

The CIS Synagogues Reconstruction: Tribute to the Past or Duty to the Future?

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Review on: Michael Beizer. *Our Legacy: The CIS Synagogues, Past and Present*.
Gesharim, Jerusalem-Moscow, 2002. - 175 p.

It is very natural that the last book of Dr. Michael Beizer is published now. An idea of writing such a book has already emerged and the author has to be credited for implementing of this idea.

Historically, synagogues have been serving for both religious and social institutions in the Jewish communities and fate of synagogue buildings have perfectly reflected the government policy toward Jews. The vast majority of synagogues had been closed during the Soviet time. Their buildings had been either demolished or used for different purposes without any renovation and proper maintenance. As a result, many buildings were degraded and self-destroyed. Nazi occupation had eliminated the synagogues, which was started by Bolsheviks. In Holocaust not only perished millions of lives but also had erased even traces of material presence of Jewish existence.

The less documented period - the post-World War II time of the Soviet and post-Soviet Jews – is perfectly explainable. The process of national assimilation was on the rise. The Soviet authorities closed the small groups of Jewish believers returned from evacuation. They made believers absolutely defenseless in their limited attempts in registration of communities and reopening synagogues.

By the end of 1980-s, the Soviet Union was a spiritual desert, without almost any traces of Jewish history. After the collapse of the USSR in its former republics, new governments had returned part of the survived synagogues to reemerged Jewish communities. However, this restitution was too limited and too late under the massive immigration and demographic crisis. A huge generation gap of Jewish heritage during last decades made this situation even worse.

Nevertheless, after ten years in the countries of CIS, Central Asia, Transcaucasia and Moldova tens of synagogues were rebuilt and returned to life. Now the communities of believers exist there. They learn Torah, established charitable institutions, Jewish schools have been reestablished; national holidays are celebrated; and significant work was done for strengthening of national self-consciousness. All this caused surprise in some people, and legitimate pride in others.

The book of Dr. Beizer gives a view on what potential the Russian Jewry had approached by 1917, and under what circumstances it was been lost later. It is difficult to define precisely the genre of the book. On the one hand, it is not the scientific research in the strict sense of the word, and with another hand, it is not the popular edition or a picture album with comments on the past and the present of synagogues of the CIS. More

likely, this is a successful combination of three listed approaches that makes the present edition especially attractive and cognitive.

The book *Legacy: The CIS Synagogues, Past and Present* is consisted of two chapters, introduction and the conclusion, notes, the bibliography and the appendix of documents. In the first chapter - « Synagogues in the past » - the period from the beginning of twentieth century before disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991, is covered. The second chapter - «Returning of synagogues » - is devoted to a problem of restitution of synagogue buildings, their reconstruction and return to normal activity. The author brings the reader into a circle of the problems connected to this process and describes the place of the Joint Distribution Committee (JDC). Two appendices present various documents on real steps of this enormous work and the lists of the returned Jewish community's buildings and working synagogues of the CIS.

Special attention is involved with the composition of the book. It is designed in such a manner that informs of the widest audience of readers. The parallel text in Russian and English languages explains illustrations without unnecessary duplication for each separate translation. A reader will be impressed by a visual aspect – a centerpiece of the book. It is written in such a manner that even the uninitiated reader quickly understands what the author wanted to say. In submission of illustrations Michael Beizer used a method of the comparative analysis: what had happened with a synagogue before and after the Soviet era? Who was standing behind the scene?

The majority of photos have been borrowed from the archives of the JDC and the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research in New York, the Jewish National and University Library in Jerusalem, the Center for Jewish Art of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, the St. Petersburg Judaic Center, and the Central State Historical Archive of St. Petersburg. Photos of Russian Jewish Congress and the Federation of Jewish Communities of Russia, along with personal collection of the author have been also used and published for the first time.

Michael Beizer has used the following extensive materials: archival documents, periodicals, petitions of communities on their registration, acts, decisions of authorities, projects of reconstruction and repair, maps and plans. Also, the solid photo archive is used, allowing visually tracking stages of reconstruction of synagogues. The author does not go deep into history and features of a religious Jewish life in the Soviet Union. This was done not without reason: author was guided by the theme of his book - synagogues buildings. At the same time, explaining destiny of synagogues, he has fluently described the attitude of the Soviet authorities to religion and has assessed a policy of authorities in relation to religion in general and to Judaism in particular.

The success of the book, undoubtedly, was enhanced also by the person of the author¹. Michael Beizer has used his own experience derived from numerous trips to communities across CIS, meetings and discussions with elder believers, heads of communities and minyanim (minions), former Soviet refuseniks. The majority of financial resources used on restoring of synagogues, was received by donations made by businesses of the former USSR. The Jewish businessmen and bankers are convinced that participation in charity, as well as in restoration of synagogues, promotes their own business interests.

Before disintegration of the Soviet Union, only about fifty synagogues had been operating all over the country. Today about one hundred buildings have been returned back to religious Jewish communities as a part of restitution, newly bought or constructed

from scratch. Among them are the largest synagogues of Odessa, Kiev, Kharkov, Dnepropetrovsk, Kirovograd, Nizhni Novgorod, Samara, Kazan. Currently, many of them have been repaired and restored.

It is possible to hope, that the governments of former Soviet republics will pay the Jewish organizations indemnification for the lost property? Hardly, while authorities agree to return to communities no more than one building for a city, except for the large Jewish centers (Moscow, Saint Petersburg, Kiev, Kharkov, Minsk). Many synagogues are located geographically where no Jewish population exists. The majority of synagogues are more than one hundred years old, they are in poor condition, and their restitution is not feasible.

What basically can one expect the synagogues to become? What role will the renovated synagogues play in the former Soviet Union? Will they mainly be houses of prayer (*batei tefilot*), places where the Torah and other holy books are studied (*batei midrash*), or places of assembly (*batei kneset*), where Jews come and feel part of their community? According to the author, this will depend on how Jewish life develops in the Soviet successor states. Post-Soviet Jews are suffering a serious demographic crisis, but at the same time their economic situation, on the whole, is better than those of the majority peoples among whom they live. Many Jews are now finding it advantageous to be Jewish and that helps strengthen their ethnic consciousness.

It is no longer possible to revive the rich heritage of Russian-speaking Jewry. However, it is possible to acquaint Jews today with the spiritual traditions of their ancestors, to help them appreciate their past about which they know so little. It is our obligation to do so for our contemporaries in Russia, as well as in other diaspora locations, who now find themselves at a crossroads in regard to their identity. Dr. Beizer's book provides confirmation of this view, as well as possible.

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