

A Biblical Exegete Surveys the New York Jewish Scene

Translated and Annotated by Jacob Kabakoff

The innumerable articles and reports that were sent to the European Hebrew press by diligent correspondents in various American Jewish communities continue to cast light on many aspects of American Jewish life. The first modern Hebrew weekly newspaper *Hamagid*, which began publication in Lyck, East Prussia, in 1856, reached subscribers not only in Russia but also the world over. As part of its coverage of world Jewish events, it also carried material on American Jewish life.

It was at the request of the editor of *Hamagid* that Arnold Bogomil Ehrlich sent his correspondence regarding Jewish life in New York. His contribution, entitled *Massa 'Ir va-' Em ba-Aretz ha-Hadasha (Concerning a Metropolis in the New Land)*, appeared in four installments in volume 24, issues 11–14, in the section devoted to America. They are dated March 10, 17, 24, and April 7, 1880.

In a previous issue of *American Jewish Archives* (volume 36, number 2, November 1984) I published an article entitled “New Light on Arnold Bogomil Ehrlich.” Ehrlich’s correspondence concerning New York Jewry illuminates additional aspects of the struggle of a scholar to eke out a living during a period when the Jewish community was still in a state of flux. In his effort to reestablish himself following his arrival in New York in 1876 he received the support of Dr. Gustav Gottheil of Temple Emanu-El and his colleagues, and he obtained an instructorship in the Emanu-El Preparatory School for the Hebrew Union College.

Ehrlich’s correspondence offers an evaluation of the spiritual status of New York Jewry and of the communal attempts to provide for the educational needs of the young. It also offers a description of the Emanu-El Preparatory School, its staff, students, and curriculum. Among the students of the highest class that Ehrlich mentioned were Dov (Bernard) Drachman, who became an Orthodox rabbi; Adam Rosenberg, an early Zionst activist who became a lawyer; and Raphael Jacob (Richard) Gottheil, who taught Semitic languages at Columbia University.

Ehrlich, who earned fame for his Hebrew and German commentaries on the Bible, was also the author of occasional poems in Yiddish

and Hebrew, which I discussed in my above-mentioned article on Ehrlich. An additional Hebrew poem of his, in memory of Samuel Frankenheimer, chairman of the Temple Emanu-El school board, appeared in the *Jewish Messenger* of June 21, 1878.

In the following correspondence Ehrlich often lapses into the flowery style that was characteristic of the time. The use of dots indicates that a few redundant phrases have been omitted.



Arnold Bogomil Ehrlich with his wife Cat (left) and daughter Olga (Auerbach)
(*American Jewish Archives*)

Concerning a Metropolis in the New Land

To the honorable Rabbi, eminent scholar and editor of *Hamagid* shalom!

I have considered your request and view it favorably. Although I have not taken up the pen of a Hebrew writer for some time, I will communicate through your publication what I know about our fellow Jews in New York where I live. To begin with let me say: I will deal only with the Jewish inhabitants of the metropolis who number a third of our brethren in the United States. The intelligent reader will be able to apply my remarks to the rest of the Jewish inhabitants. Let me also mention at the outset that I will not present a comprehensive review of their civic status and their religious observance. My article will describe mainly how they have forsaken the wisdom of our ancient

sources and how a minority of zealots have tried to defend the honor of our people.

The Jewish inhabitants of the land stem mostly from the poor classes in Germany and Poland, and the Jews of New York are among the most impoverished whose money gave out on their first day here. For lack of funds they could not travel further and they had to settle in the first seaport city in which they landed. These poor people were also poor in spirit. They had not come here to acquire wisdom and knowledge but to provide bread for their families. And even those who in their countries of origin were brought up by their parents to love Torah and knowledge, as soon as they set foot on the soil of this new land they became imbued with a new spirit. Just as the air of Eretz Yisrael makes one wise, so does the air of our country make one clever: and if the wise man is said to have his eyes in his head, the clever one is guided by practical aims. He will therefore not turn to knowledge that can only support him frugally, but will engage in business or any trade that can bring him financial gain.

The inhabitants of the metropolis in which I live are divided into three groupings. One consists of those who are against enlightenment and who are satisfied to observe meticulously everything ancient that is found in the Talmud. The adherents of the second grouping consider themselves to be modern: thus the Talmud is meaningless for them and they believe in replacing the old by the new. The third grouping is like a halfway house whose members no longer belong to the first grouping but have not yet transferred into the second. The members of the first grouping act according to their beliefs while those of the second act without rhyme or reason. The leaders of all three groupings are incompetent and unqualified, so how can their followers know what limits are not to be exceeded? Sometimes they do not reach the proper limits that have been set and sometimes they go far beyond them. For example: going without a head covering and the like is considered a serious transgression, but no attention is paid to the laws of ritual immersion by women. All this is unheard of and is entirely ludicrous. But as I indicated this is not what I want to write about, so I will return to my original theme.

You have been apprised of the fact that our three groupings differ in their views and actions regarding faith and religion. Despite these differences, they are all united in a common quest to engage in business, and their main striving is to gather wealth. Money answers all

needs, and it represents the end all of life. The members of the last two groupings meet here on common ground, for as natives of Germany they know the ways of the world and how to do business. On the other hand, those who belong to the first grouping and stem from Poland are far from being adept at business.

In addition, they do not know the language and they speak haltingly. Thus they are not as successful as the members of the other two groupings. Most of them are poor and even the more affluent do not achieve their full ambition. When they are successful and become wealthy they build elegant homes. However, because they are busy all day they do not rear their children properly. Their evenings are devoted to all kinds of leisure activities and the children are left to the mothers. This is a grievous mistake, for mothers do not command the same respect as the fathers and they gloss over their children's faults. Having pointed out the failings of the men, I would be remiss if I were to overlook their positive qualities. They are honest in their business dealings and are most trustworthy. They fulfill their civic duties and take part in all charitable causes. But because of their wealth they consider themselves wiser than those who came before them, so what need is there for Jewish learning? Silver and gold are their Urim and Thummim and their constant guide. They therefore have their children acquire only a knowledge of the basic subjects and this they can accomplish in the public schools, which are open to all, Jew and non-Jew alike. The schools are maintained by our government, which does not differentiate among religions. There are those who also teach their children Hebrew reading, Bible, and the elements of the Jewish religion. But these are considered to be but supplementary studies. To acquire this knowledge the boys and girls attend the schools maintained by each congregation on the Sabbath and on Sunday when the public schools are closed. I will not venture an opinion regarding these schools because I teach in one of them. These are some of the doings and practices of our rich brethren of all the groupings.

However, our metropolis also contains a few streets in the lower part of town in which there reside the lower-class members of the first grouping. Here the Torah is not neglected, for it is in evidence in every public place, where it is trampled underfoot. Most of the residents are learned, and even the most irresponsible are familiar with Jewish customs and practices. Yet some of the latter do go astray. They borrow money and avoid paying their debts by transferring their property to others. Some try to recoup their losses by setting fire to their

property and collecting the insurance money. Their actions are reprehensible, for they reflect on the entire Jewish community.... Yet we cannot disregard this section of the city that is brimming with Jewish life. Here one finds *batei midrash* (houses of study) where *batlanim* (idlers) sit and study daily. These *batei midrash* have rabbis and religious courts that endorse or disqualify ritual slaughterers at will and that ostracize anyone who is not to their liking. The rabbis officiate at marriages and divorces for a price, and they often will encroach upon each other's territory. . . .

Even though these few streets are considered part of New York, they are like a different city, for they remind you of Poland. Anyone who comes here will hear an unfamiliar language and will be overwhelmed by the noise. His eyes will perceive strange sights and crowded, disorderly conditions without any overall plan.... Unqualified teachers wield their sticks and smoke their pipes. The rancid smoke is felt by anyone who enters and his ears are deafened by the cries of the pupils. The pupils are American-born and speak English, while the *melamdim* (teachers) use a different language, which the pupils don't comprehend. They feel their heavy hand when they have difficulty in grasping their meaning. And what do these *melamdim* teach their pupils? The readers of *Hamagid* already know the answer to this question.

In addition to the *hadarim* (religious schools) supported by the members of the first grouping, each congregation maintains a school that is limited to its members and that is open only two days a week, as indicated above. Except for these, there was only one community school for Jewish children that was too small to house even a tenth part of the children of the Jewish poor in the city of New York. The reason for this situation lies in the divisiveness of the various groupings. The members of the first grouping prefer their *hadarim* and *melamdim* to any others. Those who belong to the second grouping cannot afford to go it alone. Can the combined groupings unite to establish a school of learning that will satisfy their differing views?... Meanwhile those children whose parents cannot pay the dues required of synagogue members have no opportunity to study and they grow up without an appreciation of Jewish knowledge.

This then was the status of our brethren in New York and other cities until six years ago, when new conditions made for a change. The new generation of native-born Jews who speak English was no

longer willing to listen to sermons offered by foreign preachers in another language or in broken English. They stopped attending the synagogues on the Sabbath and holidays. The Jewish communities were troubled by this situation and decided to unite under the banner of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations. This organization set about to establish a rabbinical school in Cincinnati. Because there was not yet a suitable body of qualified students there was first organized a preparatory school. Such schools were also organized in two or three other cities. When a sufficient number of students were available a rabbinical school was opened.

The head of the school is not distinguished for his scholarship but he is an effective preacher. He also has spiritual strength, which enables him to accomplish much in behalf of the Jewish people and Jewish learning....At the beginning of this year my friend Dr. Mielziner was engaged to teach at the college and because of his sterling character and deep knowledge he will add much to its prestige.

When New York saw what its younger sister Cincinnati did, it decided to follow suit. The leaders of the other groupings who were blessed with means decided to renovate the small building of the Talmud Torah and to expand it. Because most of the members of the first grouping were poor, as I have pointed out, it was decided to abide by their views, so that they would continue to send their children. The sponsors of the enlarged school united under the name of Hebrew Free School Association. Despite its modest beginnings, the association has been successful. There are now six Talmudei Torah under its auspices and the student body numbers 1,200 boys and girls. The budget covers the teachers' salaries and provides clothes for the poorer children so that they need not feel ashamed in the company of their friends.

The curriculum of the schools is similar to that of the congregations but differs in respect to approach. It is more traditional in keeping with the views of the first grouping. Nevertheless, some progress has been made and the policy of the schools now represents an amalgam of the views of the first and third groupings. The Hebrew schools have an advantage over those of the congregations that function only two days a week. The children of the well-to-do are pampered and so will not attend classes on rainy or cold days. The Talmudei Torah are a threefold blessing in our midst, for they are like a fountain of living waters for the students who bring their knowledge home with them

to their parents. These schools also keep our children out of the clutches of the missionaries who have also opened schools to entice pupils. The Talmudei Torah have created positions for our teachers and have opened a path to Jewish knowledge. When the supervisors and their assistants made their school visits they saw the value of their work and underwent a change in attitude. They publicized in the Jewish press the availability of opportunities for Jewish learning. Classes were available in Bible, Mishnah, and Talmud. In order to attract students, prizes were offered for excellence. The response was good, and annually between Passover and Shavuot students assemble to be tested on the year's work. Those who excel receive special awards in the form of books and medals. The contests are held in the following categories: (a) reading and translation into English of the Hebrew prayers, principles of Judaism, and biblical tales; (b) Hebrew grammar and Pentateuch; (c) one of the Prophetic books, Ethics of the Fathers, basic laws in the *Yad ha-Hazakah* of the Rambam, such as the laws of the Shema and the like. The entrants in the first two categories are pupils from our schools, while those in the third category come from those who study on an advanced level,...

Because of these contests and the honors that are bestowed on the winners, the young people of our city have begun to show respect for our Torah and heritage. When my friend, the rabbi scholar Dr. Gottheil, who is the spiritual leader of Temple Emanu-El, saw that the time was ripe he issued the following call: let us establish a house of study and let us do what we can to attract students. His call was heeded by his members and followers. Temple Emanu-El, which takes a leading role in every important endeavor, has offered to allocate annually \$1,000 for this purpose. This took place in the winter of 1877, when a school was established in our city as well under the supervision of Dr. Gottheil and Dr. Adler. The aim of the school is to prepare students for rabbinical school. Its scope of study has now been widened, but it does not have as yet the status of a rabbinical seminary. The reason for this is that at the end of 1879 Temple Emanu-El joined the Union of American Hebrew Congregations and as a result our school came under the aegis of the union. The regulations of the union provided that there be only one rabbinical school in Cincinnati and that a second school should not be organized until its budget was assured.

The students are divided into three classes and the faculty consists of three teachers. The students of the first year study the elements of

Hebrew grammar and the Pentateuch. In the second year they complete their study of the rules of Hebrew grammar and they add to their Bible study one of the books of the former prophets. The third-year students study Rashi's commentary, the prophetic books, and the Talmud. Our school is also closed for the summer months, but when it is in session it meets three days a week for two hours a session. The days of study are Sunday, Wednesday, and the Sabbath. The students of the third-year class meet on a volunteer basis for two additional hours, one on Wednesday and one on the Sabbath. During these two hours they read Rabbi David Kimhi's *Sefer Mikhlol* and study the elements of syntax.

The students of our school may study with or without head covering, according to their choice. Some follow the wishes of their parents and rabbis to cover their heads when studying the Bible or Talmud, but they participate in the lessons on grammar while bareheaded. The readers of *Hamagid* will wonder about this. But if they knew the spirit of the Jews of our land they would no longer consider it strange. Here I might add a word about the members of the first grouping and their views, which are so radically different from those of their fellow Jews in Europe. Even our most observant who say daily *Ani ma'amin be'emunah shelemah* (I believe with perfect faith) etc. have scruples when they come to the belief in the coming of the Messiah which was their source of hope in their countries of origin. Now it is recited mechanically, for their lot is much better than in the past....However, I have promised your readers not to elaborate on this matter and I will keep my word.

Generally speaking, our school does not seek to inculcate any specific beliefs in its students, but rather to teach the wisdom of our Torah and the teachings of our sages.... This is seen especially in our third-year class whose students all study Latin, Greek, logic, and other subjects in the higher schools of our city. At the beginning of the year it was therefore suggested to them, as introductory to the Talmud, to study the differences between biblical and rabbinic Hebrew. They were shown the reasons for these developments, which made it possible for them to understand the usages of rabbinic Hebrew and their variations from the biblical period.

The student body of the school numbers about thirty boys, of which six are in the third class. They are equally divided between those who want to prepare for the rabbinate and those who seek to become

knowledgeable in both Torah and general studies. The highest class consists of the following four students: Abraham Illich, Dov, son of Benjamin Drachman, Adam Rosenberg, and Raphael Jacob Gottheil, son of the rabbi preacher who founded our school. The members of this group have completed our course of study and are preparing for the rabbinate. Because there is no higher institution of learning in our city for the reason I have indicated above, they have begun to study with the following four experts: Dr. Adler, Dr. Kohler, Dr. Gottheil, and Dr. Huebsch. The subjects include Talmud (tractate *Baba Batra*) the Book of Psalms, the *Kuzari*, and Aramaic grammar. The writer also teaches these students twice a week, on Sundays and Fridays, the tractate *Pesahim* with Rashi and the Tosafot.

The reader can now see that the fortunes of Jewish scholarship in our city are better than before, and they will continue to improve in the future. Our brethren feel remorse for neglecting Jewish learning and have changed their ways. Large sums have been expended on the needs of the Talmudei Torah and our preparatory school, and additional funds will be forthcoming. Contributors will see the fruits of their efforts, for the students of the third-year class of our school, in addition to the four young men I have mentioned by name, have shown a desire to study Torah, and their people's heritage is very dear to them. Besides fulfilling their duty of learning from their teachers, they have shown their love of learning by forming an organization that is dedicated to spreading Jewish knowledge. The society's name is "Yehudit" and among its members, in addition to the students, are Dr. Isaacs, editor of the *Jewish Messenger*, and another young man, Nathan Biyur, who has studied regularly at home. The members, headed by Dr. Gottheil, meet twice a month to listen to a paper on a Jewish subject that has been prepared by one of the participants.

The papers that are read can be either original or a review of material (reproduction), depending on whether it is presented by a scholar or one of the young men. The subject of the paper is made known to the members two weeks in advance. When the presenter is finished, there is opportunity for open debate and the expression of opinion in support of or against the presentation. The discussion is conducted in good taste and without prejudice, even when the presenter is one of the teachers or an officer of the society.... The members are humorously referred to as those who "do and dine," that is, who bring pleasure to others and to themselves as well, for they offer new material

and also listen to the new ideas that are presented by others.

On the other hand, there are those who "dine but do not do," that is, who benefit from the innovations of others but do not contribute anything themselves. Because the society's purpose is to enhance Jewish knowledge it is our policy to welcome all who come, even if they are not members. The society was founded last year at the end of the winter and these are the subjects of the papers that were presented at the meetings: The Karaite Prayers (Dr. Adler); The Authorship and Time of the Second Psalm (Dr. Gottheil, the society chairman); The Biblical Cantillation (Dr. Mielziner, formerly of our staff and now in Cincinnati, as indicated above); The Calculation of the New Months and the Seasons (the scholar Sekles); Moses Hayyim Luzzatto and his *la-Yesharim Tehillah* (the scholar Schnabel who is on our staff); The Ramban (Dr. Isaacs); Rabbinic Hebrew and Its Development (four lectures by the writer); The Song at the Red Sea (Nathan Biyur); The Poetry of *Ha'azinu* (Adam Rosenberg); The Book of Kohelet—The Author and His Time. Was It Written Originally in Hebrew or Is It a Translation? (Three papers on this subject by Dov Drachman, P. Hecht, who was then a student but is now in Cincinnati, and Raphael Jacob Gottheil); The Jews as Bearers of Emancipation (Abraham Illich). The papers were presented either in English or German.

The society's members meet in the library of Temple Emanu-El, which has made its collection available to us. We are permitted to borrow books when necessary. I am also a member of the society, which has appointed me to be in charge of the books and their circulation. I have also prepared a catalog and among the books I discovered some manuscripts of Jacob Emden, some of which had been known to me only by name and some which were entirely unknown. I shall speak to the Yehudit society about this find next month. I now bring you tidings and express my regret that I was not part of *Hamagid*, which formerly would bring such tidings to the Jewish world.

A.B.E.

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