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IN A SEARCH OF HUMAN GRACE

A Photo Journey to the Jewish Community of Georgia, Summer 2011

By Eliezer Ya'ari

Exactly forty years ago, in July 1971, a group of Jews from Georgia – at the time still part of the Soviet Union – arrived discretely in Moscow with one goal: to continue bringing the world's attention to the anguish and aspirations of Georgian Jewry and Soviet Jewry, open the floodgates of the Soviet Union and allow the Jewish People to return to Israel, its homeland.

The group, led by Shabtai Alhashvili, sat itself down in front of the Moscow central post office and declared a hunger strike. The meaning of this step, according to Soviet law at the time, was treason and taking that step meant risking imprisonment and torture. The crowd and security personnel gathered around the brave protesters who told television cameras what they had written two years earlier to the United Nations' Secretary General: *"We believe that our prayers have reached the heavens. We know that our calls will enter people's hearts. We are indeed asking very little – let us go to the land of our fathers."*

That was the signal for the modern era's Exodus, in which millions of former Soviet Jews would pack up their few portable belongings and embark on a journey to the unknown. It was the signal for the renewal of the covenant between the State of Israel and the Jewish People, thanks to the determination and courage of the people of the Caucasian hill tribes, members of Georgian Jewry, who after 2,500 of local Jewish life, made their departure. Of the hundred thousand Jews living in Georgia in 1971, forty years later the community numbered only 8,000, the last remains of the large and unique community that once was.

It is their story we sought to document forty years later, in the summer of 2011. With a loving and careful hand, we touched and endeavored to tell the story of these people and their country and the story of the Jewish People's grace moments and concern for its most remote communities, until the very last Jew.

This is a journey to the memory that still remains of a magnificent Jewish community that left behind unmanned synagogues, elderly parents, and abandoned cemeteries, remnants of a world disappearing with the years.

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The idea was fantastic in its naiveté: a group of amateur photographers, most of them friends from the Israeli hi-tech sector and all deeply aware of their roots and commitment to Israeli society and the Jewish People would depart for Georgia for a roots trip and introduction to the country. The idea was to document the journey through the work of a few photographers and afterward to create an exhibition, the proceeds of which would be returned to the community. Thus, they sought to recruit additional people and funds for the benefit of the last community members on Georgian soil. The head of the group, Benny Levin, turned to JDC, was received with open arms and thus began a partnership that made the journey possible.

The group started the journey on tiptoes, if not to say in trepidation. None of them is from Georgia and no one speaks Georgian or Russian. Thus, they dedicated the weeks before the trip to learning and becoming acquainted with the community. In effect, the journey itself began with a trip to Beersheva, home to one of the largest Georgian-Israeli communities. There, in a tenement housing complex not dissimilar from the ones left behind in Rustavi or Gori, we met Olga Lubjinyazde and her husband Yigal Czengauker. If you will, Olga and Yigal's story is the epitome of Israel's melting pot: Olga came alone from Georgia in 1999 and spent the first few years of her life in Israel in isolation and emotional turmoil. Despite her insistent pleading, her parents decided not to immigrate to Israel and remained unaided in an emptied, dismembered community in the Georgian town of Oni, once a vibrant crossroads and today a deserted town on the footpaths to the great Caucasian mountains. While still at the peak of isolation and emotional turmoil associated with the period of her absorption in Israel, Olga met Yigal.

"I met Yigal at a job I found with a catering company", she says with a bashful smile. "He is Indian by origin, one of eleven brothers and sisters all born in Israel. They are good people, soft. They accepted me as I am and we began our life together. Here in Israel, we had a quiet wedding, not like the ones in Oni, Georgia. There, a huge crowd would go to the groom's home and take him to the synagogue. Today, I am Israeli."

They stand for a picture: The child is quiet and incredibly beautiful. The light spilled in from the apartment's large westward window and when she says that she married for love and not through a matchmaker, Yigal replies with a smile. People rushed to match her up with any bachelor from the community, but she wanted Yigal. They worked in catering together, he kept at it and today he is a manager.



A young family:

Olga Lubjinyazde and her husband Yigal Czengauker. She is from Georgia, he is originally from India.

Beer Sheva, Israel

"Our son's name is Or ("light"). He is enrolled in a Russian-speaking kindergarten and also speaks Hebrew. With me speaking Georgian, Yigal speaking Hebrew, he looks like a little Indian boy and together we are building a small and loving family here in Israel, a mother from Caucasia, a father from India and wonderful children who will already be Israelis in every way."

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The trip to Georgia and to Caucasia was inspired as a journey into the depth of history: the mysterious stories of the ancient Georgian monarchy, to fortresses overlooking the Silk Road stretching from the Black Sea to the Caspian Sea and from there into Asia. This is a journey to the great Caucasian mountains, to the hilltops approaching Armenia, echoing Rustaveli's epic poem and the legend of the crucified one arriving from Jerusalem to the Georgia of two thousand years ago, and onto the story of the Jews' brilliant integration into the life of their country, in the work, industry and culture of the country, all while preserving their uniqueness and religion.

This is a journey to the great mountains looking out over the fertile valleys, where everything good in the country flourished, and the torrential rivers watering their fields. This is also a journey to the traces of centuries of wars and conflict over power and control, to the relations with the Russian Bear in the north, to the remains of Soviet Communism: its cruelest and most revered ruler, Josef Vissarionovich Stalin, né Jugashvili, grew up in Georgia of all places, in the town of Gori.

This is a journey into the abandoned industrial factories along the way, to the desponding sight of crumbling smokestacks, empty warehouses and the motionless iron tracks covered in overgrown weeds. This is a journey to a land in desperate struggle over its economic and political future, in days of ruthless unemployment with fruit rotting on trees for lack of markets that will purchase them. These are days of mounting tensions after parts of the country were torn from Georgia by an act that marked the end of 20 years of great economic devastation that it is now trying to escape with American support, and to determination and passion for independence that has safeguarded the people since the dawn of history.

This is a journey to the memory that still remains of a magnificent Jewish community that left behind unmanned synagogues, elderly parents whose children left to distant lands, and abandoned cemeteries, remnants of a world disappearing with the years.

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In the end, this is a journey to human encounters, with the citizens of Georgia and the last members of the Jewish community still living there. One such encounter happened on the short flight from Tel Aviv, when we elatedly discovered that the man seated beside us in a forward sloping cap and combed mustache is none other than Mikhail Khakhiashvili, the Gabbai of a synagogue in the town of Oni in northern Georgia, which once housed 4,500 Jews or about half of the townspeople of Oni.

Once a month Mikhail Khakhiashvili pays 23 Lari (monthly Georgian pensions are less than 80 Lari) and takes a rickety bus from Oni to Tbilisi, the home of Sasson Kakiashvili who sells kosher meat to Jews still living in the country. A few days later we drank tea with Sasson in the apartment he shares with his daughter who opened a kosher catering service in Tbilisi and cooks kosher food for whoever wants it. Mikhail buys the meat and returns by bus to Oni, to the last seven Jewish families there. He will continue doing this as long as he has the strength, the last guardian of the families whose physical and emotional existence he feels responsible, theirs and that of the last remains of the magnificent community that was once there, and which disappears entirely as the days pass. Kosher food has become the symbol of independent existence, the symbol of the preservation of Jewish uniqueness, the last ember of a great community that zealously and religiously safeguarded tradition.

Mikhail's story is not dissimilar from other stories we'll hear later on throughout the journey: a touching, personal story about a dismembered family, about the children and grandchildren who immigrated to Israel or who live in Antwerp, New York or Saint Petersburg and the parents who still reside in Georgia or "Gruzia" as the Soviets called it. These are usually painful personal stories, soaked in stories about responsibility vis-à-vis the community, about businesses that once were or still are, everything that can be described in one word – life. We showed him the pictures we took in Beersheva, to be delivered to the woman who cooks at the local charity house, who together with him feeds and supports people left behind.



Mikhail Khakhiashvili,
*the Gabbai of a synagogue
in the town of Oni*
on his way back home from Israel

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About the charity institutions:

The collapse of the Soviet Union was accompanied by a great wandering of peoples, at the center of which is the Jewish People who settled throughout the vast territories of the former Soviet Union: Over one million immigrated to Israel and hundreds of thousands of others wandered throughout Eastern Europe, other territories and as far away as Australia. The wandering of peoples left behind those already unable to move, the weak and the elderly, those who couldn't stand another journey.

Those left behind soon discovered that the health and welfare services that had been regularly provided by the government vanished as if they never existed. Their state pensions are insufficient to purchase the most essential basic items, not to mention medication and others services. Hundreds of thousands stayed behind, from Azerbaijan to the Ukraine, from Vlodivostok to Odessa. They were left with nothing but severe humanitarian crisis requiring extraordinary rescue efforts. It was the JDC that entered the scene, creating Hesed ("charity – isn't the right translation Grace?") conducted in several regional centers by providing basic care services – food products, basic medical assistance, housework, hot meals, gasoline, blankets and hot baths, nutrition programs for children and clubhouses for children and youth. This vital work is done through many volunteers, a few workers on minimal wages and the support of communities and institutions, mainly in the United States but also in other countries including Israel.

One hundred and sixty five thousand people receive assistance through Hesed. Hot meals. Blood pressure medicine. Home visits. Hope.

One hundred and sixty five thousand.

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What is Hesed?

Number 6 Atolani Street, in the heart of Tbilisi: cracked walls, a dangerous, rickety staircase and a door.

On the narrow balcony sits Tonya Samsobena. Her hair white, her smile wide. An old meat grinder is clamped onto the table, the kind my mother used to grind fish to prepare gefilte fish. Studying her again, she looks a lot like my mother in her last years: the same smile, joyful at greeting visitors, an expression of thanks for life unexpectedly marching into her home, where she lives alone, sitting at a big window of the balcony.

Alongside Tonya sits Irina Tzachvadza from Razovska, the local JDC worker caring for her. She holds out her hand and embraces her and both look at the camera. I dipped my finger in the thick sauce they prepared, the taste of dill, garlic, beans, hot pepper. They come in, the cabinet open, a clean dress, warm clothes, a sheet, a blanket.

Years after my mother passed away, I thought about the last years of her life, about the desperate struggle to preserve her dignity as an old person despite being surrounded by family, her children and grandchildren. To wage this battle alone, in this decrepit house, without family and a helping hand, is the impossible.



There, in Tbilisi, perhaps because of the striking resemblance between Tonya and my mother, I understood with clarity the meaning of this Hesed: It is the embracing arm of the woman from Razovska, the clean white shirt, the plate of aromatic sauce, the clean floor and the hand waving goodbye at the window when our quick visit ends. Indeed, we shall never meet again.

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The Hesed system has 'clients': It has a clubhouse for the elderly, a nutrition plan with hot meals for children. In Tbilisi there are also music and dance lessons, a 'warm house'. There are people with whom they can share their longings and loneliness. The Hesed system has 'clients': that is what they are called in the professional jargon differentiating between them and the volunteers and staff people. Here is a report on a visit to the home of a client, Sacha (Aleksander) Dworashvilly in Tbilisi as it was written by a visiting JDC staff:

Brief Diagnosis:

Sacha Dworashvilly is a disabled person. Period.

Had a stroke. Period.

Functions with difficulty. Numerous medications on the window sill.

Moves around independently. Period.

The home is in a very poor state. The JDC rep wrote "*broken*" in her brief description. In the apartment there are two small rooms without a door, one small cot, a small very old television, bottles of water, an old rotary-dial telephone.

Other details: *Half Ashkenazi, half Georgian, parents dead, still independently mobile.*

New Line:

Sacha Dworashvilly is an extremely lonely person. Constantly speaks of his parents, buried in Avhazia, where he can no longer visit since Avhazia was annexed by Russia. He has a brother in Russia, but no contact with him. Sacha's wife does not live with him and she is currently in Israel. Their daughter, born in 1983, is in Georgia, married, coping with her own turmoil and unable to care for her father.

Sacha says: "*I tried my hand at business but failed. I am a religious man. The synagogue is the only place where I see other people. I wear tefillin every morning.*"

Final word: A caretaker visits the home once a week, cleans and prepares food for the coming days. Once a month, the community car comes and takes Sacha to bathe in the framework of the bath program conducted by the local Hesed center.

Within the great emptiness we found a degree of Hesed and dignity: To place a bowl of hot soup before the elder left behind. Without a concerted, organized Hesed effort, a full generation of adults that stayed behind could not survive.

A bath and clean clothes once every two weeks – that's Hesed. Without trying to make sense of the past, without preaching, without reviling in the failures and choices made in the face of someone who needs medication and a shower. Once every two weeks he gets clean clothes and someone checks if he is still alive. That's it.

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About politics:

At the hotel in Tbilisi, I have a cup of coffee early in the morning with the English language local paper. The headline: "Farewell Soviet Georgia" and the article itself tells of the Freedom Charter brought before the Georgian Parliament, exposing all those who had KGB contact in the dark days of Soviet tyranny, prohibiting the use of communist or fascist symbols and the war on terror. Chapter fifteen of this document attempts to battle the dark spirits, the forsaken past, monuments that tell the tragic story of Georgia.

Two hours later, we arrive to the outskirts of the town of Surami. The guide knows to tell us that during the Soviet era the town was at a crossroads, with Jewish residents, there were two synagogues, a flourishing community life, industry, work and a factory.

The factory:

Through a hole in the fence, we entered a glass factory established in 1962 (according to the inscription in the cement next to a hammer and sickle) and which functioned around the clock until the end of the 1980s, supplying glass to the Soviet Union. On the day the Soviet Union collapsed, the factory collapsed along with it and has since stood motionless, like hundreds of other factories that were abandoned along with their contents, literally falling apart, rusting on the roadside. These

factories, cement scars burn in the body of Georgia. They were responsible for its prosperity and for its demise. The border with Russia is now closed. The war between Georgia and Russia, the great superpower showed the force of its fist against its insignificant irritating neighbor. And even if the Parliament should decide to erase the Soviet Union from history, it is written on people's faces, in unemployment, culture, collapsing physical infrastructures, decades of embargo, hunger, cynical political leadership and collapse since the Soviet era. Only when one sees the gigantic glass factory outside Surami, the ovens still open in the production halls, an abandoned train car in the warehouse as if it stopped there just a few minutes ago, giant smokestacks and living quarters exposed to the elements, you understand a small part of the story.



The story of years of industry and prosperity, but also the years of oppression, times in which freedom was denied and in which in the end determined the fate of the Soviet Union and left millions of people in disgraceful poverty in horrific Khrushchev-era tenement houses, leaking schools, in this good and beautiful country crushed to bits.

Against this backdrop, what you find there is an old man seeking a hot meal, a child seeking a warm home and a future, and a woman whose face wrinkled in a few years' time, as her future was denied of her.

That's politics and that's reality.

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In the courtyard of another such factory, in the city of Rustavi, lives Dmitri Chavchavadze. "Lives" is too lofty a word to describe the conditions in which this seven year old boy grew up. The dry report of the JDC worker says: *"Dmitri lives with his bother and grandmother, Anna Gerzenstein, the widow of the renowned engineer Zelig Gerzenstein. She lost all her possessions and now lives with her daughter, the boy's mother"*.

They didn't say where the father is. The mother has no education or work. She sometimes sells tea in the local market, collecting a few pennies." Yes", says the JDC worker, "they receive food, we even have a new method of distributing food through a special electronic card. The boy is in the Hesed center's summer camp program and a social worker visits them from time to time.

That's the dry story.

The real picture is much more difficult: Dmitri “lives” in the abandoned factory courtyard with the two women. Their “residence” is a 4 x 3 meter shack with a carton divider, long marks left by water leaks on the walls. They wash themselves at a sink in the courtyard; relieve themselves in a pit dug beside a pomegranate tree, one of the symbols of Georgia.

I sat next to the sink, next to the pots in which they cook their food in the courtyard, and Dmitri threw me a red ball. In essence, I thought, he is the same age as Yael, my first granddaughter. And again he threw me the ball, I returned it, and the mother quietly scorned: “Don’t bother our guest.” Afterward he sat and examined the camera. Without paying attention I pat him on the head.

The boy came closer and as if asking to be stroked once more and then stood for a picture: a boy in an abandoned cement factory in Rustavi. Now it’s warm, no mud, for the moment there is a tentative sense of hope; someone will worry about mom and grandma. But common sense says they don’t have much chance in the cold, cruel backyard of this country.



And what remains is a picture of a little seven year old boy in an old army hat with a red ball.

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Katya Gutkova’s neighborhood, in the city of Rustavi, was built by German POWs in WWII. Four-story houses, ruined infrastructures, no electricity in the stairways, no access to the entrance other than through a pool of sewage, no central heating, unclear apartment ownership - some privately owned, others taken over by innocents who sought refuge in abandoned apartments.

Katya is an 11th grade student at the first school in Rustavi, situated in a wooden structure built eighty years ago. Katya’s mother and grandmother also learned at this school and they have a certain sense of continuity and pride in the school. The school itself lacks a schoolyard. 350 students spend most of their time in peeling classrooms and hallways. “Katya is an excellent student”, says her teacher. Katya is standing up straight as her mother and grandmother taught her well. To fly, she must learn to spread her wings, to learn, to fly.

It is hard to describe the “hit in the stomach” you feel when you enter one of these cement buildings, in those forlorn, poor public housing.

Any description of their apartment building would be an offense and the “hit in the stomach” you feel when you enter one of these cement buildings, in those forlorn, poor public housing where each family is assigned a 24 square meter apartment without a shower and bathroom. The apartment was partially renovated by the JDC. There is one bed for each of the women in the small apartment, a small closet, a small table, two bookcases full of books and flowerpots beside the window.

At the end of the long hallway, black as a cave with no lighting except pale light in the daytime from a window at the end of the hall, there is a single room with three toilets: no dividers, no place to set your things aside, a single, stark space for all the neighbors, men and women, children and adults; The door across the hall is the shower. Here too, there is a single cement-floored shower area with no dividers. And after you hear Katya sing, see the book collection at home, witness her courage to survive and fly, you think: “What happens to Katya at night when she has to go to the bathroom? Who will keep her safe? Who are the neighbors? What is her fate?”

Katya's mother has diabetes, says the JDC report. In the winter they freeze because there are holes in the walls and the heating is almost nonexistent.

How long will Katya continue living this way? When will she spread her wings and fly?

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Kutaisi was the second largest Jewish city in Georgia. Until 1971, its population of 170,000 included some 20,000 Jews and 40 years later, 100 Jewish families live there, one of which is that of Dr. Shalva Buziashvili who works at a private clinic in the city and serves as one of the leaders of the small Jewish community. Dr. Buziashvili tells of a completely private health system, lack of any health insurance in the country and of people who die of sicknesses easily treated in other countries.

Kutaisi also has unvisited synagogues, but like in other places, the synagogues are preserved as if tomorrow, people will be returning and filling its halls with prayers and the community will be restored to its glory. Meanwhile, the synagogue serves as a tourist site, primarily for Israeli travelers visiting Georgia from time to time. At the entrance we meet a group of teachers, city workers and professionals from Hadera, Israel. The visit to Georgia and the attempt to learn about its current Jewish community becomes a lesson on Israeli society from the 1970s through today, about the melting pot, about tolerance and racism and about the soul searching not done during years of mutual blindness, arrogance and splendor.



Here is what they said:

Yehezkel:

"I was always afraid of them."

"Why?"

"Gruzians [Georgians] have good hearts. Especially here, I am learning that more and more. I am ashamed. Here, Jews are Jews. Only in Israel there are groups, there are the Gruzians and us."

Galia:*"In Hadera there were closed Grusian neighborhoods. We never went there. There were the Moroccans and the Gruzians."*

Emanuel Ron (Director of the Hadera Culture Department):*"The Gruzians have a beautiful country. They are essentially beautiful and very nice people. Hospitable. In Hadera we established a Gruzian dance troupe. The racist basis was there, but that was overcome."*

Emanuel's wife, Sarah: *"The black wardrobe of the women bothered me. Not anymore. I feel bad that we couldn't really help. The city absorbed weak populations of immigrants and we couldn't do more."*

And so on. A quick glimpse of how Israeli society views immigrants from Georgia, the "Gruzians" who succeeded in integrating in the life of the country as few others have, in industry, transportation, health, all while preserving the nature, language and culture of the community. I had to travel to Kutaisi to learn this lesson, which ended with the travelers singing an Israeli song at the entrance to the synagogue and getting back on the bus to leave.

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At journey's end, we reached the town of Oni. Mikhail Khakhiashvili waited for us at the synagogue built in 1895 by Portuguese builders using Portuguese plans. The synagogue has stood motionless and unused for years, while armies passed through en route from Russia to Georgia and northward again and now the nearby border is closed and the small town of Oni, which could have been the perfect vacation skiing village, is dilapidated and getting worse.

We could not have asked for a more suitable ending to our photographic journey than to meet stubborn Mikhail, passing through the Jewish cemetery, its gravestones sinking and falling, concealed by overgrown weeds. In that spot, by saying Kadish in a tribute to the fallen community, our feeling was mixed: The Georgian Jewish community, in contrast to Ukrainian, Latvian, Lithuanian Jewry and elsewhere, was not destroyed in the Holocaust. This is a community that became integrated in this beautiful and difficult country and continued to preserve the life of the community, the family traditions, Kashrut, Shabbat and a great love of the Land of Israel. They began immigrating to Palestine in the 19th century and were the firsts to arrive at the small gateway that began opening in the Iron Gate in the 1970s. They immigrated to Israel in droves and built their homes there. Today, one finds members of the Georgian-Israeli community in Israeli Parliament, in commerce, culture, art, the army and industry. Their children, like the family in Beersheva, are married to members of other communities and are integrated in all spheres of Israeli society.

The feeling in Oni is of sadness, almost mourning. It is clear to us, as it is clear to Mikhail, that this is the community's final chapter. Within the great emptiness we found a degree of Hesed and dignity: a personal Hesed of local volunteers and workers and an organized Hesed that places a bowl of hot soup before the elder left behind, depicting a future for the shrinking group of schoolchildren in the cities that still have active communities. It is clear to us that without a concerted, organized Hesed effort, a full generation of adults that stayed behind could not survive one more winter in Georgia.



And when Mikhail locks up the old graveyard at night, the thought entering ones head is who will be there, when the time comes, to provide him a last act of Hesed? Or perhaps no one will be left and he will climb up the snowy mountains surrounding the city and simply disappear, like in all the ancient Georgian legends passed from generation to generation.

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