

From the J-Vault: Immigrant Jewish American Farmers

Posted At : March 23, 2011 10:28 AM | Posted By : Seth Chalmer

Related Categories: agriculture, J-Vault, history, poverty, immigration



The year is 1902, and Jewish organizations are welcoming poor Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe and teaching them a new way of life -- a new way to think about being Jewish, a new vocation, and a new relationship to the land. They are teaching these new immigrants to be farmers.

This description, however, has nothing to do with the kibbutz movement, or with the Yishuv (the pre-1948 Zionist Jewish community in the land of Israel). The land to which these Ashkenazic-refugees-turned-yeoman-farmers had immigrated was America.

This week from the J-Vault: [Agriculture, A Most Effective Means to Aid Jewish Poor \(1902\)](#)

"Whenever one of the Jewish poor drifts into a smaller community," writes Rabbi A.R. Levy, "and there applies for help to the Jewish residents, he is generally shipped to the nearest large city where, it is assumed, he must find work in the sweatshop or in the factory." This is undesirable, Levy explains, not only because the lifestyle is inherently unpleasant, but because the tightly packed "ghetto" life in urban centers mixes poorly with the character traits Levy perceives in Eastern European Jewish immigrants. (Levy's condescension to his immigrant kin is sadly characteristic of the attitude of many early 20th century Jews born in America.)

The better solution, according to Levy, is the one advocated by the Jewish Agriculturists' Aid Society of America.

Farm life works wonders, Levy reports:

A most marked and happy change in the character of our Jewish farmers is the self-reliance they manifest... Our farmers go about their work with an air of self-reliance that is cheering and encouraging. It has been said that no work within the scope of human activity makes for the better in all that is good in human character as does tilling the soil. Our farmers are a telling testimony to the truth of this assertion.

Farm life also means isolation from other Jews, and from Jewish communities. Levy acknowledges this, but claims that such isolation has "proven to be of no damaging effect as far as the religious life and habit of the Jew is concerned." Indeed, being disconnected from traditional religious observance seems, to Levy, to be a positive rather than a negative factor:

No one will fail to recognize the virtue of the religious practices and habits

of the Russian Jews as they are maintained by him in Russia. They are undeniably overdone and exaggerated, but they are eminently helpful to the life as it must be lived by him in Russia. For, where man's activity in the sphere of usefulness is so limited that he is forced to exist in idleness, it is the height of wisdom that he betakes himself to the field of religious enjoyment. Long and many prayers, many and extravagant ceremonies that require much time and attention are, under stated conditions, a true blessing... However, to follow up such ceremonies where divine and human agencies offer an opportunity for honest and useful toil, would lie working against the interest of religion and not for it... [T]he life of usefulness on the farm will wean him of, and bring him away from many a superfluous ceremony and obsolete observance, the practice of which is more in accord with superstition than with religion.

Read the whole article here.

