



## A Study on the Religious Life of Harbin Jewish Community in Modern Times

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### Abstract

In the early 20th century, tens of thousands of Jews from Eastern Europe and Russia lived or temporarily in northeast China, and Harbin was the largest Jewish settlement. The Jewish community in Harbin has built three synagogues. With its formal religious activities and adherence to national customs, it has not only enhanced its own national unity and cohesion, but also exerted a profound influence on the Jewish nation in maintaining Jewish values, Jewish clan identity, and being well versed in Jewish history and tradition. With the joint efforts of community leaders and rabbis, religious activities in Harbin Jewish community were carried out efficiently, which enabled diaspora Jews to maintain a unified belief and provided a strong guarantee for the realization of the Zionist ideal, the organization of Jewish migration to Palestine and the revival of the national state in the later period. At the same time, the religious life of Harbin Jewish community also fully reflects the characteristics of the national character and exclusivity of Judaism, both of which have had a great impact on the values and traditional customs of Judaism. To understand the basic characteristics of the two is helpful to understand the essence of the enduring renewal of Jewish culture.

**Key words:** Jews; Judaism; Harbin

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As we all know, the Jewish nation is an ancient nation with great influence on the world. Its number is few and its fate is bumpy. Judaism is the religion of the Jewish nation, which is accompanied by the Jewish nation nearly three thousand years of historical evolution and enduring. In the era when Jews were displaced and scattered everywhere, Judaism, as the “religion, philosophy and way of life of Jews” (Encyclopedia Judaica, 1972), was like a strong spiritual bond to help Jews continue to develop and adhere to their own national characteristics, and closely linked Jews all over the world. Guiding their living ethics, moral norms, codes of conduct, social and spiritual ideals and aesthetic values. For this reason, the study of Jewish religious life should be an indispensable part of academic work. This paper focuses on the religious history of Harbin Jewish community in modern times, and focuses on the community culture and social issues related to religion, in order to better understand the way of survival and development of the Jewish nation under the multicultural background at that time.

## 1. JUDAISM AND THE DIASPORA VIEW OF HARBIN JEWS

### 1.1 History of the Jewish Diaspora

The Jewish nation was first formed and appeared in West Asia and North Africa on the southeast coast of the Mediterranean Sea, which is today’s Middle East. In terms of ethnic origin, the Jews are homologous with the Semitic Amorites who founded the ancient Babylonian kingdom, and they are a branch of the Semitic language family (Xu, 2004). With a history of more than 1,800 years, the Jewish people had to leave their homes and live a life of displacement outside the land of Israel. From religious persecution to economic restrictions, from discrimination and hatred to Hitler’s anti-Jewish massacre, the footprints of the Jewish people spread all over the

world. The original word “Galut” comes from the Bible and takes the meaning of “exile”. Originally, it refers to the ancient Jewish prisoners who were carried away to Babylon. Later, it developed into a theological concept, namely “Galut thought”, which refers to the Jews who were forced to leave Israel and sojourn in a foreign land. Jews believed that “Galut” was a punishment imposed on them by God. Those who suffered the punishment would lose their homes and suffer discrimination, but this state would not last forever. As long as the law was obeyed, God would eventually intervene and liberate the Jews and return to their native land. The Jewish diaspora lasted for a long time and spread widely, from the small land of Palestine to the Middle East, then the Mediterranean coast, from Babylon to Spain, from Italy into the hinterland of Europe, from Western Europe to Eastern Europe, from Europe to America, East Asia and even Australia, scattered in every corner of the world. Wherever they settle temporarily, they quickly adapt and establish their own community culture. From the diaspora history of the Jewish nation, we can find that diaspora provides Jews with more opportunities for self-development, diaspora develops the Jewish nation from a regional nation to a global nation, and a single national culture becomes the source of influence on Western civilization and even world culture. As Martin Gilbert, a British historian, put it: “The greatness of the Jews was their ability to adapt to the ever-changing places in which they lived.” (Marcus, 2004) This ability came first from the Jewish diaspora, and the great significance of Jewish diaspora history is self-evident.

## 1.2 Tracing the Origin of Harbin Jews

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, about 1.5 million Jews lived in Eastern Europe, gradually forming the world’s largest Jewish diaspora, including 500,000 in Poland, where Jews began to live in concentrated market towns and villages. Between 1772 and 1795, after the three partitions of Poland by Russia, Austria and Prussia, Poland’s Jews became emigres under Russian rule, and the number of Jews living in Russia surged to 900,000. (Eban, 1986, pp.22-252) For Jewish prejudices and prevention, the Russian government formulated various anti-Semitic policies to limit the activities of Jews, including setting up “fence zone” to live in, enticing and forcing Jews to convert to Orthodox Christianity, forcing Jewish teenagers to do military service, setting the percentage of Jewish students enrolled in school, etc. The living environment of Jews was deteriorating. In particular, the assassination of Tsar Alexander II in 1881, due to a Jewish woman among the suspects, Russia started a large-scale mass murder of Jews, the famous “Kishinev Massacre” and “Belis case” shocked the world. At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, although the number of Jews in Russia was close to 5 million, about 2 million Jews chose to leave in order to escape persecution, thus setting off the largest collective

migration movement.

At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Tsarist Russia intensified its policy of aggression and expansion in the Far East and occupied Northeast China by building the Middle East Railway. Among them, some Jews came to Harbin with the Russian Middle East railway construction team and the railway guard army. These people are the earliest Jews to emigrate to Harbin. This group of Jews decided to choose Harbin to start a new life, mainly influenced by two factors: on the one hand, for economic reasons, Jews keenly noticed the business opportunities derived from the construction of the railway; On the other hand, attracted by Russia’s Far Eastern immigration policy, the Tsarist government strongly encouraged Jews to move to the “Manchurian paradise”, claiming that any Jew here would be given freedom of religion, unlimited business rights, and access to unlimited schools (Tockyer, 1992). The free living environment and unprecedented business opportunities promoted the rapid growth of the number of Jews in Harbin. In order to facilitate communication and exchanges in economic and trade activities, religious culture and other aspects, 32 Jewish entrepreneurs signed the Agreement on Jews Living in Harbin in December 1902 (Liu, 2006). On February 16, 1903, Harbin Jewish Association was officially established, which was the first Jewish society organization in Harbin’s history. Since then, the Jewish community has existed in Harbin for more than half a century, with various welfare groups constantly springing up, including sports, culture, medical care, etc., gradually becoming the largest Jewish settlement in the Far East.

## 1.3 The Influence of religious Belief on Jewish Diaspora

According to statistics, there were more than 500 Jews in Harbin in 1903 and about 3,000 Jews in 1906 (Bulletin Association of Former Residents of China, 2000). During the diaspora of the Jewish nation, once they settled down in some cities or towns, they began to actively organize religious activities to find spiritual support. It can be said that wherever there were Jews, there would be Jewish societies, prayer houses and synagogues. Judaism has an important influence on Jewish people to maintain national traditions in foreign countries, especially in political, material, spiritual and cultural aspects, which are mainly reflected in the following four points:

First, the function of religious donation and charity relief was fully developed, which greatly improved the living conditions of the Jews. The Hebrew scriptures advocate charity and generous donations. Harbin Jews set up charity associations to effectively fulfill the concept of charity in the Jewish faith. For example, in December 1907, the Jewish Women’s Charity was established to provide living expenses, rent, winter fuel, clothing and other necessities for poor women and children (Qu and Kaufman, 2005, p.379). In 1907, the Jewish Free Canteen provided free or half-cost lunch for poor Jews (Qu and

Li, 2004, p.318); The Jewish nursing home provides accommodation and relief for 24 elderly Jews, and the Jewish Society for the Relief of Poverty provides medical treatment for 25,800 people every year regardless of nationality (Fang, 1997).

Second, the believers strictly abide by the religious diet rules, according to the Jewish customs to kill livestock, to maintain the purity of the Jewish nation. Harbin Jews abide by the strict “kosher law”, and people who eat non-kosher food will be discriminated against by their peers. There are even unwritten laws not to beg for food. Jews set up butcher shops, bakeries, coffee and tea shops and restaurants for themselves to buy and eat. For example, Kagan opened a butcher shop in the old City Street. E. Magin has opened the Magin Bakery on Da’an Street in Daoli District; E.A. Katz opened Mir Aguer Coffee and Tea on Center Street.

Third, the rabbis acquiesced to the idea of Zionism and restored the use of Hebrew language, so as to continue the national spirit and culture. The rabbi was well aware of the close relationship between religion and national consciousness. After praying in the synagogue, he often explained the relevant content of the Zionist movement to the followers, and took the lead in collecting travel fees for immigrants returning to Palestine and collecting national funds (for the purchase of land for Palestine). Hebrew was taught in Jewish primary schools and Talmud courses such as Torah were introduced.

Fourth, adhere to the concept of “promise” and maintain the national spiritual trait of “walk scattered but God does not disperse”. The Jewish people believe that the Land of Israel is their homeland, the holy land promised to Abraham and his descendants by God, and that the diaspora is only a temporary solution until one day they will return to it. The land of Israel has never for a moment disappeared from the Jewish mind and aspiration. It is under the guidance of this spirit that Jews all over the world, no matter how difficult the situation is and how hopeless the hope is, will also take their families and families to return to their homeland. After the establishment of Israel in 1948, the Jewish immigrants set off a wave of return to prove the Jewish nation’s national spirit of “walk away but God does not leave”.

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## 2. RELIGIOUS CULTURE AND ITS ACTIVITIES IN HARBIN JEWISH COMMUNITY

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### 2.1 The Synagogue and the Main Rabbis

Among all the Jewish communities in northeast China, Harbin Jewish community is regarded as the only religious community. Although religious rituals are still carried out in other communities, the members of the community all lead a secular life (Kaufman, 2007). In 1899, the Jewish

Konovalov established a family prayer house in his home to conduct religious activities (Qu and Li, 2004, p.98). In the 1920s, the number of Jews in Harbin soared to more than 20,000. Such a large number of Jews naturally needed suitable places for religious activities. According to Jewish custom, traditional Jews, in addition to praying every morning, afternoon and evening, also hold mass prayers on the Sabbath and other important Jewish holidays. Jewish activity places are called “synagogue”, and there are only two remaining in Harbin. According to the construction time, they are the General Synagogue (also known as the Old Synagogue) built in 1907 and the New Synagogue built in 1918. In addition, in order to facilitate the religious activities of the Jews living in Nangang District, in 1918, Harbin Jews raised money to build a prayer hall at No. 8, Xiaoshu Street, commonly known as Majiagou Prayer Hall, which no longer exists. The establishment of three synagogues laid the basic pattern of Harbin Jewish religious places. The synagogue is not only a place for Jews to hold religious activities, but also a place for the public to study the Jewish classics. It is a gathering point of Jewish community spirit and public life in the city. After the 1920s, the Jewish community in Harbin became increasingly stable and its religious life became more active.

A Rabbi is a Hebrew transliteration of “rabbi”, meaning “teacher”. A rabbi is usually a knowledgeable person who has received formal rabbinical seminary training and is mainly responsible for teaching the Jewish scriptures, interpreting the teachings and conducting religious ceremonies. From its establishment in 1903 to its dissolution in 1963, four rabbis were officially appointed by the Harbin Jewish Religious Council and presided over the religious activities of the community. They were Shevry Levin (1903-1906), Zalman Leibovich Kashkhel (1906-1913), Aaron Moshe Giselov (1913-1949), and Saadiya Litvin (1949-1950). The daily religious, social and cultural life of Harbin Jews was well preserved under the leadership of four rabbis, especially Rabbi Giselov, who was elected by the Far Eastern Jewish Congress in 1937 as the chief Jewish Rabbi of China and the Far East (including Japan) (Wang & Li, 2013, p.115). It can be said that the development and expansion of the religious activities of Harbin Jewish community is closely related to the outstanding leadership of Giselov. During his 33 years as the leader of religious life, Harbin Jewish community maintained the basic Jewish tradition and life style. Because of this, Harbin Jews were able to maintain their unique Jewish self-consciousness when the world Jews were faced with the problem of national assimilation in the diaspora.

### 2.2 Religious Activities and Festival Celebrations in Harbin Jewish Community

Most of Harbin Jewish community’s daily prayers and festival celebrations are held in the General synagogue

and the new synagogue. The General synagogue can accommodate 300 men and 250 women, while the new synagogue can accommodate 800 people for chanting and praying at the same time. "According to Judaism, men and women cannot pray together, so during religious services, men are on the first floor and women are on the second floor. The 320 chairs closest to the podium are paid and fixed, and the owner of the chair is determined according to the amount of donations. The more money, the better the position (later changed to free)" (Du & Chen, 2007). Jews pray three times a day, namely morning, afternoon and evening prayers, which last about half an hour, and the Sabbath is slightly longer about an hour. Throughout the prayer, women were not allowed to participate in any of the activities of the prayer, such as accompanying readings or passing Torah on stage, but could only follow the reading and singing. All members of the congregation were to be attentive during prayer, and indecent gestures such as playfulness, gestures, and winking were strictly forbidden. There are many festivals in Judaism, such as Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Sukkot, Passover, Purim, etc. Here, only three important festivals such as Shabbat, Passover and Purim are taken as examples to illustrate their religious activities and celebration customs.

The Sabbath is a Jewish holy day. It usually starts after sunset on Friday and ends a day later. On the Sabbath, the believers were not allowed to do any work, and the men bathed and dressed and went to the synagogue to attend services. First, the Torah was read by the rabbinate, then the prayer was recited by the deacon, and the believers stood up and sang together to pray for the coming of the Savior (*Journal of Harbin City*, 1995). When praying, the believers face the direction of the Jerusalem Temple and wear a kippa hat, which they do not remove while praying, while the women wear a veil or a translucent veil in front of the mat. Jews believe that the Sabbath is a holiday specially arranged by God, and keeping the Sabbath is the observance of God's commandments. On this day, it is the most important activity for communicating with God, praying and learning the classics. Therefore, the religious culture of the Sabbath has profound significance. Not keeping the Sabbath or even desecrating the Sabbath was no longer considered Jewish.

The Passover Festival is one of the oldest and most important Jewish festivals. It is to remember the ancestors, remember the historical suffering, and celebrate the Jewish people escape from Egypt under the protection of God to live a free life. Therefore, the Passover Festival is also called the "Jewish Spring Festival". The Passover usually lasts for 7 days, and there are also 8 days in the diaspora. In those days, the Jews in Harbin would make a batch of unleavened bread before the Passover. During this period, they would not eat any fermented pasta, and the believers would go to the synagogue for worship. The most important event is the first day of Passover

dinner, where people prepare a large number of symbolic foods, and the traditional Haggadah reading is used to tell the children of the family about the history of the Jewish exodus from Egypt. It is worth mentioning that at that time, Harbin Jews had a bakery specializing in the production of matzah. The packaging was printed with the words "Passover Kosher food" and the seal of Harbin Jewish community rabbi, which was especially for Harbin and the surrounding Jewish community to eat during the festival, which shows the great demand of Jewish Passover at that time. In addition, Purim is the most popular holiday for Jews. The day before Purim, Orthodox Jews have a day of fasting. On Purim, the Book of Esther is read out in the synagogue, and people feast and drink and eat small baked cakes called Haman hats. When the Purim Festival comes, every family will light candles and hold a variety of celebration activities. Young people dress up elaborately and hold masquerade parties in the Jewish Commercial Club, which is also known as the Jewish "carnival".

Through these religious festivals, on the one hand, Jews remember the important events experienced in the history of the nation, and on the other hand, they maintain their own national unity and cohesion. All festivals have a strong religious color, all festivals are closely related to the Jewish nation, reflecting the standardization of Jewish religious culture, and has far-reaching significance for the continuation and development of Judaism. After the Japanese occupation of Northeast China in 1931, with the departure of Jews in Harbin, the number of Jews participating in religious activities decreased day by day. It was not until 1963 that Harbin Religious Association was dissolved and the General synagogue was closed, that the religious activities of Harbin Jews came to an end completely.

### 2.3 Harbin Jewish Religious Denomination Dispute

Like other religions in the world, with the differentiation of Judaism in modern times and the adjustment and development of Judaism itself, Judaism has derived many branches or sects due to different experiences and interpretations, and each sect has its own firm supporters, such as: Orthodox, Reform, conservative, Reconstruction and so on. Harbin Jews are mostly from Russian Orthodoxy, which is divided into ultra-Orthodox, neo-Orthodox and Hasidic groups. Orthodox Jews strictly follow the commandments and regard them as the direct will of God. The most famous far-right Orthodox sect is the Hasidic sect. We can see from historical photos that Orthodox and Hasidic Jews in Harbin wore long black coats, black domed hats, beards and sideburns when attending religious activities. As early as 1908, the Hasidic Family Prayer house was established on Diduan Street in Daoli District, with its first president being P. M. Conn served as treasurer, Coffman as treasurer, and Frog

as scholar (Wang & Li, 2013). After the new synagogue was built, it became the main place of prayer for Hasidic people in Harbin.

Orthodox Judaism's overemphasis on texts other than the Hebrew Bible has created its own opposition within Judaism, the Karaites, who recognize only the Hebrew Bible as authoritative and reject other Jewish texts such as the Talmud. There has long been a great debate among scholars as to whether the Karaites are a branch of Judaism. From an anthropological point of view, the Karaites are of Turkic descent. Although the diet and marriage customs are Tatar, the Torah is placed at the door of every house of the Karaites. Although celebrated on different dates, they observe the Sabbath and other traditional holidays, and are loyal only to the Hebrew Bible. From the above points, the Karaites have the same origin as Judaism and should originally belong to a branch of Judaism. As time goes on, the Karaites broke with Judaism and slowly developed into an independent sect. The number of Karaites in Harbin reached about 200 at its peak, and they used to rent part of a Tatar Mosque as a venue for their religious activities. The famous Polish expatriate brothers Eli Lopato and Abraham Lopato were important sponsors and leaders of Karaites' religious activities in Harbin (Liu, 2007).

Harbin Jews have religious sects, and there are different opinions on the election of rabbis, whether Jewish law can be changed, whether to support the state of Israel and participate in Zionist organizations, whether to cooperate with other sects, and even whether to use Yiddish or Hebrew. For example, in 1911, there was a dispute over the election of Jewish rabbis in Harbin. As a result, the Harbin Jewish Society did not have a rabbi to preside over religious activities for two years from 1911 to 1913. Rabbi Kashkel, who was not only deeply religious, but also often explained to his followers the philosophical knowledge he had learned in religion and discussed various issues such as Jewish culture, education, language and schools. Orthodox Jews, on the other hand, believed that rabbis should only be responsible for resolving religious issues and interpreting doctrine, so Rabbi Kashkel was not elected to the Jewish National Congress in 1911. After that, Orthodox parties in the city elected Levin as rabbi, while Hasidic parties invited Giselov to serve as rabbi in Harbin. The election was so fierce that it nearly split the Harbin Jewish community. In the end, Rabbi Levin withdrew from the election and Giselov was elected unanimously.

Conclusion: Judaism has gathered thousands of years of history. It is not only the origin of monotheism such as Christianity and Islam, but also not only a religion, it

also contains the historical tradition of the Jews. In the era when the Jews lost their own homeland and were scattered everywhere, it is Judaism that helped the Jews continue to forge and stick to their national identity, and let all the Jews be linked to each other. Therefore, the connotation of Jewish faith goes far beyond the meaning of religion in general. It represents a national ritual, a people with a common identity, a sense of belonging, roots and descent, mutual obligations and missions. The religious life of Harbin Jewish community fully reflects the close relationship between religion and national consciousness. In this sense, the study of it is obviously helpful for further understanding of Jewish culture.

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