

## Glimpses Into American Jewish History (Part --)

### Jewish Agricultural Colonies in America I

**Dr. Yitzchok Levine**  
**Department of Mathematical Sciences**  
**Stevens Institute of Technology**  
**Hoboken, NJ 07030**  
[llevine@stevens.edu](mailto:llevine@stevens.edu)

#### Introduction<sup>1</sup>

There were very few Jewish farmers in Europe during the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Indeed, in many parts of Europe Jews were forbidden to own land. Despite this there were some Jews who always felt that they should return to the agrarian way of life their forefathers had pursued in ancient times and that America was an ideal place to establish Jewish agricultural colonies.

“In 1819, William Davis Robinson printed and circulated a 40-page pamphlet in London entitled *Memoir Addressed to Persons of the Jewish Religion in Europe, on the Subject of Emigration to, and Settlement in, One of the Most Eligible Parts of the United States of North America*. The object of the pamphlet was to induce wealthy European Jews to create a fund for the purchase of a large tract of land in the upper Mississippi and Missouri territory and found an agricultural settlement for poor Jews. According to Robinson's plan, each immigrant was to receive a number of acres of land on credit. It also called for the transportation of the immigrants to their places of settlement, assistance in buying the necessary implements, and the establishment of rules governing the reimbursement of the capital. Robinson was confident that the investment would eventually prove of great advantage and magnitude. The prevailing opinion was that the entire project was designed to induce English Jews to buy land through Robinson's mediation. Recent investigations prove, however, that it was a sincere attempt, but it received no response.

“In 1820, Moses Elias Levy conceived a plan to establish an agricultural settlement in the United States, and he purchased a vast tract of land in Alachua County, Florida. He settled Jewish families from Delaware, New York, and New Jersey and some from Europe on the land and spent more than \$18,000 building houses and supplying the settlers with agricultural implements. By 1823, more than fifty persons were settled on the land. Levy had agents publicizing the project and praising the fertility of the soil. The project, however, was short lived as many immigrants hesitated to settle there because of lack of proper accommodations.”

In 1837 Jews founded an agricultural colony at Wawarsing (Warwarsing) in Ulster County, New York, naming it Sholom (“Peace”). Thirteen Jewish families settled there under the leadership of Moses Cohen.

“The land was divided into lots of 5 acres each, and a site was selected for a village. Contracts were awarded to build houses at a cost of \$400 each. The settlers requested the Congregation Anshe Chesed of New York to loan them a Sefer Torah (Scroll of the Law) until they could secure one from Europe, and they also asked for lamps for their synagogue.

“The newcomers cleared the land and built roads. For five years they tried to make farming pay, but circumstances forced them to add to their earnings from the produce of the land by manufacturing and trading. Notwithstanding, the colony carried on. The climax, however, came when the factories in the neighborhood were shut down. After a few years of further struggling, the settlers found it impossible to continue. They sold their belongings in 1842 and moved away.”<sup>2</sup>

### **A Proposal by Julius Stern**

The first issue of Reverend Isaac Leiser’s periodical **The Occident** was published in April 1843.<sup>3</sup> In it a letter from Julius Stern, a resident of Philadelphia, appeared in which Stern stressed the necessity of settling Jews on land. Stern wrote:

“Being convinced that the Israelites of Germany do not enjoy the full privileges of citizens in our age, and that many causes operate to defer the attainment of this desirable object for a considerable time, I, some years ago, expressed a wish that a considerable number might emigrate to the United States and found a colony in some of the western territories.

“A considerable number of our people has indeed come to this country, but without a common plan, without a fixed object to unite their interests; and every one, therefore, was obliged to rely upon himself. As many had not learned a trade, and a few only understanding agriculture, commerce was the only resource which they had left; but most of them being without the necessary means to be merchants in the proper sense of the word, they were obliged to become itinerant traders or peddlers, a business most troublesome, and, in the present scarcity of money, most unproductive and most onerous. Under these circumstances these people cannot possibly attain that happiness, for which their heart yearned when they were still in their native country ...

“Not until we are able to earn a respectable and independent livelihood, and live without the corroding care of procuring our daily bread, shall we be able to rejoice for having emigrated from Europe, look upon this land as a second fatherland, and cherish it from the core of our heart. But to attain this object it is requisite that the greater part of us should devote themselves to the pursuits of agriculture and the breeding of cattle, which occupations are the best props of every state, the safest means of securing to a family a happiness based upon a rock which can brave the storms of the times.

“This object could be best accomplished, and would require comparatively little exertion and outlay of money, if a number of Israelites were to purchase a large tract of land in one of the western territories, where Congress disposes of the land at \$1.25 per acre. On

this tract a number of dwellings might be immediately erected for those who are not occupied in agriculture, in a place which would form the center of the first agricultural district. The farmers would of course live each on his farm.

“In such a colony, the highest capacities of mind and heart, which, as every unprejudiced observer will confess, can readily be discovered in a large number of individuals of our nation, would be sooner and more rapidly developed than our present social life admits of, where so many circumstances unite to stifle the most splendid, most promising natural abilities in the bud.

“Facts would soon prove that the idea that our people are too lazy to till the ground is but a foolish prejudice. It would soon become evident that their aptness and intelligence would produce also in this branch of human industry useful inventions and salutary improvements. In the breeding of cattle, the acuteness of perception of our people and their application would also become distinguished, and lead to many favorable results.

“Many factories of different kinds would no doubt form another branch of their industry, and their articles of commerce would not only consist of cattle, flour, salted provision, butter, and wool, but would also comprise different kinds of manufactured goods.

“Upon our holy religion, however, venerable on account of its age and its intrinsic worth, the blessed and salutary influence of such a social reunion would be most evident, for never will it be able to appear in all its dignity, its glory and greatness, so long as our people live dispersed among the followers of other creeds. And more completely yet might all these ends be encompassed if the Israelites were gradually to transform their colony into a state, a thing by no means impracticable, as, according to the laws of the United States, only 70,680 souls are necessary for this purpose. This would entitle them to their own legislature, and by a general law, they might obtain the privilege of consecrating to the Lord, as it was in the flourishing times of our nation, every week a silent and holy Sabbath.

“Most salutary would be the influence of such a colony upon the education of our youth; for there, more than in any other situation, might we gratify the best and warmest wishes of our hearts, that of educating our children for the noble and elevated pursuits of life, for the attainment of wisdom and virtue.

“In such a society, excellent men and worthy women might spring up, who would deserve to be called an ornament to Israel, and an honor to mankind.”

**Julius Stern.**

Leeser endorsed in principle Stern’s idea of founding such an agricultural settlement but was against the idea of establishing a Jewish state. In his introduction to Stern’s letter Lesser wrote, “We do not agree with Mr. Stern that it would be expedient to found a Jewish state, or even to desire it, since necessarily its peculiar laws could come in conflict with those differing from it on all sides.”

In any event Stern's plan received no popular support and hence ended in failure.

However, this was not the last attempt to establish Jewish agricultural settlements in America and some of these will be discussed in future articles.

---

<sup>1</sup> All quotes in this section are from **Jewish Agricultural Colonies in the United States**, by Leo Shpall, *Agricultural History*, 24, 1950, page 121

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Available at <http://www.jewish-history.com/occident/volume1/contents.html>