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**HISTORY OF JEWISH COMMUNITIES
IN REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA FROM THE
BEGINNINGS UNTILL 2000**

DOCTORAL THESIS
- SUMMARY -

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„Most history books about Jews are written by Jews to Jews, or by scientists for scientists. But Jewish history is very fascinating, very interesting, so incredible to remain the private property of Jews and scientists”¹. Most research undertaken recently on the history of Jews in the Romanian area focuses mainly on the left side of the Prut communities. There are few studies that approaches Jews life over the Prut. This thesis entitled „*History of Jewish communities in Republic of Moldova from the beginnings until 2000,*” is intended to be an approach test of this ethnic components of the Bessarabian population and aims to highlight the past of Jewish community on this geographical area.

¹ Max I. DIMONT, *Evreii, Dumnezeu și Istoria*, revised and adapted edition, translated by: Irina Horea, Hasefer Publishing House, Bucharest, 1997, p. 9.

The theme chosen treats an historical and theological field as actual and important as delicate and sensitive to modern society. The motivation of this work is based on two elements: first, the study lack on this subject in the Romanian space, and secondly, the abundance of information that can be extracted regarding life, work and changes occurred in the bosom of the Bessarabian Jews. Complexity of themes regarding this ethnic community along the time requires special attention and at the same time is extremely tempting for the researcher, elements that in present conditions justify the increased interest towards the topic.

The work is founded on historical and analytical method and it contains five chapters. The first chapter „The Jews: chosen nation and people of the word” is an introduction in thematic by approaching the general historical framework of the Hebrew people. The chapter begins with the presentation of the concepts „Judaean”, „Israelite” and „Hebrew”. In the Old Testament, the word „Judaean” is derived from the name of Judah, the fourth son of Jacob (Gn. 29.35, 49.8) and it means „to thank”, „to praise”, „praised”, „the one praised”, „praised is the Lord”, „the price of praise”, „confession”, „confession of praise”, „praise and song of praise”. The name Jew is „a title of glory” and it is the one who thanks for something, for God's

greatnesses. By incipient politic and religious dismemberment of Israelite kingdom after Solomon's death (930 BC), the word „Israel” was bounded in the Northern Territory, while the Davidic dynasty kingdom took the name Judah and the inhabitants wore the name „Judaean”. Only the Book of Esther (4:16) the word „Judaean” receives religious connotation which has by its etymology, namely the one who brings glory to the One God. Loosely, „Judaean” word is used freely to indicate the national origin and includes all persons belonging Jewish race, scattered around the world.

Concept עִבְרִי („ivri”) - Hebrew we meet for the first time in the Old Testament books (Gen. 14.13; 39.14; 39.17; 40.15; 41.12; 43.32; Ex. 2.6; Dt. 15.12; I Kings 4.9; 13.3; 14.11; Jer. 34.9; Jonah 1.9). Etymology is uncertain. Could derive from עֵבֶר Eber, son of Shelah, grandson of Shem and ancestor of Abraham (Gen. 11.10 to 17), or Ibri, one of the sons of Merari (I Chronicals 24.27). In the Bible עִבְרִי „Ivri” occurs 34 times (Gn. 39.17; 40.15; 41.12; Ex. 1.16; 2.6 to 7; 3.18; 5.3; 7.16; 9.1; 21.2; I Kings 13.3; 14.21; Dt. 15,12; Jeremiah 34.14 etc.), of which 18 cases represented the Jews unlike their Egyptian masters. Initially, Eber term referred to „any man translocating,

crossing places like a nomad”². He later came to refer specifically to Abraham and his descendants (Isaiah 3.18; 5.3). Term „Eber” sends to „a geographical origin”: other side, across the river (Joshua 24.2 to 3).

After leaving Egypt, mostly Jews are mentioned as „Israelites”. The term *יִשְׂרָאֵל* - „Israel” derives from Jacob, the third patriarch, also called Israel, a name given on the occasion of his return from Mesopotamia when he crossed the brook Jabbok after his fight with God’s Angel at the Peniel river: „Your name won’t be Jacob any longer, but Israel, because you with God and with men and won” (Gn. 32.22 to 32). Patriarch reveals his true name thus receiving a new identity. St. Basil the Great suggests that by the name of Jacob and Israel should understand two essential things: initiation of those unaccomplished and the high accomplishment of virtue. To change a name is to change the status or condition, to start a new life. The name Jacob, who alluded to a betrayal and represented human ascetic effort, for „kingdom of heaven is violently attacked” (Matthew 11,12), has now been changed to Israel which

² *Biblia de Studiu pentru o viață deplină*, editors: Donald C. STAMPS, M. DIV, Translators: Aurelian Marinescu, Aurel Mihalcea, Răzvan Mihăilescu, Bucharest, 2000, p. 27.

means „he who struggled with God”³(Gen. 32.28), „warrior of God”, „victorious of God”, „the man who struggled with God”, „the man who affronted God”, „one who emulates in the Lord”, „God finders”, „The man who fights with God in prayer, asking His goods”, „Prince from the grace of God”⁴, „God Who is far from sin”⁵.

Currently, the term „Hebrew” means any descendant of the ancient Judaeans who practice Judaeian religion and who make part of an ethnic or cultural group spread worldwide. Jews represent a collective being specified by religion, tradition, history, culture, life forms that can not be separated one of the other.

The idea of a chosen people doesn't suggest a preference for a people based on discrimination on any number of people. This status of being chosen, set apart, brings responsibility of living in a way fated to indicate to God who created them for His glory. People aren't chose because of something, but for something, into a particular purpose. To be the one elected

³ Paul JOHNSON, *A History of the Jews*, Phoenix Giant, London, 1995, p. 20.

⁴ Fritz BRAUN, *Noi, cei din Israel. Cum s-au format națiunile din Israel*, revised edition, preface: Constantin Moisa, translated from German by Monica Dan, Stephanus Publishing House, Bucharest, 1996, p. 59.

⁵ Sfântul AMBROZIE al Milanului, *Scrieri, Tâlcuiri la Sfânta Scriptură*, Partea întâi, in: PSB 52, translated by: Pr. prof. Teodor Bodogae, Pr. prof. Nicolae Neaga and Prof. Maria Hetco, EIBMBOR, Bucharest, 2007, p. 267.

determine the will to serve and fulfill until end what has to be accomplished (John 4:34). Choosing theology highlights in the same time the status distinctive and special responsibility of people. Israel, as a people, have the mission and responsibility of being a guide for humanity, to communicate for nations the word of God, to confess Him, to become His witnesses (Isaiah 43.12, 44.8). Israel's election is the result of a covenant by which the two parties, God and man undertake mutually to observe certain religious and moral judgments. The condition of the covenant was the obedience. If people decides to walk on Lord's path, to obey commandments, all the blessings of heaven will be provided. On the contrary, if people do not accomplish the conditions of the covenant, then God, is released from His promise and biggest disasters will be sent to people (Dt. 11.26 to 27, 28.15). Israel's election require his moral behavior corresponding to its state of the chosen people of God, called to accomplish its own holiness, to live according Divine order.

Love of God to the Hebrew people was manifested in the gift of the Torah, but „any gift assumes a duty”⁶. God has prepared Torah for Israel, in turn, will use in its human action,

⁶ Walther ZIMMERLI, *Old Testament Theology in Outline*, Translated by David E. Green, John Knox Press, Atlanta, 1978, p. 109.

leading to accomplishment the Divine work of the world creation.

Second chapter, has in attention the beginning of Jewish diaspora in Bessarabia, demographic constitution of Jews during 1810-1941, the organization of community and spiritual and cultural life. Although the majority of Bessarabian Jews are Ashkenazi Jews, first Jews arrived in Moldova were Sephardi Jews, descendants of Jews from Spain and Portugal, which have entered on this territory, mostly in Turkey and the Balkan Peninsula at the beginning of the sixteenth century as merchants and craftsmen and settled here because of the deep sense of hospitality of some of Wallachian lords and their interest in crafts and trade flourishing in a country at the beginning of its development. The geographical position of Bessarabia was a special attraction for immigrants Jews because of anti-Jewish politics visible in Poland. Ashkenazi Jews, meaning the Jews that by origin, language, name, ritual prayers and religious customs are related to those in Poland and Russia, are originate from Germany and refugees after then in Eastern Europe, their ritual is slightly different than the Sephardic and their language was Yiddish in the Middle Ages. Sephardic religious practice and lifestyle are much more liberal than the Ashkenazi Jews, they have created a free cultural life, often more tolerant. Strict

observance of the law is characteristic of this last branch. Both Ashkenazi Jews and Sephardi Jews were appreciated for outstanding qualities in organizing the economy. They brought more income, thereby contributing to the economic development of the country.

During Phanariote epoch we meet Jewish settlements in boroughs: Lăpușna (1735), Orhei (1742), Bălți (1792), Șoldănești and Telenești (1794). Testimonies of Jewish presence in Kishinev are Jewish Cemetery and Brotherhood status for burial aid in 1774, written in Hebrew, reinforced by 144 signatures and approved by Rabbi of Yassy. In the entire Moldova, Census of 1774 found 1323 Jew families to 85,624 Moldovan families, most - 63% - living in cities and boroughs and a third - 37% - in villages. Census reveals that in the same year Jews were mostly in the north of the country - 59 families in Hotin, 163 families in Chernivtsi, 147 families in the boroughs of county Sorocăi (Râșcani, Movilău), 41 families in Botoșani and 171 families in Yassy. Figures accurate in all details of the Hebrew population in Bessarabia can not reproduce. The wherefore of this surprising situation should be sought in historical events of recent decades, which occurred on the one hand repeated and radical changes in political

boundaries, and on the other hand caused massive population displacements both within the country and abroad.

Evolution of Jewish population in Bessarabia was as follows: 1817 - 19 130, 1862 - 78 750, 1871 - 93 600, 1897 - 228 168, 1907 - 120 195, 1910 - 286 000, 1916 - 270 000, 1918 - 270 000, 1924 - 238 000, 1925 - 49 514, 1930 - 206 958, 1940 - 70 000, 1941 - 72 625 people.

Community was a semi-political institution with its own laws, its own customs, its own organization, its officials, but its autonomy was only on religious and social fields. Rabbi and community members were elected by the Jewish people once a year, on the third day after Easter. In 1816 Kahal was divided into two parts: religious and economic. Rabbi with three representatives from each house of prayer deal the spiritual side. The household was run by five members, who had the obligation to fulfill all the indications given by the state. In management responsibility of Kahal was the obligation to care of the schools, perpetuating Jewish traditions and learning Hebrew. Every community had its institutions: the synagogue, ritual bath or *mikve*, *cașer* slaughter, funeral aid association „*Hevra Kadiša*”, educational and charitable associations (hospitals, asylums, home help, and so on).

According to the Statute of 1804, Jews from Bessarabia were divided into four social classes: merchants, craftsmen, farmers and petit-bourgeois status, this stratification has been preserved throughout the nineteenth century. Living mainly in urban centers Jews were hardworking entrepreneurs, independent professionals, doctors, midwives, lawyers, jewelers, silversmiths, blacksmiths, miners, weavers, coachmen, grain merchants, pretzel men, skimmers, moneylenders, excengers and farmers. In 1813, at the request of Jewish craftsmen, Garting - Kishinev governor, approved the establishment of six guilds: the tailors, the carpenters, the woodworkers, the masons, the glassware and the tanners. Jewish guilds had a predominantly economic. Their goal was to defend their economic interests and privileges of language and faith to the authorities. Guild paid tribute state for all Jews, recover the amount by ritual meat tax and other similar taxes. Ensuring tribute was to justify the interest of authorities on the activity of the Jewish guild. To industrial development of the country, Jews have contributed both by craft activity and the one that took place through the creation of large enterprises and also by forming joint-stock companies.

Education and teaching have been one of the permanent purposes of community (Proverbs 13.1; 13.24; 22.6). Bessarabia

was ranked third after Poland and Lithuania in developing a network of Jewish institutions, entitled “*Tarbut*”. They were religious schools at all levels from *heder* (“room”) - institutions for children in preschool age in which children gathered to home teacher and learning to read in the book of prayers - to the *Ieșiva* - higher Talmudic school. In 1837 to Kishinev there were 38 private Jewish schools, each with a teacher. In 1839 to Kishinev was founded a Jewish school for boys, which study Bible, the Talmud, chemistry, physics, accounting and languages: Hebrew, German and Russian. During 1858-1859 the state of public education appears to us as follows: four first degree Jewish schools with 14 teachers and 129 students, a second degree school, with five teachers and 43 students, five public schools, two in Kishinev and one in Hotin, Bălți and Briceni, maintained with the tax that is levied on the sale of candles by synagogues and 122 *headers* of which 96 for boys and 26 for girls being maintained by particulars. If in 1915 operated 36 secondary Jewish schools, 67 primary schools and 340 *headers* in 1938 there were 75 private Jewish schools in Bessarabia.

Till joining the Russian Empire, history has preserved the names of two rabbis from Bessarabia, successors of Hasidism: Phallic and his brother Zalmin Suher. The oldest synagogue in Bessarabia is the one from the village Rașcov, County Camenca

- built in 1749. In 1812 under Prime rabbi of Jewish community in Chisinau, Zalman Mordecai son Şargorodschi the Main Synagogue was built. At the end of 1920 in Bessarabia operated 366 synagogues and prayer houses.

Chapter III concerns of Jewish charities and helping to the congregation members and those of other ethnicities. In the institutional structure of the Jewish communities an important role in social had the philanthropic organizations to assist persons in difficulty. One of the first Jewish charity associations in Bessarabia was founded in 1774 in Kishinev, known *הַבְּרָת הַקַּדִּישָׁה* “*Hevra Kadiša*” or Brotherhood/sacred brotherhood. This Community institution initially provided multiple functions in helping the fraternity members, social support for poors, supportive and creatition of a stronger communion among its members. These functions were gradually reduced to funeral aspects and cemeteries care, actions that were traditionally on a voluntary basis.

The fourth chapter hits the painful problem of hostile attitude against the Jewish people and extermination manner of Jews in Bessarabia and Transnistria. Antisemitism in Bessarabia was marked by disturbances from Ismail and Cahul in 1872. Especially after the assassination of Alexander the IInd (1855-1881), Tsarist authorities directed to Jews both: the state

apparatus anger and the complaint of peasants and non-Russian periphery and continued with pogroms - actions of devastation, depredation and massacre - in 1903 and 1905 in Kishinev, marking with yellow star and ghettoization which meant crossing the stage to internment camp and deportation to Transnistria.

Cession of Bessarabia to the Soviet Union after the ultimatum of 1940 created waves of disappointment and manifestations of physical violence against Jews. We can establish some steps in extermination of the Jews. The first mass extermination took place during the military actions carried out by extermination teams of Einsatzgruppen D, action or operational groups, under General Otto Ohlendorff, and Operative Echelon 1 of Romanian Secret Service and Romanian Armies 3 and 4, who indulged in executions during sporadic operations throughout the region. Extermination methods were different: shooting, hanging, poisoning, drowning, butchering, cremation, starvation, uncontrolled epidemics, diseases, provoked exhaustion, torture until redemption or suicide. The second stage of genocide took place in the period when Jews were in temporary camps and ghettos in Bessarabia during August-September 1941. The last stage of the final solution was the deportation to Transnistria during September-November

1941. Estimates of the number of victims and survivors among Jews differ from one author to another, depending on the sources used, referred geographical area and political orientation of the authors. Bessarabia lost between 200 000 and 206 731 of Jews.

The last chapter entitled „Jewish community between 1944-2000” is on the development of cultural and religious life of the Jews after the Shoah, their return to the Promised Land and the Jewish role in the development of the country. Between 1946-1967 Jewish life is in a great constraint: religious activity is tracked, publication of books in Hebrew and various articles that would be content pages in Jewish history are prohibited. According to the first post-war census in the USSR that took place only in 1959 has been established a total of 2 267 000 of Jews. Statistical Yearbook of the Republic of Moldova sets the following figures of Jewish population: 95 107 in 1959, 98 072 in 1970, 80 124 in 1979, 65 836 in 1989 and 3628 in 2004.

During 1947-1962 rabbi of Jewish community in Kishinev was Iosiv Ș. Epelboim followed by Rabbi Lev M. Smoliak, and in 1990, rabbi of Kishinev and Moldova is Zalman Leib Abelschii. In 2000 in Moldova have been operating ten synagogues, three in Transnistria: Two in Tiraspol and one in Bender. Although Diaspora is a long test route for

any Jew, is surety that coincide with the initial and final stage: Eretz Israel. 60 000 people of Jewish nationality have emigrated from Bessarabia during the years 1897-1917. Under Leonid Brezhnev's regime between 1971 and 1982, could go to Israel 300 000 Jews. From Moldova, during 1970-1990 were repatriated to Israel or have emigrated to the U.S., Canada and Germany about 150 000 people. After a halt during the Andropov-Chernenko, the *alyia* resumed in 1985, as a result of coming to power of M. Gorbachev, he allowed the emigration of 400,000 Jews that left in Israel between 1989 and 1991. In 1997 from Moldova immigrated to Israel 1404 people. By 2000 there were numerous immigration of Jews from Moldova to Israel, the U.S. and Germany. In total in Israel live more than 100 000 citizens of Moldovan Jews.

Despite of an undeniable evidence the Jews laboured for the welfare of this country. By occupations and crafts that were practiced since ancient times, Jewish population was actively involved in social and economic life of the country. They contributed to the economic, scientific and cultural life of the country.

History of the Jewish people form an entirety so complex and diverse that we can not show the entire wealth, but rather we try to highlight the fundamental axes that deeply marks it. We

are not allowed to draw a veil of forgetfulness over the past Jewish history. The past, when exposed according to truth, are ushered out not things themselves that have passed, but words conceived of their images, which they have set in heart like an imprint. We may conclude with the words of the Song of Moses: „Remember the days of old, consider the years of many generations” (Dt. 32.7).