By Dr. Yitzchok Levine


During the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century, many European Jews viewed America as a refuge from the persecution of traditional Jewish religious observance. It was felt that it was virtually impossible to remain observant in America, and many Jews professed that this was indeed the case, as they or their children abandoned their faith once they arrived in this country.

One might well ask, “Well, how bad was it really?”

One can gain insight into this from Rabbi Shlomo Lifshitz in America during the latter part of the nineteenth century from the writings of Rabbi Moshe Weinberger (1854-1940).

A young man came to New York from Hungary in 1880. He was a keen observer of the American Jewish scene, and in 1887, published his controversial book, Ha-Tephudim veHa-Tehudim be-New-York. (For a biography of Rabbi Weinberger, see page C26 in last week’s edition.)

“Written in Hebrew and directed to his former countrymen about the poor standards of kashrut and Jewish education and the low level of Talmud knowledge of Jewry’s religious functionaries. He lamented America’s ‘magnificent’ synagogues, which some Jews felt compelled to build, and chided Jews for the extravagance of dressing in black, wrapping yarn around their necks and wearing yarmulkes.

His message to Jews in Europe was blunt: Stay Home! ’As far as [Rabbi Weinberger] was concerned, the New York City was America in microcosm. What he learned about the one, he applied to the other. In addressing his peers abroad, he generalized accordingly: Nothing will be left for you to do save dressing in black, wrapping yarn around your necks, and rolling from dawn to dusk. You can’t afford to look one step forward to the window before the holiday.

His wife, who came from a good family in the Hungarian state, felt most distressed and argued with him daily. ‘How is it possible,’ she asked him, ‘to stock [sugar] on Passover without any proper certification? Did the sages in our country dwell on this problem in vain? Did the Gaon from Szerem waste his time troubling himself about it? And what about the dried fruits: do you know where they came from? Would the Jews back home have used them? Does America have a special Torah for itself? Her husband listened and proceeded to burn his sign before her eyes. Now he is among those working to bring about improvements in these matters where the Torah strictly demands proper Passover supervision.”

Finally, the owner of the supply house came out, brought him to his office, gave him a seat, and in a soft, earnest voice said, ‘I see, my friend, that you as green as golden can be. You just arrived in this country, and you know nothing of its ways. Be aware of the fact that, aside from flour, there is no Passover merchandise in New York. Many Jews who would never dream of drinking coffee on Passover, or dried fruit on Passover, and who place in their store windows and advertise large signs reading PASSOVER GROCERIES, are actually lying. The words are a deception and fraud. Since many of the storekeepers who do business with us requested it, we were forced to act as you saw. Not that it helps us any, but — as you too now understand well and know for the future — it does benefit the storekeepers in the Jewish area.’

“A new year came, and he knew what lay ahead. Though snow still covered the earth, he already had a sign prepared in gold letters ready to hang in the window before the holiday. But his wife, who came from a good family in the Hungarian state, felt most distressed and argued with him daily. ‘How is it possible,’ she asked him, ‘to stock [sugar] on Passover without any proper certification? Did the sages in our country dwell on this problem in vain? Did the Gaon from Szerem waste his time troubling himself about it? And what about the dried fruits: do you know where they came from? Would the Jews back home have used them? Does America have a special Torah for itself? Her husband listened and proceeded to burn his sign before her eyes. Now he is among those working to bring about improvements in these matters where the Torah strictly demands proper Passover supervision.”

Sad, this was the state of Yiddishkeit on the Lower East Side during that latter part of the 19th and the first part of the 20th centuries.


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“Jews in Europe, Do Not Come to America!”