

ENGLISH

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Address of Jewish Diaspora of Azerbaijan

Dear brothers, shalom!

The Jews of the Republic of Azerbaijan, who are around 30 thousands, have the honor to inform you about the life of our communities in the sovereign Azerbaijan. There are few countries in the Euro-Atlantic area, where the attitude to the Jews is so friendly and loyal. At no time in the whole history of Azerbaijan there have been recorded cases of oppression and persecution of Jews on their ethnic and religious affiliation. It should be pointed out, that Jews are living in Azerbaijan for a long time. After release of our ancestors from the Babylonian captivity in 538 B.C. many of them stayed in the territory of Parthian (Persian) State, wherefrom they settled in neighboring countries, including Azerbaijan.

After the Russian-Iranian wars under the treaties 1813 and 1828 the territory of Azerbaijan has been divided between these countries and the northern part of Azerbaijan has passed under the power of the Russian Empire. At that time many Jews were living in the territory of several Azerbaijani khanates, including in Guba khanate where they were invited and taken under the patronage of Fatali Khan in 18 century. The local authorities were treating to Jews with loyalty, paying high tribute to their diligence, honesty and knowledge. In general it should be mentioned that Turkic people traditionally treats cordially to Jewish migrants. It is sufficiently to remember that the Ottoman Empire accepted in 1492 the refugees from Spain and Portugal. A unique situation was created in Azerbaijan; where the representatives of two branches of the Jews - Ashkenazi and Sephard met. The communities of mountainous and Georgian Jews, who are living mainly in the South Caucasus, represent the Sephard branch. The Ashkenazi Jews faced with the persecutions of the tsarist Russia appeared in the territory of Azerbaijan in 1832, found asylum and friendly attitude of local population. In 1864 petroleum reserves were discovered in Baku city. The oil boom begun in 1872, and attracted the great number of Jewish migrants to Azerbaijan.

Thus, the absence of anti-Semitism, the possibility to find a job and to get education has led to the fact that in 1913 the Jewish community of Baku was 9696 people or 4.5% of whole Baku population.

The first synagogues and Jewish streets, where house fronts were studded with doorplates of the names of famous doctors, lawyers, musicians, jewelers and etc. have appeared. Among 238 lawyers and advocates, among 185 doctors registered in Baku in 1912 – 75 and 65 were Jews respectively.

In 1918 the first democratic republic in the Muslim East - Azerbaijan Democratic Republic (ADR) was established. The Constitution of this Republic has guaranteed

the equal rights to all nationalities living in the country. The famous doctor and professor Evsey Gindes became a minister of health in the first Government of ADR was. Three Jews were the deputy ministers. The Jewish newspapers and magazines have been published, the synagogues, schools and specialized colleges have been functioning.

In the Soviet period of time the Jews were also playing prominent role in the press agencies, industry, health and law, were taking the responsible posts in the Soviet Azerbaijan. Until 1941 the Jewish theatre was operating in Baku, which had been closed after departure of all dramatic staff for touring to Minsk; the destiny of the troupe was tragic – all of them have been shot by Nazis. The aggression of Nazi Germany stimulated the increase of the Jewish population of Azerbaijan, which number has come to around 60 thousands by 1970. The Azerbaijani people expressed sympathy for our troubles. We all together were fighting against our common enemy. Many representatives of Azerbaijanis have saved Jews in concentration camps, hiding us among them. You remember that the Nazis divided peoples on national ground; so many of Jews came from Baku and knew Azerbaijani language had managed to survive. There were no cases when Azerbaijanis gave up the Jews.

In the beginning of 40's, that is the peak of Stalin's repressions, the synagogue of Ashkenazi, Mountainous and Georgian Jews opened in Baku. It should be underlined that contrary to the anti-Semitic policy of the Kremlin it has been done everything in Azerbaijan in order that Jews didn't feel aggrieved themselves. It became especially brightly apparent since 1969 when Mr. Heydar Aliyev became the leader of the Republic. It was the period of prosperity of the Jewish culture, active participation of our representatives in public and political life of the country. The whole pleiad of young, talented writers, poets, artists and scientists came to the science, literature and arts. Among the heads of ministries and departments, directors of factories, editors of newspapers and magazines were the large number of the Jewish representatives. The Jews were being admitted to the universities and institutions without any limitations.

Started in the middle of 80's so called Gorbachev's Perestroika followed by the collapse of Soviet State. The new independent States were established in the post-Soviet area. This period of time was characterized by the break of stable economic relations, the collapse of national economy, full chaos and political instability. Moreover, Armenia began aggression against Azerbaijan with a purpose to seize its historical land of Nagorny-Karabakh. All these reasons led to mass departure of Jewish population. Many of them emigrated to Israel, part of them to the USA and Canada. It should be mentioned that in this period of time the Jews of Azerbaijan were actively fighting for our common freedom and independence. In bloody events of 20 January 1990 when the Soviet army entered Baku, in a result of shooting of innocent and peaceful people by the Soviet soldiers not only Azerbaijanis were killed but also the representatives of other nationalities,

including the Jews – Y.Meerovich, L.Bessantina, doctor A.Markhevka, who did his duties rendering an assistance to wounded people.

Many of Jews were bravely fighting against Armenian aggression in Nagorny-Karabakh, and one of them Albert Agarunov posthumously was honored with the title of the National Hero of Azerbaijan. It has been done without any compulsion, but from the bottom of the heart, as we could not be indifferent to the destiny of our Motherland.

June 1993 became a crucial moment in the history of Azerbaijani State. The nation-wide elected in September of the same year President Heydar Aliyev, for whom the vast majority of Jewish population of the country voted has started the process of reconstruction and renewal of the country. Because of his dynamic policy the disintegration of Azerbaijan and threat of civil war was prevented, the war in Nagorny-Karabakh was stopped. Despite of occupation of 20% of the territory and the problems of about million refugees and displaced persons, the Republic of Azerbaijan has started to restore its destroyed economy. The new Constitution was adopted in 1995, which guarantees the rights to all nationalities and ethnicities, regardless their race, religion and language. The Republic is in the way of construction of the really democratic and secular state. The different religious confessions peacefully coexist in Azerbaijan. The President is the guarantor of the rights and freedoms of all citizens regardless their national belonging.

Azerbaijan – one of the few Muslim countries, which maintains close friendly, economic and political relations with the State of Israel. Referring to the new democratic Constitution of the Republic of Azerbaijan the Jews freely use their native language, study Hebrew, culture, history and traditions of the Jewish people. In 5 synagogues daily prayers are being carried out, the Jewish kindergarten and two schools of general education were opened.

Being the advanced post of democracy and stability in the region Azerbaijan actively opposes to all manifestations of fundamentalism and anti-Semitism.

We would like to draw your attention to the following figures: as above-mentioned in Azerbaijan are living about 30 thousands of Jews, in Georgia – around 9 thousands, in Armenia – no more than 100 persons. Moreover many businessmen-Jews from USA, Canada, Great Britain and Israel visit Baku. It has appeared the tendency of return of Jews, former citizens of the country, to Azerbaijan, in a result of stabilization of the political situation, reviving of economy, provided opportunities to work in the sphere of business and public life. It is very actual, as far as in addition to 5 synagogues at present about 16 public organizations have been established and got official registration.

The Jewish Diaspora of Azerbaijan has broad contacts with international Jewish organizations like “Sokhnut”, “Aghudat Israel”, “Tshuva Israel”, “Joint”, “Vaad” and etc. In short, in Azerbaijan where the manifestations of anti-Semitism have never taken place, all conditions for Jewish population of the country have been created.

We may note with confidence the high level of tolerance of Azerbaijani people and their ability to peacefully coexist with representatives of all nationalities and ethnicities living in the country.

We, Jews should contribute to the establishment of solid peace, understanding and blessing in the world, including in the second holy Azerbaijani Motherland in the spirit of our eternal Book of Books Torah! Amin!

On behalf of the Jewish Diaspora of Azerbaijan.

**Chairman of the community
of mountainous Jews**

Semyon Ikhiilov

**Chairman of the community
of Ashkenazi Jews**

Gennadiy Zelmanovich

Baku, 17 June 2003