
Rethinking the American Jewish Experience

Some East European Letters on Emigration

Jacob Kabakoff

Letters played a vital role in influencing East European Jews to emigrate to America. Countless immigrants from Eastern Europe wrote home to describe the economic and material benefits of life in the New World. Many expressed misgivings about the lack of religious observance and the low spiritual state of immigrant existence. Yet, for the most part, the constant stream of letters served to encourage emigration and to fan hopes for a better future.

The use of model letters for didactic purposes is part of an old literary tradition. A history of collections of model Hebrew letters has been published by Judith Halevi-Zwick under the title *Toledot Sifrut ha-Igronim* ("The Hebrew *Briefsteller*") (Tel Aviv: Papyrus, 1990). Her volume traces the development of this literary form from the sixteenth through the twentieth century and highlights the role which it played as a means of transmitting ideas.

At first *Briefstellers* were published exclusively in Hebrew. Later they became bilingual, consisting of Hebrew-Yiddish and Hebrew-German collections. Intended as guides for both young and old, some were compiled by well-known authors, such as Abraham Mapu, Menahem Mendel Dolitzky, and David Frishman. Other collections represented the efforts of pedagogues who utilized the letter form to foster correct Hebrew style.

The letter collections dealt with various aspects of Jewish life and touched on both personal and national problems. They reflected the conditions of their times and the attitudes of their compilers. They sought also to impart practical knowledge and to offer guidance regarding proper conduct.

Among the issues touched upon by some of the model Hebrew letter collections was that of emigration to America. We shall examine

here three such letters and present them in English translation in order to illustrate some of the prevailing attitudes at the time of their composition.

Dov Aryeh Friedman (1845–1925) published his collection, entitled *Mikhtavim li-Venei ha-Neurim* ("Letters to Young People"), in Berditchev in 1889. In letter no. 96 (in part I), translated below, a son informs a friend that his father has emigrated to America, and he confides that he is deeply concerned over his fate in the New World. In letter no. 97 his respondent seeks to comfort him and expresses the hope that he will soon be reunited with his father. In still another letter (no. 89, in part II) he offers further encouragement and indicates that many immigrants in America have risen from poverty to riches. In a humorous aside he adds that if Columbus had come from a rich family, who knows whether he would have been led to discover America?

That emigration was very much on the mind of Dov Aryeh Friedman is evident from the fact that in 1892, at the age of forty-seven, he set out for America. Born in Suwalki, Poland, he had been a Hebrew teacher in Warsaw and was the author of Hebrew textbooks. In America he continued to teach Hebrew in various cities.

The thoughts of Friedman's readers must have been similarly occupied with plans for emigration, for the subject is touched upon in several letters. In one letter (no. 34, in part I) a son writes to his father about a nephew who, following a two-year stay in America, where he became wealthy, had returned for a visit to his hometown. The family could not get from him whether he intended to remain or to return to America. At times he was full of praise for the new land, but at others he was critical of the people and their ways. Still a further indication of the sorrow that was experienced by the break-up of families due to emigration is seen in another letter (no. 42, in part I) in which the writer informs his brother in America about the death of their father and suggests that he return in order to run the family business which is their only support.

All in all, Friedman's letters concerning emigration to America reflect an ambivalent attitude. On the one hand, there is emphasis on the sorrow of parting and its tragic results. On the other, there is a note of hope for the better life that beckons in the new land.

That emigration to America was often viewed negatively is evident from letters included in two collections, Israel Pizar's *Mikhtavim le-Venei Yisrael* ("Letters to the Children of Israel"), published in Warsaw in 1900, and Tuviah Pesach Schapiro's *Yad va-Et* ("Hand and Pen"), published in Vilna in 1891. Both authors took a strong stand against emigration to America.

In letter no. 72 of Pizar's collection, translated below, the writer expresses satisfaction over the fact that his friend has changed his mind about going to America. He indicates that on the basis of press reports the difficulties of travel are considerable and concludes with the hope that his friend will succeed in finding employment at home.

Schapiro (1845–1927), who had earned a reputation as a pedagogue in Suwalki, and who was a contributor to the Hebrew press, emigrated to America in 1882. He remained here for about one and a half years but was unsatisfied with conditions. Upon his return to Europe, he published a critical article in *Ha-Melitz* in which he sided with the supporters of Palestine in the ideological debate that was then current. He did not deny that America offered material benefits to immigrants, but maintained that it brought harm to the Jewish soul and the Jewish national spirit. He decried the squabbles among both the Orthodox and Reform groupings in America and pointed to the danger of anti-Semitism.

Schapiro's support of Palestine settlement led him to incorporate his views in a lengthy letter (no. 193), which he included in his collection. In the letter, translated below and dated Tishri 1883, he presents a survey of Jewish settlement and agricultural efforts in America, which he maintains ended in failure. He offers particularly an account of the abortive attempt of Mordecai Manuel Noah to found the Jewish agricultural colony of Ararat. For information about Ararat he used an article by Yehudah Jeiteles which appeared in 1826 in the Hebrew yearbook *Bikkurei ha-Ittim*, published in Vienna.

Although Schapiro's letter is critical of the Ararat project, it has praise for the sincerity of the founders which stands in contrast to the damaging actions of the current religious leaders in both the Orthodox and Reform camps. The reader of the letter is led to conclude that Palestine is more suitable for Jewish agricultural effort and that

there is little hope that America could become a center of Jewish settlement.

Schapiro's letter serves as an additional document attesting to the conflict engendered by the Palestine-America debate following the outbreak of the 1881 pogroms in Russia.

We present below the translations of the letters by Friedman, Pisar, and Schapiro.

1. From Dov Aryeh Friedman, *Mikhtavim li-Venei ha-Neurim* ("Letters to Young People"), part I, letter 96 (Berditchev, 1889).

My dear friend! This day was a sad one for me, for my dear father has left us and has set out for America in order to seek there sustenance for the members of his family. My soul grieves when I remember that such a man will be forced to live in a strange place without friend or acquaintance and will have to work and toil by the sweat of his brow, while many who are ignorant and empty-headed live here on the fat of the land. But can we complain about the doings of the Almighty? He has ordained it, and who can tell Him what to do?

Your faithful friend,

2. From Israel Pisar, *Mikhtavim li-Venei Yisrael* ("Letters to the Children of Israel"), letter 72 (Warsaw, 1900).

My friend! You have gladdened me with your fine letter in which you informed me that you have changed your mind about going to America, which, as the reports have it, has enough hungry people without you, and where hundreds go about dejectedly without finding an opportunity to earn anything. I am very surprised, my dear friend, how such a strange idea could have entered your mind. You are, after all, a reader of the *Ha-Melitz*, and you undoubtedly read in its issues about the sorrows that beset the travelers on their journey, for it is very difficult nowadays to cross the border, and many of those who crossed it were punished. They were caught red-handed and were returned under military guard to their cities of residence. Only after three months of trouble and misery were they permitted to return home in one piece. You, my dear one, who—as you have indi-

cated—lack any travel document from the district authorities, would most probably have been caught and subjected to the same suffering as that of the travelers who preceded you. You can readily appreciate how great was my happiness when I heard through your letter that you have rejected your unfeasible plan and that you have some hope of finding a position at an adequate salary in our country. May your hope be fulfilled in accordance with the prayer of your friend who wishes you success . . .

3. From Tuviah Pesach Schapiro, *Yad va-Et* ("Hand and Pen"), letter 193 (Vilna, 1891).

Tishri 1883

My dear friend! We have until now had many discussions concerning the question of the settlement of Eretz Yisrael, which now preoccupies the minds of most of our fellow-Jews as well as of our writers who are concerned with the fate of their people and religion. But you still persist in giving preference to the unloved son over the loved one, to America over Palestine, to the foreign soil over our ancestral soil and the cradle of our history. —As long as your arguments stemmed from considerations of sustenance and economy, knife and fork, white collar and polished footwear, as long as you held that America was a desirable land for commerce and industry and great economic opportunity, I went along with you to some degree. However, when your fantasy misleads you to imagine that the land of Columbus is more suitable than our ancestral land for agriculture as well, this is the height of folly!

You argue that by increasing Jewish settlements on special sites there in the land of freedom the hope for Jewish nationalism would be broadened and ensured. However, you have only to go back and look into the history of our fellow-Jews there, or to go forward and observe the present status of Judaism in this country. If you but use healthy common sense, you will surely be disillusioned.

The hope for Jewish redemption through agricultural work in America is not a new idea which was fathered by the Board of Delegates of American Israelites in 1879. Its roots can be traced to a much earlier time when it was elaborated by Mordecai Manuel Noah, the American consul and sheriff, in 1825. He appeared as a savior and

leader of his people and chose Grand Island on the banks of the Niagara River in New York as the site of a Jewish agricultural colony which he called "Ararat." —This Ararat was officially proclaimed in a public ceremony in the month of Tishri 5585, during the fiftieth year of American independence, in a house of worship in which were gathered Mordecai Manuel Noah and his followers. When the spirit rested upon him and he envisioned the salvation and revival of Israel, he proclaimed loudly: "Hear, O Israel, today you have become a people."

For the purpose of settling the remnants of Israel on American soil as an independent people under the aegis of the American government—a hope which our fellow-Jews in Eretz Yisrael cannot entertain—and of restoring their ancestral practice of tilling and tending the soil, many important individuals rallied to the help of the consul with funds and advice. These included leaders and the wealthy, men of power and bankers, who all united and helped launch that important project of building a Jewish nation in America. However, the leading rabbis of Paris and London, who had heard of the plan, publicly made their views known in the press indicating that they were unhappy with the idea and that they refused to support it. For besides being an impractical plan built on air, it was also opposed to the Torah and destiny of Israel (*Bikkurei ha-Ittim*, 1826, p. 47). It goes without saying that both the building and the destruction of Ararat occurred at the same time. The advice that the leaders had given to the people was of no avail. It did not become a reality and was not followed by deeds. The plan for the projected settlement remained incomplete, and the acquirer of this area was unable to carry out his program.

On the basis of all this you can discern the difference between the early organizers and the later destroyers. The main aim of the group that wished to build Ararat was to establish colonies for the scattered of Israel and to gather the Jews from the various American states into a national union based on our religious faith. It was not merely to set up individual colonies in order to strengthen the material status of the dry bones that had been scattered by an ill wind without any national and religious bonds. The area which they had chosen for settlement was a fertile and fruitful one, free of any sickness and pollu-

tion. It did not involve the cultivation of the soil of strangers in Texas and Louisiana, and the eating of pork so as to have the physical strength for the work, as reported in *Ha-Maggid*, 1882, no. 21, on the basis of the account in the *Jewish Chronicle*. The religious leadership had not changed its policy in those days and had not fallen into the hands of reverends and doctors who desecrated the tradition and despoiled the Torah. When the early organizers—Mordecai Manuel Noah and his followers—assembled to lay the foundation for the institutions that would incorporate his idea, they prayed reverently, sang songs of praise in Hebrew from the Book of Maccabees, the Prophets, and the Psalms (see *Bikkurei ha-Ittim*, loc. cit.). They still knew nothing of the innovations of Dr. Einhorn, who uprooted the Hebrew language from the synagogues in Baltimore, Chicago, and New York, who ruled that even the contents of the weekly Torah portion should be read mostly in German (*Sinai*, vol. 1, no. 4) in order to cause his people to forget God's word. They did yet know or hear of the Torah secrets of his son-in-law Dr. Kohler in New York, who openly preaches to his congregation to exchange the Sabbath day for Sunday. The irresponsibility of various unworthy Orthodox hypocrites from among the reverends who now lead many American synagogues was also unknown to them. —Even though we cannot agree with their ideas about the rebirth of the Jewish people, there is little doubt that if they had succeeded in carrying out their plan, at least the Jewish spirit would not have been so diminished by those who seek to dismember it. Still they too failed, and their entire labor and striving was in vain. For this is not the place and the land that is suited to become a center of Jewish nationalism. How can we look forward today to the salvation of Jewish nationalism in America by the mixed multitude who seek only gain and pursue chaos?

Forsake your opinion! Not only does the American environment not help foster spiritual matters, but even with regard to material things there is no hope there for Jewish colonizers. Only farmers who live in settled areas and work cultivated fields are able to receive a full measure of return for their efforts. This is not true, however, of the newcomers who settle in arid or swampy areas. Will they be able to find the courage to cope with their problems? And then there is more than a slight fear of an anti-Semitic outbreak because of the

many differing groups who will continue to hate us! —Consider these facts and choose the proper way and approach to this lofty and vital matter, so that your dear friend may rejoice in you . . .

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