

# “Free America”: Glimpses of Jewish Immigrant Life in the Pages of American *Brivnshteler*s

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At the turn of the twentieth century, Jewish families scattered by migration were forced to adopt what some called “a paper life”—a life of letters.<sup>1</sup> In correspondence between Europe and America, and between big cities and shtetls, Jews struggled to maintain contact with distant family members in letters that discussed what mattered to them most: the search for economic security and the ups and downs of everyday life. In both eastern Europe and America, Jews wrote business letters, courtship letters, and all manner of emotionally intense family letters.

While learning to write letters in Yiddish was the one stable aspect of girls’ education in Russian and Polish shtetls (with special tutors sometimes hired for this purpose), writing Yiddish was not a regular part of the curriculum for boys in the *kheyder* until perhaps beginning in the late nineteenth century.<sup>2</sup> But even for people who had some training in writing Yiddish, letter-writing could pose problems. How do you communicate on paper your feelings, thoughts, and requests in a style different from everyday, spoken Yiddish? How do you make sure that you are spelling words correctly and organizing your thoughts in the proper fashion? One path to reassurance was the “letter-writer” (*brivnshteler* in Yiddish), a book of model letters for all occasions public and private.<sup>3</sup> In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, more than thirty *brivnshteler*s by more than fifteen authors were published in the Russian and Austro-Hungarian empires in cheap, affordable editions, with some books going into multiple printings.<sup>4</sup> This kind of demand suggests that the books were likely to be found in many Jewish homes and in the hands of many Jewish tutors.<sup>5</sup> Another mark of popularity is parody. A character in Isaac Bashevis Singer’s story “A Crown of Feathers” dismisses a suitor with a comment that he sounds like a *brivnshteler*.<sup>6</sup> Sholem Aleichem—who seems to have toyed with the idea of writing a *brivnshteler*<sup>7</sup>—parodied formulaic openings and closings in his Menakhem Mendl letters (serialized 1892–1913).

The American-Yiddish *brivnshteler* was a small genre, the province of a handful of authors. This essay will focus on the work of three of them: Nokhem Meir Shaykevitch (1849?–1905), Alexander Harkavy (1863–1939), and Ben Zion Eisenstadt (1873–1951). *Shaykevitch’s nayer briefenshteler* (Shaykevitch’s new *brivnshteler*, New York, 1905) and *Harkavy’s amerikanisher briefen-shteler* (Harkavy’s American *brivnshteler*, New York, 1902) advertise the prominence of their authors directly in their titles; these publications went into multiple later editions. Eisenstadt’s *Der Moderner Briefenshteller* (The modern *brivnshteler*,

New York, 1910) had only a single edition but is a rich source of thinking about Jewish identity and family life.<sup>8</sup>

These three *brivnshtelers* were published during the height of the mass immigration of eastern European Jews to the United States. Within each book, letters of all types—courtship, business, social, and family—reflect the writer’s understanding of the needs of his immigrant readers, as well as his vision of how these readers should become American Jews. In the distinctive approach of each *brivnshteler*, we get glimpses of the diverse attitudes, ideologies, and experiences of the American Jewish immigrant community at the turn of the twentieth century.

The popularity of *Shaykevitsh’s nayer briefenshteler* is inseparable from the popularity, or notoriety, of its author, who wrote under the pen name Shomer. The author of hundreds of potboiler novels on romantic and historical themes, Shaykevitsh/Shomer provided generations of Yiddish-speaking women and (as Iris Parush shows, more than a few men<sup>9</sup>) with a stirring vision of life beyond the shtetl. Intellectuals like Simon Dubnow and serious writers—most famously, Sholem Aleichem, who skewered him in a diatribe called *Shomers mishpet* (The Trial of Shomer, 1888)—saw him as a purveyor of literary trash and hence an impediment to Yiddish cultural development. Shaykevitsh spent the last sixteen years of his life in the United States. Had he had any expectation of the funeral he would receive—an unprecedented public extravaganza, organized in part by his enemies at the *Forverts*<sup>10</sup>—he might have been less bitter. As it was, he concludes his *brivnshteler* with an ironic letter to his readers, comparing the Yiddish reader to someone who has been eating happily at a restaurant for many years until he is told that the food is unhealthy, at which point “he starts screaming *moves bsir* (‘there’s death in this restaurant’s pots’).” Shaykevitsh’s conclusion combines a belief in the worth of his work—in particular the *brivnshteler*—with the barest hope that purchasers might reconsider their attitudes:

So I ask you: if you yourself have enough understanding to see the importance of this *brivnshteler*; if you don’t rely on the expert opinions of certain people who turn black to white and dark to light, then you will bring great joy to your old acquaintance, THE WRITER.<sup>11</sup>

The consummate philologist and lexicographer Alexander Harkavy had a very different professional profile. Among the earliest and greatest Yiddishists, Harkavy arrived in the United States in 1881. Best known for his trilingual Yiddish-English-Hebrew dictionary of 1928, he wrote scholarly works on Yiddish linguistics and folklore, edited a variety of Yiddish literary anthologies, and prepared a Yiddish translation of *Don Quixote*. Closer to the spirit of his *brivnshteler* are his educational works, notably a series of English grammar books that he wrote in Yiddish, Hebrew, and Russian. Harkavy’s *brivnshteler* is bilingual and intended, at least in part, as a textbook of English language and

American manners. (He also wrote a bilingual English-Russian *brivnshteler*, which serves the same purpose for an overlapping set of immigrants.) If there is a contradiction in the image of a Yiddishist teaching immigrants the language and style of upper crust America, it may be related to what Dovid Katz describes as Harkavy's crossing of ideological boundaries.<sup>12</sup> Or it may simply be a maskilic commitment to making Yiddish-speakers bilingual and bicultural, with American letter-writers as the authoritative source of how Americans write and act.

Benzion Eisenstadt was not a household name among the immigrant masses on the level of Shomer or even Harkavy. Born in Kleck, a shtetl in Belorussia, he immigrated to the United States in 1903. A prolific author of Hebrew works, such as biographies of rabbis (including Orthodox rabbis in America) and sermons, he is the most religiously traditional of our three authors. *Der moderner Brieffenshteler* may have been his only foray into more secular provinces.<sup>13</sup>

Much of what unites Shaykevitch and Eisenstadt, and differentiates both from Harkavy, is traceable to the tradition of the eastern European *brivnshteler*. Like the American version, the *brivnshteler* in Russia and Poland served its readers as a model for modernization and, in some cases, acculturation. Changing customs were reflected in courtship correspondence, with flowery letters between *khosn* (bridegroom) and *kale* (bride) marking the incursion of modern romance into the arranged marriage. But the most notable feature of the eastern European *brivnshteler* is its highly emotional correspondence between parents and children. Small children write anxious letters to fathers who are away; older children, married or simply studying elsewhere, are an endless source of parental worry. The *brivnshtelers* openly acknowledge this anxiety—a kind of barometer of love—to an extent where it seems almost as if the very point of their existence is to provide words for it.

Harkavy largely rejects the eastern European tradition, using the American letter-writer (and its Russian equivalent, the *pis'movnik*) as a model. American letter-writers contemporary to Harkavy teach a style of writing whose hallmark is brevity.<sup>14</sup> In these books, emotional intensity is reserved for love letters, with men expressing ardent love and women responding either with affection or—in the case of a rejection—cool rationality. American letter-writers do contain letters about life's reversals, but in stark contrast to the eastern European *brivnshteler*, they spend no time on potential disasters. This does not, of course, mean that Americans did not worry, simply that letter-writing manuals appear not to have considered fantasies about catastrophe as suitable subjects for correspondence. When bad things *do* happen, the operant words in their letters are “duty,” “perseverance,” and, when appropriate, “manliness.”

## Describing America

Two of our authors, Shomer and Eisenstadt, follow through on the promises made in their introductions to provide letters for every eventuality.<sup>15</sup> They provide

model letters useful even for their Jewish immigrant readers' first moments in the New World, despite the unlikelihood that someone just off the boat would have prioritized the purchase of a *brivnshteler*. Both *Shaykevits'h'es nayer briefenshteler* and Eisenstadt's *Der moderner briefeffsteller* include several examples of letters that new immigrants could send home to family in Europe within their first days after landing in New York Harbor.

In Eisenstadt, Zusman Lipshits writes to his parents not two hours after his arrival in "the free America," describing a difficult journey in which his ship was mired in a fog and the passengers frightened by the constant sounding of the foghorn. But thank God, they arrived in port safely, and

... as soon as we saw the Statue of Liberty in New York Harbor, it became bright before everyone's eyes.

We were deeply inspired by the American symbol as expressed in the image of an angel standing in the middle of a vast and stormy sea holding outstretched his [*sic*] hand and inviting everyone who is lonely and homeless to turn to him so that he can take them under his wings and protect them and stretch out a helping hand to them.<sup>16</sup>

This celebratory tone is repeated in *Shaykevits'h'es nayer briefenshteler* in a letter from Leah Goldberg to her parents:

Not for nothing does the world have the proverb: 'The devil is not so terrible as he has been described.' This is very true. In our small *shtetlekh* it is believed that traveling to America is a sort of trip to hell and one imagines the most terrible things about this journey.... When you arrive in New York you encounter so many acquaintances from home that you think you're still in the shtetl.

There is not a single town in Russia, Austria, and Romania that hasn't sent a few families to America, and so a new arrival, or as it is called here, a greener, won't fail. His landsmen help him with advice (and most of the time with actual help). Blessed is America for the fact that here, working is no disgrace. Everyone works: old and young, men and women, and as long as one wants to work, there is no lack of work in New York.<sup>17</sup>

The condescending tone of Leah's letter is echoed in other glowing letters about America in both *brivnshtelers*. Both authors seem to suggest that merely stepping foot on American soil effects an immediate transformation of the eastern European Jew into someone who, in comparison with those left behind, is already a sophisticate, a man or woman of the world. How to describe the unimaginably different world of America to one's friends or family back home in the shtetl? Shaykevits'h's Yitskhok Dov Ayzenshteyn, a Jew who has apparently been in America for some years already, writes in response to a friend's query:

It seems to you, as it appears, that it is a trifle to write about what kind of land America is and how one lives here. . . .

What then do you want, my friend? That I should describe for you everything clearly and in detail in connection with America and her inhabitants?

No, this would take years and reams of paper! . . .

This, my friend, is no little village or a small town. This is a world of little universes. Here live people from every continent, from all countries, from every city and from every nation.

America is a veritable Garden of Eden, and here one can see “how far our Yankele can work himself up when he is given full freedom.”<sup>18</sup> Another letter in Shaykevitsh, from Marcus Tarkin, makes the point that, though his economic prospects in the shtetl had been dim, in America, “every person needs only good skills to have here the best opportunity to draw upon and use them.”<sup>19</sup>

Despite these advertisements for America, however, both Shomer and Eisenstadt pull back from endorsing everything about American life or from touting America as an option for every single Jew in Europe. Yoysef Bernshteyn in Eisenstadt gives his friend Avrom cautious advice:

You ask me whether it would be worth it for you to come to America. And believe me, I can't give you any correct answer to such a question. America is like the whole world, everywhere one must have a bit of luck. People who are entirely common and ordinary come here and work themselves up to being propertied, and on the contrary, here one sees intelligent and educated people who are not very well-off.

Naturally, there is more room to make a living in America than in another country, but it depends a lot on the talent for work and even more on getting the right job.<sup>20</sup>

Shaykevitsh's Leah, too, warns those back home about having too rosy a view of life in America:

You know what an impression our shtetl inhabitants have of America. They believe that gold is scraped up off the street here with shovels because Khayim Yankel the tailor, who in our shtetl didn't earn dry bread, sent, in the first year that he lived in America, a whole two hundred rubles to his Khane Dvoyre, and Beyle, the daughter of Khasye the storekeeper, sent her mother money for a wig and a coat.

In our shtetl, they believe that here in America everyone lives like kings, in fine palaces with the most expensive furniture and that one travels around in equipages.<sup>21</sup>

She complains about the high cost of living, noting that while ten dollars would be a fortune in Russia, it does not go far in New York, if one wants to dress fashionably and enjoy a few luxuries.

The brutal pace of work in America is the most oft-cited drawback of life in the New World. While some immigrants arrived with tailoring skills and experience of city living, many others had to learn their trade on the job, in sweatshops and factories where work hours and other conditions differed markedly from those of the small-town workshops they were used to. Eisenstadt has Avrom Kaplan write to his sister that he does not think that she should come to America:

There is no doubt that for girls who love and are comfortable with work or business America is certainly much better than any country in Europe. In America women work on average almost like men. However, I don't know, devoted sister, if working in American factories (shops) will be too hard for someone like you who has always been accustomed to fresh air and easy work.

It is true that America pays higher wages than other countries but, by the same token, the work in America is much harder and more strenuous than work in other nations. The worker in the United States is a real slave and during working hours he must be punctual about getting up in the morning and until late in the evening must keep his head and shoulders bowed, and, in addition, remain sitting in the factory, which is usually dark, without air or sunshine, and dusty.<sup>22</sup>

But his sister apparently persists in her determination to come to America because there is a second letter, in which Avrom becomes even more graphic in his description of the ill effects of factory work on young women:

Don't forget, dear sister, that a girl of your age will have to go work in the shops, and God forbid, become a ruin. Don't look, dear sister, at the pictures that the girls from our hometown send to their relatives in Europe, and which make it seem that in America, everyone shines like a mirror, that everyone is beautiful and doing well. Don't forget, beloved, that it is nothing more than a picture that gets gussied up and tinted by artistic workers here. I can give you the example of Ruvn's daughters, how dark and gloomy they are in reality, how white their faces are without a drop of blood in them—even though their pictures, that they sent off to their parents this summer, caused a stir in the shtetl—and then you will see what a terrible ruin America makes out of girls who are like you.<sup>23</sup>

A rare female correspondent in Eisenstadt, Basye Strauss, continues on in this vein, complaining that she has not had the time to write her friend a letter because work in the factory, from which she does not get home until eight o'clock at night, leaves her so exhausted that she has not written her "beloved

parents” more than five times during her year in America. She adds that in order to write this particular letter, she has “had to give up a day’s work, which represents a sizeable portion of my earnings.”<sup>24</sup>

Shaykevitsh, too, focuses on the particular hardships for women in the workshops and factories of America, but his view of their prospects is considerably less bleak than Eisenstadt’s. Leah, whom we first became acquainted with moments after her arrival in New York and who has gone to work in a glove factory, is more upbeat than Basye about America. Yes, workers in America must labor bitterly and live in “airless rooms.” But here in America, a girl does not need a dowry to marry. “If a girl in America isn’t ugly and is respectable, she can easily find a groom who will take her as she is.” Many times, she has regretted coming to America, but when she sees how other girls who came with as little as she has have progressed and are now rich and married to upstanding men, she is inspired.<sup>25</sup>

Despite the ambivalence about America expressed in both Shaykevitsh and Eisenstadt, their *brivnshtelers* stand in marked contrast to the almost uniformly negative portrayal of America in contemporaneous *brivnshtelers* published in eastern Europe.<sup>26</sup> The mass emigration of Jews to the United States is given surprisingly short shrift in European *brivnshtelers*, which devote most of their pages to letters to and from internal migrants to large cities, such as Warsaw and Lodz. The rare letter to or from America, as often as not, paints the New World not as a place of opportunity—the dominant perspective of the American *brivnshtelers*—but as a place of purgatory and punishment for Jewish boys who have messed up by not applying themselves to their studies or apprenticeships and thus must go into exile for the sake of economic survival. Some of these fictional immigrants write to their parents begging for assistance to return to Europe.<sup>27</sup>

But Shaykevitsh and Eisenstadt assume that their readers are in America for good. Their connections to the Old Country are now a matter of keeping in touch with and sending money to families back home and weighing the pros and cons of sending steamship tickets to wives and children, fiancées, and siblings, so that they can come and join them in the “golden land.”<sup>28</sup>

## Business

Unlike Shaykevitsh and Eisenstadt’s *brivnshtelers*, *Harkavy’s amerikanisher briefen-shteler* assumes a reader who is already firmly ensconced in America. As its title shows, it is an “American” *brivnshteler*, firmly focused on the here and now, with nary a backward glance at the Old Country. Absent entirely is any material relating to an immigrant’s first days in America or letters between immigrants and relatives back home in Europe. All the letters in this bilingual Yiddish-English letter-writer are intended for recipients in America, and the Yiddish letters are included only as a tool for helping the reader learn how to write proper English.<sup>29</sup>

But while at first glance it might seem as if Harkavy's letters—intent on smoothing the rough edges of the Jewish immigrant into the unaccented blandness of a properly English-speaking, well-mannered American—lack content related to the American Jewish experience, a closer look reveals that the book is written very much with the needs of the Jewish immigrant in mind, albeit one who has been here long enough to be ready to take the next step in Americanization and upward mobility by writing letters in English. This is demonstrated by the book's more than fifty pages of business letters. Harkavy's businessmen deal almost exclusively in dry goods, the manufacture and sale of which was the most common occupation for Jews in New York in the 1890s.<sup>30</sup> They have Americanized Jewish names (Goodman, Blank, Newman) and correspond with other businessmen, Jewish and non-Jewish (Richards, Williams), about the purchase and sale of cloth, shoddy merchandise, mistakes in billing, and announcements of the opening of new dry goods establishments. There are almost no letters in *Harkavy's amerikanisher briefen-shteler* related to employment in factories, sweatshops, or peddling.<sup>31</sup>

Harkavy's readers may have "arrived" in the sense of having amassed enough capital to open their own businesses, but this new status was precarious, as evidenced by the many letters dealing with requests for credit and for deferment of payments on loans. Harkavy's letters, like those in American letter-writers, handle the topic of debt calmly, in a neutral, businesslike style. Quite different are the loan and debt letters in Eisenstadt and Shaykevitch, which are emotional and personal, full of appeals to friendship and kinship. Consider, for example, how a tenant who is delinquent in his rent writes to his landlord in *Harkavy's amerikanisher briefen-shteler*:

From a Tenant, Excusing Delay of Payment.

Sir:—I have now been your tenant above ten years in the house where I now live, and you know that I never failed to pay my rent quarterly when due. At present I am extremely sorry to inform you that from a variety of recent disappointments, I am under the necessity of begging that you will wait one quarter longer. By that time I hope to have it in my power to answer your just demand, and the favor shall be ever remembered by

Your obedient servant.<sup>32</sup>

Eisenstadt handles the same situation as follows:

Esteemed Mr. Landa!

Please excuse me for not paying the rent this time. Right now, as you are no doubt aware, I have not worked for a whole month, and especially, my two dear children were very sick this month, and this put a lot of pressure on me. I hope that such a refined man as yourself, who has empathy for the plight

of someone else, will patiently and calmly wait until next month, when I expect to obtain work and will bring the first money that I receive to you, with thanks.

Your friend,

Yoysef Berman<sup>33</sup>

The sequence concludes with a reply from Mr. Landa, the landlord, who assures Berman that he knows him to be an honest man who doesn't ask for handouts from strangers and that he and his "agent" trust him to pay the rent when his situation improves.<sup>34</sup>

Eisenstadt's Berman makes a bid for his landlord's sympathies, not hesitating to mention his sick children, and he announces his insolvency without apology. Harkavy's letter is as impersonal as a form letter. He eschews emotion, and one can all but hear the writer clearing his throat in embarrassment when he speaks of his "recent disappointments." This letter, like many of the letters in Harkavy, is likely to have been pirated or lightly adapted from an existing English-language letter-writer, with changes in the names of the correspondents and an added focus on the garment trade as the only nods to the ethnic identities of its intended readership.<sup>35</sup> The assumption is, apparently, that to properly Americanize, one must step out of the confines of one's ethnic community and shed one's cultural style as well as one's language.

By contrast, letters about credit and debt in Eisenstadt and Shaykevitsh are exclusively between Jews. Often the creditor and debtor are old friends as well as business associates, and the letters are not only emotional, but openly angry and very personal. In Eisenstadt, Mordkhe Zeligson writes to M. Aleksandrov supposedly for the third time about the sixty-five-dollar tab that the latter has racked up in his store. Zeligson stood by Aleksandrov when he was down and out, and now Aleksandrov has been working for a whole year already, but he still hasn't paid his bill. Moreover, Zeligson is a poor storekeeper who works from early in the morning to late at night—in short, he is not a wealthy man. He is getting to the point where he is thinking of taking Aleksandrov to "court" (the English word is supplied in Yiddish transliteration and glossed). Aleksandrov replies, offended, saying that there is no need for such an angry tone and that it's really not true that he is making a fine living. In fact, he is often out of work. Furthermore, there has been sickness in his house. He'll try to pay his debt soon.<sup>36</sup>

Shaykevitsh in particular seems to take into the account the possibility that some of his readers might encounter a real reversal of fortune and end up destitute. The introduction to his section on "Friendship Letters" divides these letters into different categories, one of which is correspondence between former friends who are no longer in the same social class due to the rise of one and/

or the fall of the other.<sup>37</sup> He includes two letters from men down on their luck begging for financial assistance from wealthy men. Both letters make naked appeals not only to the potential benefactor's generosity but also to the shared Jewish kinship of both parties. In one of the letters, Mordkhe Rozenthal writes to an old friend who is doing well financially, asking him for a job, a letter of recommendation, or a loan:

I won't bother you by describing my sad situation. I will only tell you that *Bo'u mayim ad nefesh*<sup>38</sup>—the water is already rising up to my soul, and we might all, God forbid, be extinguished due to our lack of all that a human being needs to live.... Loan me a little money so that I can do a bit of business and if God helps me, I will return your *gmiles khased* with the utmost gratitude at my first opportunity.

The tears are pouring from my eyes and I can't write any more. So I am ending my letter with the hope that my words won't be *k'kol kore bmidbar*<sup>39</sup> (like one who cries out in a wilderness).<sup>40</sup>

The biblical passages are glossed in Yiddish, in a concession to the possibility that the reader was not educated enough to know their meaning. This is not the only letter in which Shaykevitsh includes Hebrew phrases and words. They are there to give letters a more educated, high-class tone and also to remind the recipients of their religious duty to be charitable and merciful when it comes to dispensing financial aid or forgiving business or other transgressions. Eisenstadt also does not hesitate to pepper his letters with Hebrew terms. His intention is to present his readers with letters that “always uses a plain and pure prose style which reads the way people speak” and that includes Hebrew words commonly used in Yiddish.<sup>41</sup> He helpfully indicates these words with quotation marks to draw them to the reader's attention. No doubt this is to help readers learn to spell them correctly, as less-educated Yiddish-speakers tend to spell *loshn-koydeshe* (Hebrew) words phonetically and incorrectly in their correspondence.

## Jewishness in America

The use of Hebrew in both Eisenstadt and Shaykevitsh is not only a matter of utilitarianism in correspondence but is also an expression of the authors' philosophical positions on Jewishness in America. In letter after letter, Shaykevitsh stresses the need for a “modern” outlook even as he urges his readers not to turn their backs on Jewish tradition altogether, scolding, for instance, those who scoff at bar mitzvah ceremonies. In one letter, he depicts a father who objects to his son marrying a girl whose family is without *yikhes* (lineage).<sup>42</sup> But he reserves his real enthusiasm for the possibilities America offers for secular Jewish culture, even as he takes a somewhat apologetic tone about Yiddish—the vehicle for his fame as a writer—acknowledging the low regard in which it was held by many in the Jewish intelligentsia. In answer to a friend's question, “What is the state

of Yiddish literature in America?” Shaykevitsh’s Yankev Moyshe Vebman writes, “[I]t is a joy to see how our *zhargonishe* (Yiddish) literature has developed in America. There have never been as many good writers and excellent poets in our poor language as there are today.” Yiddish literature in America can hold its head high, Vebman continues. The major English newspapers frequently print translations of stories and articles from the Yiddish press, and the Yiddish writers in New York have even formed a union. And who would have believed that in New York City alone there would be five Yiddish daily newspapers, not to mention monthlies, annuals, and five Yiddish theaters?<sup>43</sup>

Compared to Shaykevitsh, Eisenstadt spends much more time on the topic of Jewishness in America. His *brivnshteler* is chock-full of letters related to Jewish communal life and even includes a selection of letters written in Hebrew, as well as a couple of sample bar mitzvah speeches to be delivered by the boy’s father and teacher. But at the same time, it is apparent that he is aware that his readership includes Jews of all stripes, not only the steadfastly Orthodox but also, as Jenna Weissman Joselit puts it, Jews “who were highly selective in their approach to ritual behavior and cultural identity” and were given to “ignoring, retaining, modifying, adapting, inventing, reappropriating, and reconstructing tradition.”<sup>44</sup>

Eisenstadt’s position is that Judaism can and must survive in America, but he seems more than willing to acknowledge that its practices might, at least on the surface, need to be modified to suit new lifestyles. Whereas Shaykevitsh portrays Jewish ritual as old-fashioned but nonetheless deserving of respect, Eisenstadt promotes the combining of Jewishness and religious observance with the everyday realities of life in America. His model letters paint a world in which there are synagogues and Jewish educational institutions and communal organizations (albeit in a different form from those in Europe). Indeed, the types of letters he supplies—invitations to a benefit picnic of the “Brooklyn *lines-hatsedek*” (aid society for the indigent sick), requests for the recommendation of a Hebrew teacher, a reminder from the *shames* (beadle) to a member of a shul about his father’s *yahrzeit*—are not to be found in any European *brivnshteler* and reflect circumstances that would have been alien to religious life in Russia and Poland. He even includes a text that playfully acknowledges the Jewish popular culture of the time—a letter from the head of one Yiddish theater to the head of another, rival Yiddish theater:

Worthy Herr Thomashefsky and his worthy wife!

Enclosed are two tickets to Adler’s Grand Theater for the play, “Bar Kochba,” which will be performed Monday evening, January 15 as a benefit for the Brooklyn Gmiles Khsodim (free loan society). I believe that you will certainly do us the honor of attending the play, as your presence is very important for us and can do a great deal of good for the noble work of the Gmiles Khesed.

On behalf of the directors and the board,

M. Breslav (Secretary)

(Seal of the association)<sup>45</sup>

Here, Eisenstadt has Thomashefsky graciously accepting Breslav's invitation and sending ten dollars as a donation to the charity.

While Eisenstadt demonstrates his familiarity with benefit performances and other fundraising techniques used by Jewish charities in the New World, his communal organizations retain the European names for such institutions (Gmiles Khesed, Lines Hatsedek), rather than the "benevolent associations," "progressive aid societies," "free loan societies," and other anglicized names that immigrant associations in real-life New York preferred. In the last section of his *brivnshteler*, his set of Hebrew letters envisions an America that is not completely devoid of a Hebrew-speaking intelligentsia: there is a letter from a *prenumerant* (an advance subscriber to a forthcoming book); an invitation to a rabbi to deliver a speech in honor of a *siyem toyre* (celebration to mark the completion of the writing of a Torah scroll) in a synagogue in Brownsville, Brooklyn; and an invitation to a dignitary asking him to deliver an address at a special event in honor of the opening of the Ninth Zionist Congress.

Indeed, Eisenstadt seems, in no small measure, intent on dispelling the stereotype of America as a place devoid of Jewishness. In one letter, titled, "A son in America reassures his father in Europe that he has remained as steadfast in his Judaism as he was back home," Reuven Fink writes:

It is completely unnecessary, devoted father, to instruct me in your letter to observe the Sabbath, in particular, and to maintain *yiddishkeit* in general, because you know me, dear father. You know that I have always trod one path, whether sitting in Kiev or Odessa, Warsaw or Moscow, I nonetheless kept intensely to my Jewish customs, especially the Sabbath, which is one of the greatest and strongest Jewish fundamentals. I have never traded Judaism for money or even for riches and property.

I can go as far as to write you that in my present occupation, I was offered a job in which I could get 3 dollars more a week than I do now; however, it would have involved me having to do business on the Sabbath and on the Jewish holidays and so I didn't take it, because for me, resting during the holy Jewish days is much dearer than money.

I am also a member of a beautiful *shul* where I go to worship every Sabbath and holiday.<sup>46</sup>

These concerns about lack of religious observance are almost completely absent from European *brivnshtelers*.<sup>47</sup> Indeed, lurking throughout Eisenstadt is the fear that America poses particular challenges to the continuation of Jewish

life and identity, not only for the untutored masses but even for those with a highly refined Jewish education. This anxiety finds its fullest expression in an exchange of letters in which one Jew accuses another of permitting a Christmas tree in his home:

I have heard from a reliable source, that, dear friend, in your house, where there are treasures with our best Jewish pearls; where there are many, many of the best Jewish holy books; in your Jewish home where mezuzahs hang on the doorposts and beautiful pictures of our greatest spiritual giants decorate and adorn the walls—in that same house, you permitted the Christmas rituals to be observed in all their “holiness,” may it not be so, and in your house you allowed the display of a tree around which your children celebrated in nothing less than a goyish way. My dear friend! Consider carefully what you have done. It might seem like “child’s play,” an enjoyable occasion and nothing more. But it smacks of something completely different and my feeling is that if such a Jewish Jew like you—a man like you who was brought up among such passionate and warm Jewish patriots—have allowed this to be done in your house, then what will the vulgar and ignorant masses end up doing?

It is possible, dear friend, that maybe it was done without your permission; maybe no one asked you. We know the children of today, and know that they infrequently consult their parents. It’s possible that the seemingly “modern” and “civilized” children who constantly imitate the Christians were the ones who brought the “green crucifix” into your house, and that their “kosher” hands planted the non-Jewish plant, completely without your knowledge. But I believe, dear friend, that an educated and learned man like you should have known how to handle this sort of situation. You should have known that this kind of “child’s play” always ends in the worst, most terrible and saddest tragedy of “assimilation,” which is not only the death of *yidishkeyt*, but also a very, very shameful and ugly death. You should have known that in the final result these sort of “playthings” bring with them no honor but only degradation and spiritual malaise into the Jewish home.<sup>48</sup>

The accused replies that it is all a false rumor spread, perhaps, by his “enemies,” and that he remains as pious and Sabbath-observing as ever:

I am very upset, my friend, and can hardly hold the pen in my hand.... Yes, it is true that on Christmas day, my children and also a few friends and acquaintances gathered at my house and that we enjoyed ourselves a little bit. But this affair was not mixed with or connected in any way with Christmas rituals. It was very simple—since neither the children nor our acquaintances were working that day or doing business, they spent that day at my house. But whoever saw a “tree” or all these silly and mysterious rituals that you are going on about so much?... You know my rigorous and steadfast loyalty to my people and all of their holiness, you know that for years and years I have fought so that my children would observe the Sabbath and holidays, and not

defile the holy days, even when I have suffered from hunger and cold. You know this quite well and such a terrible accusation against me at my age has really embittered my heart.<sup>49</sup>

Passing on Jewish traditions to one's children indeed takes a special place in *Der moderner briffenshteller*. Eisenstadt's focus on bar mitzvahs is a case in point. He has included several sample invitations to bar mitzvahs, as well as one letter in which Uncle Elkhanon Harkavy regrets that he can't make it to his nephew Alexander's celebration because he is tied up with business but that he is sending as a gift a very old Bible bound in silver with, on one side, the bar mitzvah boy's monogram in gold and on the other side, his own monogram. He is sorry that he will miss the boy's speech "about *yiddishkeit* in three languages."<sup>50</sup> There are also three bar mitzvah speeches, one in Hebrew and two in Yiddish, reflecting the new prominence of this ritual in American Jewish life.<sup>51</sup> The Hebrew bar mitzvah speech was written with the bar mitzvah boy himself in mind, but the Yiddish speeches were to be delivered by, respectively, the boy's father and his teacher. The speech for the father takes an overprotective tone (he has trouble with the idea that he is no longer officially responsible for his son's actions) and interprets the son's new responsibility to lay *tefilin* as a symbol not only of his fealty to Judaism but also as a defense against antisemitic violence:

Until now, given his extreme youth, when he still didn't have an impression of education, of knowledge, of religion, of spirit and morality, he could also make mistakes, but not now, not now when he has already begun to see and sense the pure radiance of our Jewish religion, of our Jewish nation, not now when he has come into a position... to fortify [his faith] with might against external enemies and to bind his head with such a holy and strong bandage as the *tefilin*.

Now . . . my child is ensured protection from the enemy, who has a mighty hand, and he will protect his head so that he will not be hit by the unexpected, horrible bullets that hover perpetually over the Jew's head.<sup>52</sup>

The speech written for the teacher to deliver takes a different approach by attempting to address cynicism about the very custom of the bar mitzvah *droshe* (sermon). It acknowledges that everyone knows that the bar mitzvah boy has not single-handedly written his speech but that this does not matter. The point of the ceremony needn't be the display of erudition but, instead, one's willingness to take on the ethical precepts and moral obligations of Judaism. Eisenstadt makes the point that this is a communal endeavor, a joint effort on the part of the bar mitzvah boy, his parents, and his teachers:

And because of this, we consider the entire bar mitzvah speech ritual holy. It is true that the young child did not write or craft it by himself, but we Jews take pride not in our intellectuals themselves, in those who can create and

write. We take pride only in the good and noble practical work that we do from our hearts, with which the peoples of the world cannot compete, because we have more heart, more blood, more spirit than they do.... [we take pride] when the child now indicates that he is drawn to the holy Jewish principles, the holy Jewish feelings. This is not some hopeful fantasy—it is nothing but the pure, godly soul that encourages him in this direction.<sup>53</sup>

This bar mitzvah speech is the very last item in Eisenstadt's book and thus carries a certain weight. It emphasizes scholarship and erudition, important to both Orthodox Jews and *maskilim* (proponents of the Jewish Enlightenment). But it also acknowledges that this is probably not where American Jewry is headed, and that, as an alternative, the continuation of Judaism might draw strength from ethnic pride and a new focus on ethical traditions. This approach can be contrasted with that of Shaykevitsh, who does not articulate a strong, alternative vision of Jewishness in America. Instead, when a father writes to a son who he has heard is contemplating conversion to Christianity, the best he has to offer as a deterrent is a Zionist argument: Jews are persecuted, but one day, when they have their own land, they will be as respected as other peoples.<sup>54</sup>

## Parents and Children

The eastern European *brivnshteler* focused on providing words for parents anxious about their children's well-being—and occasionally for children rebelling against parental authority. In America, the first part of this equation was turned upside-down.

In Shaykevitsh's and Eisenstadt's *brivnshtelers*, family angst resurfaces in transoceanic correspondence, in which the predominant goal of the letter-writing children is to make their parents feel better. In the Eisenstadt letter cited earlier, Zusman Lipshits's first impressions of America are interspersed with expressions of love for his parents: The whole voyage, he says, he thought of his mother and father's "hot and boiling tears" and awaited the moment when he would finally be able to tell them he had arrived safely.<sup>55</sup> In Zusman's second letter, he writes that when he and his friends say *l'chaim*, they address it to "our warm and devoted families in Russia."<sup>56</sup> And he mentions a detail (perfect for soothing parental worry): He's boarding with a *landsman*.<sup>57</sup> There are, apparently, familiar aspects even to life in New York.

Shaykevitsh's letters between the newly arrived Leah and her parents also start with empathy and reassurance: "My letter should fly to you—I know what anxious thoughts are in your head."<sup>58</sup> Like Eisenstadt's Zusman, Leah lets her parents know that she is in familiar hands, picked up from Ellis Island, "the place where all immigrants from third class go now," by "a friend (or relative)"—the writer is apparently meant to insert the person's name—who found her a place to sleep. Her parents mustn't worry, because she will be fine; "like thousands of girls, [she'll] earn money."<sup>59</sup> The father reacts, true to European-Yiddish type,

by reiterating his anxieties, even though the cause is now past: “It was bad for me as a man, I could hide my pain in my heart, but as for your mother, don’t even ask....”<sup>60</sup>

Leah’s next letter continues to assuage parental fears: “When you arrive in New York you see so many acquaintances from home you think you’re still in the shtetl,”<sup>61</sup> she says, echoing the conceit in the second half of Sholem Aleichem’s *Motl-Peyse dem khasns* (1907), where most of Motl’s shtetl turns up in New York. Leah assures her parents that she will work—working here is no *shande* (shame)—and make money. Indeed, Leah, as cited earlier, writes a letter with a much darker picture of immigrant life. But that letter is intended for her girlfriend.

With initial letters out of the way, the parent-child correspondence in Shaykevitsh and Eisenstadt oscillates between connectedness and feared or actual abandonment. Connectedness is expressed through comforting news that marriages in the New World, even if contracted without a *shadkhn* (matchmaker), are with familiar types of people. Such is the case with Shaykevitsh’s Bella, who announces that she’s become a *kale* and wishes her parents a *mazel tov*. Who is the *khosn*? Nothing strange here—he’s Lazar Grinblum from Bobroisk. Her parents can check out his family with their Bobroisk acquaintances, where they will find every qualification satisfied: Not only is Lazar’s father a rabbi, but he was at one time (the past tense presumably necessary to explain the son’s presence in America) a very wealthy man. Bella’s parents can rejoice over their daughter’s marriage, even though, as they are quick to point out, they will not be leading her to the *khupe* (marriage canopy).<sup>62</sup>

Money is a major theme of parent-child relations, just as it was a major push toward emigration. In his first letter home, Eisenstadt’s Aleksander Gordon announces that he is putting aside half his “wages” (in English) for his parents as thanks for their devotion to his education and his future. In his second letter, he proudly encloses forty rubles and asks that they drink a glass of whiskey to his health.<sup>63</sup> Not all children are, or remain, so prompt to send money home. Shaykevitsh includes a letter from “an old father” whose Dovidl has forgotten him, does not write, and does not send money. The son is obliged to help his father, who is too weak to earn a living. Dovidl should not forget that he too will grow old.<sup>64</sup> Since old fathers in eastern Europe were unlikely to peruse a *brivnshteler* published in New York, we have to assume that Shaykevitsh either got carried away by his narrative or includes the father’s story to prompt readers like Dovidl into ethical behavior.

In Shaykevitsh and Eisenstadt, parents worry about children’s moral lives. Eisenstadt’s Rokhl Rabinovits assures her father that even in “free America” (meant in this sense as libertine) she maintains her father’s honor by only associating with the most honest and best people.<sup>65</sup> Shaykevitsh gives the fathers themselves a pair of letters. Following a pattern long established in eastern

European *brivnshtelers*, these fathers have heard from unnamed sources that their children have become wayward. Otherwise, the context has been Americanized. In the first letter, the son has not put aside money—not a single “cent”—even though he has been working for two years; a morality lesson follows about what happens when you go into debt.<sup>66</sup> In the second letter, Yitskhak Funk tells his *freylikhe* (carefree) daughter Reyzele that her parents’ hearts are broken. A “trusted man” has seen her at “dances, masquerades, and picnics.” But Funk goes to some lengths to establish his modernity. He “is not one of those people who say a girl should never talk to a man”; indeed “a woman has just as much right to get pleasure from the world as a man.” However, young men have something else on their minds and can drag a girl “into the swamp.”<sup>67</sup>

The single letter in Shaykevitsh that deals with child-rearing dispenses altogether with the usual eastern European Jewish emphasis on education. This letter is attributed to a grandmother responding to her daughter’s complaints about “wild Yankele,” who runs on roofs and fights in the street. Combining a grandmotherly Yiddish full of diminutives with an unexpectedly clear grasp of American conditions, Sonia asserts that a boy *has* to know how to fight, and to make him strong the parents should make sure he does gymnastic exercises. Serving as a mouthpiece for what we can assume are Shaykevitsh’s ideas, she promotes modern child-rearing by opposing corporal punishment. Hitting a child, she says, only hardens him and makes him nervous.<sup>68</sup>

In Harkavy, parent-child relationships are almost entirely absent. The one grouping that includes them is a curiosity, because it links Harkavy, who usually draws his material from American letter-writers, with the Russian *pis’movnik* he was familiar with from his pre-emigration years.<sup>69</sup> Following Russian practice, the opening letters in Harkavy’s family section consist of birthday and secular New Years’ greetings from children to parents. The formality of these letters (“I consider it one of the principal duties of my life to express to you my filial veneration. Your birthday again offers me one of these opportunities”<sup>70</sup>) represents a striking contrast to the emotional overdrive of Shaykevitsh and Eisenstadt, as well as to European *brivnshtelers* as a group. More surprising still is the contrast with American birthday letters, which, though uncommon, are unfailingly affectionate and aim—insofar as possible in a letter-writer—for an air of spontaneity. As far as New Years’ letters go, American letter-writers do not include them at all. The importance of January 1 as a time for sending formal congratulations was particular to Russian culture, and indeed, one of Harkavy’s sets opens with the standard *pis’movnik* formula: “Dear Father, Not because it is customary, but because my heart prompts me...”<sup>71</sup>

## Courtship Letters and Letters Between Husbands and Wives

While eastern European *brivnshtelers* include love letters between *khosn* and *kale*, they do not offer many letters that initiate the relationship. Here is where

Shaykevitsh, Eisenstadt, and Harkavy all step in, though the approaches they take to the matter are very different.

The *shadkhn*, a figure of derision even in eastern European *brivnshtelers*,<sup>72</sup> makes a defensive appearance in both Shaykevitsh and Eisenstadt. In Eisenstadt, the *shadkhn* is approached by a somewhat embarrassed client, a man who has met a young lady on his own but needs an intermediary to press his case because he lacks mutual acquaintances. He has heard of the *shadkhn* “by chance.”<sup>73</sup> Shaykevitsh has two letters reimagining the role of the *shadkhn* in America. In the first, the *shadkhn* introduces himself to a potential in-law. After several paragraphs explaining the circuitous route through a variety of occupations that led him to his present profession, he proposes a match for the recipient’s daughter.<sup>74</sup> In the second letter, this same *shadkhn*’s awareness of his own obsolescence is more marked. “It may be,” he begins, “that you belong to the class of people that doesn’t keep the old customs of getting married through a *shadkhn*.” But, he goes on, what if a friend were to introduce you? How is the *shadkhn* any different? As we have seen earlier, Shaykevitsh is all for modernity, but he still sees a role for traditional Jewish values and customs in America, albeit in an updated form.<sup>75</sup>

Indeed, in letters that assume the involvement of a *shadkhn*, the strengths and weaknesses of potential matches are predictably traditional. In one letter, the prospective groom may be no beauty, but “he makes the best impression.” He’s a “cutter.” He makes twenty-five dollars a week. He does not want the kind of girl who goes to picnics and dances and, presumably, is so concerned with her appearance that she “doesn’t take off her corset even at night.”<sup>76</sup> In the second letter, the potential *khosn*—who declares outright that he does not belong to that class of modern people who spurn the *shadkhn*—gives seven numbered conditions that the *kale* needs to fulfill. Among them: The lucky bride must be pretty, from a good family, able to cook and sew, and “not too educated.” In addition, the groom hopes to be rich and give his wife all pleasures, but if it is God’s will that he ends up poor, she’ll have to put up with it.<sup>77</sup>

For those men who choose to seek their own matches, without the intermediary of a *shadkhn*, American *brivnshtelers* provide model letters with written declarations of love, while women get tips on how to draft responses that either accept the proposals or politely turn them down. The first declaration letter in Shaykevitsh addresses the American situation of falling in love with someone at work. He proposes beginning this way: “You might think, what kind of business does Herr [*space left blank*] have with me? Why is he writing me a letter? There are moments in a man’s life, dear lady, when he is forced to speak his feelings.”<sup>78</sup> Other letters express ardor through simile—the writer compares himself to a “fire-spitting mountain”<sup>79</sup>—or to Adam in the Garden of Eden, “who could not be happy until he caught sight of Eve.”<sup>80</sup> A careful reader might, however, choose to avoid using the comparison with Adam, as it

backfires with the woman who receives that particular letter. One of Shomer's feisty female respondents, Eliza Gotfried, points out that Adam and Eve had no choice, while "you, dear Sir, aren't in a Garden of Eden and can find women who are prettier and better than I am."<sup>81</sup>

Harkavy's women would not think of availing themselves of a retort like that. His opening love letter has Joseph Marks referring to Miss Abrahams's "maidenly dignity," which precludes her from revealing what is in her heart. The suitor has been "received" at Miss Abrahams's house for more than a year now and "cannot endure suspense any longer."<sup>82</sup> As his life hangs in the balance, Miss Abrahams is provided with two options for reply. The positive response announces that she has already shown "his kind and manly letter" to her parents. In the negative one, the letter is again referred to as "kind and manly," but Miss Abrahams regrets that the sentiments expressed are, unfortunately, not reciprocated.<sup>83</sup>

If Mr. Marks and Miss Abrahams sound like well-heeled American Protestants, the reason may be their origins in an American letter-writer, where an identical set of letters is exchanged between Miss Rebecca Kingston and Mr. Fred Hill.<sup>84</sup> While Harkavy's point might only have been to provide Yiddish-speaking readers with genuine American prose, the result is a kind of alternate world in which people with Jewish names behave like WASPs. The one letter that breaks this pattern is labeled "from a young workman to his sweetheart."<sup>85</sup> The English in this letter, and correspondingly, the Yiddish translation, are much simpler than most of the other letters in *Harkavy's amerikanisher briefen-shteler*. While American manuals do provide an occasional love letter from a servant or a sailor, Harkavy's suitor in this letter has little in common with those stock characters. He records going with his beloved to the theater—definitely a pastime for working-class Jews. And instead of calling at her house or the home of her employer, he asks her to leave a note at his "lodgings": They will go to the park and talk about their future over coffee and cake.

A staple of letter-manual courtship is the problem of jealousy and "coldness." "Sir," writes Harkavy's Esther Goodman to Mr. Morris Cohen, "I was both shocked and surprised yesterday at seeing a letter from you to Miss Stone, written within the past week and making the most ardent protestations of undying love."<sup>86</sup> Following American preferences for brevity, Miss Goodman cancels the engagement in three paragraphs, each one sentence long. Engaged couples in Eisenstadt and Shaykevitch also experience emotional turmoil, but at considerably greater length. In Eisenstadt, an exchange between Yakov Levinzohn and Lina Rozenblatt goes on for eight pages. He thinks she has been cold to him; she complains that he has said cruel things and has complicated her relationship with her cousins. She says that their souls are bound up together. He wants to see her the next day.<sup>87</sup>

While problems are permitted between engaged couples in American letter-writers, letters reflecting problems in marriage are out of bounds. Harkavy, not surprisingly, does not include any in his book. But for Shaykevitsh and Eisenstadt, the situation of wives in Russia writing to estranged American husbands becomes a source of high drama. Both writers supply intense outcries for the unhappy wives, replete with useful if banal metaphors. Shaykevitsh's Hinde Gutman, whose husband Anshel is rumored to have an American girlfriend, is "a withered flower, deprived of air and sun."<sup>88</sup> Eisenstadt's Sore Turman, who has not heard for quite a while from her husband Yoysef, about whom there are also rumors, writes "not with black ink but with the last drops of blood."<sup>89</sup>

More interesting, perhaps, than the women's complaints are the husbands' responses. Shaykevitsh provides two alternative replies for Anshel or someone in his position, depending on the writer's actual circumstances. The first begins, "Every word of your letter pierced my breast like a sharp knife"—a suggestion, common enough in *brivnshtelers*, that a good turn of phrase will bring the desired effect. The husband has not yet been able to set aside money in this alien world. But for him, she is not a withered flower, but "the freshest and most beautiful." The second letter reflects a situation in which the rumor of a girlfriend turns out to be true. In the apartment where he is boarding, the young and beautiful "missus" treated him very warmly, and he strayed. But his wife's words (again, the power of prose!) have pulled him out of his drunken stupor.<sup>90</sup>

Errant husbands seeking marital advice from Eisenstadt also have two letters to choose from. In the first, the husband professes his undying love and encloses five thousand dollars—every bit of his earnings since coming to America. In the alternative letter, the husband declares that he has tuberculosis and is off to a sanatorium in Colorado.<sup>91</sup> He may or may not be dying, but Eisenstadt has assuredly provided him with the last word.

Taken together, Harkavy, Shaykevitsh, and Eisenstadt provide a portrait of a messy but vibrant American Jewish community at the turn of the twentieth century. The fictional Yiddish-speaking Jewish immigrants depicted in their *brivnshtelers* grapple not only with the economic and social challenges of their early years in an alien land but also the long-term challenges of building individual lives, families, and communities in America. The letters in these *brivnshtelers* not only provided them with models for how to express to each other and to those back in Europe who they were and who they were becoming but also served as complementary, if not competing, visions of how to become American Jews.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>For examples of this expression, see a model letter in Arn Dovid Bernshteyn, *Bernshteyn's nayer yudisher folks-briefenshteler* (Warsaw: Ya. kelter, n.d.), 64–65; and a real letter in Collection of Zimman Family, Letter 123/125, n.d., private collection.

<sup>2</sup>Y. Birnboym reports that the teaching of Yiddish letter-writing was introduced into the *kheyder* at the demand of parents who wanted their sons to learn this “everyday skill” in addition to *tanakh* and *gemore* (“Brivenshtelers” in *Dertsyungens-entsiklopedye* Vol. 1, ed. H. Bass [New York: Congress for Jewish Culture, 1957], 468). He claims that *brivnshtelers* were used both in the classroom and by the girls’ tutors. At least one introduction to a *brivnshteler* makes specific mention of this practice. Yoysef Arukh, the author, and himself a teacher of writing, addresses himself to his fellow teachers: “[The appearance of this book] will put a few noses out of joint... who would criticize? Only those whom it affects,... a teacher, for him it is a bad thing, despite the fact that with this *brifenshteller*, no teacher is needed, that’s my idea, but can I really be angry at this sort? They must have their say, everyone needs to make a living, ach!” *Arukhs brifenshteller* (Kishinev: Yehezkl Litvak, 1892), 5.

<sup>3</sup>The letter-writing manual was a cross-European genre with a long history. In the Russian Empire and the United States, it gained increasing popularity beginning in the eighteenth century.

<sup>4</sup>These preliminary estimates are based on listings in the catalogs of the library of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, the New York Public Library, and the library of The Jewish Theological Seminary for *brivnshtelers* published in 1880–1914. Some are later editions of works published before 1880, and a few have anonymous authors. Included are any letter-writing manuals that contain Yiddish letters. There were also a number of Hebrew letter-writers published during the same period.

<sup>5</sup>For a discussion of the important role *brivnshtelers* played in the teaching of Yiddish writing and spelling in *kheyders* and other alternatives to crown schools in the Russian Empire in the nineteenth century, see Kh. Sh. Kazdan, *Fun kheyder un “shkoles” biz tsisho: dos ruslendishe yidentum in gerangl far shul, shprakh, kultur* (Mexico: n.p., 1956), 76–108.

<sup>6</sup>Isaac Bashevis Singer, *Collected Stories: A Friend of Kafka to Passions* (New York: The Library of America, 2004), 274.

<sup>7</sup>Shmuel Niger, *Sholem Aleikhem* (New York: Yidisher Kultur Verlag, 1928), 217–226, as cited in Joseph Bar-El, “The Yiddish ‘Briefenshteler’ (Letter Writing Manual) of the 18th to the 20th Centuries,” doctoral dissertation [Yiddish] (Jewish Teachers Seminary, 1970), 162–163.

<sup>8</sup>Other known American *brivnshtelers* include Frederick Warne, *Varn's folshtendiger Englisher-Yidisher briefenshteler und ferschiedene gezelslikhe formen fun ferschiedene kontrakten* (New York: Y.L. Verbelavski, 1900); *Freyinkel's English-Yudisher brifenshteler* (New York: M. Chinsky, 1901); Anonymous, *Briefenshteler in shraybschrift* (New York: Hebrew Publishing Company, 1905); P. Berliner, *Dr. Berliners moderner Yidisher brivnshteler* (New York: Star Publishing Company, 1926); and Abraham Steinberg, *Shtaynberg's brifenshteler* (New York: Star Publishing Company, 1926). The last two appear to be American editions of European *brivnshtelers* and the first two on the list, Yiddish translations of English-language letter-writers.

<sup>9</sup>See, for example, her citation from I.D. Berkowitz, Sholem Aleichem’s son-in-law and translator: “I felt this was a great descent on my part, yet even so I fell upon the novels of Shomer with

a new hunger and swallowed them one after the other. Only to the yeshiva I did not bring them—I was ashamed in front of my friends.” Iris Parush, *Reading Jewish Women: Marginality and Modernization in Nineteenth-Century Eastern European Jewish Society*, trans. Saadya Sternberg (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2004), 127. On Shomer, see also Sophie Grace-Pollak, “Shomer l’or shomers mispet l’Sholom Aleikhem,” *Khulyot: Journal of Yiddish Research*, no. 5 (Winter 1998): 125–159, and “Shomer ha-publitsist,” *Khulyot*, no. 9 (Summer 2005): 161–195; Alyssa Quint, “Yiddish Literature for the Masses?: A Reconsideration of Who Read What in Jewish Eastern Europe,” *AJS Review* 29, no.1 (April 2005): 61–89; and Eric Goldstein, “Pop’em in Yiddish: The subterranean world of Jewish pulp fiction,” in *Guilt and Pleasure*, [http://www.guiltandpleasure.com/index.php?site=rebootgp&page=gp\\_article&cid=248](http://www.guiltandpleasure.com/index.php?site=rebootgp&page=gp_article&cid=248) (accessed 23 October 2009).

<sup>10</sup>See Arthur A. Goren, *The Politics and Public Culture of American Jews* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999), 30–33.

<sup>11</sup>N.M. Shaykevitch, *Shaykevitch’s nayer briefenshteler* (New York: Hebrew Publishing Company, 1915), 185. Shaykevitch also had two *brivnshtelers* published in the Russian Empire, though he wrote them in New York: *Shomer’s briefenshteler* (Vilna: The Widow and Brothers Romm, 1898) and *Der nayer Shomer’s briefenshteler* (Vilna: Farlag fun Kh. M., 1908). The latter, published after his death, may be a later edition of a previously published *brivnshteler*.

<sup>12</sup>Dovid Katz, “Alexander Harkavy and His Trilingual Dictionary” in *Yiddish-English-Hebrew Dictionary*, ed. Alexander Harkavy (New York: YIVO and Schocken Books, 1988), x–xi. In his own introduction to this dictionary, Harkavy is explicit about documenting “the living language of the people” (xiii). This was, clearly, not his aim in the *brivnshteler*—or perhaps it was, if “living language” is understood as English, and its source is the language of American letter-writers. Harkavy’s autobiography (*Perakim me-hayai* [New York: Hebrew Publishing Company, 1935]) casts no light on this matter, as his focus is his life before emigration and his first American job as a farmhand in upstate New York.

<sup>13</sup>Zalman Reisen, *Leksikon fun der Yidisher literatur, prese un filologye* Vol. 1 (Vilna: B. Kletskin, 1927), 65. Among Eisenstadt’s Hebrew works are *Rebe Kalonimus Ze’ev Visotski* (New York, 1905); *Otsar ha-temunot: kolel me’ah va-hamishim temunot shel gedole’amernu* (New York, 1909); and *Anshe ha-shem be-Artsot ha-berit: sefer zikaron le-rashe alfe Yisra’el* (St. Louis: Moyneshter Press, 1933).

<sup>14</sup>In the introduction to L.W. Sheldon, *Sheldon’s Twentieth century letter writer: an up-to-date and accurate guide to correct modern letter writing* (Philadelphia, D. McKay, 1901), the reader is advised “to state one’s desires in as few words as possible—to couch them in polite, grammatical language—to write them legibly with all due regard for courteousness without ‘toadyism,’ respect without effusiveness.” <http://digital.library.pitt.edu/cgi-bin/t/text/text-idx?idno=00a138205m;view=toc;c=nietz> (accessed 21 October 2009). In *The Complete Letter Writer and Book of Social Forms* (Chicago: Frederick J. Drake, 1902), which can be accessed at <http://www.vintage-ebooks.com/LetterWriter.htm> (accessed 23 October 2009), editor Charles Walter Brown labels the “chief requisites of a letter” as “clearness, explicitness, and conciseness”(3) and continues, “Generally it is best that the purpose of the letter should appear in its earlier portions: that is, the most important part of the letter should come first, that which is less important coming next”(4). Compare Harkavy’s opening words, “In writing a letter, one should have a clear idea of the points one wishes to make, and these points must have a proper order. The more important should come earlier, and the less important things must come later” (Harkavy 1902/1999), 1.

<sup>15</sup>From the title page of *Shaykevitch’s nayer briefenshteler*: “A complete guide for all classes of people. A proper manual in the art of how to write all sorts of letters for whatever takes place in life.” In the foreword to Benzion Eisenstadt’s *Der moderner briefenshteller* (Brooklyn: M. Shapiro, 1910), he promises readers letters suitable “for all the different aspects of life, which can prove useful for everyone and for different occasions.” Both the promise to serve “all classes” of people, and the claim of a wide selection of model letters were standard elements in the front matter of *brivnshtelers* of the late nineteenth to early twentieth century.

<sup>16</sup>Eisenstadt, 38–42. The bizarre change in the statue's gender no doubt can be explained by the fact that *malakh*, the word for angel in Hebrew, is masculine in gender.

<sup>17</sup>Shaykevitch, 59–60. Descriptions of voyages and arrivals in America were not unique to *brivnshtelers*, as attested to by a cycle of letters from J.C., an Irish immigrant in *The Lady's Letter-Writer* (New York: J. Ivers and Co., 1902), 106–107. J.C., newly arrived from Dublin, writes to her siblings that she has had a similarly harrowing voyage but that she too has arrived safely.

<sup>18</sup>Shaykevitch, 167–172.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., 65–66.

<sup>20</sup>Eisenstadt, 121–122.

<sup>21</sup>Shaykevitch, 61–62.

<sup>22</sup>Eisenstadt, 68–69.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., 69–71.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., 118–120.

<sup>25</sup>Shaykevitch, 61–64. Immigrant delight in egalitarianism is also evident from the previously cited model letters from the Irish immigrant woman J.C. in *The Lady's Letter-Writer*, 109: "So far I like New York very much, there is not that reserve or clanship in society so noticeable at home, each one considers himself on an equality with his fellow-creatures, and all seem influenced by a spirit of freedom." Real Jewish immigrant letters also sometimes comment on this. For more on this topic, see Alice Nakhimovsky and Roberta Newman, "A paper life: model letters and real letters as a key to Russian-Jewish aspirations at the turn of the twentieth century," paper presented at Jews in the East European Borderlands: Daily Life, Violence, and Memory conference, Russian, East European, and Eurasian Center, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 19–20 April 2009. This paper also appears in Yiddish, in abbreviated form in *Forverts* (26 June 2009): 12–13.

<sup>26</sup>In Abraham Steinberg's *Shtaynberg's brifenshteler* (New York: Star Hebrew Book Company, 1926), 42–44, Zalman, in America for eighteen years, tries to get his brother Volf in Russia to pack up and leave. Both brothers are united in the feeling that American freedom is good for the Jews and that Jewish life in Russia is dreadful. The book is an anomaly and a bit of a mystery because it is published in New York, but, aside from this set of letters, it seems to have only European content.

<sup>27</sup>See Nakhimovsky and Newman. Shaykevitch's European *brivnshtelers* are also markedly pro-American compared to others published in the Russian Empire. The authors of European *brivnshtelers* may have drawn inspiration for their negative portrayals of America not primarily from letters sent home by immigrants but from the Jewish press. See Judith Zabarenko, "The Negative Image of America in the Russian-Language Jewish Press, 1881–1910," *American Jewish History* 75, no. 3 (March 1986): 267–279.

<sup>28</sup>The anonymously authored *Briefenshteler in shraybshrift* (New York: Hebrew Publishing Company, 1905) does include one letter from a man who intends to return home to his wife in the shtetl after the "busy season" is over in New York (65–67). While it is estimated that as many as 20 percent of Jewish immigrants before 1905 returned to eastern Europe, this percentage fell to 5–8 percent after 1905 (Gerald Sorin, *A Time for Building: The Third Migration, 1880–1920* [Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992], 249–250, n. 2). See also Jonathan Sarna, "The Myth of No Return: Jewish Return Migration to Eastern Europe, 1881–1914," *American Jewish History* 71, no. 2 (December 1981): 256–268. The seventy-seven Yiddish letters from Jewish immigrants in Josephine Wtulich's *Writing Home: Immigrants in Brazil and the United States, 1890–1891* (Boulder, CO: East European Monographs, 1986) includes only one letter that makes direct reference to a Jew who has returned to Europe, though most writers, especially the newly arrived, express all sorts of ambivalence about American life, as well as varying levels of homesickness.

<sup>29</sup>Harkavy does deal with the immigration experience in his *Der Englisher lehr-bukh* (New York: Hebrew Publishing Company, 1900?), an English phrase book for Yiddish-speakers. The

book takes the reader every step of the way through the immigration process, from the trip over (“I feel very weak and must vomit now”) to arrival at Ellis Island (“Will we be searched when landing?”) to filling one’s most immediate needs upon release from immigration (“Can I lodge here?... This room is too dark for me, show me a brighter one”).

<sup>30</sup>Moses Rischin, *The Promised City: New York’s Jews, 1870–1914* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 52. Gerald Sorin asserts that in 1897 more than 60 percent of the Jewish workforce in New York was employed in the garment industry (*A Time for Building*, 74).

<sup>31</sup>The one exception is a courtship letter from a “young workman” in *Harkavy’s amerikanisher briefen-shteler* (New York: Hebrew Publishing Company, 1902), 151. His *Der Englisher lehr-bukh* is practical about supplying English phrases particularly useful to the businesses in which immigrants were likely to be engaged. In a chapter called “Buying and Selling,” Harkavy teaches Yiddish-speakers selling unspecified items—perhaps from a pushcart—how to *handl* (bargain) in English: “I sell them [*sic*] 75 cents”... “Sir, I cannot sell them any cheaper” (76).

<sup>32</sup>*Harkavy’s amerikanisher briefen-shteler*, 79.

<sup>33</sup>Eisenstadt, 23.

<sup>34</sup>*Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>35</sup>A few of the English letters in Harkavy and the 1901 *Freyinkel’s English-Yudisher brifenshteler* are identical, and all of the letters in the latter appear to have been copied verbatim from existing American letter-writers and then translated into Yiddish. For instance, Freyinkl includes and translates into Yiddish without any changes whatsoever a letter from Oliver Brooks to his mother, looking forward to vacation from school, when he will “enjoy the celebration of the Christmas festivities in the old-fashioned manner” (62–63).

<sup>36</sup>Eisenstadt, 29–31.

<sup>37</sup>Shaykevitsh, 85.

<sup>38</sup>Psalms 69:1.

<sup>39</sup>Isaiah 40:3.

<sup>40</sup>Shaykevitsh, 104–106.

<sup>41</sup>Eisenstadt, 22.

<sup>42</sup>Shaykevitsh, 40–41; 120–122.

<sup>43</sup>*Ibid.*, 172–174. In this letter, Shaykevitsh makes oblique reference to his own vilification at the hands of critics. All good Yiddish writers earn a lot of money and live very well, he says, but this was not the case ten years earlier, when Yiddish writers had nothing to eat “so they ate each other,” attacking the “few writers who were fortunate enough to be earning enough for a piece of bread.”

<sup>44</sup>Jenna Weissman Joselit, *The Wonders of America: Reinventing Jewish Culture, 1880–1950* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1994), 4.

<sup>45</sup>Eisenstadt, 124–125.

<sup>46</sup>*Ibid.*, 50–51. It is worth noting that Fink does not claim that he goes daily to *daven* at the synagogue, only that he does so on *Shabbos* and holidays.

<sup>47</sup>One exception to this rule is a letter in a *brivnshteler* by Aaron David Bernstein, from a man who has been granted the privilege of living in a Russian city outside the Pale of Settlement: “There is no Jewish atmosphere here, no Jewish street and Jewish population, which in the end is dear and beloved to me. There are a few Jewish families here, residents, but these Jews can’t compare with our Jews in G. Maybe they are Jews in their hearts, but in their appearance, in their languages, and the way they live, they are true Russians. And this alone alienates me from them.” *Bernshteyn’s nayer yudisher folks-briefenshteler* (Warsaw: Ya. Kelter, n.d.), 121–122. Another rare example in a European *brivnshteler* of concern with religious backsliding is a letter from a young man studying in Vienna. Because he was pious and resisted the temptation to go to the theater, he avoided a fire that broke out there (a real event in 1881, which killed 650); his friend,

who lacked such scruples, was killed. (H. Poliak-Gilman, *Der nayer obraztsover brifenshteller* [Berditshev: Yoysef Berman, 1904], 17–19).

<sup>48</sup>Eisenstadt, 99–103.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid., 103–105.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid., 127–128. Given the previously cited joke involving Boris Thomashefsky and Jacob Adler, it seems safe to assume that the use of the name “Harkavy” and “Alexander” and the mention of “three languages” is some kind of dig at Alexander Harkavy, whose own *brivnshteler* had already appeared in several editions by 1910, the year of *Der moderner briffenshteller’s* publication.

<sup>51</sup>Eisenstadt is also the author of a few compilations of bar mitzvah speeches. Joselit writes extensively in *The Wonders of America* (89–110) about the new prominence the bar mitzvah ceremony and celebration assumed in American Jewish life. Mentions of bar mitzvahs are practically nonexistent in European *brivnshtelers*. A rare example is a pair of letters in which the writers express their regrets that they are unable to attend their relatives’ bar mitzvah ceremonies (A. Miller, *Miller’s nayer brifenshteller in tsvey theyl* [Piotrkow: Shloyme Belkhotovski, 1911]).

<sup>52</sup>Eisenstadt, 136–138.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid., 139–142.

<sup>54</sup>Shaykevitsh, 161–165.

<sup>55</sup>Eisenstadt, 39.

<sup>56</sup>Ibid., 41.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid., 42.

<sup>58</sup>Shaykevitsh, 54–55.

<sup>59</sup>Ibid., 56.

<sup>60</sup>Ibid., 57.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid., 59.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid., 70–75.

<sup>63</sup>Eisenstadt, 43–46.

<sup>64</sup>Shaykevitsh, 122–123.

<sup>65</sup>Eisenstadt, 52.

<sup>66</sup>Shaykevitsh, 113–115.

<sup>67</sup>Ibid., 116–118.

<sup>68</sup>Ibid., 118–121.

<sup>69</sup>Harkavy himself wrote a *pis’movnik*, *Angliskii pis’movnik dlia russkikh* (New York: Hebrew Publishing Company, 1917). The letters are similar (and sometimes identical) to those in his *brivnshteler*, though there are more that refer to social occasions among adults. Some names are American, some Russian, and some Jewish.

<sup>70</sup>Harkavy, 107.

<sup>71</sup>Here is an example from a *pis’movnik* intended for Russian-Americans: “It is not the New Year alone that makes me express to you my indebtedness and gratitude. It always abides in my heart as sincere filial affection.” (*Novyi russkii pis’movnik” v” 5 otdielakh” spetsial’no prisposoblennyi dlia Russkikh, zhivushchikh” v” Amerike* [1900s, 16].

<sup>72</sup>For a striking example of this, see Max Weinreich, “Levin Lion Dors *brivn-shtelers*,” *YIVO Bleter* 18 (1941): 109–112.

<sup>73</sup>Eisenstadt, 80–83.

<sup>74</sup>Shaykevitsh, 108–110.

<sup>75</sup>Ibid., 110–111.

<sup>76</sup>Ibid., 108–109.

<sup>77</sup>Ibid., 112–113.

<sup>78</sup>Ibid., 124.

<sup>79</sup>Ibid., 130.

<sup>80</sup>Ibid., 126–127.

<sup>81</sup>Ibid., 129.

<sup>82</sup>Harkavy, 138–139.

<sup>83</sup>Ibid., 140–141.

<sup>84</sup>The first two letters (though not the third) appear verbatim in *Brown's Complete Letter-Writer*, 142. Since Harkavy and Brown both appeared in 1902, the likely original source for all three letters is another, earlier American letter-writer.

<sup>85</sup>Harkavy, 150–151.

<sup>86</sup>Ibid., 156–157.

<sup>87</sup>Eisenstadt, 92–98.

<sup>88</sup>Shaykevitsh, 76–77.

<sup>89</sup>Eisenstadt, 61.

<sup>90</sup>Shaykevitsh, 80–81.

<sup>91</sup>Eisenstadt, 62–66.