

## Source Sheet Class 6-“2000 Years of Jewish History”-Rabbi Menachem Levine

### Source 1

**“Of all the astonishing experiences of the widely dispersed Jewish people none was more extraordinary than that concerning the Khazars.”**

**- American author and historian Nathan Ausubel, in *Pictorial History of the Jewish People* (1953)**

### Source 2

**“The Khazar people were an unusual phenomenon for Medieval times. Surrounded by savage and nomadic tribes, they had all the advantages of the developed countries: structured government, vast and prosperous trading, and a permanent army. At the time, when great fanaticism and deep ignorance contested their dominion over Western Europe, the Khazar state was famous for its justice and tolerance. People persecuted for their faiths flocked into Khazaria from everywhere. As a glistening star it shone brightly on the gloomy horizon of Europe, and faded away without leaving any traces of existence.”**

**Vasilii V. Grigoriev, printed in his 1876 compilation book *Rossiya i Aziya* on page 66**

### Source 3

**“Though the Jews were everywhere a subject people, and in much of the world persecuted as well, Khazaria was the one place in the medieval world where the Jews actually were their own masters.... To the oppressed Jews of the world, the Khazars were a source of pride and hope, for their existence seemed to prove that G-d had not completely abandoned His people.”**

**- Professor Raymond Scheindlin, in *The Chronicles of the Jewish People* (1996)**

### Source 4

I, Hasdai, son of Isaac, son of Ezra, belonging to the exiled Jews of Jerusalem in Sepharad, a servant of my lord the King, bow to the earth before him and prostrate myself towards the abode of your Majesty from a distant land. I rejoice in your tranquility and magnificence and stretch forth my hands to G-d in heaven that He may prolong your reign in Israel....

Praise be to the beneficent G-d for His mercy towards me! Kings of the earth, to whom his Abd-ar-Rahman's magnificence and power are known, bring gifts to him, conciliating his favor by costly presents, such as the King of the Franks, the King of the Gebalim, who are Germans, the King of Constantinople, and others. All their gifts pass through my hands, and I am charged with making gifts in return. Ibn Shaprut, who knew several languages, received these embassies. Let my lips express praise to the God of Heaven, who so far extends His loving kindness towards me, without any merit of my own, but in the fullness of His mercies!

**I always ask the ambassadors of these monarchs who bring gifts about our brethren the Israelites, the remnant of the captivity, whether they have heard anything concerning the**

deliverance of those who have languished in bondage and have found no rest. He was anxious to know if the “Ten Lost Tribes” existed as an independent Jewish state anywhere.

At length mercantile emissaries of Khorasan a land southeast of the Caspian Sea told me that there is a kingdom of Jews which is called al-Khazar. But I did not believe these words for I thought that they told me such things to procure my goodwill and favor. I was therefore wondering, till the ambassadors of Constantinople came between 944 and 949 with presents and a letter from their king to our king, and I interrogated them concerning this matter,

They answered me: “It is quite true, and the name of that kingdom is al-Khazar. It is a fifteen days’ journey by sea from Constantinople, but by land many nations intervene between us; the name of the king now reigning is Joseph; ships sometimes come from their country to ours bringing fish, skins, and wares of every kind The Khazars, great traders, got their wares from the Rus to the north. The men are our confederates and are honored by us; there is communication between us by embassies and mutual gifts; they are very powerful; they maintain numerous armies with which they occasionally engage in expions.” When I heard this report I was encouraged, my hands were strengthened, and my hope was confirmed. Thereupon I bowed down and adored the God of heaven. Hasdai was happy: Christians could no longer say the Jews were without a country as a punishment for their rejection of Jesus....

I pray for the health of my lord the King, of his family, and of his house, and that his throne may be established for ever. Let his days and his sons' days be prolonged in the midst of Israel!

### Source 5

THE LETTER OF JOSEPH THE KING, SON OF AARON THE KING, THE TURK-MAY HIS CREATOR PRESERVE HIM TO THE HEAD OF THE ASSEMBLY, HASDAI, THE SON OF ISAAC, SON OF EZRA

...I wish to inform you that your beautifully phrased letter was given us by Isaac, son of Eliezer, a Jew of the land of Germany Isaac carried it through Germany, Hungary, and Kievan Rus to Khazaria. You made us happy and we are delighted with your understanding and wisdom... Let us, therefore, renew the diplomatic relations that once obtained between our fathers, and let us transmit this heritage to our children.

You ask us also in your epistle: “Of what people, of what family, and of what tribe are you?” **Know that we are descended from Japheth, through his son Togarma. In Jewish literature Togarmah is the father of all the Turks.** I have found in the genealogical books of my ancestors that Togarmah had ten sons. These are their names: the eldest was Ujur, the second Tauris, the third Avar, the fourth Uauz, the fifth Bizal, the sixth Tarna, the seventh Khazar, the eighth Janur, the ninth Bulgar, the tenth Sawir. These are the mythical founders of tribes that once lived in the neighborhood of the Black and Caspian Seas. **I am a descendant of Khazar, the seventh son.**

I have a record that although our fathers were few in number, the Holy One blessed be He, gave them strength, power, and might so that they were able to carry on war after war with many nations who were more powerful and numerous than they. By the help of God they drove them

out and took possession of their country. Upon some of them they have imposed forced labor even to this very day. The land along the Volga in which I now live was formerly occupied by the Bulgarians. Our ancestors, the Khazars, came and fought with them, and, although these Bulgarians were as numerous as the sand on the shores of the sea, they could not withstand the Khazars. So they left their country and fled while the Khazars pursued them as far as the Danube River. Up to this very day the Bulgars camp along the Danube and are close to Constantinople. The Khazars have occupied their land up till now.

After this, several generations passed until a certain King arose whose name was Bulan. He was a wise and God-fearing man, trusting in his Creator with all his heart. He expelled the wizards and idolaters from the land and took refuge in the shadow of his wings ... After this his fame was spread broadcast. **The king of the Byzantines and the Arabs who had heard of him sent their envoys and ambassadors with great riches and many great presents to the King as well as some of their wise men with the object of converting him to their own religion. The Byzantines and Arabs hoped to stop the raids of the Khazars by converting them.**

But the King-may his soul be bound up in the bundle of life With the Lord his G-d-being wise, sent for a learned Israelite. the King searched, inquired, and investigated carefully and brought the sages together that they might argue about their respective religions. Each of them refuted, however, the arguments of his opponent so that they could not agree. When the King saw this he said to them: "Go home, but return to me on the third day..."

On the third day he called all the sages together and said to them. "Speak and argue with one another and make clear to me which is the best religion." They began to dispute with one another without arriving at any results until the King said to the Christian priest "What do you think? Of the religion of the Jews and the Muslims, which is to be preferred?" The priest answered: "The religion of the Israelites is better than that of the Muslims."

The King then asked the qadi: "What do you say? Is the religion of the Israelites, or that of the Christians preferable?" The qadi answered: "The religion of the Israelites is preferable."

**Upon this the King said: "If this is so, you both have admitted with your own mouths that the religion of the Israelites is better Wherefore, trusting in the mercies of God and the power of the Almighty, I choose the religion of Israel, that is, the religion of Abraham. If that God in whom I trust, and in the shadow of whose wings I find refuge, will aid me, He can give me without labor the money, the gold, and the silver which you have promised me. As for you all, go now in peace to your land."**

**From that time on the Almighty helped Bulan, fortified him, and strengthened him. He circumcised himself, his servants, attendants, and all his people. Then Bulan sent for and brought from all places wise men of Israel who interpreted the Torah for him and arranged the precepts in order, and up to this very day we have been subject to this religion. May God's name be blessed and may His remembrance be exalted for ever!**

**Since that day, when my fathers entered into this religion, the God of Israel has humbled all of their enemies, subjecting every folk and tongue round about them, whether Christian, Muslim, or pagan. No one has been able to stand before them to this day about 960. All of them are tributary.**

**After the days of Bulan there arose one of his descendants, a king Obadiah by name, who reorganized the kingdom and established the Jewish religion properly and correctly. He**

**built synagogues and yeshivot, brought in Jewish scholars, and rewarded them with gold and silver. The Jewish scholars could have come from Baghdad and Constantinople. They explained to him the Bible, Mishnah, Talmud and the order of divine services. The King was a man who revered and loved the Torah. He was one of the true servants of God. May the Divine Spirit give him rest!**

**He was succeeded by Hezekiah, his son; next to him was Manasseh, his son; next to him was Hanukkah, the brother of Obadiah; next Isaac, his son; afterwards, his son Zebulun; then his son Moses; then his son Nissi; then his son Aaron; then his son Menahem; then his son Benjamin; then his son Aaron II; and I, Joseph, the son of Aaron the King, am King, the son of a King, and the descendant of kings. No stranger can occupy the throne of my ancestors: the son succeeds the father. This has been our custom and the custom of our forefathers since they have come into existence. May it be the gracious will of Him who appoints all kings that the throne of my kingdom shall endure to all eternity.**

You have also asked me about the affairs of my country and the extent of my empire. I wish to inform you that I dwell by the banks of the river known as the Itil Volga. At the mouth of the river lies the Caspian Sea. The headwaters of the river turn eastward, a journey of four months distance.

Alongside the river dwell many tribes in cities and towns, in open as well as fortified places.... Bear in mind that I dwell at the delta of the Itil and, by G-d's help, I guard the mouth of the river and do not permit the Rus who come in ships to enter into the Caspian so as to get at the Muslims. **Nor do I allow any of their the Muslims' enemies who come by land to penetrate as far as Derbend Derbend, an Arab city, was the gate through which the nomads of eastern and southern Europe hoped to rush through and raid the rich towns of Asia Minor. I have to wage war with them, for if I would give them any chance at all they would lay waste the whole land of the Muslims as far as Baghdad. . .**

You have also asked me about the place where I live. I wish to inform you that, by the grace of God, I dwell alongside this river on which there are situated three capital cities. The queen dwells in one of them; it is my birthplace. It is quite large, built round like a circle, the diameter of which is fifty parasangs.

Jews, Christians, and Moslems live in the second city. Besides these there are many slaves of all nations in it. It is of medium size, eight square parasangs in length and breadth.

In the third I reside with my princes, officers, servants, cupbearers and those who are close to me. It is round in shape and its diameter is three parasangs. The river flows within its walls. This is my residence during the winter. From the month of Nisan March-April on we leave the city and each one goes forth to his vineyards, fields and to his work....

**You mention in your letter that you yearn to see my face. I also would very much like to see your pleasant countenance and the rare beauty of your wisdom and greatness. Would that it were according to your word. If it were granted me to be associated with you and to behold your honored, charming, and pleasant countenance then you would be my father and I your son. According to your command would all my people be ruled, and according to your order and discreet counsel would I conduct all my affairs. Farewell.**

## Source 6

**After this [conversation] the Khazar king, as is related in the history of the Khazars, was anxious to reveal to his vizier in the mountains of Warsan [Varshan, near Balanjar] the secret of his dream and its repetition, in which he was urged to seek the God-pleasing deed. The king and his vizier travelled to the deserted mountains on the seashore, and arrived one night at the cave in which some Jews used to celebrate the Sabbath. They disclosed their identity to them, embraced their religion, were circumcized in the cave, and then returned to their country, eager to learn the Jewish law. They kept their conversion secret, however, until they found an opportunity of disclosing the fact gradually to a few of their special friends. When the number had increased, they made the affair public, and induced the rest of the Khazars to embrace the Jewish faith. They sent to various countries for scholars and books, and studied the Torah. Their chronicles also tell of their prosperity, how they beat their foes, conquered their lands, secured great treasures, how their army swelled to hundreds of thousands, how they loved their faith, and fostered such love for the Holy House that they erected a tabernacle in the shape of that built by Moses. They also honored and cherished the Israelites who lived among them. While the king studied the Torah and the books of the prophets, he employed the rabbi as his teacher, and asked him many questions on Hebrew matters. The first of these questions referred to the names and attributes ascribed to God and their anthromorphistic forms, which are unmistakeably objectionable alike both to reason and to law....**

**Kuzari, Rav Yehuda Halevi, Beginning of Essay 2**

## Source 7

**“You will find the communities of Israel spread abroad... as far as Dailam and the river Itil where live Khazar peoples who became proselytes. The Khazar king Joseph sent a letter to Hasdai ibn-Shaprut and informed him that he and all his people followed the rabbinical faith. We have seen descendants of the Khazars in Toledo, students of the wise, and they have told us that the remnant of them is of the rabbinical belief.”**

**Abraham ibn Daud (Ravad I) of Toledo, Spain, in The Book of Tradition (1161)**

## Source 8

**One of the Jews undertook the conversion of the Khazars, who are composed of many peoples, and they were converted by him and joined his religion. This happened recently in the days of the Abbasids.... For this was a man who came single-handedly to a king of great rank and to a very spirited people, and they were converted by him without any recourse to violence and the sword. And they took upon themselves the difficult obligations enjoined by the law of the Torah, such as circumcision, the ritual ablutions, washing after a discharge of the semen, the prohibition of work on the Sabbath and during the feasts, the prohibition of eating the flesh of forbidden animals according to this religion, and so on.**

**Abd al-Jabbar ibn Muhammad al-Hamdani, in The Establishment of Proofs for the Prophethood of Our Master Muhammad (c. 1009-1010):**

**Source 9**

“At the present time we know of no nation under the heavens where Christians do not live. **For [Christians are even found] in the lands of Gog and Magog -- who are a Hunnic race and are called Gazari (Khazars)... circumcized and observing all [the laws of] Judaism.** The Bulgars, however, who are of the same seven tribes [as the Khazars], are now becoming baptized [into Christianity].”

**9<sup>th</sup> Century Monk, Christian of Stavelot, in Expositio in Matthaenum Evangelistam (864):**