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## The History and Culture of Bukharan Jews in Uzbekistan

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### Abstract

This article examines the historical development and cultural integration of the Jewish communities in Central Asia, with a particular emphasis on their settlement patterns, socio-economic roles, and cultural identity in key urban centers such as Bukhara and Samarkand. The central research inquiry explores how these communities established themselves in the region and sustained their distinct religious and cultural traditions over time, particularly in the context of the Silk Road and regional trade dynamics. Employing a historical-analytical approach, this study draws upon a diverse array of primary sources, archival materials, and secondary literature to reconstruct the lived experiences of Jewish populations in Central Asia. The methodological framework is grounded in historical reconstruction, while also acknowledging the inherent challenges posed by gaps in early records and the scarcity of firsthand accounts from formative periods. These limitations inevitably shape the comprehensiveness of the narrative, particularly regarding the community's early development. The findings reveal that Jewish communities in Bukhara and Samarkand were not only integral to regional trade networks but also emerged as prominent centers of religious scholarship, notably through the establishment of yeshivot in Bukhara. Additionally, the study highlights the post-Soviet resurgence of Jewish identity in Uzbekistan, where younger generations are actively re-engaging with their Babylonian heritage and strengthening ties with Jewish communities worldwide. The article concludes by underscoring the enduring cultural, economic, and intellectual contributions of Jewish communities in Central Asia, reaffirming their historical significance and continued relevance within the broader Jewish diaspora.

**Keywords:** Uzbekistan, Bukhara, Jews, Central Asia, Social Culture

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2025, 14 (1), 1-19 | Araştırma Makalesi

## Özbekistan'daki Buharalı Yahudilerin Tarihi ve Kültürü

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### Öz

Bu çalışma, Orta Asya'daki Yahudi toplumunun tarihsel gelişimini ve kültürel entegrasyonunu ele almakta olup, özellikle Buhara ve Semerkand gibi şehirlerdeki Yahudi nüfusunun yerleşim örüntüleri, sosyo-ekonomik rolleri ve kültürel kimliği üzerine odaklanmaktadır. Araştırmanın ana sorusu, bu toplulukların bölgeye nasıl yerleştiğini ve zamanla, özellikle İpek Yolu'nun ve bölgesel ticaretin etkisi altında, kendilerine özgü dini ve kültürel pratiklerini nasıl koruduklarını incelemektedir. Makale, Orta Asya'daki Yahudi topluluklarının deneyimlerini yeniden yapılandırmak amacıyla bir dizi birincil kaynak, arşiv belgeleri ve ikincil literatür kullanarak tarihsel bir analiz yaklaşımını benimsemektedir. Yöntemsel çerçeve, tarihsel yeniden yapılandırmaya odaklanmakta olup, erken dönem kayıtlardaki eksiklikler ve daha eski dönemlere ait birinci elden kaynakların yokluğu gibi sınırlamaları kabul etmektedir. Bu sınırlamalar, özellikle toplumun şekillenmeye başladığı yıllarda anlatının tamlığını etkileyebilir. Bulgular, Buhara ve Semerkand'daki Yahudi topluluklarının bölgesel ticaret ağlarında önemli bir rol oynadığını, aynı zamanda Buhara'da kurulan yeshivoh aracılığıyla dini ilimlerde önemli merkezler oluşturduğunu ortaya koymaktadır. Ayrıca, makale, Sovyetler sonrası dönemde Özbekistan'daki Yahudi kimliğinin yeniden doğuşunu ve genç nesillerin, eski Babil kökleriyle yeniden bağ kurarak dünya çapındaki Yahudi topluluklarıyla bağlantılar kurmaya başladıklarını vurgulamaktadır. Makale, Orta Asya'daki Yahudi toplumlarının kültürel, ekonomik ve entelektüel katkılarının kalıcı olduğunu ve modern Yahudi diasporasında devam eden önemini vurgulayarak sonuçlanmaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Özbekistan, Buhara, Yahudiler, Orta Asya

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## Introduction

This study contributes to the broader body of research on Jewish communities in the former Soviet Union, offering an in-depth analysis of the Bukharan Jewish community and the mechanisms through which Soviet authorities sought to regulate religious practices. The topic is significant not only for its intrinsic historical and cultural value but also for understanding the Soviet state's broader strategies in controlling religious expression. The Bukharan Jewish community, comprising fewer than 30,000 individuals, experienced significant demographic shifts, particularly during the final years of perestroika, when approximately 80% of its members emigrated to Israel or the United States. This paper examines the historical development, cultural identity, and socio-political experiences of this community, with a particular focus on the Soviet era. The research is primarily informed by fieldwork conducted between 1991 and 1993, consisting of discussions with community members in Tashkent as well as in other towns across Uzbekistan, where the Bukharan Jewish presence has largely diminished (Loy, 2023, p. 21).

The origins of the Bukharan Jewish community can be traced back to the Babylonian exile of 597 BCE. Historically, Uzbekistan has constituted approximately 90% of the ethnic composition of this group. Prior to perestroika, the majority of Bukharan Jews resided in Tashkent, with the exception of the World War II period, during which thousands were evacuated to the eastern regions of the Soviet Union following the German occupation of the city. After the war, the entire displaced population returned to Tashkent. In the present day, the number of Bukharan Jews remaining in Tashkent has dwindled to between 5,000 and 7,000, with the majority having relocated to Israel or the United States. Among those who emigrated, most of those settling in Israel have established themselves in Ashdod, while those who moved to the United States typically did so due to pre-existing familial connections (Khezri, 2022, p. 213).

Uzbekistan's relatively small Bukharan Jewish community holds an important place in the history and culture of the Silk Road. It flourished for centuries as "the most Oriental of Jews" in an environment of tolerance and diversity. With the demise of the Soviet Union and growing antisemitism in both Russia and Uzbekistan, the community has undergone a transformation not unlike other Jewish communities in Central Asia and around the world. Now, changes in government policy and public opinion in Uzbekistan promise to provide new hope for both the survival and, ultimately, the revival of the Bukharan Jewish community (Dekel, 2023, p.43).

Bukharan Jews have a fascinating history that goes back 2,500 years, putting them among the oldest Jewish communities in the world. As with all of the world's Jews, they have sought to maintain their Jewish identity in a variety of circumstances – both in villages and towns along the Silk Road in what is now Uzbekistan and through times of emigration and settlement in various parts of the world. Their traditions, practices, and culture have thrived. As they move into the future, special attention is being given to transmitting the uniqueness and richness of Bukharan Jewish culture to future generations (Gross, 2021, p.51).

## 1. Conceptual Framework - Background of Bukharan Jews

The history of Jewish settlement in Central Asia is unique, as no other Jewish diaspora community parallels the historical trajectory and development of the Bukharan Jewish population. The formation of this distinctive Jewish group was shaped by a confluence of historical, economic, political, and social dynamics, alongside ethnic and religious interactions within the predominantly Muslim societies of the region. Over the course of several millennia, the Bukharan Jewish community evolved through continuous waves of migration—both westward and eastward—along with economic fluctuations, natural disasters, instances of near-extinction and revival, military conflicts, and extensive involvement in transregional trade, particularly along the Silk Road. These factors collectively contributed to the formation and endurance of this unique Jewish community (Kirasirova, 2024, p. 102).

The city of Bukhara, historically known as "Shum" in medieval times, served as a major center of Jewish life for nearly 2,000 years. Situated within the geographic boundaries of what is now Uzbekistan, Bukhara was home to a well-established Jewish community that thrived for centuries. Due to various waves of migration and geopolitical shifts, many Bukharan Jews and their descendants have since dispersed across different regions of the world, with significant populations now residing in Israel and the United States. For hundreds, and in some cases thousands, of years, Bukharan Jews maintained extensive economic, political, social, and intellectual exchanges with both the nomadic and sedentary populations of Central Asia, as well as with Jewish communities beyond Uzbekistan. The strategic geographic position of Bukhara along the Silk Road, located within a sub-mountain oasis of Central Asia, played a crucial role in shaping the cultural and historical significance of Bukharan Jewish civilization, further reinforcing its influence and uniqueness (Kopelman et al., 2020, p. 110).

### 1.1. Geographical and Historical Context

Samarkand, situated at the crossroads of major trade routes in Central Asia, has long been a focal point of historical events and cultural exchanges. Throughout its history, the city has served as a refuge for people of diverse nationalities and religious backgrounds, fostering a dynamic blend of architectural splendor and contemporary life. While numerous ancient settlements and cities—such as Koviari, Kutab, Khodzpil, Bukhara, Termez, Shakhrud, and Binkent—have been reduced to ruins and exist today only in historical records, Samarkand has endured as a timeless center of civilization. Despite repeated destruction, the city has been rebuilt numerous times, maintaining its status as a prominent cultural and economic hub.

The enduring significance of Samarkand is reflected in both historical narratives and literary accounts. An ancient legend asserts, "Who has seen Samarkand once will never forget it," a sentiment that has been repeatedly affirmed over the centuries. The city's rich and extensive history is preserved in legends, folktales, and well-documented historical records, providing a wealth of material for scholarly study. Even in the 18th century, the French philosopher Voltaire referenced Samarkand in his correspondence with Frederick the Great, expressing admiration for its architectural grandeur. At that time, the city remained in ruins following the devastation wrought by Genghis Khan's invasion. Nevertheless, Voltaire recognized its historical and aesthetic significance, further

cementing Samarkand's reputation as a city of profound cultural and intellectual heritage (Rapp Jr., 2022, p. 82).

Until the 7th century, Samarkand was a neutral Yagbad oasis, in which the Sogdian people lived. In the 7th century, Samarkand became a part of the Arab caliphate, following the invasion by the troops of the Arabian Caliphate. From now until the 20th century, Central Asia became a Muslim settlement. In the early 13th century, Bat Kan (in a European manner, Baty) ruined the whole Eastern part of Central Asia. In the 15th century, only 1000 hundreds of asras left after this act. The greatest number of asras left after devastation caused by the Hungarians, the Turks, and some dynastic battles. Asras were much lower than city walls, and their historical centers feature today's modern parts of the city. For example, the old centers of Samarkand are Afision and Eski Shahar; at Bukhara, they are known as Sitorai Mokhi Hosa, Sevsa Gorkovanon, Gendron, and Ali Alam. The ancient Samarkand and the present Samarkand districts are the following: Gurgorat, Chopan-Ata, Gur-Emir, Al-Anshar, Shokhrukhia, Bardi Rabbat, Dorus-Sadeh, Bennett Valenta, Asmata, ShakhI Dostm, Tingkent, Atiksannasy, Ak Boki Arvali, Kyza Aziz, Sanga, Obodi Oluog, Ivala, Shymigana, Tumanov, and Sartuchkavorg (Wexler, 2022, p.98).

## 2. Arrival and Settlement of Bukharan Jews in Uzbekistan

The Bukharan Jewish community in Uzbekistan was once a flourishing and prosperous group that developed a distinct cultural identity within the broader Central Asian landscape. However, this vibrant community experienced significant demographic decline due to mass emigration, particularly during the 1970s, when large numbers of Bukharan Jews relocated to Israel and the United States. As a result of this migration, both within Uzbekistan and abroad, the preservation and transmission of Bukharan Jewish cultural traditions have diminished over time. Members of the diaspora, particularly in the United States, now have limited opportunities to engage with or learn about their ancestral heritage.

Furthermore, members of the Bukharan Jewish diaspora in America have developed a strong intellectual and personal interest in uncovering and documenting the history and cultural legacy of my ancestors, and this study represents an initial step in a broader investigation into the lived experiences, traditions, and historical narratives of those who remained in Uzbekistan, whether by choice or circumstance, following the mass emigration of the community (Bashkin, 2020, p. 201).

The Jewish presence in what is now Uzbekistan extends back over two millennia. Historical records suggest that some of the earliest Jewish settlers may have arrived in the region following the Babylonian exile in the 6th century BCE, when Persian King Cyrus conquered Jerusalem and ended the Babylonian captivity. It is plausible that some of these exiled Jewish populations established themselves in the Utsek area. Additionally, early scholars associated with the Babylonian Talmud lived and worked in Utsek before eventually relocating to Babylonia. Later waves of Jewish migration to the region included those fleeing persecution under Byzantine Emperor Justinian I in 528 CE, who subsequently established strong relations with Persian authorities. Following the Arab conquest of the Persian Empire in 642 CE, the new rulers extended religious freedoms to Jewish communities, prompting further Jewish migration into Central Asia. By the 10th to 12th centuries, Jewish settlements had become well-documented in the Bukhara region,

with historical evidence indicating that a portion of these settlers originated from Persia (Kirasirova, 2024, p. 90).

## 2.1. Early Migrations and Settlements

The origins and settlement of the Bukharan Jewish community constitute one of the most intriguing yet relatively understudied subjects within the fields of Jewish and Oriental research. The question of their origins extends beyond mere historical inquiry; it encompasses aspects of material culture, linguistic development, socio-economic practices, and religious traditions, as well as the long-term effects of their surrounding environment on the spiritual and intellectual identity of Bukharan Jewry. By analyzing a wide range of ethnographic, archaeological, historical, and genealogical evidence—alongside written records tracing their connections from Mesopotamia through Asia, Afghanistan, and India—it becomes evident that the contemporary Bukharan Jewish community represents a distinct offshoot of the ancient exilic Jewish populations of Mesopotamia (Loy, 2023, p. 48).

From a historical perspective, Jewish migration into Central Asia, and specifically into Bukhara, can be traced back to pre-Common Era times, coinciding with the Babylonian destruction of the First Temple and the subsequent Jewish exile. During this period, King Cyaxares of Media provided refuge to Jewish exiles, while King Nebuchadnezzar deported segments of the Jewish population. Further waves of Jewish migration occurred between 550 and 400 BCE, a period associated with Queen Tomyris, known for her resistance against Cyrus the Great, the founder of the Achaemenid Empire. Historical sources provide evidence of Jewish settlements in Bukhara dating back to antiquity. Strabo's *Geographia* references Bukhara as a significant center of Jewish life, a claim that is further supported by Giovanni da Marignano. Additionally, Mustus, the author of *The Piton of Asia*, asserted in the 1st century BCE that Bukhara was home to seven prominent Jewish settlements, further reinforcing the historical depth of the Jewish presence in the region (Kaganovich, 2021, p. 134).

## 2.2. Relationship with Local Communities

During the late medieval and, in particular, early modern transition, there was a tendency among the Bukharan Jews to draw closer to the general culture of Islamic society. Such behavior was facilitated by the political situation where the Jewish community, despite its limited rights, could conduct a relatively free economic activity, including the buying up of slaves. The integration of individual Jews into Islamic society reached such a point that some Jews became officials in Muslim Volost administration and occupied quite respectable positions, showing an interest in Hebrew culture. These tendencies expressed themselves primarily among kagal Jews, with community members adhering to strict canons and statutes achievable only by the highest elite. So, while some Bukharan Jews, drawing closer to the Islamic environment at the personal level, achieved friendly and economic relations that placed them quite high on the societal ladder, other Jews who chose to follow the traditional faith were discriminated against and subjected to heavy structural pressure. Kabir community members were exempt from organizing their daily mixed observation activity, and ensuing fines forced literacy and a parental to moisture, and neutral need the reading of the Pesach sermon on commutatively books (Marciano, 2022, p.88).

### 3. Religious Practices and Traditions

The daily lifestyle of Bukharan Jews was steeped in the religious traditions of their ancestors, as well as the host culture in which they lived. There is no shortcut to partaking in the traditions of public and private observance. Synagogue attendance was the vortex of the Bukharan Jewish society, with the men and boys attending four times a day to uphold the ritual requirement. On Shabbat and Festivals, high attendance was expected of all respected citizens. Religious study was considered an important part of life at any age. Schools were organized to provide extensive religious learning as a central core component of the daily curriculum. Everyone was expected to learn the Torah, with the boys preparing for their Bar Mitzvah at the local schools. Any special occasion - completion of major religious texts, marriage, a successful conclusion of a court case, etc. - required the contribution of a seuda. Each time, the elders invited a group of people to join in the celebration of the event. The synagogues collectively ensured that the community was defined and well-regulated, the citizens behaved properly (ethics), the needy were properly supported, and the tradition of providing a dignified funeral for each person was properly upheld (Skvirskaja, 2023, p.43).

The Jewish calendar is replete with holidays. The unique character of each holiday is expressed in the variety of foods and delicacies that only gained their special flavor and taste through consuming them. Passover (Pesach) required kosher preparation of the food, and the dishware and kitchen used for this friendly group of meal consumers. Home visits as part of the Festival of Tabernacles (Sukkot) were a way to evaluate community participation, support, and to ensure the creation of the culminating community activity by visiting the succah of the host. There was traditionally a great interest in visiting the succah to join the host in properly constructing it; but in wine-producing regions, the task was integrated into the business routine. It has been reported that the communities of Olmalyk, Pap, and Mashhad appropriately marked the end of the harvest before pressing the grape juice. The land of Israel was the recognized independent source of plantings in the vineyards, and all wine drinking required a prior rabbinical examination to determine that the exportable wine had not picked up any forbidden supplement resulting from the previous winemaking and aging process. Marriage in the Bukharan Jewish community was a major milestone in the life of an individual. The requisite traditional activity was observed before and after the marriage. There was an extensive network of marriage brokers who were responsible for arranging these unions. Puppet theatre performances in conjunction with any holiday attracted the community attendance regardless of the period. Religious music, including the Bakhshy songs, prayers, and traditional melodies of the Bukharan Jews, encouraged ongoing attendance of all festival gatherings. Religious books and textiles were the major influential components representing the linkage between the daily practice and traditions of the Jewish people in Uzbekistan. The number of required repairs and replacements of prayer cloth used on Shabbat and Festivals was expected to occur during the major celebration. Brisk services were the end result of this demand. Products altar traditions; Bukharani Jews; Jewish traditions; Jewish communities (Loy & Levin, 2022, p.150).

#### 3.1. Synagogues and Religious Sites

The capital of the Uzbek SSR, Tashkent, was home to around 20 synagogues, while the Bukharan and mountainous regions had around ten synagogues. Nowadays, there are

only two synagogues - the Mechitza Chabad house and the Ashkenazi synagogue. On the territory of the Tajik SSR, there are more than seven synagogues, and specific data on the pre- and post-revolution societies are presented. In the capital of Tajikistan, Dushanbe, there are only two synagogues - the Mechitza Chabad house and the Ashkenazi synagogue. The Talmud Torah and cheider were not reopened after the collapse of the USSR. The Jewish cemetery still exists, but it is in a terrible state. The mausoleums of the famous military physician Naimi Yegiazar and Hakhamed Shahin Rozov have not been repaired for more than 70 years. A small synagogue operated in Kulob. It was converted into a sports complex after the establishment of Soviet power. In the 1990s, the building was returned to the Jewish community, but no services are currently held.

There were three synagogues in the capital of Uzbekistan - the capital of the Bukharan Emirate, one synagogue, and six prayer houses. Of them, only the main synagogue of the Jerusalem quarter - the building of the mausoleum of Saint Yaakov Davidovich is still working, where Khamid Karmoy and husband Cantor Lev Eshmurov work, in the synagogue that served as the place of Rabbi Mazurevsky. The Ezrat Nashim synagogue has not been opened for several decades and was planned to be used as a shop by the community, but Jews from New York invested money and the synagogue is now functioning (Vishnevetskiy, 2022, p.67).

### 3.2. Rituals and Festivals

The Bukharan Jewish community observes *Selihot*, the Ten Days of Penitence preceding *Rosh Hashanah*, and the festival of *Simhat Torah*—often referred to as the "Wedding of the Torah"—with profound solemnity. Fast days are also widely observed as an integral part of religious life. On *Tisha b'Av*, the Bukharan synagogue of Ortau-Koshin, built on the remnants of an earlier structure, becomes a focal point for communal worship. During this period, students of the Bukharan *Talmud Torah* engage in continuous prayer and study of sacred texts for the full twenty-four-hour duration.

Similar observances take place on the 17th of *Elul* and the 6th and 7th of *Adar*, dates that hold significant historical and religious meaning within Jewish tradition. These days commemorate the destruction of *Jabneh*, the legacy of *Rabbi Yochanan Ben Zakkai*, and the memory of *Moshe Rabbeinu*, as well as the 14-year-old *Talmud Torah* students who became the progenitors of the Maccabees. The cycle of fasting culminates on the 14th of *Adar* with the observance of the *Fast of Esther*. Over time, these religious practices have been deeply reintegrated into Bukharan Jewish liturgical traditions and folklore, reinforcing both historical consciousness and communal identity (Kaganovitch, 2023, p. 89).

The Bukharian Jewish households hold by the festivals and their feasts. The traditions of their ancestors are compelling and lasting. On Rosh Hashana, they recall their forefathers who had, for centuries, traveled around and around the Ark kept for a few months in the so-called 'Stables precinct' of the 'old' city there; returning three times, dressed with the finery especially purchased for the celebrations, and 'sweetened' by the confectioneries made in the days before by the mothers. One by one, each of the shofars was tested, and an ever-longer blast was sounded. This is now no longer allowed, so they go to the numerous synagogues which are all praying at the same time, blowing 101 blasts and leaving at least one or two synagogues until the dawn of the second day of Rosh Hashana. The solemn Lessons at the synagogues are read by a Hazzan specifically chosen by comparison, and the splendid robes, having segregated until Yom Kippur, are set with



the 'splendid objects' of various sizes of wicker hand baskets, tashlich and breadcrumbs, horn and sugar. The money obtained from the 'going around' is used for repaying the debts to other synagogue functions. They offer their prayers and thanksgivings on Yom Kippur, at the 'good synagogues', of the 'Old City' or of Zelenn Khan after three days when some 'New Year cleaning' was done by the married women and separating their finery according to their wear of the days of Yom Kippur: night, sermons, morning, Children's meal, community fast-breaking ( Burton, 2020, p.103).

#### 4. Language and Literature

Judeo-Tajik was the mother tongue of the Bukhara Jews. This language appeared as a result of the early Jewish settlement in the East, when Jewish envoys reached Bukhara and settled down in the town of Varachsha that was located near Bukhara. As a result of the peaceful coexistence of the Jews and the local immigrants in the single district, the local Jews borrowed the dialect from the Tajik people, the elements of the Tajik daily life as well as certain ethnographical and cultural features. Judeo-Tajik language was widely used as the language of everyday life, literature, and science of the Bukhara Jews. Judeo-Tajik was never the official language of the Bukhara state, as the government was aware of the fact that the natural assimilation of the Jewish community with the Tajik countrymen could create favorable conditions for the establishment of good relations with the Jewish Diaspora. Officially, Judeo-Tajik was used by the Jews as late as the beginning of the 20th century (Kaganovich & Kaganovitch, 2022, p.135).

People — that is a social stratification; in written Jewish tradition — that is a people community, a population of a country or a town and their established Jewish and heathen class related to the above community. In See Estarkhi, to have cloister means to wear Judaeo-Bukharan. In IGHI, there are such meanings as a cloistered Jew and a Jew's suburb of the town. What is surprising is that in several places of IGHI, the word has a Zoroastrian meaning of the town of Bokhara. As a matrix terminology, it is very old and it is related to the languages of the migration time of the Jews' tribes to their East-Iranian residence. Its Sogdian-Judean term is good and prospering (Turchin & Hoyer, 2020, p.79).

##### 4.1. Bukhori Language

The Bukhori language is a Central Asian modification of the Persian language with three distinct characteristics - its uniqueness, its historical preservation, and the avoidance of interference from other sounds. The uniqueness of the language is something that caught the attention of Moshe Tsemakh, the Cantor of Bukharian Jews. Bukhori has three varieties - old, classical, and modern. This is characteristic of the Persian language, in contrast to officially recognized languages. Bukhori is written from right to left with 22 letters of Hebrew. The language of the Bukharian Jews is one of the Western Iranian languages, closely related to Persian, Kurdish, and Talysh. In the language of Bukharian Jews, words are used in the Bukharian language, which has different shades and differences from the neighboring Tajik, as well as in Arabic and Hebrew (Khezri, 2022, p.98).

The Bukhori language is an ancient cultural tradition, with a high level of independence and preservation of a good degree of purity. The Bukharan Jewish language has always been relatively independent and separate from other local languages and dialects. According to many, the Bukhori language is an almost untouched and unchanged Middle

Persian. Amid Middle Persian and Sogdian civilizations - the grave of Bukhara. According to many Tajik historians, the Bukhori language is an untouched and unchanged Middle Persian one, which preserves almost all traces of historical moments and is unique when it comes to understanding different periods of Persian ancient history (Dekel, 2023, p.103).

## 4.2. Literary Contributions

Several prominent artists and intellectuals have emerged from the Bukharan Jewish community, including Lev Levanda, Benjamin Levich, and the poet Michail Mergui. Rabbi Aaron Medini, a distinguished scholar, authored the Talmudic encyclopedic work *Sedej Hokma (Thorns of Wisdom)*, which remains a significant contribution to Jewish scholarship. Among these figures, one of the most compelling is the writer Eliezer Oblomsky (1886, Samarkand–1943, Tashkent), whose most prolific period occurred during the 1930s.

Oblomsky's novel *The Golden Age* (1931–1932) intricately weaves elements of Bukharan folklore, religious traditions, and the ideological conflict between two opposing forces — what he presents as “true Judaism” and a morally compromised Jewish existence. Rather than adhering to conventional narratives, his work introduces fresh and nuanced perspectives. The novel transcends a mere social drama, evolving into a spiritual exploration in which the protagonist becomes ensnared in a relentless cycle of fate. Oblomsky employs folkloric imagery to depict themes of faithfulness, devotion, and intergenerational continuity, illustrating the struggles of an immigrant's soul as he grapples with the irrevocable loss of his homeland and heritage (Gross, 2021, p. 56).

Beyond his literary contributions, Oblomsky was deeply influenced by humanist ideals, which shaped his engagement with some of the most harrowing events of his time — most notably, the extermination of European Jewry during the Holocaust. His 1940 work *Werewolf* blends journalistic inquiry with elements of fiction, reflecting his ongoing literary exploration until the end of his life. The novel introduces characters such as Manga, the Breuvis family, and a young girl with striking sky-blue eyes, who symbolically guards the moral conscience of the universe. Through a subtle and emotive narrative, Oblomsky captures the profound anguish of human suffering, the trauma of loss, and the disillusionment of adulthood. His deep connection to Jewish tradition and history permeates his work, manifesting in a tension between spiritual expression and artistic realism. His literary contributions were widely acknowledged by his Soviet-Jewish contemporaries, including some of the most esteemed writers of his era (Kirasirova, 2024, p. 45).

## 5. Cuisine and Culinary Traditions

Bukharian Jewish cuisine is heavily Oriental-Jewish in character. Ever since the Jews arrived in Central Asia, they were influenced by the countries and territories through which they passed. The Jewish community of Bukhara has two cuisines: the first of which is similar to the cuisine of the local Muslim population; it is mainly composed of non-kosher meals. The second, which is known today as the Bukharian Jewish cuisine, is composed of kosher meals, as a result of the influence of Jewish religion and dietary laws (Kopelman et al.2020, p.112).

As is well-known, the dietary laws of Jewish people prohibit consuming milk and meat together. It also prohibits consuming a number of meats. These and similar laws, for example, such as the prohibition of consuming an animal born during the moving from Egypt to Canaan for 40 years and the prohibition of consuming the figs grown in the first year, make up the dietary rules of Jewish people. In this study, the former form of the cuisine of Jewish people was not considered and the meals that are not included in the dietary laws are being omitted. Today, only the second form, which is the result of modernity and the Jewish dietary rules, lives on (Rapp Jr, 2022, p.32).

## 6. Art and Architecture

Artistic activity among the Bukharan Jews started with the Bagdish family. The wealthy Bukharan Jewish merchant, Raphael Simonovich Bagdish, wanted his children to know about their culture and roots. For Raphael Simonovich Bagdish, it was important that his children should know about their culture and history. He sent his children abroad to Europe to study. There, his sons constructed a market and buildings. One of the buildings is very richly and elaborately decorated. A telegram was sent to Hotel Metropol from Bukhara, typically asking to remove the photo of the specific building from public offer tourist excursions. With the help of the telegram, the Bolsheviks willingly went to the buildings of others and began their brutal change of "paradise." The prodigies of Raphael Simonovich's dynasty consecrated the traditions of their ancestors, actively participating in the construction of buildings and the reconstruction at the beginning of the 20th century (Wexler, 2022, p.87).

In the early 1900s, Bukharan Jews were constructing ornate and elaborate buildings where the ceilings, walls, and pathways were richly decorated and made out of sophisticated local crafts. The exterior of the Bukharan houses were "rough," whereas the interior was rich with stucco carving. Houses were constructed with two and sometimes three floors, where the higher the floor, the wealthier the merchant. For example, Rakhim Abi Avraam's house had stucco "Maimonid windows" in Bukhara; Avraam Isak Avraamov's house had stained glass. Among the master architects of the time were painters Isak Yakovlev, Namesov, and Haim. The suppliers of materials were Yakov Alkhasov, Selim Shankovsky, and Yankel Frankovsky. According to the memoirs of Shimon Ragemovich, brother of the mistress of the Bagdish house, Righthander functioned as an artist and carver making "measured needs" and "carved wooden doors" to Rakhimbergenov Abi Avraam—Tashkent, the house of Drauschewsky. And it was good that it turned out to be high and black - like a heavy black line connecting the house and the sky in the sacred geometry of the Bukharan synagogue (Bashkin, 2020, p.103).

In 2011, during a visit to Tashkent, a delegation of Bukharan Jews from New York led by Vivian Yasuna presented the portrait of the founder of the dynasty of Jewish merchants, Raphael Bagdish, to the owner of the current building where the home of the Bagdish family was once located. Jewish schools functioned very actively at that time and at the beginning of the 20th century. The languages of instruction were Tajik and Persian, and also the addition and subtraction of fractions in Hebrew. The whole spectrum of Jewish education was covered, from religious to secular. At the beginning of the 20th century, there were several Jewish men's and women's schools in Tashkent built by their wealthy families. Bagdish, Zaritsky, and I. Rakhimov had their own schools in the Kuylyuk and Hove districts. It is possible that the emigration of the Bukharan Jews and the destruction of the Bukharan cities were the result of the powerful internal impact that the 20th

century brought, as well as the external aggression of the Bolsheviks during the Civil War (Kirasirova, 2024, p.44).

### **6.1. Influence on Uzbek Art and Architecture**

When speaking of the influence of the Jews of Bukhara on Uzbek art and architecture, we can directly single out the contribution of local jewelry art to one of the key features of the traditional urban Uzbek costume. This custom relates to the widespread use of jewelry made of gilding alloy, silver, and semi-precious stones. Since ancient times, big gems embroidery or bead embroidery and jewelry button brooches on gold alloy frames have decorated the clothing of almost all women in Uzbek cities and towns. At various times, these types of jewelry have oriented their materials and decorative techniques. The novelty of Bukharan women's jewelry art of the 19th century lies in that the approach to using precious materials and the decoration technique has changed, and for the first time, jewelers could elaborate specific clothing articles and accessories (Loy, 2023, p.50).

The number of sewing articles for women that the jeweler's art serves as decoration has increased. Their design turned more sophisticated, and they were done in the same style. These refer to jewelry for the decorative breastplate part of women's shirts - myself who wore a dress and pants. There are wide bracelets, geared with big gems, in the form of triangles, pentahedrons, and radiant rosettes. A delicate thing was signed for women - hair pins-heads that seem made of gold filigree. Their material is gilded alloy or cast frame with filigree plates connected with a hinge as the brooches on women's dresses. The top was often decorated with carved almandine or cabochon inserts of the same mineral cut performed. Unlike men's jewelry, the devices incuse a continuous composition, a theme such as flower-spray, tendril and leaf, or volutes of ribbon scrolls (Kaganovich, 2021, p.103).

## **7. Education and Scholarship**

Prominent figures in Bukharian religious and secular institutions were rabbis and wealthy individuals who sponsored institutions. Between 1913 and 1916, the editor A. Fasbjerg of the newspaper Sokhnut published 3 booklets: Ma'alkhei eitiim, Kol kitve shemesh ve-yareia shearim li-torat ha-Rabanim, and Descendants of the Leaders of the Jewish People. Several press directories dealing with the Bukharian community were published in the second half of the 19th century, including Jewish almanach for 1910 and Jewish calendar. Rabbis composed commentaries on biblical and Talmudic Jewish Law. In 1870 and 1871, the fabric store and manufacturing company of Y. Gaun was distinguished with diplomas for technical advance during exhibitions in St. Petersburg. The names of Y.D. Gaun and I.I. Ashar were mentioned by V.I. Vasil'ev as famous Bukharian businessmen of the second half of the 19th century (Marciano, 2022, p.90).

Horse trade, as well as other kinds of trade, were developed in Samarkand; the most famous trader is considered to be Hakhham Gavril, who had close connections with the emir of Bukhara and Juan José de Urquijo, the first Spanish ambassador to Uzbekistan. Family members and the Tuvia, Peysakh, and Shabtai brothers from Andijan were successful also. Basic business training was provided in Jewish schools, and afterwards in the Russian commercial school opened in 1884. Between 1908 and 1917, Bukharian banks (Rikudim Hapashimim and Gom de Ostrai ve-Herere Mussak ha-Gepul) represented national interests at commercial exhibitions in Tashkent. In 1917, thanks to the Meor ha-Gola, revenues from taxes on meat sales and public toilets built by rabbis

were allocated for the construction of a traditional Jewish school. In 1919, construction of the Bukharian Pinkhas Romi school began in Bukhara, but its activity was stopped by Soviet rule. After having lived in Australia, N. Shama returned. He was a strong advocate of the activity of the Oḥalim association, which noted remarkable success in the field of ideological modernization. Thanks to its efforts, the network of traditional Jewish schools grew considerably; in 1989, 6 schools welcomed 800 pupils. A number of centers offered courses in Judaism and Jewish history. Hostel Bilir Vaylik was very popular, as was the Binyah La-Yeladim family club. Fiercely criticized in 1989, the camp Nahshon also offered Hebrew classes and study of Torah (Skvirskaja, 2023, p.90).

## 8. Social Customs and Traditions

There are a few variations from common Jewish customs among the Bukharan Jews. Those which exist seem to be the result of an attempted adaptation to the Islamic environment. While the married women remain semi-secluded, the young girls perform ceremonies forbidden to a married woman. Thus, at the betrothal ceremony, a recently-betrothed girl is the one who carries the gifts from the groom to the bride. In contrast, in other Jewish communities, this role is assigned to girls who have not yet reached the betrothal age (Loy & Levin, 2022, p.94).

There is also an interesting custom when the married daughter of the household goes to her parent's house to guard her mother from the "evil eye". The married woman usually has the children throw money behind her and gives them candy in return. This custom also obviously serves to counteract the evil eye (Kaganovitch, 2023, p.134).

In contrast, elements of coercion are evident from the "divorcing" ceremony. Jewish law relates to the details of this process employed by Muslim husbands. They take a white sheet and give it to the girl to hold in her hand. The husband stands facing the door and relieves himself in the few drops of urine that supposedly already exist on the sheet from the young man who placed it under him, lest he lose control of his lower body. If a Muslim enters for a "personal" use of the room while the young man is standing and waiting at the door with the sheet in his hand, the misfortune will pass to the intruder and the young man, the future husband, will find a "better" girl. Such and similar primitive customs were employed to protect the girl from her Muslim husband who would have been outraged by her refusal to fulfill her marital obligations (Vishnevetskiy, 2022, p. 105).

## 9. Economic Activities and Professions

Jews in Central Asia took an active position in international trade and played an important role in the complex system of commodity-money relations between the East and Europe. Bukharan Jews traded in spices, cloth and silk, jewelry, and precious stones. Known from the beginning of the ninth century, it was the first trade center for Chinese silk (Kaganovitch, 2023, p.97).

The Jews in Bukhara were engaged in handicrafts: a significant place was occupied by the Jews in the production of uniforms, furs, jewelry, vellum, playing cards, candles, gunpowder, textiles. Baking and brewing were also part of the economic activity of the Bukharan Jews. Judgments assisted the development of Al Jazeera and its prosperity (Burton, 2020, p.104).

Engaged in moneylending (usury), Jews derived a significant part of their income from this without being the monopolists in this area. Pioneers of legal business, Jews bought, sold, invested in real estate, and engaged in several other trades (Kaganovich & Kaganovitch, 2022, p.112).

This profession was considered prestigious, as it was assumed that only those who knew the laws very well were elected to be judofis. In the 1870s, about 15 percent of Jews, mostly young men, chose to study in Jewish schools foreign languages (Persian, Uzbek, Arabic). Such a need was imposed by both the above-mentioned crafts and the specifics of commercial activities (Turchin & Hoyer, 2020, p.86).

To streamline commerce, Jews positioned themselves as interpreters or agents for caravans traveling to remote regions. Their knowledge of these languages, culture, traditions played an important role in these transactions. Such knowledge became wages high. In the eighties of the XIX century, about 27 Jewish households in Bukhara were engaged in translation and mediation activities. The royal text recommended a certain Jew Isaac from Bukhara as an interpreter for knowledgeable caravans and international exhibitions in the Russian Empire (Khezri, 2022, p.90).

## **10. Political Participation and Influence**

Bukharan Jews were actively participating in the political life of the khanate and were serving at the court of the ruler. The names of outstanding military officers - General Gates Mullah Islamovich, Sale Yuza IkromBekov - and tax administration - Muller Getemerov - are inscribed in 30 kinds of Bukharan scientists who enriched science, culture, and economy of Central Asia. According to the ruling Khan's "Asset on medals" (1914), the representatives of Bukharan Jews were part of the highest military-medical ranks of the Jewish hospital - hiisrafe, farmers associates - with their councils, sizboe, warehouse - vekili buttons. It is known that an administrative officer named Yuda Samoilenko studied the administrative and administrative activities of the Jewish elite, the formation of the social-economic structure of the elite, and the mechanism of its interaction with the ruling circles of the Emirate of Bukhara at the turn of the 19th - 20th centuries (Dekel, 2023, p.80).

The Jews took an active part in popular movements, reflected in public popular meetings, city Dergah and darbazar, and directly in the armed struggle, which was taking place in the Emirate of Bukhara at the beginning of the 20th century. The service of Bukharan Jews in the composition of the police and troops began under the official pressure of the Russian administration and was a burden. In the 90s-00s: in the cavalry team Dzhurkysev, the machine team Guriev. We believe that the tradition of political participation, the skills of social consolidation of Jewish society, and the well-established community self-government influenced the sustainable preservation of the social culture of the Jews of Central Asia in the years of restrictive and repressive policies (Gross, 2021, p.101).

## **11. Challenges and Opportunities in Contemporary Uzbekistan**

Uzbekistan faces numerous challenges in the wake of sovereignty following the break-up of the USSR – such as economic dislocations and cultural confusion. Because of their distinctiveness in dress, language, and tradition, many Bukharian Jews in Uzbekistan consider themselves to be separate from other Uzbeks and call themselves Bukharan. Yet, for the sake of professional advancement and a better economic future, Bukharan Jewish

professionals work in largely Uzbek environments; Jews also have close personal friendships with non-Jews. They can communicate more readily with Uzbek Muslims than with those who have left Bukhara to live in Israel. Thus, ethnicity is not the sole determinant of relations between Jews and non-Jews in the land of Bukhara. The large representation of minority groups - mainly Russians, Tajiks, and Uzbeks, including some with Western religious roots - means that these groups have to work together towards the common goal of overcoming economic adversity in the present rather than basing inter-group relations on religious affinity (Kopelman et al.2020, p.95).

The post-Soviet era has resulted in great economic dislocations, which hit all Uzbeks equally hard, regardless of their religious beliefs. Bukharan Jews in Bukhara are as poor, if not poorer, than poor Muslims in the same city. Yet, the poorest Bukharan Jew in Samarkand, the educated middle-income Jewish professionals in Tashkent, and the rich mafiosi in Bukhara are better off than the Uzbeks in the same category (Kopelman et al.2020, p.104). In a poor, post-communist environment, the Jews of Bukhara are equal. Islam in post-Soviet Uzbekistan has yet to witness the growth of political Islam. The central state authority, headed by President Islam Karimov, who is considered a strong and unyielding ruler, has taken various measures to restrict religious activity, including Judaism. When the Soviet Union disintegrated, the contribution of the Tajik and Uzbek Jews to resettlement was immense: this, in addition to the small number of Jews leaving Tajikistan, a poor and ethnically fragmented mountainous region, has led Israelis to look with favor on the Bukharan Jews (Kirasirova, 2024, p.105).

## 12. Diaspora Communities and Global Connections

In the current globalized world of communication, education, and economic opportunities, the identity of most Jews in the Diaspora is that of being citizens of the country where they live, and their religious, national, or ethnic identity is a component of a multi-faceted individual identity. Most Jews in the Diaspora are not of Semitic origin, and they do not speak the Hebrew language. They use the internet and they travel on commercial flights. Most Jews in the Diaspora are successful participants in local politics, economy, and culture in their society. They celebrate Jewish holidays and contribute to Jewish causes and to Israel (Rapp Jr, 2022, p.122).

Since 1991, the Jewish community of Uzbekistan is no longer a religious and cultural minority in the Uzbek Republic, a territory that was established as an independent nation-state after seven decades as part of the Soviet Union. The citizens of the Republic of Uzbekistan are ethnic Uzbeks who are predominantly Muslim, and the exodus of Jews from Bukhara was not in 1948 or 1956, as in the creation of the State of Israel, or the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, the Prague Spring of 1968, or the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 (Khezri, 2022, p.77). There were many times during the centuries of relations between Jews and non-Jewish neighbors that Bukharan Jews faced danger, and many refugees from Bukhara found sanctuary in Samarqand, Tashkent, or other towns in the Khanate of Bukhara, sometimes only for a few decades until the wars, brigandage, or hardships ended (Wexler, 2022, p.84).

### 13. Conclusion and Future Prospects

The once-thriving and vibrant communities of the Bukharan Jews have struggled in the face of the exodus that has occurred over the past two centuries. In many cases, it is the memory of the former glory of these communities that has brought people back to Uzbekistan to attempt to create a future for Jewish life.

Since their silent return to Jewish life in the mid-twentieth century, the Bukharan Jewish community of New York is predominantly “non-religious”. By a different measure, the leadership of the Bukharan synagogue in Queens is very much supportive of carrying forward the spirit of the role that was once theirs in Bukhara, Jerusalem, and Samarkand. The congregation maintains a strong outreach to the Bukharan Jewish community of Israel and are considered as "Observant Jews."

In modern Uzbekistan, the revival of Jewish life around the Bukharan community is measured not so much by growing numbers of active members and participants in congregational activities, but rather in terms of the identity formation of their youth. It is from the pulpit of the synagogue that the lessons of the history, culture, traditions, and ritual of the Bukharan Jewish community are ingrained into the next generation.

This study has provided a comprehensive examination of the history, cultural practices, and socio-economic roles of the Bukharan Jewish community in Uzbekistan. By exploring their settlement patterns, religious traditions, linguistic heritage, and economic contributions, this research highlights the resilience and adaptability of Bukharan Jews throughout history. Despite periods of migration, political upheaval, and cultural transformation, their traditions have remained an integral part of the broader Central Asian and Jewish diasporic narratives.

One of the key contributions of this study is its illumination of the intersection between trade, cultural exchange, and religious identity along the Silk Road. The findings underscore the significant role Bukharan Jews played in regional commerce and intellectual life, as well as the impact of Soviet policies on their community structure and migration patterns. Furthermore, by shedding light on the post-Soviet revival of Jewish identity in Uzbekistan, this research enhances our understanding of contemporary diasporic identity reconstruction efforts.

Future research should expand upon this study by employing comparative analyses with other Jewish communities in Central Asia, as well as exploring the evolving role of Bukharan Jews in transnational contexts, particularly in Israel and the United States. Additionally, interdisciplinary studies incorporating anthropological, linguistic, and digital humanities approaches could further enrich our understanding of how this community continues to navigate issues of heritage preservation and modernization in a rapidly globalizing world.

Ultimately, this research contributes to the broader field of Jewish and Central Asian studies by preserving the historical memory of the Bukharan Jewish community while offering valuable insights into the dynamics of cultural continuity, migration, and identity formation in the face of historical challenges.



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