

Glimpses Into American Jewish History (Part --)

Kashrus Observance During the Nineteenth Century

Dr. Yitzchok Levine
Department of Mathematical Sciences
Stevens Institute of Technology
Hoboken, NJ 07030
llevine@stevens.edu

*Note: All quotes are from **The Trend in Jewish Religious Observance in Mid-Nineteenth Century America**, by Jeremiah J. Berman, *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society (1893-1961)*; 1947; 37, AJHS Journal, pg. 31 ff. The article is available online at no cost at <http://www.ajhs.org/reference/adaje.cfm>*

Introduction

During the latter part of nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century many European Jews viewed America as a *treife medina* (a non-kosher land) from the perspective of traditional Jewish religious observance. It was felt that it was virtually impossible to remain observant in America, and many Jews proved that this was indeed the case, as they or their children abandoned much of their religious practices once they arrived in this country.

However this was not necessarily the case for the German immigrants who came in the 1840s and 1850s. Many of them were strict in their observance of mitzvot, doing their best to live according to the Torah. It was only in the 1860s and later, when the reform movement swept throughout the country, that things changed drastically and ritual observance declined.

The first Jewish immigrants were men [and women] of strong Jewish loyalties and generally adhered to traditional Jewish practices. They were quite innocent of reformist ideology. To them Judaism meant living in accordance with the traditional orthodox code. As soon as a handful of these pioneers settled in one place, they usually instituted congregational high holiday worship. Shortly thereafter they bought a piece of land for a burial ground. With little delay they then advertised for a man to come to serve them as reader [*Chazan*], ritual slaughterer (*shochet*), circumciser (*mohel*) and teacher. If their religious practice was technically faulty, as it often was, it was not due to indifference on their part, but to circumstances beyond their control. Evidence of their desire to do their religious duty are [sic] the records we have of their observance of the three basic practices-kosher diet, circumcision and Sabbath.

Until the latter part of the nineteenth century there is considerable evidence to show that many Jews did their best to maintain traditional religious observance when it came to kashrus, ritual circumcision (*bris milah*) and Shabbos. In this article we shall focus on

their efforts to make sure that they ate kosher slaughtered meat and poultry. In our next article we shall discuss their efforts to make sure their sons had a proper *bris milah* and to maintain Sabbath observance.

Ritual Slaughter (*Shechita*)

A licensed *shochet* was to be found in many settlements with even relatively small Jewish populations. In places where the Jewish population was too small to support a licensed ritual slaughterer, this service was provided by qualified, unpaid individuals who had studied the laws of *shechita*. In fact, even in the seventeenth century it was not unusual to find *Baalei Batim* who were qualified ritual slaughterers.

Illustrative is the example of Michael Hart [1738 – 1813], Indian trader and merchant who, in 1773, set up shop in Easton, Pa. He acted as his own *shochet*. George Washington once ate a kosher meal. It was when he stopped for lunch at the home of this Michael Hart.

In 1846 a Mr. Umstetter served as a volunteer *shochet* in Norfolk, VA. He slaughtered twice weekly for the Jews who lived in this town. Prior to his arrival a number of Jews ate non-kosher food.

Samuel Adler, the father of Cyrus Adler, studied the slaughter of fowl with the Philadelphia *shochet* Leopold Sulzberger before he moved to Van Burn, AK, in 1858. He mastered this skill, because he wanted to be sure that his family and the other Jews of Van Buren would have kosher poultry to eat.

Congregation B'nai Sholom was founded in Chicago in May 1852 by eleven members, many of whom came from the Prussian province of Posen. In 1854 Edward Meirs agreed to serve as the congregation's unpaid *shochet* for one year. There was a non-professional *shochet* in Portsmouth, N.H., in 1858, and in Pueblo, Colo., in 1870. A letter he wrote gives the following interesting description of Jewish life in Pueblo.

Pueblo, March 20, 1870.

It will afford you some interest to hear from this portion of the world, and to learn that even here there are quite a number of Jews respected and respectable. We are 120 miles south of Denver City, which, as you know, is quite thriving.

We have experienced great difficulty in complying with our religious duties, but these are lessening every day. Having learnt *Shechitah* some years since, I make practical use of it here. We have the finest and the healthiest cattle, requiring but little examination. Of course, as yet we have no Synagogue, and the Sabbath is not observed, but there is a prevailing feeling that we should be Jews in fact, as we are in name. Another advantage we are beginning to have is as it regards circumcision. We were formerly compelled to send young ones 120 miles to have that rite performed, and now I have already officiated several times with success.

I have no doubt, that, ere long, it will be in my power to afford you the information, that, even in Pueblo, the Jews observe the dietary enactments, honor the Sabbath day, and conduct themselves in every way becoming the descendants of those who suffered persecution, even martyrdom, for the cause they deemed right.

N.

Volunteer (unpaid) *shochtim* served either isolated families or tiny settlements. Larger communities consisting of 10 or more families did their best to hire professional *shochtim*. Anglo-Jewish publications often carried advertisements like the ones below:

Wanted - Columbus, Ind., Congregation Chisuk Emunah, shohet, baal korah and teacher in Hebrew. (**The Occident**, July 6, 1859)

Wanted - By the Israelite Congregation of Wilmington, N. C. Chasan, Shochat, and Mohel, and also to take charge of a Hebrew and English school. (**The Hebrew Leader**, August 2, 1867)

Wanted - By the German Congregation Beth Hasholom of Williamsport, Pa., a *Chazan*, *Shochet*, and Teacher, who is able to thoroughly instruct the children in German. Must be himself a German. Salary, \$600, and perquisites

Henry Ulman, Vice-President. (**The Jewish Messenger**, August 19, 1870)

Wanted - By the Cong. "Ahabath Achim," (Minhag Aschkiness,) Altoona, Pa. a teacher, chasan, and schochet, must teach Hebrew and German ... Only a married man and a German need apply

M. Mayer, Secretary (**The Jewish Messenger**, April 18, 1879)

Almost always the community would expect its religious functionary, in addition to doing the slaughtering, to chant the congregational prayers, to circumcise the eight-day-old males, and to teach the children Hebrew and German.

Unfortunately, during the latter part of the nineteenth century a marked change occurred. Many Jews, influenced by the reform movement, began to disregard the tenets of kashrus. *Shochtim* began to disappear from settlements that contained only a small Jewish population. For example, this was the situation in Waco, Texas in 1876.

One family alone is orthodox. The rest consider Moses and his dietary laws entirely too antiquated to deserve modern observance. Until lately, we had a shohet, but feeling himself out of his element he hath departed.

People began to openly neglect the observance of the dietary laws both at home and in public. It got to the point where on December 26, 1879 the Anglo-Jewish newspaper **The**

Jewish Messenger published a letter from Reverend H. P. Mendes in which he condemned the serving of non-kosher food at banquets conducted under the aegis of Jewish organizations.

America was indeed on its way to becoming a *treife medina*!