house, a hat is thrown on the head and a scarf is thrown on top. The 16 most important of the invocations are recited while standing. While reading others, actions such as kneeling and shaking the body are performed (Vikhnovich, 2006:203-206).

Rituals have a special place in Jewish life. They begin with the birth of a Jew and are performed throughout his or her life. Such ceremonies include circumcision, puberty, marriage, burial, and other ceremonies.

It is no secret that the birth of a child is a cause of joy. The circumcision ceremony is called “Brit Milah” which means “covenant of circumcision” in Hebrew. The Jewish family usually calls a person called a Mohel for this work and holds the ceremony. In the absence of an emergency, this ceremony is performed on the eighth day after the birth of the child. Guests from the circle of family members and friends attend the circumcision ceremony, which is considered a joyous event and then a Minyan (quorum) is organized. Since it is an honor to attend the ceremony, close relatives are obliged to bring the child and hold him during the ceremony. A banquet will be held after the ceremony (Karimov, 2017b:97-98). The baby is often given a name at the Brit Milah ceremony. Continuing the Sephardic tradition, Jews often give the child the names of aged people who are still alive. Studies have shown that Bukhara Jews have a tradition of giving two names. Although there is no practice of circumcision for girls in Judaism, the divine covenant applies to them as well. According to tradition, the birth of a girl is announced in the synagogue. During the ceremony, the best wishes and prayers will be said for the newborns (Firestone, n.d.:167-169).

The Jews of Bukhara regularly held the “British Mila” ceremony during the Soviet era, when there was a fierce struggle against religion. However, the persecution of Muslims also applied to members of the Jewish religion. Usually, in these ceremonies, the father went on a long journey or could not attend it for some reason.

Jews are required to study the Torah from childhood and to live following its rules. During the transition from childhood and adolescence, they must now take responsibility for their actions as members of society. In Judaism, a person who has reached the age of thirteen becomes a “Bar mitzvah” or “son of the commandment.” It is now accepted that a person is an adult and must perform religious duties. After this stage, he will be able to participate in public meetings and form a “Minyan”. Shortly after age thirteen, the boys were invited to read the Torah on Saturday and officially became bar mitzvahs. They demonstrate their skills by performing the necessary prayers in front of the synagogue and reading passages from the Bible. After this practice, which is usually limited to a ceremony held at the temple, a banquet is held in many places (Birnbaum, 1991:94-95).

In classical Judaism, for girls, this age is considered to be twelve years. Today, “bar mitzvah” for boys is held in many synagogues, but this custom is mainly performed at home with various ceremonies and rituals (Neusner, 2000:14).

Bukhara Jews who immigrated to Israel, the United States, and several other countries after the collapse of the Soviet Union see each other, especially because of the “bar mitzvah” ceremony, despite being spread and not closely related, and living far away (Neusner, 2000:74).

In Judaism, marriage is seen as a social institution introduced by the Creator at the time the world was created. The main purpose of marriage is mutual support between men and women (Genesis 2:18), sexual intimacy (Genesis 2:24), and the continuation of the human race (Genesis 1:28). Marriage is a good deed, and it is even encouraged to marry buying books of the Torah. On the contrary, not marrying a family is considered a sin according to the Talmudic tradition.

In Judaism, a man is responsible for providing his wife with food, clothing, and sexual needs. Breaking family ties is voluntary, but not recommended. Traditionally, men give their wives “ketubah” when they get married. This is to prevent women from suffering economically in the event of a husband’s death or divorce. The marriage ceremony consists of two parts. The first is called “erusin” (engagement) and the second is called “kiddushin” (prayer). Today, these two rituals, which are separated from each other, are often combined as a single ritual (Firestone, n.d.:170-173).

Marriage and wedding ceremonies of Bukhara Jews take place in several stages. While some of these stages are common to other Jews, some practices are unique to Bukhara Jews. There are also various customs associated with marriage and weddings.

Studies show that during the Soviet era, there were some restrictions on the marriages and weddings of Bukhara Jews. In this sense, the wedding ceremony was held in the evening, in secret, the rabbi came to the house of the new couple, and the wedding ceremony was attended only by very close family members to witness (Cooper, 2000:176). However, in most cases, the Jews of Bukhara ignored the restrictions and tried to hold marriage and wedding ceremonies often following their traditional culture.

It should be noted that there are some changes in the conduct of wedding ceremonies among the Jews of Bukhara who moved abroad. A. Cooper, who immigrated to America, gives some information about what has changed and what has been preserved at the

wedding ceremonies of the Jews of Bukhara. The American environment makes it difficult for Bukhara Jews to marry off mutual girls and prevent their traditions from continuing. For this reason, most Bukhara Jewish young men and women are trying to get rid of their traditional customs, preferring a life in America that is devoid of their traditions (Cooper, 2000:211-213).

In any case, if the Jews of Bukhara who immigrated to America establish a marriage bond between themselves, they are trying to preserve their traditions as they did in Turkestan. They continue the “eyebrow”¹ custom before the wedding. However, the bans to leave the house within 40 days are slightly different. In an urban setting, the newlyweds are allowed to visit the bride’s in-laws as well as their parents if they live in a separate apartment (Cooper, 2000:180).

During the Bukhara Khanate and the Tsarist period (from 1860 to 1920), marriages between Bukhara Jews and non-Jews were almost non-existent. Although no statistics are available, according to travelers in the 19th and early 20th centuries, the Emirate of Bukhara had strong social boundaries separating Jews from its Muslim neighbors (Cooper, 2000:244-245). These strong social boundaries were partially broken during the Soviet era. Marriages between Bukhara Jews and their non-Jewish neighbors probably began during the Soviet era, when new doors to intergroup relations opened and strong social conservatism ended (Arık, 2005:244-245). However, marriages with non-Jews were not common, and foreign marriages were as rare among Bukhara Jews as in other Jewish communities in the former Soviet Union. Unlike Ashkenazi Jews, especially in Uzbekistan, Bukhara Jews had very low levels of intermarriage with non-Jews during the Soviet era (Pilkington, 1999:93-94).

It should be noted that Central Asian Jews have many traditions related to marriage and weddings. Since the purpose of our study is not to describe them separately, it is not possible to list them all in this article. It is noteworthy that in these traditions there

¹ In preparation for the wedding, the bride’s parents hold a banquet in their home called a “kashchinon.” In Bukhara Jews, if a girl is married, she is not allowed to have facial hair removed. Shortly before the wedding, a bridal party is held and the hair on the bride’s face is cleaned. A make-up artist is called for this purpose. He puts a colored cloth on the bride’s forehead and ties it in the form of a crown. He then begins to remove the bride’s hair using only tweezers. As this continues, the bride’s future mother-in-law, mother, other female relatives, and the bride’s friends take turns holding the bride’s head. Meanwhile, each of them throws money at the crown, wishing the bride blessings and goodness. The beautician then collects all the money thrown here as his fee. Only women can attend this ceremony. Today, however, the bride’s father, future groom, and her friends are also attending these ceremonies. However, men are generally not allowed to attend the event.

is a state of integration with the culture of other peoples who have lived next door for many years, which can be cited as a distinctive feature of the Jews of Bukhara from other Jewish communities. Data on this have been detailed in several studies (Amitin-Shapiro, 2014:62-105; Karimov, 2017c).

In the Jewish holy book, the rites of death and remembrance are one of the basic elements of Judaism, the belief in salvation and the hereafter(al-Fayyumi, 1882:272-305; Abdulboriy, n.d.:84-90). That is why Judaism sees death as a part of life. In the Jewish Bible, there are many reports of mourning over the death of a person or relative (Genesis 3:3; Genesis 2:16-17).

When a person dies in Judaism, the people around him help him say “Shema Israel”. It is a Hebrew expression that affirms the oneness of God and is similar to the “Testimony” in Islam. It should be noted that there are great similarities between the customs of the Jewish and local Muslim peoples, from washing the dead to burying them (Patai, 1997:265-272). This can be assessed by the interdependence of the origins of these two religions and the fact that these peoples have lived side by side for a long time.

The dead will not be left alone and will be followed until burial as a sign of respect. Before burying the dead, it should be bathed and wrapped in a simple, flat, and white shroud. This is called Tahara(Abdulboriy, n.d.:84). The funeral should be buried as soon as possible, within 24 hours. It is important to accompany the dead when it is taken to the cemetery. Their close relatives symbolically tear a piece of their clothes and said, “Baruh Dayan a-Emet” (Blessed are You ... The True Ruler). Each of the participants throws some soil into the grave. Then the Kadish prayer is said to glorify God. This is followed by condolences and the mourners and relatives wash their hands as they leave the cemetery. The crowd then goes to the mourning house. It will be the home of the deceased or one of his close relatives, chosen for seven days of mourning (Arik, 2005:252-253).

Mourning, which takes the form of a process, consists of several stages. The first stage, called Aninut, is the time between receiving the news of a loved one’s death and burying it. The person who mourns in this short time is engaged in no activity other than the funeral. The second stage is a seven-day period called Shiva. At this time of deep mourning, a candle is lit in the house and all the windows are closed in memory of the dead. It is forbidden for mourners to have sex, to shave, to cut their hair, to work,

and even to recite the Torah, except for verses of grief. In the process, the people visit, offer condolences, and bring food to the mourners. At the same time, visitors sit quietly while expressing grief or other feelings to the dead. Daily prayers are said in the house of mourning. The same can be said of the mourners who recite the Kadish for the dead. “Sheloshim” - the last stage of mourning ends thirty days after the funeral. The mourners still don’t shave their beards and don’t take part in entertainment events. Even during this period, friends and relatives visit the bereaved and try to comfort them. With the end of “Sheloshim” mourning will end for other people, except for children who mourn for their parents. This last phase of mourning will last a year (Firestone, n.d.:175-179; Abdulboriy, n.d.:84-86).

Commemoration ceremonies have been held among the Jews of Bukhara since ancient times. One of them is a memorial service in honor of the dead every evening for a week after his death. Although this practice is common among Jews around the world, it is performed once a week after seven days in Bukhara Jews. For example, a memorial service for a person who died on a Wednesday is held every Wednesday of that month. At the end of the first month, remembrance is done once a month for the first year. If he died on the 14th of a month, he will be remembered on the 14th of every month of that year (Arik, 2005:253-254).

In addition, another memorial service will be held at the end of this year of mourning. During the first year, the number of memories dedicated to the memory of the dead will reach 21. Such ceremonies are held every year on the anniversary of the deceased for those who want to remember their relatives. Rituals usually take place at the home of the dead (Cooper, 2003:144-145).

The memorial service begins with “Minha and Ma’ariv (noon and evening prayers), in which passages from Zohar are recited and prayers are said in honor of the dead in the form of Hashkavah (be pleased) (Arik, 2005:254-255).

Then food is served. The order of meals and service is carefully carried out. First of all, the pastries placed on the tables are eaten before the guests arrive. Then fresh greens and radishes are given. After these vegetables delicious fish fried with garlic and greens fried dough are served. Rice and meat pilaf, which are common in all Turkic peoples, are served as a main dish. Finally, the fruit meal ends (Cooper, 2003:268). It is noteworthy that the memorial services of Bukhara Jews who immigrated to Israel are held in the

same manner as in Uzbekistan, with some exceptions (Cooper, 2000:194-196). Studies have shown that food is not necessarily served in this order but on a case-by-case basis.

Today, some elements related to mourning ceremonies can be seen among the Jews of Bukhara. For example, in the past, a mourner should not watch TV, worn new clothes, eats sweets, pistachios, pickles, and other similar products. However, to date, these things have been allowed.

There is another memorial and mourning ceremony among the Jews of Bukhara. This ceremony is called “sobgororon”. Sobgororon is a ceremony held before the end of the first year of the dead’s death. In this ceremony, which is attended only by women, food is eaten and prayers are said for the deceased. In addition, close female relatives of the dead clean the hair on their faces as a sign that they have stopped mourning. In this sense, the ceremony is reminiscent of the pre-wedding “kashchinar” ceremony of the Jews of Bukhara (Cooper, 2000:380).

Studies show that the elements in these ceremonies were integrated with the customs of other nations inhabited by Jews. For example, the city of Kattakurgan was inhabited by many Jews. Even among the Muslims living in this city and its environs, it can be seen that the above-mentioned customs have been carried out together in some places, and in some cases with minor differences. In particular, a year after the death of the deceased, the women of his close relatives will hold a mourning ceremony. This is very close to the “sobgororon” ceremony that exists among the Jews of Bukhara (Field research, n.d.).

From the above, it can be concluded that prayers are an integral part of Jewish life. Among them, the place of the Sabbath is special, and all Jewish communities around the world recognize it and try to live by the rules of that day.

As for rituals, they are performed at different times of a person’s birth and life, due to different relationships. In this part, we have considered some of the rituals and customs associated with circumcision, adulthood, marriage, and burial performed by the Jews of Bukhara.

The Jews of Bukhara, especially during the Soviet era, tried to preserve their religious rites, customs, and traditions. Funerals and related ceremonies are the most striking example of this. It should be noted that the funeral rites of the Jews of Bukhara can be seen as a sign of respect and reverence of the living for the dead. It is noteworthy that the rituals associated with the funeral are also performed in the Turkic peoples of the country.

This situation, which is common among the Jews of Bukhara, can be seen as a result of their interaction with Islamic culture. When analyzing these beliefs and traditions of the Jews of Bukhara, they are considered not only religious traditions but also a means of strengthening kinship, as important interconnected elements in maintaining a sense of religion and strengthening social unity.

In addition to the above, the customs associated with marriage and weddings also have a unique place in the lives of Jews. Studies show that in the tradition of the Jews of Bukhara, there were processes of interaction with the local population in the conduct of this ceremony. It is true that over time, some of the customs associated with this ceremony have been merged and compacted. This can be seen not only in the example of the Jews but also in the traditions of other nationalities in the country.

Examining the situation of Bukharian Jews who immigrated to countries such as Israel and the United States, it should be noted that many of the wedding and wedding ceremonies in Turkestan continue, albeit partially, in their new places of immigration. Some of the conditions created by the modern lifestyle also have an impact on the purity and health of the cultural traditions in the region. An example of this is the fact that men are not allowed to participate in the “kashchinon” ceremony, and due to economic difficulties, the parties that were previously held separately are now being merged. From now on, it may be difficult to talk about “true Bukhara Jewish culture.”

CONCLUSION

The traditions and ceremonies of the Jews of Bukhara represent an important example of the preservation of Jewish religious identity within the unique historical and cultural environment of Central Asia. This study has demonstrated that core elements of Jewish religious life—including Sabbath observance, daily prayers, annual festivals, circumcision (brit milah), bar mitzvah, marriage, and funeral rites—have been faithfully maintained while simultaneously incorporating local cultural characteristics developed through centuries of coexistence with the peoples of the region.

The findings indicate that religious ceremonies served functions extending beyond their spiritual significance. They acted as mechanisms for preserving collective memory, strengthening kinship networks, reinforcing communal solidarity, and maintaining ethnic and religious identity, particularly during periods of political and ideological pressure such as the Soviet era. Even under restrictions on religious practice, the Bukharan Jewish

community continued to observe essential rituals, demonstrating the resilience of its religious and cultural traditions.

The research also reveals that long-term interaction with the Muslim and Turkic populations of Central Asia influenced certain ceremonial practices, especially those associated with weddings and mourning. These cultural exchanges did not undermine the normative foundations of Judaism but instead produced distinctive local expressions that distinguish the Bukharan Jews from other Jewish communities. At the same time, migration to countries such as Israel and the United States has led to both the preservation and transformation of these traditions, as changing social, economic, and cultural conditions have altered the performance of some rituals while maintaining their symbolic and religious significance.

Overall, the traditions and ceremonies of the Jews of Bukhara should be understood not merely as religious obligations but as dynamic cultural institutions that have ensured the continuity of community identity across changing historical contexts. Further comparative research on Bukharan Jewish communities in different diaspora settings would contribute to a deeper understanding of the processes of cultural adaptation, identity preservation, and the transmission of religious heritage in the modern world.

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