

Written and researched by Yulia Oreshina

Exploring Georgian Jewish Cemeteries

Commissioned by the Foundation for Jewish Heritage as part of the European Union Jewish cemeteries preservation project involving



Foundation for
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ESJF

EUROPEAN JEWISH
CEMETERIES INITIATIVE



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This teacher's pack aimed at secondary school age pupils is part of an EU-funded project, with a consortium of international partners including ESJF (European Jewish Cemeteries Foundation), Centropa and the Foundation for Jewish Heritage to build awareness on both the historical and contemporary significance of Jewish cemeteries. The deep dives project, as part of this programme, has involved developing different projects in seven different European countries, exploring the potential of different historic Jewish cemetery sites for interpretation, local community engagement, developing heritage skills, and for general educational, cultural, artistic and touristic purposes, and trialling the application of new types of activity including the use of digital technologies. The lead partner for this activity is the Foundation for Jewish Heritage. Further information on the Deep Dives:

<https://www.jewishcemeteries.eu/deep-dives/>

The range of Deep Dive activities include a digital audio guide, a photographic exhibition, heritage trails, a poet-in-residence programme, a digital mapping project and a documentary film. For Georgia we have developed these freely downloadable education packs for schools specific to both Georgian Jewish history and Jewish cemeteries in the country, which are uniquely different to other burial grounds across Europe. This pack can be used in any Jewish cemetery in Georgia and is filled with historically informed activities and relevant information to guide and inspire students and teachers visiting Jewish cemeteries. This education pack is available in Georgian and English, in a PDF format, which can either be downloaded and printed out before visiting these cemeteries, and/or easy to view on tablets or smartphones.

This education pack includes:

- an introduction to Jewish cemeteries in Georgia
- historical information on Jewish heritage, Jewish life and Jewish cemeteries in Georgia
- activities including drawing the symbols from a Jewish tombstone and interpreting epitaphs
- customs and traditions of Jewish death and burial
- things to look out for when visiting Jewish cemeteries in Georgia
- some personal stories of Georgian Jewish figures
- further reading, useful links, a glossary and a quiz.

The Foundation for Jewish Heritage and project manager Dr Rachel Lichtenstein would like to thank our partners ESJF and Centropa, particularly Line Manager Ninja Stehr and Country Coordinator Teo Dalakishvili, the designer of this pack Ketevan Javakhishvili and most crucially Professor Yulia Oreshina of the Georgian American University in Tbilisi, who is a historical expert on Georgian Jewish cultural heritage who has researched and produced the content for the pack.

An introduction to Jewish cemeteries in Georgia

- The largest Jewish cemeteries are located in Tbilisi, Akhaltsikhe and Kutaisi.
- Among the oldest surviving Jewish cemeteries in Georgia are those in Akhaltsikhe in the South, Lailashi in the North-West and Ortachala in Tbilisi.
- All these cemeteries are no older than the mid-19th century.
- The oldest Jewish tombstones in Georgia date to the 4th and 5th centuries new era. These tombstones from the necropolis of Mtskheta, were discovered in 1872 and 1938.

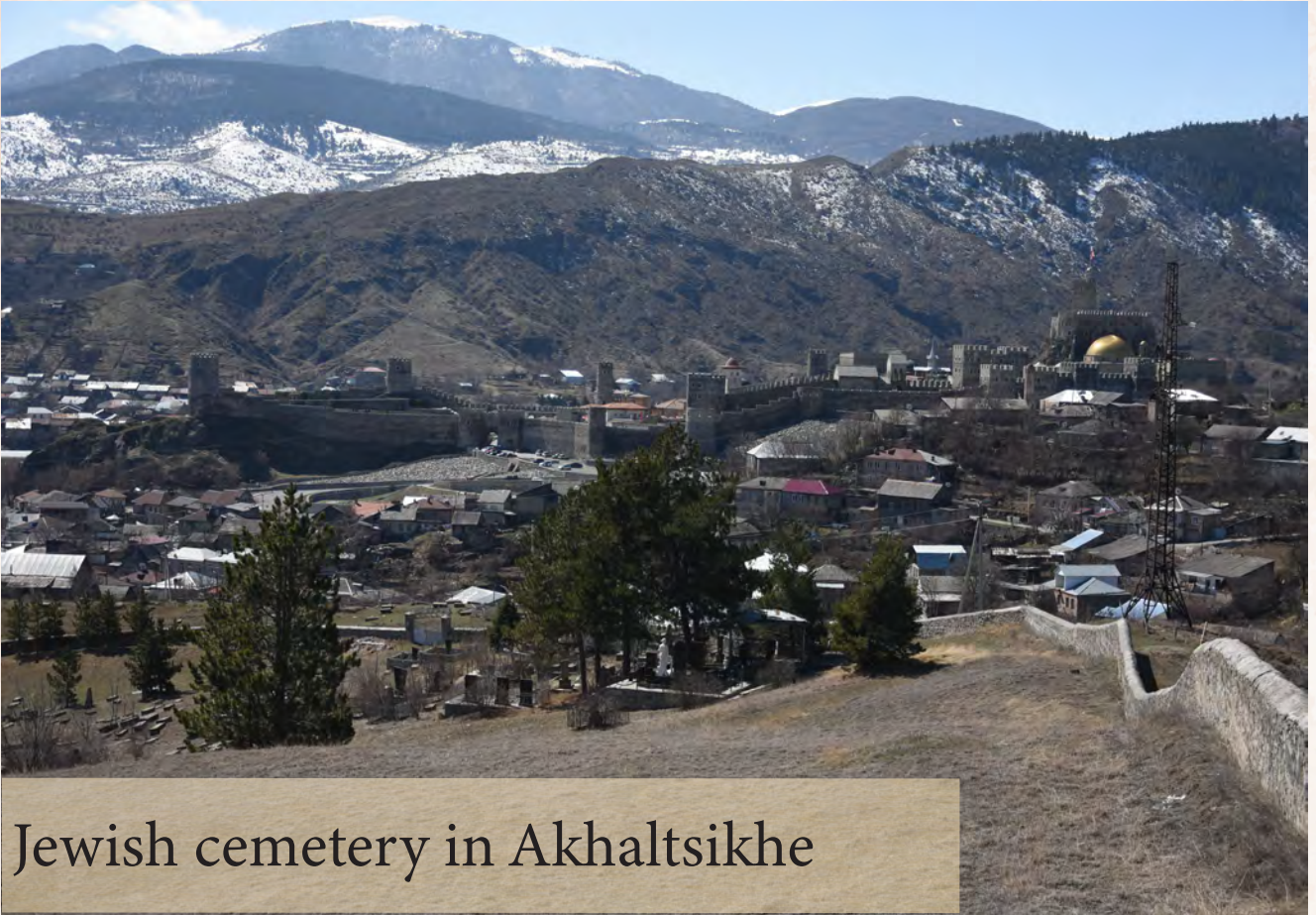


The oldest Jewish tombstones discovered in Georgia in 1872 (on the right) and in 1938 (on the left).

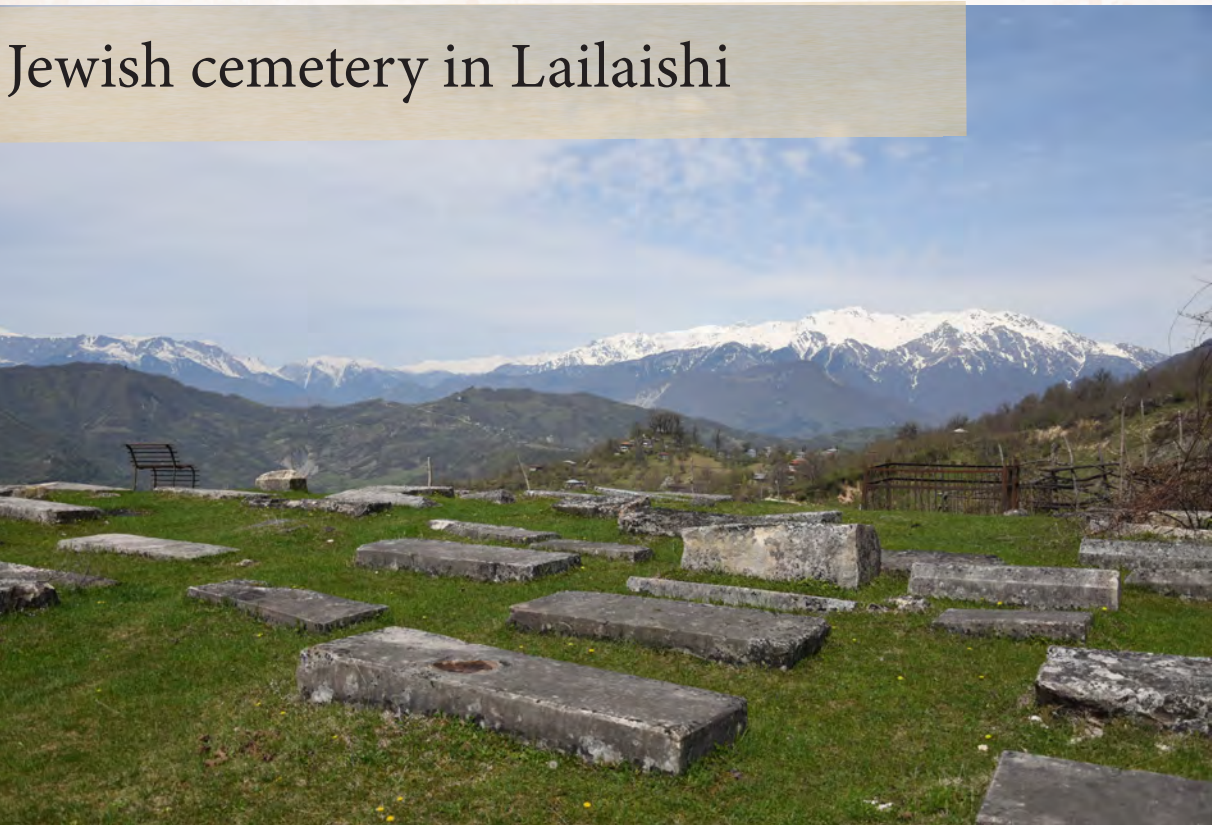
- The most picturesque and interesting cemeteries to visit are located in Lailashi, Akhaltsikhe and Tbilisi.
- The cemetery of Ashkenazi Jews in Navtlughi, Tbilisi, is especially interesting as it is the only cemetery in Georgia where Ashkenazim alone are buried together: in most Georgian Jewish cemeteries the tombstones are either completely Georgian Jewish, or a mix of Georgian Jewish and Ashkenazi.
- The cemetery in Lagodekhi has a special character, since this is the only cemetery related to a Jewish collective farm.



Jewish cemetery in former collective farm Tsiteli gora
Lagodekhi



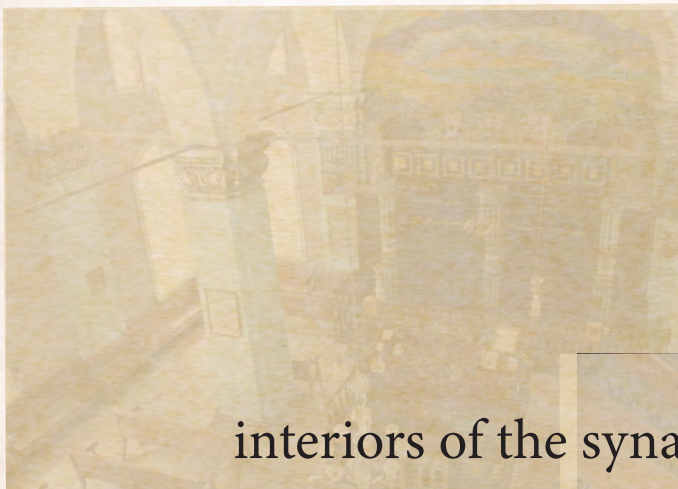
Jewish cemetery in Akhaltsikhe



Jewish cemetery in Lailaishi

Historical information on Jewish heritage and its preservation

- The Jewish diaspora has been a part of European and World history for many centuries.
- The events of the 20th century, such as the Holocaust, the creation of the state of Israel, the dissolution of the Soviet Union and military conflicts - have led to large reductions in the number of Jewish communities in European countries.
- The size of Georgia's Jewish community has dwindled as the local Jewish population has migrated to Israel.
- Currently, Jewish life continues in Tbilisi, Kutaisi, Gori and, seasonally, Batumi.



interiors of the synagogues Oni and Vani



You can find the objects of Jewish material culture, especially synagogues and cemeteries, in various corners of Georgia.

The most important historical monuments are usually protected by law and by the state. However, cemeteries and synagogues are not always on the official list of the protected sites. Nevertheless, they are an important part of the local historical heritage.

By discovering Jewish heritage in your region, you enrich your knowledge of local history and of your own region, as well as playing a role in popularizing and preserving Georgia's Jewish heritage.

Yulia Oreshina finds the first discovered tombstone at the site of the Jewish cemetery in Velistsikhe



Historical information on Georgian Jewish life and cemeteries

Please, note

- ✓ Jews have lived in the territory of Georgia for many centuries
- ✓ It is believed that it's been about 26 thousand years since the first Jews settled near Mtskheta
- ✓ The Jewish presence in Georgia is mentioned in the medieval chronicles such as 'Kartlis Tskhovreba' and the 'Life of Saint Nino'
- ✓ In the Middle Ages, **Georgian Jews** could be serfs just as Georgian non-Jews
- ✓ Most Ashkenazi Jews came to the territory of Georgia from the Russian empire and the USSR in the 19th and 20th centuries
- ✓ 'Mountain Jews' and Lakhlukhs also came to Georgia mostly in the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century
- ✓ In the 1920s and 1930s several Jewish collective farms were organized in Georgia
- ✓ During World War II Georgia became an important destination for the evacuation of people and enterprises from the front line in the western Soviet Union
- ✓ Among the war refugees that Georgia hosted in the period of 1942-1945 were many Ashkenazi Jews from the territories of Poland, Ukraine, Belarus and Bessarabia
- ✓ Georgian Jews were prominent in the struggle for permission to make aliyah from the Soviet Union
- ✓ The letter from 18 heads of Georgian Jewish families to the United Nations (1969) with a request to influence the Soviet government to permit them to leave for Israel was the first document of the movement for aliyah in the USSR
- ✓ A square in Jerusalem is named after Shabtay Elashvili, the Georgian Jew who organized the letter from the 18 families to the UN
- ✓ The majority of Jewish population made aliyah from Georgia in two large waves, in the 1970s and in the 1990s



Shabtay elashvili square
in Jerusalem

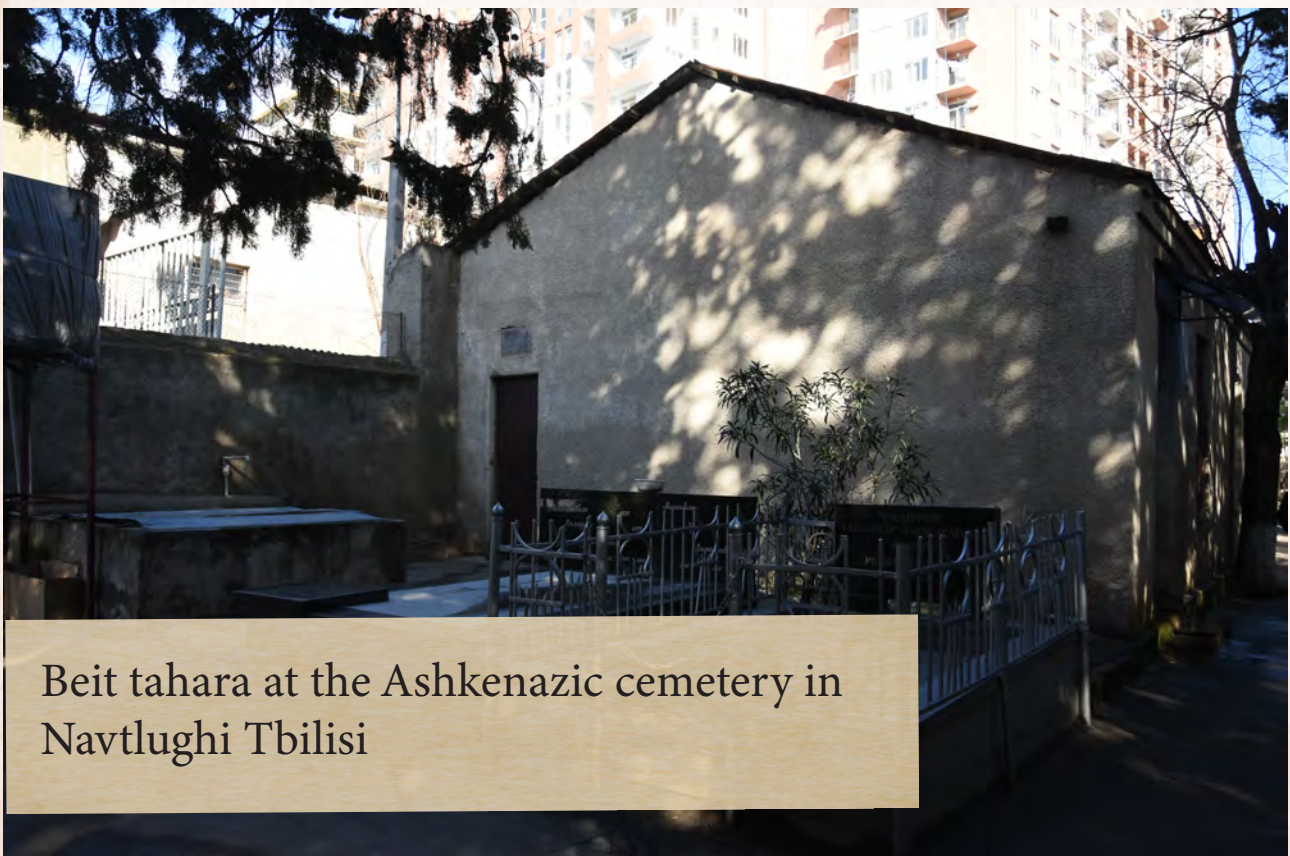
Did you know?

1. For the Jewish cemetery, the most important element is the burial underground. Even if there are no tombstones left, the cemetery still exists.
2. There are two types of tomb markers: matzeva and ohel.
3. Matzeva (Hebrew - tombstone) is a vertical or a horizontal tombstone.
4. Most traditional matzevot in Georgia are horizontal.
5. Vertical tombstones became common in Georgia in the Soviet period.
6. Ohel (Hebrew - tent) is a structure of four walls and a roof, larger than matzeva in size.
7. Most ohel-like constructions in Georgia consist of a metal fence with a roof. Their main function is to protect the grave from weather conditions - rain and snow.
8. Ohel-like structures are also used in non-Jewish cemeteries in Georgia.
9. In Georgia one can find tombstones of a special form, which goes back to the form of Jewish tombstones in ancient Israel. It is widespread in Samtskhe-Javakheti in the south of Georgia.
10. In the village of Lailashi in north western Georgia double-pitched conical gravestones are widespread. Similar tombstones are found in the medieval cemeteries of the Crimea.



Customs and traditions of Jewish death and burial

- In many European countries **Chevra Kadisha**, or Jewish burial societies were established, to prepare the body for burial.
- Georgian Jews did not have an official Chevra Kadisha, rather all members of the community participated in the ritual cleansing of the bodies and burial
- The preparation of the bodies for burial is often carried out in special buildings near the cemeteries **beit tahara** (houses of purification).



Beit tahara at the Ashkenazic cemetery in Navtlughi Tbilisi

- Family members are not allowed to wash and clothe the dead, as they are considered unclean. This ritual was performed by men for male bodies, and women for female bodies for a fee. The body of the deceased is usually watched and not left alone before the burial.
- Georgian Jews usually bury the dead on the same day as they died, before sunset, if they can complete all the rituals of the funeral rite within that period.
- The Jewish religion requires the distance between graves to be a minimum of 40 cm.
- After bathing, the body is dressed in a shroud and placed in a coffin. Georgian Jews took the deceased out of the coffin at the cemetery before lowering into the grave.
- In Georgia, in the event of the death of a married woman, her **ketubah** is buried with her
- In Kutaisi, there was a tradition to bury with a silver ring engraved with the name of the deceased.
- If the deceased was over 13 years old, the funeral procession would stop in the courtyard of the synagogue, where songs would be sung by the **hakham** to the departed.
- The women would leave the funeral procession and wash their faces and hands by the river. One of the women would bring a vessel with water from the river to the house of the deceased, so that the others could wash their hands.
- During the first seven days of mourning, also called *abeloba*, only dairy food is served at the home of the mourners.
- On the seventh and thirtieth days of mourning, large feasts with meat are allowed.
- On the thirteenth day, the family of the deceased visits the cemetery, and the men drink wine and eat bread near the cemetery.
- In the house of the grieving family, an eternal lamp (or candle) is lit, and the clothes and shoes of the deceased person are laid out on their bed.
- The mourning period ends after a year, which is calculated according to the lunar calendar.
- Cemeteries are visited on **yortzait** (anniversary of death), **Tisha B'Av** and on the eve of **Yom Kippur**.

Activities such as drawing the symbols from a Jewish tombstone and interpreting epitaphs in Georgian Jewish cemeteries

Tombstones and epitaphs are an important source of information. Most of the epitaphs share similar structure and contain several recognizable key details. By identifying these details, it is usually possible to obtain basic information for primary research, such as the name, gender, and date of death of the buried person.

Please note

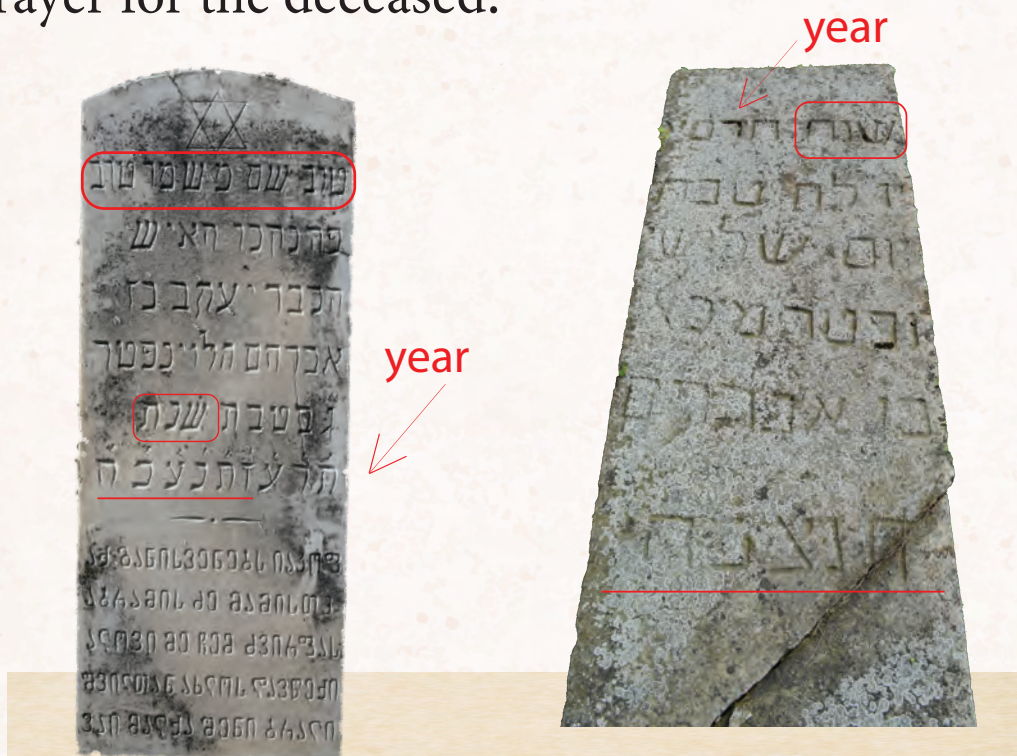
- Epitaphs in Georgia up to the beginning of the 20th century were often written only in Hebrew.
- Hebrew text is written and read from right to left.
- The 20th century epitaphs in Georgia are often bilingual, containing Hebrew and Georgian or Hebrew and Russian inscriptions.
- Texts of epitaphs in the local language may contain different information than the Hebrew text.
- Bilingual epitaphs in Georgia often contain information about the mother of the deceased in the Hebrew text and information about the father in the Georgian text.



Important designators to decipher information in the Hebrew text:

- **פנ** - two letters of the Hebrew alphabet, pey and nun, usually found at the beginning of the epitaph. This is the abbreviation of the words “buried here” - po nitman.
- in Georgia you can find whole phrases beginning the epitaph such **אבן המצבה זאת מצבה אבן / זאת** (this is the tombstone), **זה אבן על הקבר** (this is the stone on the grave)
- For a female burial in Georgia you can find such phrase: **סכרה אשת חיל מי ימצאורחק מפנינים** (“Who will find a good wife? Above pearls the price of her”).
- For male burials in Georgia this phrase is widespread: **הולדו טוב שם משמן טוב ויום המות מיום** (“A [good] name is better than good oil, and the day of death is better than the day of birth”).
- **בן** - “son”, **בת** - “daughter” connect the name with the patrimonial, so you can easily identify the name and work out the gender of the deceased if you find it
- Before the name of the mother, it is usually written **הנולדת מן**
- born from - or is given a shortening **הנ'מן**
- **לפק** (li-frat katan) - “according to a small account” - the abbreviation which is added after the date to indicate that the year of death is given without the thousands. It is an additional useful marker for finding and determining the date of death in the epitaph.
- **שנת** - which means “year” - is one of the most widespread markers for finding the date of death in epitaphs in Georgia.

- **תנצבה** - the five letters of the Hebrew alphabet which most often complete the tombstone inscription. They are an abbreviation of a traditional blessing for the deceased - “let his soul be tied in a knot of life”.
- An alternative to this abbreviation in Georgia can be: **אמן כן יהיה רצון** (Amen, let it be [God's will]), a part of the prayer for the deceased.



Task: Analyse the epitaph visible in the picture and find as much information about the deceased person as possible using the key designators from the Hebrew text given above (i.e. the beginning and the end of the epitaph, gender). Bonus: use the info from the next page to calculate the date.



How to calculate a date

Each letter in the Hebrew alphabet has a numerical value:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
א	ב	ג	ד	ה	ו	ז	ח	ט	י	כ
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	20
(a) Alef	B, V Bet	G Gimel	D Dalet	H He	W, V Vav	Z Zayin	H, X Chet	T Tet	J, I, Y Yod	K Kaph
12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22
ל	מ	נ	ס	ע	פ	צ	ק	ר	ש	ת
30	40	50	60	70	80	90	100	200	300	400
L Lamed	M Mem	N Nun	S Samekh	(o) Ayin	P, F Pe	Ts Tsade	K, Q Qoph	R Resh	S, Sh Shin	T Tav



Please note that there are 5 letters (marked with circles) that can be written in two ways, either of which you may see when reading the epitaph. The form on the right always appears at the end of the word.

Jews traditionally count years from the Biblical creation of the world. Numbers are indicated by letters. For example, the year 5765 would be written as shown above (read from right to left). If you add together the numerical values of all the letters, you will get the number 5765.



In order to translate the date to the Gregorian calendar, you need to:

- 1) Add the numerical values of all letters (see table above),
- 2) Ignore the thousands column (often it is not even included),
- 3) Add 1240 to the resulting number. You do it because the year 5000 in the Jewish calendar fell on the year 1240 according to our own.

Tasks : Visit the Jewish cemetery closest to your location:

- What do you see?
- Are there any tombstones?
- Can you see the epitaphs?
- Look closer at these inscriptions and try to analyse them.

Are these epitaphs bilingual?

- Which language is most dominant?
- Try and compare two language versions of the epitaph to each other: find all possible information about the deceased person in the Hebrew version using the key designators which you already know.
 - Does the non-Hebrew text on the gravestones contain the same information?

Decorations which are frequently present on tombstones, often have symbolic meaning and can provide additional information about the buried person.

The main symbols which one can find on a Jewish tombstone in Georgia are:



The Star of David (Magen David) is a six-pointed star. It is a symbol of the Jewish people, Judaism, Israel. According to medieval legend, it was the sign of the Jewish king David who placed it on the shields of the soldiers in his army. It is the main national symbol of the state of Israel.



Cohen was a priest in the Jerusalem Temple during the days of the ancient state of Israel. After the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in the 1st century CE. Cohen priests lost most of their functions, except for the implementation of a special priestly blessing on major holidays during prayer. For this blessing, they put their hands together as shown in the picture.

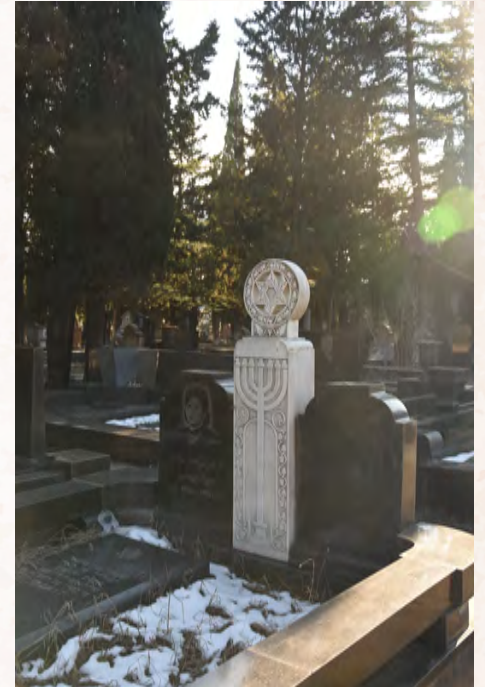


The lamp (menorah) is a golden menorah, which, according to tradition, was present in the Jerusalem Temple. Its image is one of the most ancient symbols of Judaism.



Shabbat candles symbolize one of the most important religious laws of Judaism - the observance of Shabbat. Female tombstones are often decorated with symbolic Sabbath candles. Such a symbol on the tombstone indicates not only the gender of the deceased, but also that she was righteous and observed religious canons.

Task: Please find the symbols on the pictures you see. What are the meaning of these symbols?



Task: Visit the Jewish cemetery closest to your location.

- Find the symbols on the tombstones and draw as many of them as you can.
- Which symbol is the most common in the Jewish cemetery you visited?
- Which one is the rarest?
- Try and draw in detail the tombstone which has the most widespread symbol and the grave with the rarest symbol on it.

Task: Spot the difference:



Things to look out for when visiting Jewish cemeteries in Georgia

When you visit a Jewish cemetery in Georgia:

- Find out what is the most widespread form of the tombstone. Is it vertical or horizontal?
- Find the rarest form of the tombstone in the cemetery. Take a picture of it or draw it.
- See whether you can try, using your knowledge of the main elements of Hebrew epitaphs, to find the newest and the eldest tombstone. Can you find a tombstone older than from the mid-19th century?
- Can you identify any ohel-like construction? What does it look like? Which materials are used for the construction?
- Which language is most commonly used on the epitaphs apart from Hebrew? Is it Georgian?
- Are the surnames you can see on the tombstones Georgian or Ashkenazic?
- Can you find some non-Georgian families? When did these people die? Might they be someone who came to Georgia during World War II to find refuge from the Holocaust?
- Try and look for the **וְנַם תְּדַלְנָה** or **וְנַם 'נָה** on the tombstone - this indicates that the epitaph contains the mother's name of the deceased person.

Some personal stories of Georgian Jewish figures

Davit Baazov (1883–1947) was an important public and religious figure in Georgia. He was a Zionist activist and enlightenment enthusiast. He got his education in Jewish philosophy and history in Belarus and Lithuania. In 1903, he attended the Sixth Zionist Congress in Basel. In 1918, he founded the first Georgian-Jewish Zionist paper *ebraelis khma* ("The Voice of Jew") and helped organize the All-Jewish Congress in Tbilisi. Together with his son Hertzell Baazov he was actively involved in Jewish education, organizing Jewish schools across Georgia.



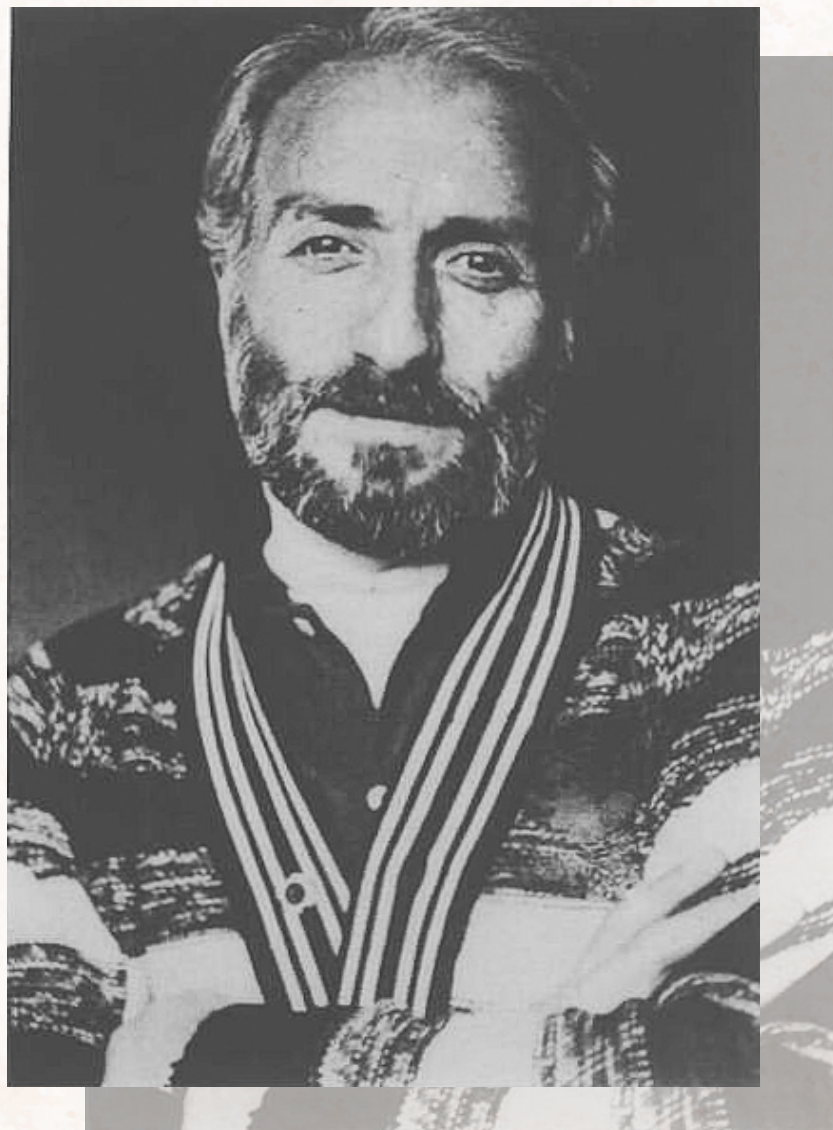
Shalom Koboshvili (1876 – 1941) was a Georgian Jewish painter who specialized in drawing and painting Jewish life and traditions. Born in a poor Jewish family in Akhaltsikhe, Koboshvili was discouraged in his interest in art by his family. He was a self-taught artist. In 1937 he became a security guard at the newly established Jewish Historic-Ethnographic Museum in Tbilisi where he painted most of his known works.



Iosif Eligulashvili (1890 - 1952), born in Kutaisi, was a Georgian Jewish politician and public figure, member of the Constituent Assembly of Georgia. In 1921, together with Ekvtime Takaishvili, he evacuated the national treasures of Georgia (the treasury and all exhibits of Georgian material culture) to France. During World War II, he rescued Georgian Jews from German captivity together with Mikhail Kedia.



Nisan Babalishvili (1938 - 1986), born in Tbilisi, was a Soviet philologist, linguist, scholar of Semitic studies and biblical scholar. In 1972 Babalishvili defended his dissertation on the topic "Jewish epigraphic inscriptions in Georgia (XVIII-XIX centuries)". His main work is devoted to the study of Jewish epigraphic monuments in Georgia. In this work he published and commented on 101 inscriptions from different parts of Georgia. He also studied the inscriptions of the Mountain Jews and the Karaite epigraphy of the Crimea.



Margarita Biniaurishvili-Eligulashvili (1919-1980), born in Kutaisi, was a doctor and surgeon who worked during the Second World War in a field hospital and served in the territories of Belarus, Poland, Germany, saving hundreds of wounded. After the war Margarita worked in Tbilisi's 1st City Hospital and as the head of the surgical department at the Polyclinic.



Faina Baazova (1911-1980) was a lawyer, historian and publicist. She wrote books: "David and Herzl Baazov" (1976), "On the protection of the honour and reputation of Georgian Jewry" (1979), "Lepers" (1980). During the economic trials in the USSR, when most of the accused were Georgian Jews, Faina Baazova defended them not only in Tbilisi, but also in Moscow.



A quiz for students to test their knowledge with additional activities such as finding the oldest tombstone

Test your knowledge!





QUIZ:

Can you find...

The beginning of the epitaph

The date of death

The gender of the deceased

The end of the epitaph

A menorah

A Magen David

Cohen hands

A shabbat candle

The oldest tombstone in the cemetery



Further reading, useful links and a glossary

Glossary

Aliyah - from Hebrew "ascension", migration of Jews from the Diaspora to the land of Israel.

Ashkenazi - a Jewish sub-ethnos that comes from medieval Germany and Eastern European countries, the Jewry of Central and Eastern Europe.

Beit tahara - a house, usually adjacent to the cemetery, for carrying out funeral rites in Jewish tradition.

Chevra Kadisha - an organization of Jewish men and women who oversee that the bodies of deceased Jews are prepared for burial according to Jewish tradition and take care of these processes.

Epitaph - an inscription on the tombstone.

Georgian Jews - one of the oldest Jewish diaspora communities in the World, acculturated in Georgian society, sharing its language and elements of culture.

Hakham - (Hebrew חכם) a wise and learned person, a Torah scholar; in Eastern Jewish communities, it is equivalent to the title of rabbi.

Ketubah - a Jewish marriage contract.

Matzeva - a Jewish tombstone.

Ohel - from Hebrew - "tent" - a Jewish tomb structure that has four walls and a roof, larger than matzeva in size.

Tisha B'Av, or the 9th day of the month of Av - is an annual day of mourning in Judaism, the date when a number of disasters in Jewish history occurred, including the destruction of both the First and the Second Temples in Jerusalem. According to the Jewish calendar, it is usually in July or August.

Yom Kippur is the holiest day of the Jewish year. On that day Jews traditionally fast and ask for forgiveness for their own wrongdoings from God and from all human beings.

Yahrzeit - in translation from Yiddish, it means anniversary, and it is the anniversary of an individual's death, a commemorative day.

Useful links:

ESJF European Jewish Cemeteries Initiative:

<https://www.esjf-surveys.org/surveys/>

International Jewish Cemetery Project (by the International Association of Jewish Genealogical Societies)

<http://iajgscemetery.org/eastern-europe>

Online Worldwide Burial Registry by Jewishgen (JOWBR)

<https://www.jewishgen.org/databases/Cemetery/tree/CemList.htm>

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