



SUDDENLY, OUT OF THE DOOR OF A
SALOON, A YOUNG WOMAN REELED.
"LOREEN!" CRIED VIRGINIA.



WHEN VIRGINIA LEFT THE CARRIAGE
AND WENT UP TO LOREEN, SHE ASKED HERSELF

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Beersheba, Kan.: "God's Pure Air on Government Land"

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THE AMERICAN Jewish community in 1882 numbered about 200,000 people. They were mainly of Sephardic (Spanish-Portuguese) or German origin. These settlers had been coming to the New World since 1654, and by the late 19th century they had become integrated into the general society. The overwhelming majority of the American Jews of that time lived in urban areas of population.

Although some anti-Semitic statements still occasionally appeared in the American press, and despite some "Know Nothing" Jew-baiting, America had by the 1880's become a haven for the Jews and a true home for the former homeless.

However, after the Russian Czar had issued his anti-Semitic "May Laws" in 1882,¹ a new type of immigrant came to America. Instead of migrating by families as the earlier Jewish settlers had done, the East European Jews came by community, sometimes by province. Instead of following the reform or liberal approach to Judaism as many of the earlier immigrants had done, the newcomers were often extremely orthodox in their Jewish religious practices. And instead of speaking a socially acceptable language such as German or Spanish, the Eastern Europeans spoke Yiddish.²

The latter wore distinctive garb, and they tended to live in separate neighborhoods or in separate districts of American cities, just as they had done in Europe. Often housing in mixed neighbor-

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1. The "May Laws" included the following: "(1) As a temporary measure, and until a general revision is made of their legal status, it is decreed that the Jews be forbidden to settle anew outside of towns and boroughs, exceptions being . . . existing Jewish agricultural colonies. (2) Temporarily forbidden are the issuing of mortgages and other deeds to Jews, as well as the registration of Jews as lessees of real property situated outside of towns and boroughs; and also the issuing to Jews of powers of attorney to manage and to dispose of such real property. (3) Jews are forbidden to transact business on Sundays and on the principal Christian holy days; . . . (4) The measures laid down in paragraphs 1, 2, and 3 shall apply only to the governments within the Pale of Jewish Settlement (that is, they shall not apply to the governments of Poland)."—Herman Rosenthal, "May Laws," *The Jewish Encyclopedia* (New York and London, Funk and Wagnalls, 1904), v. 8, pp. 384-386.

2. Abram L. Sachar, *A History of the Jews* (New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1955). pp. 304-308.

hoods was made unavailable to the new Jewish immigrant. The established Jewish community had ambivalent feelings toward the newcomers,³ but once the East European Jews had arrived, their American coreligionists were faced with a problem: what was to be done with them? This was a question to which no one really knew the answer.

Moritz Loth, president of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations in 1882, occupied a position of importance as the highest official of the organizational body of American reform Judaism. Loth told his executive board in January, 1882, that it was

“. . . not for the best that the refugees settle in the large cities, and live in crowded tenement houses and eke out a bare existence in the lowest strata of commerce . . . it would be far more beneficial to the race [sic] and the country to lead . . . [them] into agricultural pursuits, under the auspices of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations and the superintendence of practical American farmers.⁴

Loth may have had more than altruistic reasons for proposing agricultural colonies as a means of answering the problems raised by mass Jewish migration to America. Benjamin Peixotto, the author of *Anglo-Jewish History*, and a member of a distinguished Sephardic New York family wrote:

If 500,000 Jews come into the city [New York] within the next thirty years [1887-1917], there will creep up a spirit of enmity . . . as in old Europe today. There will be no safety, there may be dishonor, disgrace, and misery on every side. There is enough misery already. Go over to the East Side where from 40,000-50,000 Jews now live . . . go on a Sunday and look at the crowd of Jews . . . jabbering, uttering language unnatural, inhuman, making the day hideous with their sights and voices. They are blind and they are deaf and they are dumb, because they cannot make known their wants except to those of their own condition . . . we must give them hearing and give them speech . . . We must rescue them!⁵

The United Jewish Charities of Rochester, N. Y., spoke for many American Jews in 1893 when it denounced the new immigrants as a “. . . bane to the country and a curse to the Jews.” The Rochester group asserted that American Jews had earned “an enviable reputation in the United States, but this has been undermined by the influx of thousands who are not ripe for the enjoyment of liberty and equal rights, and all who mean well for the

3. Rudolf Glanz, “Source Materials on Jewish Immigration,” *YIVO Annual of Jewish Social Science*, v. 6 (New York, Yiddish Scientific Institute—YIVO, 1951), pp. 73-156.

4. “A Colony in Kansas—1882,” *American Jewish Archives*, Cincinnati, November, 1965, p. 115.

5. *American Israelite*, Cincinnati, February 18, 1887.

Jewish name should prevent them [as] much as possible from coming" to America.⁶ As late as 1901 the leader of the most important Jewish fraternal order, the B'nai B'rith, told the United States congress that American Jews had ". . . never stimulated, encouraged, desired, or wished this wholesale influx of their co-religionists," but ". . . naturally preferred that they should remain in the countries in which they had been born."⁷ It is interesting to note that the author of this statement, Simon Wolf, was born in Germany.

Notwithstanding Rochester and Simon Wolf, the Jews of Poland and Russia continued to flee the Czar's anti-Jewish pogroms in ever increasing numbers after 1882. The *American Israelite*, a weekly newspaper published in Cincinnati, did allow that one type of Jewish immigrant was welcome to America:

There is but one class of immigrants of which there never comes too many to this country, and that is the class of agriculturalists because the area of arable lands is very large on this continent . . . there are already too many people in commerce . . . the unnatural growth of large cities leads to labor troubles, socialism, and anarchism . . . immigrants should not come to this country unless they are ready to enter at once upon agricultural pursuits.⁸

The *American Israelite* was edited by the founder of the American reform Jewish movement, Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise. His newspaper reflected the opinion of the established Jewish community, and in particular, it was the champion of the Beersheba, Kansas agricultural colony.

Thus, the leaders of American reform Judaism were mixed in their feelings towards the new immigrant. There is no reason to doubt their sincerity in wishing to provide for the well being of the East European Jews. There is also no reason to doubt their genuine fear and anxiety in the face of the newly arrived and socially inferior immigrant.

Wise and Loth began to organize a committee to assist Eastern Jews in beginning agricultural careers. The annual meetings of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations from 1880 to 1885 were often scenes of intense discussion regarding the development of Jewish agricultural colonies. In 1880 the chairman of the "Committee on Agricultural Pursuits" was convinced that ". . . \$15,000

6. "A Colony in Kansas—1882," *American Jewish Archives*, November, 1965, p. 114.

7. *Ibid.*

8. *American Israelite*, April 29, 1887.

is the smallest sum required to insure success," but ". . . an examination of applicants has convinced me that we have not, as yet, the material qualified to insure success in a far Western State."⁹

In early 1882 Wise's newspaper heralded the organization of the "Hebrew Union Agricultural Society." As in most organizations the real power rested with a "Central Board of Control" that could "employ superintendents or other agents . . . as it may deem proper, and shall have full power to do all things necessary to carry out the objects of the Society."

The *American Israelite's* editor, in a moment of candor, stated the true reason for sending new immigrants to agricultural colonies: "Reader, do not stand aloof from the great movement of promoting agricultural pursuits among the Israelites, which will help to suppress prejudice and persecution among the Hebrews."¹⁰

In June, 1882, two East European Jewish immigrants left Cincinnati and traveled to southwestern Kansas "where they selected and entered . . . a tract of land [homestead territory] twenty-two miles from a railroad [Cimarron], sufficient for the whole colony, which is now ready to start and take possession at once."¹¹ Messrs. Cohen and Goldfarb represented the HUAS in this legal transaction. It seems incredible that the sponsoring group would have permitted Cohen and Goldfarb alone to have made the homestead claim. No official from the Hebrew Union Agricultural Society had seen the tract prior to the claim. This was but the first of several serious errors.

Wise's newspaper carried an article in almost every issue during the summer and fall of 1882 describing the proposed Beersheba colony. Rabbi Wise appealed to "all men who have pity . . . to send us at once as much money as they think might be proper to spend in this charitable enterprise. . . . Go at once at this business . . . collect as much as you can get of either Jew or Gentile. . . . No words, no advices, no ifs and no whens are wanted."

But the rabbi-editor did receive some "advice" from a subscriber in Chattanooga, Tenn. Julius Ochs wrote a letter to Wise in which he cautioned American Jews not "to spend the money in a foolish or romantic scheme, but use it for practical purposes . . . assist

9. Union of American Hebrew Congregations, *Proceedings* (Cincinnati, Ohio, 1879-1882), p. 793.

10. *American Israelite*, November 17, 1882.

11. *Ibid.*, June 30, 1882.

those who have learned the American way of farming, and proven themselves worthy to settle among American settlements and not in colonies, but scattered. . . .”¹²

The *American Israelite's* response was an editorial that concluded with the words: “. . . colonize and colonize again.”¹³ It was apparent by the summer of 1882 that Isaac Mayer Wise's newspaper and his heart were deeply committed to agricultural colonization as a viable means of integrating the East European Jew into American life. The *American Israelite* of July 28, 1882, said it all with the words: “Ho, for Kansas!”¹⁴

The Kansas of 1882 had barely recovered from the trauma of the Civil War. In 1874 the first important change in the state's agricultural pattern took place. A colony of Mennonites came to the plains of central Kansas from the steppes of Russia, bringing with them a variety of hard wheat called Turkey Red because of the crop's color and place of origin. Turkey Red was to thrive in Kansas, and in time it and its derivatives would spread throughout the state. This hard winter wheat grew better in Kansas than any other variety because it was drought resistant and quite hardy. Thus began the great wheat industry of Kansas, for prior to 1874, corn had been the major crop, but the Mennonites and Turkey Red changed that.¹⁵

Messrs. Cohen and Goldfarb had chosen a site in Hodgeman county in southwestern Kansas. The county was thinly populated in 1882, and the crops of the area included broom corn, as well as wheat. However, the area was not considered prime land for crops, and because of its nearness to the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe railroad, the Hodgeman lands were often regarded in the 1880's as choice grazing areas for cattle.

The Beersheba colony was to be established about 22 miles northeast of Cimarron, not far from the present day town of Kalvesta. The colony was situated on Pawnee creek. There was no timber in the area, and most of the buildings were to be made from sod. Such was the land that awaited 24 Russian Jewish families as they departed Cincinnati on July 26, 1882.

The trip involved about 60 immigrants and the *American Israelite* fully publicized the journey to Kansas. Charles K. Davis and

12. *Ibid.*

13. *Ibid.*, August 4, 1882.

14. *Ibid.*, July 28, 1882.

15. *Kansas: A Guide to the Sunflower State*, compiled and written by the Federal Writers' Project of the Works Project Administration for the State of Kansas (New York, Hastings House, 1939), pp. 66, 67.

Leo Wise, the rabbi's son, accompanied the immigrants. Rabbi Wise called the latter group "martyrs" because they had clung to their Jewish religion during the anti-Semitic pogroms in Russia, and the rabbi was confident that ". . . in a very short time they would feel at home. . . . Uncle Sam has a farm for everyone [homestead land], . . . the land must be carefully selected . . . each colony must be organized into one society . . . the implements and livestock should remain the common property of the colony . . . the livestock, seeds, etc. are not the colonists' own property . . . all these things are loaned to them, and they must, at the end, pay for all they receive."¹⁶

Davis has left us an extensive diary describing his trip to the Beersheba colony. He became somewhat depressed while en route to St. Louis with his five dozen immigrants. The cause of Davis' depression stemmed from a conversation with George A. Knight, the Vandalia railroad agent, who spoke in negative terms about the land around Cimarron, and Davis became even more despondent when his welcoming committee in Kansas City also spoke about the poor agricultural potential of Hodgeman county. "Alarmed," Davis hurriedly sent Leo Wise on to Topeka to consult with the state agricultural department.¹⁷

Davis soon discovered that immigrants were fair prey for train agents and hotel managers. The 60 Russian Jews were denied first class rail accommodations even though they had valid tickets. In addition, the Kansas City hotel tried to evict the would be colonists, but Davis prevented this, and he grew more gloomy as he heard more discouraging opinions about Hodgeman county. ". . . We had no opinion of a single person that had been personally on the grounds and inspected it." Leo Wise returned from Topeka with inconclusive information, and Davis ". . . decided not to go as yet. . . ." ¹⁸

After more consultations Leo Wise and Julius Cohen, one of the two immigrants who had selected the Hodgeman tract, left for Ellsworth, with the hope of acquiring different land. Davis noted that Cohen ". . . is satisfied that no better lands can be found any place. . . ." ¹⁹

Some of the immigrants had taken jobs in Kansas City while waiting for the journey to southwestern Kansas. A local furniture

16. *American Israelite*, August 4, 1882.

17. "A Colony in Kansas—1882," *American Jewish Archives*, November, 1965, p. 119.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 120.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 121.

factory provided employment for them. Charles Davis discovered that the food and liquor supplied him by his mother had been stolen, indeed, the Russian Jews stole many cans of sardines from the colony's provisions. Davis, then only 29 years old, was left alone after Leo Wise had departed for Ellsworth. Davis wrote that ". . . the responsibility was too great for a young man . . . they [the immigrants] almost worry me to death, as I want to hide their conduct from the people of Kansas City, especially the Gentiles, who have never seen Russians before, because I don't want them to form a bad opinion of our people. . . ." ²⁰ The "martyrs" of Isaac Mayer Wise had obviously lost their sanctity for young Charles Davis.

A week of "mischief" in Kansas City passed, and finally Davis received two telegrams urging him to proceed to Cimarron. One came from Loth back in Cincinnati, and the second was from Leo Wise who assured Davis that the land in Hodgeman county was "much better than expected." Davis sent the immigrants ahead on a slow train, while he remained behind to pay the group's debts. "Our expense at Kansas City was enormous. Every hotel keeper seemed to want all the money we had and overcharged us in every instance. . . ." ²¹

Davis then took the fast train from Kansas City and quickly overtook his charges, and he arrived in Larned six hours before the immigrants' train, despite the fact that the latter train had left ten hours earlier from Kansas City! In Larned the young diarist rejoined Leo Wise who explained the reasons for the adverse comments about Hodgeman county. Since the western counties of Kansas "are new . . . the R. R. pays no taxes on its lands. . . . It is to their interest then, to keep the emigration East, where the counties are organized and they are paying taxes." In addition, the cattle men ". . . run up in droves of from one to ten thousand (or even more) head from Texas. . . . These cattle graze on all lands . . . and wherever a farmer settles in this country, it, of course, takes away so much free grazing land, and furthermore, the owners of the herds are responsible for all damages that they may do the farmer . . . as people don't have fences out here, it's no easy job to keep the cattle from running over and destroying crops, etc." ²²

On August 6, 1882, Davis arrived in Cimarron, and he saw his

20. *Ibid.*, pp. 121, 122.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 126.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 127.

first cowboy. The Cincinnatiian wrote that "Every man almost in this section carries his *shoot iron*, as they call it, and many of them lay down to sleep at night . . . with these *little trinkets* on their persons." Despite his concern about his immigrant group and his worry over the land, Davis was ". . . favorably impressed with the country. . . ." ²³

On the morning of the seventh, Davis sent his colonists ahead to Beersheba under the leadership of Leo Wise. Davis remained behind in Cimarron for the tents and other provisions scheduled to arrive via rail. He was certain that the delay was due to the Santa Fe's antagonism to settlers. During the three days of waiting, the "city slicker" from Cincinnati let his beard grow, and he shed his coat and vest to don more appropriate clothing.

"I put on . . . a blue flannel shirt, a broad brimmed straw hat . . . I am afraid I can't get used to carrying my pistol around all the time. It's too heavy, and besides, it is only a 38 calibre, while a 44 is regulation out here." Boredom set in quickly, and Davis made a side trip to Dodge City. His remarks provide a superb description of that town, a town quite remote from his native Cincinnati, and even more remote from Czarist Russia:

This is a regular frontier town, and sights are seen here that would shock the nerves of many timid persons from the East, who would be surprised to note that such things are countenanced in any community. There are probably over a dozen saloons on the main street, in each of which they entertain their patrons with music from a piano and violin, and sometimes the cowboys are regaled with a vile song by an abandoned woman.

Gambling is done openly, the doors being wide open in these saloons, where they have faro tables, rouge et noir, chuck a luck, Spanish monte, and many other games of chance, where in many cases, women preside over them, and the roll, or money, of the bank is displayed in stacks of gold and large notes in front of the dealer, and then there is a dance-hall here as well, and in all these places the cowboy . . . spends his hard earned money in a few days and nights, then . . . goes out on the trail again for five or six months. . . ." ²⁴

The colony's supplies arrived on August 10, and Davis reached Beersheba the following day. He spent his first afternoon tramping about the area in a temperature of 110 degrees. His Sabbath dinner that night consisted of ". . . coffee, antelope steak, onions, and bread. Although the dust and grass was flying all over what we ate, I never enjoyed a meal so much in my life." ²⁵

23. *Ibid.*, pp. 130, 131.

24. *Ibid.*, pp. 132, 133.

25. *Ibid.*, pp. 133, 134.

There was no dust or grass flying back in Cincinnati, and the editor of the *American Israelite* was able to proclaim:

They [the immigrants] have been supplied by the Committee [Emigrant Aid Committee of Cincinnati] with wagons, horses, steers, harnesses, cows, sheep, poultry, agricultural and mechanical implements, dairy vessels, provisions, tents, cots, lanterns, lamps, about everything necessary to go to work at once and put in a good patch of wheat this fall. . . .²⁶

The taste of success was sweet to Wise and his associates, and by October, 1882, he noted that “. . . houses have been built, and wells sunk . . . every family is in full possession of 160 acres of land with dwelling. None can dispute their dwelling. None can dispute their possession, none dare move or disturb them. . . .” One wonders whether Wise meant the Czar or cattlemen as potential disturbers of the peace at Beersheba, Kan.

In the fall of 1882 the HUAS in Cincinnati appointed a superintendent for its colony. He was Joseph Baum, a “. . . Hungarian said to be an excellent practical farmer.” Rabbi Wise predicted that Beersheba would expand to “. . . 500 souls . . . by next spring . . .,”²⁷ under Baum’s direction. The superintendent was authorized “. . . to withhold . . . provisions and the benefits of the implements and the cattle . . .” from any errant Jewish farmer.²⁸

The HUAS published its financial report in late 1882; it told of Beersheba’s expenses. Wise’s appeals for funds had netted only \$2,458.57, while the Kansas colony had cost \$4,222.46. The difference was paid by Wise himself. Clearly, he had committed more than grand rhetoric to the “colonization scheme.”²⁹ In November of that year he wrote directly to his rabbinical colleagues: “The Rabbis of the United States will do honor to themselves and to the positions they occupy by advocating with all of their power a hearty and unanimous support of the HUAS. . . .”³⁰

A hard Kansas winter did not diminish Wise’s spirit nor his hopes for Beersheba. In early January, 1883, the *American Israelite* published a progress report on the Kansas colony. It noted that 19 families numbering about 80 people had settled on the homestead land, but it pointed out that the colony desperately needed 50 cows, two steers, and 500 sheep by spring.³¹

The same issue of Wise’s paper also contained a letter of effusive

26. *American Israelite*, July 28, 1882.

27. *Ibid.*, October 13, 1882.

28. *Ibid.*, October 20, 1882.

29. *Ibid.*

30. *Ibid.*, November 17, 1882.

31. *Ibid.*, January 5, 1883.

praise written by the Beersheba settlers to Moritz Loth, president of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations. Loth, a strong supporter of the colony, was thanked for his "kindness and benevolence" toward "the destitute and miserable fugitives." The letter listed in great detail all the supplies and implements given to the colonists by the HUAS, and "our wives and children thank you." Apparently the colony's inhabitants were not aware that the farming tools and animals were but lent to them. The letter concluded with many complimentary words about Joseph Baum, Beersheba's superintendent:

He busies himself for us . . . and we obey him. He treats us all alike. To him we owe that each one lives in his own house. Oh gracious sir! You have provided us with more than our ancestor Jacob prayed to God for. . . . You provide us with all our necessities. . . . May you thrive in might and beauty as your grateful servants of the Beersheba colony will it.³²

The true authorship of this letter is in doubt since it seems most unlikely that Yiddish speaking Jews could have mastered the English language in such a short time. Rabbi Wise saw the letter as a complete refutation of the "croakers and calumniators."

The colony's sponsors hoped that the Russian Jewish farmers would fit into the general American farming community in Kansas. The colonists were met with good will when they arrived in Hodgeman county. Davis noted that "All the farmers were in and received me kindly, offered every encouragement to me. . . ." ³³ The Kansas farmers promised to show their new neighbors "everything" and to lend "all the aid in their power." Davis was perceptive enough to realize that this help was not merely philo-Semitism, but rather ". . . our coming would drive the stock men off this trail. . . ."

Beersheba was located "right on the fresh cattle trail," and it was the object of cattle men. The latter tried to bribe people in an attempt to prevent the newcomers from settling the land. The report of bribery was offered by "Mr. Sewel Mason, who is one of our staunchest friends and our neighbor out here. . . ." ³⁴ The records indicate that the Jewish settlers were met with favor by the farmers, and with disfavor by the cattle men. There did not appear to be any religious or ethnic prejudice, and the spirit of welcome was strongly influenced by economic forces.

In June, 1883, Mason wrote a letter to his friend, Leo Wise. The latter's father printed it with pride in the *American Israelite*:

32. *Ibid.*

33. "A Colony in Kansas—1882," *American Jewish Archives*, November, 1965, p. 129.

34. *Ibid.*, pp. 129, 130.

. . . The cows of the colony have arrived, and they are a fine lot of stock.
 . . . This is the best thing that the Committee [HUAS] has done for the colony. . . . Crops are looking well, and we have a good prospect for a big yield of potatoes . . . cattle have gone out of sight to what they were last year. I have offers of \$75 a head for my stock. . . .

Rabbi Wise commented in the same issue that "Mr. Mason has lived on his present location for the last six years, and has been successful. Let us hope that our people will not be less fortunate."³⁵

The religious life of the rabbi's "people" was not neglected. Although there was no timber around Beersheba, the settlers "built a number of dugout shelters and a sod synagogue."³⁶ The Hebrew Union Agricultural Society did not send colonists in "numbers less than ten [the minimum needed for a public Jewish religious service], and they must be provided with a *shochet* [ritual slaughterer], a *mohel* [ritual circumciser], a *sefer Torah* [a scroll containing the first five books of the Hebrew Bible], and *shofar* [ram's horn sounded at special Jewish holidays]."³⁷

By December, 1882, the settlers had erected a sod school house in which the children were to study during the day, and the adults by night. "The school needs furniture and books . . . an educated American lady" had promised to be the colony's teacher.³⁸ Hopes for Beersheba's success were high.

In January, 1883, Isaac Mayer Wise noted in his newspaper that the colony would be self-sustaining by the following August, but additional funds were needed from the American Jewish community. Beersheba had 18 houses, 18 wells, and 28 children. Money was to be used for the purchase of badly needed livestock and farming equipment. More and more the emphasis in the *American Israelite* shifted from crops to cattle as a major source of income for Beersheba. Indeed, cattle became the critical factor in the settlement's economy. In early 1883 the first note of doubt crept into the published reports about the Kansas colony: ". . . This country is a grazing one. If cattle can be supplied, the question of success is no longer doubtful."³⁹

Real pessimism set in following Superintendent Baum's initial report, and Rabbi Wise duly noted: "They [the colonists] obey his [Baum's] word as soldiers; they were at first unruly, but now are tractable and docile . . . one thing alone is needed, and that

35. *American Israelite*, June 18, 1883.

36. *Kansas: A Guide to the Sunflower State*, p. 387.

37. *American Israelite*, August 4, 1882.

38. *Ibid.*, January 26, 1883.

39. *Ibid.*, January 19, 1883.

is cattle. . . ." ⁴⁰ Wise was disappointed in the small response to his almost weekly appeal for funds. By February the urgent need was \$5,000 for the purchase of cattle,⁴¹ and by May, 1883, the Cincinnati newspaper called the Beersheba colony "a purely experimental state . . . it would be impossible to speak definitely of failure or success until next fall." ⁴²

In the summer of 1883 M. H. Marks, the secretary of the HUAS, left Cincinnati for a personal inspection of Beersheba. His lengthy report was published in the July 20 issue of Wise's newspaper:

. . . owing to the many discouraging reports, and the evil influence of so many disparaging letters and editorials of some of the great and wise heads of Israel, I started on this trip firmly convinced that all money expended for these people [the colonists] had been thrown away. . . . We were met at the Kansas City depot by one of those men . . . who immediately volunteered the information that the colony was a failure . . . that . . . the colonists were all running off and becoming a burden to Kansas City . . . in Kansas City we met three of the families of the colony, who . . . were anxious to return to the colony. . . . Our Board having previously taken action on these deserters, we, of course, left them as we found them, but . . . they will eventually all return . . . and become farmers without our assistance. . . .

After a tedious drive of four hours over a very dusty road [from Cimarron], we arrived at our destination and surprised our worthy superintendent, Mr. Baum, and his estimable wife, by suddenly landing in camp. . . . The colony consists of eleven families, fifty nine people in all, of which thirty six are children, and one single . . . man. . . . Each family owns 160 acres of land, upon which they have built a dwelling. . . . The eleven families live on an area of land covering six miles, that is, the first settler lives six miles from the last. . . . The best building . . . is the school house. . . . Services are held every Saturday and holidays under the ministrations of Mr. Edelhertz who acts as Chasan [cantor], shochet . . . at the same time he is a first class farmer . . . the Sabbath here is strictly observed, and no labor is performed by man or beast. . . .

The colonists have plowed 250 acres of land, 200 of which are planted with sorgum . . . sufficient to bridge them over until next year's harvest, as all the men will be able, and willing, to earn their living by working on the adjoining railroad when they are not needed on the farms. . . . The working force consists, in addition to the men, of five yoke oxen, a team of mules, a team of horses, six plows, and five wagons. Domestic stock, twenty three cows, twenty two calves, and no end of chickens. . . . In addition . . . they own the various implements necessary for so distant a settlement, such as a full set of blacksmith's tools, planting and harvesting machinery, etc. The health of the colony is excellent. . . . There are several Americans settled in the immediate neighborhood. . . . These gentlemen speak

40. *Ibid.*

41. *Ibid.*, February 9, 1883.

42. *Ibid.*, May 25, 1883.

of our colonists in terms of highest praise. . . . These neighbors . . . have always done all in their power to assist with their advice.

The work . . . is to lay in their supply of fuel for the coming winter, which . . . consists in stacking up piles of cattle refuse obtained from the great Texas cattle trail close by. There is no wood in this part of the country. . . . This refuse . . . furnishes a good article of fuel . . . for cooking and heating. . . . The climate is excellent . . . they have had all the rain they needed this season. . . .

I am not prepared to say that the land here is as fertile as any other. . . . Still, the great force of this country consists in stock raising, which can be made more profitable than any other branch of agriculture. . . .

But the great question in which we all take such a lively interest—“Can Jews become successful farmers?”—is virtually solved by our Beersheba colony, and . . . that the Jewish race [*sic*] can become again . . . an agricultural people is established beyond any reasonable doubt. . . . I am inclined to believe that most of the failures are due to theoretical farming, in which I take little stock. I am a firm believer in practical farming . . . our successful farmers . . . not one ever heard of an agricultural school, and my idea of making farmers is to send them on a farm and let them learn by experience . . . we have the satisfaction of knowing that our colony is a grand success, and an honor and glory to our cause, fully demonstrating the fact that, as usual, Cincinnati is bound to succeed in what she undertakes. . . . Eleven happier and more independent families would be hard to find, and I doubt if any reasonable sum of money could induce any of them to leave their land and return to this city. . . . God’s pure air on Government land . . . Jews can become successful farmers. . . . 43

Rabbi Wise gloated editorially:

All croakers, fault finders, and birds of ill omen . . . are invited to read the report of MR. M. H. Marks . . . at Beersheba we are done with questions and experiments and theories . . . we . . . have proved the possibility of successfully forming agricultural colonies . . . a 1000 families will settle still leaving room for thousands more.⁴⁴

There is much that can be said about Marks’ full report on Beersheba. The HUAS secretary showed a naiveté about agricultural methods that surprises the 20th century reader, and his lack of compassion towards the three families he found in Kansas City was typical of the society’s cold business attitude. We can perhaps forgive his chauvinistic outbursts and his overstatements, but his poor judgment in advocating “practical farming” sounded the death knell for Beersheba.

The breaking point in the Kansas colony came during the spring of 1884 when the “tractable and docile” settlers leased part of their holdings to a syndicate that wished enlarged cattle trails. The HUAS leadership in Cincinnati was furious at the settlers, and it

43. *Ibid.*, July 20, 1883.

44. *Ibid.*

took strong action to curb such independence. On orders from Cincinnati, and with the approval of Superintendent Baum, all farming implements and livestock were taken from the Jewish settlers and sold to one of the colony's "neighbors":

COWLANDS, KANSAS, April 9, 1884.

Received of Moses Edelhertz property belonging to the Hebrew Union Agricultural Society, J. Baum, Agent . . . One pair oxen, two cows, one calf, one wagon, one yoke, one chain, one well bucket and rope, axe, shovel, churn, twelve milk pails, two milk buckets, hatchet, wheel barrow, one pr. boots, one straw hat, one bale of wire.

The above articles were turned over to me as Constable of Ross Township for the Hebrew Union Agricultural Society.

(sig) T. J. PATTERSON
Constable⁴⁵

The editor of the *American Israelite* never informed his readers that the farming implements and livestock had been turned over to the local constable. Thus, the HUAS severely crippled its own agricultural colony by removing from the settlers the means to work the land. The Jewish farmers in Kansas had one friend, however, in Cincinnati.

Charles Davis, the escort of two years earlier, investigated the sale of the land to the cattle syndicate, and wrote a bitter article in which he justified the colonists' action:

The matter was entirely misrepresented. The transaction was legitimate and had the full sanction of the neighbors. Before the contract was entered into, a meeting of the neighbors was held and a resolution passed consenting to the transaction. This arrangement leaves them as much land as they can possibly cultivate and gives them the means to fence it around and replace stock and implements taken from them and sold by order of the Cincinnati Committee.

Under this contract, made for one year with the privilege for five, eight families received \$200 per year, a living in itself. There was no feeling against the Beersheba colony, nor is there any now. If there is any indignation, it is against Baum who induced the Committee to take back the stock, implements, etc., that had been advanced to the colonists, and for his overzealousness in carrying out instructions.⁴⁶

Davis' defense did not bring about a change in the Hebrew Union Agricultural Society's policy, and some of the colonists began to drift away from Beersheba. Rabbi Wise's plan for moving Jewish immigrants to agricultural colonies had failed, for he discovered that although Russian Jews were "martyrs" they were human beings as well who did not fit into neatly preconceived plans. Wise learned that sponsors can not always control their charges, and that students

45. Richard Singer, "The American Jew in Agriculture: Past History and Present Condition" (unpublished prize essay, Hebrew Union College, 1941), pp. 467, 468.

46. *Ibid.*, pp. 466, 467.

do not always follow their mentors. A single act of selling part of their Beersheba land caused Wise and the other Cincinnati leaders to react in a most damaging way. It may have been that the HUAS was obsessed with 160-acre farms, model villages, and the like. The "crime" of the settlers did not merit the "punishment" of the sponsors from Cincinnati.

After 1886 there was nothing left of the Beersheba colony, and the *New Encyclopedia of Social Reform* officially lists 1885 as the closing year of the colony's life. Some of the colonists drifted to Kansas City or St. Louis. Indeed, two of the names mentioned in Davis' diary are today prominent in the Kansas City Jewish community: Terte and Goldman.⁴⁷

The St. Louis *Jewish Free Press* printed what might be considered Beersheba's obituary in January, 1886:

. . . They organized a district school and engaged a competent teacher with the aid of the Cincinnati Society. Nevertheless, the colony was reduced to deplorable conditions by its first manager, an energetic but illiterate Hungarian. He governed the colony with terror causing an obstinate attitude to develop which resulted in the requisition and sale of the chattels by the Cincinnati Committee. The colonists, reduced thereby to abject poverty, scattered to surrounding towns and engaged in odd jobs to eke out a living. When they saved up enough to buy a couple of cows and horses, a few returned to their claims. . . .⁴⁸

Beersheba was but one of several attempts to establish Jewish agricultural colonies in Kansas. The other attempts in Lasker, Gilead, Touro, and Hebron also failed.

The failure of the Beersheba colony was due to five basic causes. First, the settlers generally had little or no knowledge of farming and agriculture as a science. The sponsor, the Hebrew Union Agricultural Society of Cincinnati, was often naive about the importance of modern farming methods.

Second, the colony had insufficient means of support. The HUAS did not, or could not, invest the huge sums of money that would have insured the colony's success. The lack of support was especially acute during Beersheba's first year of existence. Third, the colony had to borrow money at an excessive rate of interest even though it was made up of homestead land. High rates were charged when Beersheba needed seeds, implements, livestock, and building supplies.

Fourth, the colony was in a poor geographical location since it was far from a convenient market. It was 20 miles from the railroad,

47. "A Colony in Kansas—1882," *American Jewish Archives*, November, 1965, p. 128.

48. St. Louis *Jewish Free Press*, January, 1886.

and although Beersheba was on Pawnee creek, the stream was not large enough for the settlers to use as a waterway. Finally, the colony was beset by the problem of poor soil, drought, bitter cold, and other natural disasters. This caused some of the immigrants to leave Beersheba to take other jobs. Almost all of the settlers had a profession or trade other than farming. America absorbed her immigrants without the necessity of planned agricultural colonies. The settlers usually found employment in either Kansas City or St. Louis.

There were some important secondary factors that also helped defeat Beersheba. The dream of Jewish farmers on their own land in America did not strike the responsive chord that Rabbi Wise had hoped for in his planning. His pleading editorials and lengthy articles in the *American Israelite* failed to rouse the "established" American Jewish community. Thus, the HUAS was always woefully short of funds.

Social snobbery and class lines, whether real or imagined, hindered the growth of Beersheba. The irony of the entire program was that *Reform* Jews sponsored *Orthodox* Jews in Kansas. It often seemed that the adjective was more important than the noun, for the comfortable urbanized American Jew had ambivalent feelings about the new immigrants. This ambivalence was probably not lost upon the Russian Jews who formed the colonist group.

The sense of Jewish isolation may have been a contributing factor to the colony's breakdown. East European Jews tended to live in communities with synagogues, schools, hospitals, welfare agencies, newspapers, food stores, and many other institutions. Beersheba was hundreds of miles from large and well-established Jewish communities, and it was extremely difficult to construct a new one with a small population and severe financial problems. The urban centers of America acted as a magnet for the immigrants.

As mentioned above, the settlers generally had another profession or trade. Thus, the motivation for successful farming was sometimes lacking. Beersheba also lacked a natural quality in its brief existence. It was a "hothouse" experiment conducted in the full glare of national and even international publicity.⁴⁹ The Cincinnati sponsors wanted quick results and they lacked the patience to cope with crop failures and agricultural inexperience. The HUAS sometimes seemed more concerned with answering psy-

49. Some European Jewish newspapers covered the colony's activities, including: *Hamelitz* (Hebrew), *Jeschurun* (German), and *Oesterreichische Wochenschrift* (German).

chological questions than with dealing with real people and their problems.

Rabbi Wise and his followers seemed to be suffering from an inferiority complex. The pages of the *American Israelite* were filled with proud declarations that Jews *could* become successful farmers. Isaac Mayer Wise wrote these words in 1883:

Cincinnati . . . succeeded in planting Jewish colonies on government lands in Kansas. . . . The question, how the poor Jews can be enabled to become useful citizens, is practically ended. . . . Let us have no able-bodied beggars or tramps or adventurers in the family.⁵⁰

Beersheba began before the Zionist movement held its first congress in 1897 in Basel, Switzerland. The highly motivated Jewish farmer found on an Israeli "kibbutz" was totally unknown to the settlers and sponsors of the Kansas colony. They were working without the psychological benefits that today's Jews have derived from successful farming in Israel. In 1900 the Jewish Agricultural Society in America was founded, and this group put farming for Jews on a solid financial and scientific footing.⁵¹

Beersheba, although a failure, set in motion new forces in American Jewish life. Perhaps for the first time Jews were called upon to help other Jews in the United States through community action and concern. The Hebrew Union Agricultural Society was the forerunner of larger, more successful, and more sophisticated Jewish welfare agencies in America.

50. *American Israelite*, July 27, 1883.

51. *Annual Reports, 1902-1924* (New York, Jewish Agricultural and Industrial Aid Society, 1903-1925).