
American Jewish Personalities

Rabbi Joseph H. Hertz to Henrietta Szold: Letters from South Africa

Alexandra Lee Levin

“My dear Miss Szold,” wrote Dr. Joseph Herman Hertz on October 8, 1899, to Henrietta Szold, future founder of Hadassah and head of Youth Aliyah during Hitler’s time. The letters and newspaper clippings upon which this article is based are in the possession of the author. They were sent to the Szold family by Dr. Hertz. The author’s mother-in-law, Bertha Szold Levin, was Henrietta Szold’s sister. The twenty-seven-year-old rabbi of the Witwatersrand Old Hebrew Congregation in Johannesburg, South Africa, corresponded regularly with the three unmarried daughters of Dr. Benjamin Szold, rabbi emeritus of Oheb Shalom Congregation of Baltimore. Dr. Szold was a member of the Bible revision committee of the Jewish Publication Society, and in 1898 Hertz had become a member, translating as his assignment the Book of Joshua.

It was inevitable that Hertz’s path should cross that of the Szold family, particularly as Miss Henrietta was secretary—in reality editor, writer, translator, and proofreader—of the Jewish Publication Society. Dr. Szold looked with great favor upon the young man, and in Dr. Hertz’s own words “lavished a friendship bordering on parental affection” upon him.

Joseph H. Hertz was born in Pebrin, Hungary (now Czechoslovakia), on September 25, 1872. His father, driven by poverty, emigrated to the United States in 1885. Educated at a public school on New York’s East Side and at City College, Joseph was a member of the first class to enter the newly established Jewish Theological Seminary. He was ordained in 1894 and was called to the pulpit of Congregation Adath Yeshurun in Syracuse. Four years later his career experienced a dramatic change when the Witwatersrand Old Hebrew Congregation, the oldest synagogue in the Transvaal, South Africa, advertised for a rabbi with “American experience preferable.” Hertz was chosen and

he sailed for England. He left there for Cape Town on August 24, 1898. After accepting the call he continued his ties of friendship with the Szolds through correspondence.

Hertz arrived to find South Africa a political cauldron seething with animosity between the English and Dutch. The government of the Boer South African Republic, under strongly anti-British Paul Kruger, vowed to keep all foreigners, or Uitlanders, deprived of political power. It denied them naturalization and taxed them heavily. The British government, on the other hand, was determined that it should be the leading power in South Africa.

It had been estimated that 7,000 Russian Jews lived on the Transvaal's Witwatersrand, the world's richest gold-mining region since gold was discovered there in 1885. The Jewish community of Johannesburg was estimated at 12,000 out of a total population of 120,000. The Jews formed an integral part of the business, social, intellectual, and political life of the city. Today South Africa has a Jewish community of some 110,000.

On June 28, 1899, a great mass meeting of the Johannesburg Jews was held to protest the proposed exclusion of Russian and Rumanian Jews from the franchise, and their deprivation of the rights and privileges enjoyed by their coreligionists of all other nationalities. Dr. Hertz had announced the proposed meeting, saying that because Russia had robbed Jews of the rights of man and had hounded the Jews from abject misery to serfdom, it was no reason why a state which called itself civilized should follow such an inhuman example. No, he said, they must protest. They must prove to the world that they had self-respect.

According to the *Johannesburg Star*, the mass meeting was "an eloquent endorsement of the South African formula, applicable to all, without distinction of race or creed: 'Equal rights for all white men'." It added that Dr. Hertz's appeal to the Pretoria government not to make the mistake of the St. Petersburg government would find a ready response "in the heart of every liberty-loving man from Capetown to the Zambesi." The *Transvaal Leader* chimed in with: "The Jewish leaders ask that the fetters shall be stricken off the Russian Jew at the same moment when every other Uitlander receives his emancipation from political serfdom. The demand cannot be resisted in principle, once the Russian Jew is admitted to be a white man."

Joseph Hertz's letter of October 8, 1899, to Henrietta Szold continued:

I seem to be having it all my own way out here, you say. Well, up to a certain point that is true. Transvaal is but another name for opportunity, and the fact is, more opportunities for doing *something* have presented themselves to me during the last twelve months than would have been the case during as many years in America. . . . However, there are two circumstances which well-nigh neutralize the advantage of my position, as well as the advances I have made during the last year:

First, the uncertainty of Transvaal life. Everything is in flux. Now this uncertainty pervades every department of life. For example, I cannot for the life of me tell whether the next year will see me unanimously elected Chief Rabbi of the Federated Jewish Congregations of the Transvaal (and ultimately of South Africa) or whether a year from today I may not begin to see that there is absolutely no scope for me on the sub-continent as a rabbi.

The people of Johannesburg are young, given to inordinately admiring a thing today only to throw it aside as a stale toy on the morrow. Secondly, there is no peace, no leisure in this city. The great current of life, of work, of activity is forever tearing you along. . . . The climate is an enervating one; its unspeakable beauties even, because so changeless, pall; it is without even mild winters, with their invigorating cold. More than once I have blamed the sun for my troubles, and may one fine day succeed in convincing myself that this climate was never intended for white men, only for Kaffirs. *Amerika du hast es besser!*

The British, after the appointment in 1897 of Sir Alfred Milner as governor of their South African territories, decided to force a showdown concerning what they considered to be their commercial rights. When troops were sent out from England, the Boer leaders in the Transvaal and the Orange Free State declared war on October 12, 1899.

Four days before hostilities were declared, Joseph Hertz wrote from Johannesburg:

Your *Sunpaper* undoubtedly brought short cable descriptions of the Exodus from "Judasburg." Naturally the city is depopulated, given over to silence, solitude and starvation. As for myself, I am tolerably safe: with an American flag flying over my house, an American passport in my vest pocket, a pistol in my trousers pocket, and the coat of a *predikant* on my back. I have furthermore provisions enough stored in my house to last a company of five for nearly six months.



Henrietta Szold (1860–1945)

Hertz did not need the stored supplies for long. His outspoken protests concerning the disabilities suffered by the Jews resulted in his being expelled from the country. Meanwhile a young British war correspondent named Winston Churchill was captured by the Boers. Two headlines in the same Cape Town newspaper stated: "Dr. Hertz Expelled—Mr. Churchill Escapes." The pair found themselves on the same train composed of cattle cars bound for Portuguese East Africa. Hertz was on his way home to the United States.

Although the Boer War was not settled until May 1902, Joseph Hertz returned to his duties in Johannesburg in 1901. He wrote again on August 14:

My congregation is alive again. Of the 350 members in normal times some 30 have remained here throughout the war and some 30 have been allowed to return since the British occupation. But only two of all these sixty have been fortunate enough to have their families allowed to return to them.

Hertz had spent a week in Durban in connection with the visit of the Prince and Princess of Wales to Natal. "I presented an address to the Royal Pair in the name of Natal, Orange River Colony, and Transvaal Jewries," he wrote. "To your iconoclastically democratic mind it were vain to dwell at length on the various gorgeous functions connected with the visit." Looking for fifteen minutes at the beautiful Princess May, the future Queen Mary, he said, was almost enough to make one take the oath of allegiance on the spot. "As for myself, I managed to squeeze in a sermon, a Zionist mass meeting, a banquet in my honour, and two other Jewish meetings of some use to Natal Judaism during the busy week."

The Baltimore *Jewish Comment* for January 12, 1912, carried the news of Hertz's return to New York: "Dr. Joseph H. Hertz arrives to assume the pulpit of Congregation Orach Chaim. Full of energy and altogether a live wire, he will no doubt make things hum in New York . . ."

But the New York pulpit was but a stepping stone in Hertz's career, for he soon left to become Chief Rabbi of Great Britain. Many Jewish congregations are familiar with the volume, *The Pentateuch and Haftorahs*, edited by Dr. Hertz and first published at London in 1936. He

died on January 14, 1946, less than a year after the death in Jerusalem of Henrietta Szold, his old friend from Baltimore.

Alexandra Lee Levin of Baltimore, Maryland, is a much-published author. She is perhaps best known for her book, *The Szolds of Lombard Street: A Baltimore Family, 1859-1909* (1960). She has also published, among other volumes, *Vision* (1964), a biography of Harry Friedenwald, and *Dare to Be Different*, a biography of Louis H. Levin. In 1987, the Herzl Press will publish her book entitled *Henrietta Szold and Youth Aliyah: Family Letters, 1934-1944*.