

Can Jews Become Farmers? Rurality, Peasantry and Cultural Identity in the World of the Rural Jew in Nineteenth-Century Eastern Europe

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Abstract: Based on conventional learning and supported in no small measure by stereotypes, agriculture as a vocation was not considered as part of the occupational profile of Jewish society in Eastern Europe until the Second World War. However, various studies show that in different regions in this area, primarily Lithuania, White Russia, north eastern Poland, and Bessarabia, tens of thousands of Jews made a living from direct engagement in various branches of agriculture, including field crops, orchards, lake fishing, etc. These Jews lived mainly in the rural areas and were a factor, and at times a highly significant one, in the local demographic and economic structure. The first part of this article examines the question whether these Jews, who were part of the general rural society living in the countryside, developed a certain type of rural cultural identity. This question is discussed by examining various aspects of their attitude towards nature. The second part of the article considers the possible influence of the agricultural occupation on the shaping of a unique peasant cultural identity among these rural Jews and the ways they coped with the accompanying religious, social and cultural implications.

Introduction

In 1828 Isaac Ber Levinsohn, the most famous thinker of the Jewish Enlightenment in Eastern Europe, published his book *Teudah be-yisrael*.¹ Levinsohn devoted the last section of his work, in which one may see the manifesto of the Jewish enlightenment in this geographic and cultural space, to the question of the vocational profile of Jewish society in Eastern Europe. In considering this issue the author pointed out what seemed to him to be one of the essential failures in the vocational structure of this society:

Why have we set our course only in the direction of commerce, why do we not follow in the footsteps of our forefathers and work the land? Why have we despised [agriculture] and moved away from it and today no one among us is either farmer or vine-grower or planter?²

In his second book, *Beit Yehudah*, Levinsohn proposed applying to the state authorities to allocate land for cultivation to at least one third of the Jewish population, and he attests to himself as having already begun such activity which also stirred interest among many

Jews.³ Yet, as opposed to other elements in his treatise, it seems that Levinsohn's approach to this question reflects the narrative that was more widespread among contemporary enlightenment proponents than the socio-economic reality of his time. Despite the abovementioned common stereotype and stigmatisation, European Jews had been engaged in agriculture from as early as the Middle Ages.⁴ In respect of the late modern era, as Jonathan Dekel-Chen and Israel Bartal noted, 'between the 1880's and the outbreak of the Second World War, "Agrarianization" was a truly global Jewish phenomenon . . . Agrarianization is, and was, a central piece in the collective Jewish past'.⁵ However, in contrast to their conclusion that prior to the 1880s East European Jews were not engaged directly in farming but were rather involved in 'trade and commerce or held administrative positions linked to agriculture', recent studies indicate the existence of thousands of Jewish farmers⁶ in nineteenth-century western provinces of the Russian empire.⁷

Some facts and figures are necessary in order to understand this phenomenon fully. As early as 1818, agriculture was the source of livelihood for over 12,000 Jews in the Ukraine, White Russia and the Baltic region, and from the beginning of the 1830s, there was a significant rise in the number of Jewish agricultural settlements in these regions. The Jewish agricultural colonies established in the first half of that century in New Russia, as well as those founded between 1833 and 1862 near the cities of Slonim and Bobruisk in White Russia, are just a few examples of this phenomenon. This is the background for the fact that in 1847 the Jewish farmers in White Russia alone had lands of around 223,000 acres.⁸ Similarly, in a survey conducted in 1851, it was found that some 580 Jewish families who had settled in the Lithuanian rural area were engaged in agriculture and five years later that number grew to over one thousand. The scope of the agricultural land rented by Jews in the late nineteenth century in the province of Vilna alone totalled more than 322,000 acres.⁹ If we add to this figure the Jews who were involved in supplying the raw materials and work tools to the farmers as well as in marketing the agricultural produce, then as economist-agronomist Ber Brutskus has shown, the number of Jews 'engaged in the farming economy' in Eastern Europe in the last decade of the nineteenth century reached more than 150,000.¹⁰ On the eve of the First World War, this number grew to 200,000.¹¹ Despite the description portrayed here, it would seem that Levinsohn's contention in his discussion that 'the Jew is as capable of this employment as any other man',¹² did indeed reflect reality to a great extent.

This phenomenon was part of the process of 'leaving the ghetto' and 'the Jews' return to history',¹³ and may be seen as an additional stage in the progressive integration of various groups in Jewish society into the fabric of the social and economic life of European society. Behind these Jews' occupation in agriculture there lay no ideology based on 'a return to the nature' but rather a wish to utilise the potential of their geographical, economic, and social environment. This was either as a result of the difficult economic and vocational situation or with an eye to earning various concessions and benefits such as exemption from military service, as described by one Jewish farmer from the Pinsk region in the mid 1860s:

How can we be false to our beliefs to prefer the life of the city where a crime is committed for a piece of bread . . . The labor and toil of the townsmen is more alien to us than our labor and toil is to

them, to plow our fields and reap our harvest . . . our bread and water are assured to us continually and perpetually.¹⁴

Nonetheless, when speaking of people whose historical and natural breeding ground was not the rural expanses, this course of events could not be taken for granted. Thus, for example, when, at the end of the 1870s, news items were published about the intentions of the Paris-based Alliance Israélite Universelle¹⁵ society to purchase extensive agricultural lands in southern Russia and to settle ten thousand Jewish families there, a stormy public debate began over the question of the suitability and aptitude of Jews to realise this option.¹⁶ Along with relating to the political and financial aspects of the plan, extensive space in this discussion was devoted to the question of the suitability of the Jews to agricultural work and the attendant life style. Along with the voices which supported this idea, particularly in consideration of the urgent need to offer an employment option to thousands of Jews with no source of livelihood, other opinions were also voiced. 'This operation to turn the Jews, erstwhile city-dwellers, into tillers of the soil and farmers is a total revolution', claimed Isaac Kaminer heatedly, 'It is reincarnating one man's soul into another . . . such a total transformation has never happened in history'.¹⁷

And yet, although the writer is referring to the difficulty in coping with the classic vocational tradition of Jewish society which had taken shape since the Middle Ages with its primary focus on commerce, there were also theological–historical motivations driving the opposition to this step. According to one school of thought prevalent in traditional Jewish thinking, one of the aspects which expressed the chosenness of the Jewish people was the vocational one. The mission of the non-Jew, according to this view, is to develop and refine the real-life dimensions of human existence, such as producing and supplying food, building cities and paving roads, technological development and so on. The mission of the Jew, in contrast, is to 'perfect the world under the kingdom of God', in other words to disseminate throughout human society the monotheistic worldview and the ethical values derived from it, as well as to work for social justice with special reference to the weaker segments of society.¹⁸ Even if this view can be seen as an attempt to rationalise the anomalous employment structure of Jewish society, in effect it became a permanent component of the collective Jewish consciousness. This was true particularly under conditions of exile where the proximity of Jewish society to the surrounding society was considered to hold religious and cultural perils and therefore to require a clear-cut demarcation of the Jewish living space. The writer Micha Yosef Berdichevsky¹⁹ gave literary expression to this:

My father used to teach me that the entire outside world is the work of Satan . . . the earth is Satan and whatever a person sees is the act of Satan. Beautiful trees, pleasant fields, charming courtyards, and delightful forests – these are an illusion created by Satan and his faction. We must never heed his voice: we must shut our eyes, in order to fulfill what is written: He closes his eyes to avoid seeing evil.²⁰

In the light of this worldview and consciousness, rurality, and particularly the peasantry, was seen as part of the non-Jewish social and cultural territory. However, in reality this theological-historical conception could not hold out against the need to provide a solution to the increasing difficulties of survival and one can detect an inverse

correlation between the deepening economic crisis in nineteenth-century Imperial Russia and its attendant vocational reality and the rapid growth in the number of Jews who turned to agriculture as an occupation. This phenomenon had far-reaching repercussions for the socio-economic structure of Jewish society in Eastern Europe, both at the time and in much later years when the Zionist movement was shaping the character of the Jewish farmer as the ultimate idealist prototype.²¹ On the premise that the Jews who lived in the rural regions and engaged in agriculture can be characterised as ‘peasants’, at least according to the ‘minimalist approach’ identifying rural cultivators as peasants,²² the question naturally arises of whether this reality also had an effect on their consciousness and cultural identity. Did a singular Jewish identity take shape in this living space which was different from that of the urban Jew, which challenged the accepted stereotype and included elements both of rural and of peasant identity?

Rural identity

In order to answer this question one must first consider the subject of rural identity. By this I refer to the extent of the influence exerted by the rural space, with its diverse climatic, geographic, botanic, biologic, and zoological elements, on the self-identity of the individual inhabiting that space. One of the ways to examine this issue is by using an analysis of the individual’s ways of observing his or her environment, the interaction developing between this subject and the way the individual gives expression to it, whether consciously or unconsciously. Two descriptions that demonstrate this reality serve as a departure point for the following discussion. The first is by Judah L. Jonathan who describes the relationship between his grandfather, the Jew who belonged in practice and consciousness to traditional pre-modern society, and the rural space where he lives:

Grandfather strolls frequently along the bank of the river. Did he know anything of the mighty birch, pine, and oak forests that encircled the town on all sides like a belt? What did he know of the great waters and streams that flowed in the recesses of the forest? He knew that in *gematria* (values of letters), ‘nature’ is equal to ‘God’. In the month of Nissan he would recite the blessing on the trees that began to blossom.²³

The second text is taken from memoirs of Shmaryahu Levin who studied in the traditional Jewish educational system, later in the Realgymnasium in Minsk and the universities of Koenigsburg and Berlin, and became an active and enthusiastic member of the Zionist movement:²⁴

Far beyond the meadows the forests began, but between them lay the wheat fields of the peasants . . . Jews and gentiles alike lived on terms of intimacy with the forest, their best friend. It provided them gratis with countless fruits and plants, with berries, mushrooms, and wild apples, wild pears, nuts of all kinds, and guelder-roses. In the things that grew in the soil Jew and gentile shared alike.²⁵

As one may note, both texts are rooted in the rural space. Neither of the two observers sees himself as detached from the immediate, actual reality, and both, even if unconsciously, observe ‘nature’ from the subjective cultural point of view that dictates

the ways man relates to the space around him as part of his world of values, as defined by William Cronon:

Nature is not nearly so natural as it seems. Instead, it is profoundly human construction . . . the way we describe and understand that world is so entangled with our own values and assumptions that the two can never be fully separated. What we mean when we use the word 'nature' says as much about ourselves as about the thing we label with the word.²⁶

The difference between the two lies in the role that the surrounding nature and landscape plays in the mind, both as reflecting the observer's world of values and as this mode of observation influences the shaping of identity. The grandfather's observation of rural space is entirely from a religious perspective. This space has no meaning of its own for the believing Jew but rather represents the immediate and absolute expression of God's presence in the world. And yet, the grandfather is not content with an amorphous 'nature' that emerges from the pages of the various types of religious canonical literature, that constitutes his cultural theological base; he rather relates to actual, immanent nature. However, this actual nature has a double meaning. On the one hand, it is perceived as a material, corporeal subject that 'belongs' to the world of the non-Jew, and as such, harbours danger for distracting the Jew both from the religious purpose of his life and from the ability to live a Jewish life in practice. On the other hand, nature is not only God's handiwork but also testimony to His direct involvement in the material world of man. For the grandfather, relating to nature in the religious as well as the material sphere attested to the special role of the Jew in the human social system. For him it symbolises the clear-cut lines of demarcation between himself and the 'other' and thus nature constitutes, at once, both real space and symbolic space.

In contrast, in the world picture of Shmaryahu Levin who clings to the rural space surrounding the town where he grew up, 'nature' is perceived first and foremost in its actual dimensions, to which has been added a romantic dimension rooted in the Zionist-national worldview.²⁷ For him, unlike for the grandfather, the surrounding space is both real space and imaginary space. One may conjecture that emphasising the ideal-romantic dimension also stems from the need to anchor the new Zionist-secular model of life in a religious context which is seen as being the existential basis of the local Jewish society. This is similar to the way a Jewish farmer in the agricultural colony of Kozlovichya in White Russia described it: 'The trill of birds in the forest and field are for us the melody of our songs and poems; this is our lot in life.'²⁸ This approach was given extensive expression in the memoir literature of those who grew up in the rural areas at that time.²⁹ To the same extent one can read these descriptions as an expression of the romantic worldview which prevailed in various circles of Imperial Russia in the late nineteenth century and which saw the village and its inhabitants as the source of the good and the pure, as one can see from the way they are depicted by Abraham Singer:

The slumber of the worker-peasant is sweet, when each one lies down in his place in peace, one in his home his castle, one on a pile of dry hay smelling fragrantly of the threshing floor, another who wishes his garden to be his place of repose, between the branches and delicate flowers which his own hand had planted under the verdant fruit tress . . . the peasant will not worry about tomorrow and will not yearn for thousands of things and imaginings . . . His entire concern is that God grant

him pure warmth on the earth and clear light in the heavens so that he may gather his grain on time and without disturbance. And towards evening he will thank God for His kindness. He is confident that the morrow will be a cloudless and clear day, and he will lay himself down to sleep, secure, even before night falls.³⁰

For the young Jewish men and women of the second half of the nineteenth and early twentieth century who underwent the cultural transformation in the spirit of the values of enlightenment, the open spaces served as a refuge from the economic and cultural crowding of the traditional Jewish community, as it was expressed in Wolf Kaplan's poem *The Land of Wonders*:

My eyes have not yet seen their fill, and before I can even speak, my leader took me outside and led me on the path of the vineyard through orchards. There in song men and women reap, boys and girls carry sheaves. Among the harvesters, I have seen many in my time; my ears have also heard the singing of men and women singers. But the experience of such delight, I have never felt and thus to tell of it, I know not how. The song and smell intoxicated me. The sighs of my heart I have wearied of containing.³¹

Notwithstanding, even if we read these texts with the reservations called for by the idyllic quality that cloaks them, this does not detract from the centrality of 'nature' in the world of these writers but at most colours them in brighter colours. In general, it may be said that the dialogue with 'nature' conducted by these two writers, each one in his own way, attests to their view of themselves as either 'men of nature' or 'men of the village'. The surrounding space fulfils a focal role in shaping their identity, even if it is a limited rural identity that is subordinated to a significant religious and national perception of identity. The process by which both the grandfather and Levin shape their approach to the landscape is an excellent example of the theory of James Duncan and David Ley which emphasises the importance of the cultural perspective in any attempt to interpret the landscape.³²

However, as Esther Kingston-Mann and Willard Sunderland showed, the development of rural identity was generally accompanied by a dimension of localism in its primary, pre-national sense.³³ This dimension represents a sense of totality, viewing the land as a mother and as the source of life. Shmaryahu Levin describes the attitude of the countrymen in his village in relation to possession of the land but also the return to the land at the end of the life cycle:

The fat, rich fields were soft to the foot, breathing an odour of fruitfulness and sustenance. That odor interpreted the Russian phrase *Matiushka Zemlya* – Mother Earth, a mother giving suck from bountiful breasts to countless children. When the peasants spoke of *Matiushka Zemlya* their eyes, usually dull and expressionless, were flooded with love, like the eyes of children who see their mother at a distance.³⁴

Yet, internalising this aspect depends on the way the local, immediate earth is perceived in the consciousness of the rural individual. In contrast to the surrounding society, the primary historical, cultural, and experiential roots of the Jews were not in that rural space. Even if, over the course of years of living in this rural environment, their consciousness was imprinted by elements of local experience, they did not develop a heritage-based place identity, and these elements never triumphed over the social otherness that was a

permanent component of their consciousness. This sense shaped the attitude they had towards their environment to a considerable degree. Nature, in its religious sense, as seen by the grandfather, as well as in its romantic sense, as fixed in the consciousness of Levin, was not an integral and inseparable part of the immediate, local space. Although they 'complemented the ethnographic landscape' and even 'were an integral part of the peasant community', as Hirsz Abramowicz depicted,³⁵ this integration was limited mainly to the economic sphere. Their cultural essence was not derived from the immanent connection to the source from whence they sprang, namely, the land, but rather from its symbolic meaning for the observer. Since they were members of a sub-community that was seen by the majority group as 'other', they never integrated into the social fabric of the local life,³⁶ and never disconnected themselves from the actual or symbolic experience of the wandering Jew, moving from place to place, from one piece of land to the other. This ambivalence was expressed:

When they come to that part of the daily prayers which speaks of God as the One 'that causeth the wind to blow and the rain to fall', and later, to the passage which implores the All-Merciful to send down His blessing on the land and drench it in 'dew and rain'. At this very moment, a second, unuttered prayer rises in their hearts, a silent contradiction: and they beseech God for snow and frost. Two parallel prayers, antagonistic and stubborn; the one born of the daily struggle for bread, the other born of thousands of years ago in a land of hot suns. Which prayer, I often wondered, came up before the throne of Graces?³⁷

Similarly, the term 'Mother Earth' took on their minds a unique significance, analogous to the image of the Jewish mother who wanders eternally until she returns with her children in the messianic era to that piece of land where her primordial, autochthonic reality, and theirs, was formed.

Peasant identity

The second concept, 'peasant identity', is seemingly a neutral term that marks the identity of a person living in rural space and engaged in agriculture. Yet in both Jewish popular and public discourse in the period being discussed, and the intellectual and educational discourse that was prevalent in nineteenth-century Imperial Russia, cultural meanings were also attributed to this concept. It was regarded as indicating a simple, coarse identity, passive and primitive, lacking all intellectual and spiritual dimensions and rooted in archaic cultural traditions. The peasant identity was equated with the lowest cultural level, such as is sometimes described by the term 'rustic', and as Emilio Willems suggested, 'Peasants are often said to have much in common with primitives'.³⁸ A contemporary observer claimed that the peasants 'had not the slightest notion of the progress made by the sciences, and believed that the earth rested on three whales swimming on the ocean'.³⁹

Behind this approach was the sense of intellectual superiority that characterised the middle class and the socio-economic and intellectual elite in urban society, as well as the sense of socio-cultural superiority that was deeply engrained in the consciousness of the families of the Russian, Polish, Lithuanian and Ukrainian nobility. This image was

bolstered by the fact that most of the peasants in the Russian Empire at the beginning of the 1860s still lived in a state of serfdom.⁴⁰ Therefore the Russian, Polish, Lithuanian, and Ukrainian peasant was seen by his urban neighbours as a primitive creature, and as Ben Eklof, a scholar of the Russian rural educational system, describes him, as ‘preliterate, pre-logical, pre-modern, incapable not only of comprehending abstract ideas but even of perceiving his own best interests’.⁴¹

The extent to which this perception prevailed among the Jewish urban population in this region can be viewed in Hirsch Lipschitz’s words:

The peasant, because of his servitude and baseness, was like a wild donkey from birth. In the brutishness of his feeling and the baseness of his spirit, he was like a beast. Not only did he not know how to read and write, but his mind was incapable of counting and calculating. Because he was despised and the appearance of his clothes and shoes pitiful, so was he like one deprived of human rights in the eyes of many . . . despised and low were the peasants, wretched, oppressed, and tormented. The bread of men they did not eat and the lives of men they did not live; they are like the beasts of the field.⁴²

This view was not the exclusive province of Lipschitz. Jewish-Zionist poet Zalman Shneur of the town of Shklov in north eastern White Russia described the local peasants in a similar way, when he sketched the image of Mikhalke the shepherd as ‘a savage from before the Flood, hairy and teeming’.⁴³ In the collective memory, as well as in contemporary Eastern European Jewish prose and poetry, another dimension was added to this image, that of ignorance and illiteracy. In the Lithuanian context that had a special meaning. The urban non-Jewish population in the northwestern provinces of the Russian Empire was mainly Polish, Russian, and German, groups whose level of education was relatively high. In the rural area there lived primarily the poor Lithuanian and Belorussian population where illiteracy was relatively low, in part because of the deliberate policy of the Russian government, stemming from the desire to suppress any possible stirring of a local national movement. This policy was reflected, for example, in removing all the children of Lithuanian peasants from the secondary schools in 1824, as well as the prohibition of printing books and newspapers in Latin letters in the second half of the century.⁴⁴

Thus, the non-Jewish urban population had a similar image of the rural population, as the Lithuanian peasant is described in the writings of Juozas Tumas-Vaižgantas, one of the most famous writers of Lithuania who himself was born and raised in a rural area.⁴⁵ The character of the Lithuanian peasant was seen not in a romantic perspective as a kind of ‘noble savage’, but rather as an inferior primitive creature who has more than in common with animals than with the society of human beings. This image resulted, among other reasons, from the fact that peasant culture had been the object of upper-class contempt in Russia since the early eighteenth century, as described by Wendy Salmond.⁴⁶ This identity was nonetheless perceived by the Jewish peasant as real and as a total antithesis to both the general human-cultural identity and the concept of ‘Jewish identity’. Therefore, despite the close economic links between these two groups, the cultural gap, whether real or imagined, was the basis for perceiving the non-Jewish peasant as the ‘complete other’ in the eyes of his Jewish neighbour.

Paradoxically, the Jewish farmers who worked and lived in the rural areas and farms also suffered from a certain 'peasant' image of this kind, even though they did not belong to any of the categories of peasantry.⁴⁷ In the prevalent social consciousness and in the contemporary Jewish intellectual discourse, the image of the Jewish peasant was used as the archetype of a shallow cultural life, a place dominated by small-mindedness and lack of vision, sentimentalism and naiveté, as Joseph Klausner defined it.⁴⁸ In the eyes of the Jewish observer who lived in the big city, their external appearance was corroboration for this image. They were 'other Jews, different . . . large, tall, and robust; working men who also wore everyday clothes on the Sabbath – short pants with feet shod in high boots'.⁴⁹ However, the ultimate proof of their 'peasantry' was the fact that 'their level of culture was very low' as Ber Brutskus wrote, suggesting that they 'themselves are in the habit of saying that "their heads are worse than the heads of the town Jews". In commerce they are not geniuses . . . their gait is heavy and their language poor. Peasants.'⁵⁰ This peasant identity was also expressed in their talk which generally did not deviate from:

Conversation about the blessed harvest, the prices of milk . . . the noblemen, their hunting, their love affairs, their debts, the growing number of edicts that the Czar issued and about the 'Starosta' [elders of the village] and their clerks who suck the blood of the Jews like leeches'.⁵¹

This perception was given expression in the Eastern European intra-Jewish discourse:

There was a totally negative attitude toward these peasants by the Jewish public in the surrounding towns. They looked at them as wayward sons who had left the lifestyle of the Jews of the diaspora, imitating the acts of the gentiles in working the land, and by doing so they move farther away from the Torah and its precepts and eventually they will be assimilated among the gentiles. They treated them as inferiors, as being of lesser value.⁵²

Thus, going out to 'the other place', to the rural space and the profession of agriculture, was perceived by the urban Jewish society as a one-way process with the potential for an uncontrolled cultural transformation that could lead to a total loss of the traditional identity that was viewed as essential for the preservation of the unique identity of the religious-ethnic minority that was waging a daily struggle for survival. Behind this 'peasant' image, as it was constructed by urban Jewish society, one can see the dominance, albeit unwitting, of the cultural perception of the peasant 'subject'. This is a typical example of what is known in anthropological discourse as the 'peasantry-city dichotomy',⁵³ while ignoring the important economic function that the peasant fulfils and which constitutes the basis for the survival of the society at large. Yet, as stated, agriculture as an occupation was not seen in these circles as accepted and desirable in reasonable circumstances but at most as a constraint that had to be accepted when conditions required it. In the spirit of the anthropological approach, one may assume that these people were members of a community typified by distinctive cultural practices, even though some of them were not directly engaged in agriculture.⁵⁴ However, in truth, the acceptance of this reality did not lead to a fundamental change in the image of the Jewish peasant in the eyes of the urban observer. To phrase it differently, although this was a sizeable group, the Jewish peasants were categorised as the ultimate 'other', that is, those who had crossed the geographical, and primarily cultural, lines of demarcation laid out

by Jewish urban society which defined itself as a 'holy community'.⁵⁵ Crossing these lines was not seen as an act of moving out of a traditional and sacred space to a neutral ground, where a cultural vacuum exists that allows the shaping of an alternative normative system, secondary to that accepted at the social centre and essentially based on its values. Instead it was seen as a process of no-return which signified a denial of the formative ethos of society. As happened in the late nineteenth century with the spread of trends towards secularisation in Jewish Eastern European society, here, too, one should not regard the attitude of the urban centre towards the peasant periphery as an attempt to redefine the Jewish religious and social hierarchy with the urban community at the top, under which was peasant society, because the hierarchical positioning also gives legitimacy to those lower down in the system. Thus, although, unlike their non-Jewish farmer counterparts, they were not formally considered inferiors with all the accompanying implications,⁵⁶ culturally they were defined, placed and treated in the same way by the Jewish urban society.

Rural Jews were conscious, even if only intuitively, of the negative meaning of the peasant identity which was imagined and attributed to them. Their main fear was that due to their intensive involvement in agriculture, this image might materialise and the occupational component would become central to their religious and cultural identity, as they adopted for themselves, even unconsciously, the peasant identity to become rustics.⁵⁷ This fear sprang primarily from the totality of the occupation of farming, as described by Abraham Aviel:

The daily life of the Jewish farmer was essentially no different from that of the other farmers. The life of a farmer who lives off the land is shaped by the livestock he breeds and determined by the seasons of the year. In early spring, with the melting of the snow, they would lead the cattle and the sheep to the pasture . . . with the loosening of the topmost layers of the soil from its frozen state, the ploughing and the sowing began . . . towards the end of the summer, when the corn stood golden in its fields, the whole family would be recruited for the harvesting . . . after the harvest it was time to collect the potato crop . . . as soon as the potato crop was collected, it was time to pick the fruits.⁵⁸

Likewise, many Jews were engaged in animal husbandry, particularly breeding cows, which required complete daily devotion to this occupation. Similarly, Jews who were engaged in cultivating fruit had to remain near their orchards during the entire summer season to prevent theft of their fruit.⁵⁹ Jewish fishermen who fished in the many lakes scattered throughout Lithuania stayed in the lake region, or on the water, for most hours of the night and morning.⁶⁰ Thus, since the rest of the day was spent sleeping, they were hardly involved in the local social and cultural Jewish life. In general, the total dominance of the occupational aspect of a person's life, which was the basis of the peasant existence, was seen as determining individual identity. However, the fear of adopting the peasant identity also stemmed from the fact that farming brought together Jews and their neighbours, who lived side by side in the rural space. This emerges from an account by Eliezer E. Friedman of his childhood years in the village of Vajguva in central Lithuania: 'In the field we learned how to plow, to dig up the soil, and to plant. We went far from the town to watch them harvesting the hay. We helped them'.⁶¹

These rural Jews made an effort, both conscious and unconscious, to avoid sliding down the slippery slope that leads from a rural identity, or a professional farmer identity, to what they perceived as a peasant identity. On the unconscious level, this was reflected in the fact that they did not adopt local rituals and agricultural ceremonies 'through which peasants hoped to ensure the fertility of the soil, ward off the risk of crop failure, and guarantee a bountiful harvest by appealing to supernatural forces'.⁶² This natural need, which is an integral part of the life of any farmer, was not requited by the formation of alternative Jewish agricultural rituals and ceremonies, but rather by the conventional Jewish prayers and rituals. On the conscious level, literacy, study, and acquiring knowledge were perceived as the demarcating line between the Jewish farmer and his neighbour,⁶³ as Abraham Aviel describes:

During the weekdays, the daily routine of the Jewish farmer resembled that of the Polish farmer in the main. The notable difference was in the education of the children. Every Jewish child attended school or *heder*,⁶⁴ more or less. This was not the case of the Polish neighbors. I recall my mother saying to us: 'Children, if you don't study, you'll be swine-herds'.⁶⁵

The central function of this precautionary process was supposed to be fulfilled by the educational system, and specifically the local *heder*, and such an institution did indeed operate in all Jewish rural and farming communities. And yet, like Willems' understanding with regard to the cultural perspective of the peasant community in Neyl, here too 'literacy per se did not necessarily change the peasant way of life'.⁶⁶ Indeed, the very fact of spending time in the *heder* was no guarantee that the pupil had actually formed a cultural-religious identity that could serve as a barrier against the threatening cultural slide downward. This situation was not the result of the limited intellectual capacity or narrow cultural perspective of most of the children but rather primarily due to the fact that most of the rural Jewish teachers were young men who had never succeeded at any profession and found in teaching a vocational and economic refuge, but were lacking any kind of didactic abilities.⁶⁷

For most of the local children, the *heder*, like the traditional teacher, represented the conservative ethos of traditional society as well as the world of Jewish urban society which was delineated in the classical Jewish cultural space and was reflected, among others, in its decadent occupational profile. As a result the academic fruits of this institution were rather few, and for most of its graduates canonical Jewish literature remained a closed book. Moreover, this 'book' could hardly compete with the other 'book', namely, 'the book of nature' which was brimming with colours, fragrances, and temptations and therefore proved superior in the battle for the souls of local Jewish youth. Thus, with regard to formulating a meaningful religious-cultural identity, one cannot point out any remarkable success by the *heder*. Despite this, and perhaps because of it, many of the rural area Jews attributed supreme importance to the very presence of the written book in the public space in general, and particularly to the place in which it was located, the study hall, and to the characters who operated in these worlds, the local rabbi and his students. The activity that transpired in the space between the text, the place, and the characters is what is seen to be drawing the boundary line between the different

identities previously mentioned, as described by Jewish farmers from Shchedrin in White Russia:

Our holy scriptures were also not abandoned by us, and among our company are people who study these Scriptures and hand down the teachings of Moses to us and to our children . . . We are Jews and we remember the saying of King Solomon the wise 'For everything there is a time', a time to work the soil, a time to pray, and a time to study the Holy Scriptures.⁶⁸

Nonetheless, in most cases these scriptures and the study house had no real meaning for these Jewish farmers, except in the utopian sense. Rural Jews, and certainly the farmers, found it hard to make the time to study an actual text or to sit in the study house. And even if they did find the time, most of the commonly available texts were not comprehensible to them. The Holy Scriptures and the study house were part of their world, even if they themselves were hardly present in the study house. In effect this religious scholarly world was more symbolic than an actual reality. Thus, crossing the common professional lines prevalent in the Jewish religious and cultural ethos, while adopting the conventional occupational elements characteristic of the majority society, did not weaken the perception of a unique ethnic identity among these Jewish farmers.⁶⁹ And this perception proved itself also when put to the test.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, secularisation in Eastern European Jewish society became a significant and widespread component of urban Jewish identity, specifically in the social circles where literacy was an established principle of religious-cultural life.⁷⁰ The Jewish farmers however, for whom the canonical religious literature was virtually a closed book, did not develop a distinctive model of traditional Jewish rural culture, but instead made an effort to preserve the traditional religious-cultural model of identity together with all of its ritual manifestations.⁷¹ However, it would seem that one must differentiate between the practical-ritual expression of religious-cultural identity with the external image derived from it, and the inner consciousness of the Jewish farmer.

Conclusion

As a rule it might be said that in order to preserve identity and ethnic singularity, and to create a clear line of demarcation between professional identity as farmers and what was perceived to be peasant cultural identity, the rural Jews employed a system of symbols that was not conditional upon direct access to the canonical sources, but rather in its own way preserved a sense of being different from the surrounding society that stemmed from the consciousness of chosenness. Indeed, even if they unconsciously adopted elements of peasant identity, and even when they lived in an environment where many of the inhabitants had a peasant identity, the policing force of the group's ethnic-collective sense of identity which they saw as their ultimate frame of reference, separated them from the possibility of allowing the peasant identity to overpower their own character and cultural world. It seems that we are looking at a classic case of a culturally articulated community set in a subordinate structural position relative to outside social actors.⁷² The East European rural Jew tenaciously refused to submit to the process where, to

borrow Frederick J. Turner's words, the surrounding reality 'strips off the garments of civilisation and arrays him in the hunting shirt and the moccasin'.⁷³

Notes

1. Isaac Ber Levinsohn, *Teudah be-yisrael* (Wilno and Grodno, 1828). On him see Stefan Schreiner, 'Aufklärung als Re-Hebraisierung: Anmerkungen zu Isaak Ber Lewinsohns Haskala-Programm', *Studia Judaica*, 5:1 (2002), 69–83
2. *Teudah be-yisrael*, p. 171
3. Isaac Ber Levinsohn, *Beit Yehudah* (Wilno, 1839), p. 153.
4. See, for instance, С. А. Бершадский, *Литовские евреи, история их юридического и общественного положения в Литве от Витовта до Люблинской уни, 1388–1569 г* (С.-Петербург, 1883), pp. 173–239; Michael Toch, *Peasants and Jews in Medieval Germany: Studies in Cultural, Social, and Economic History* (Aldershot, 2003).
5. Jonathan Dekel-Chen and Israel Bartal, 'Jewish Agrarianization', *Jewish History*, 21 (2007), 239.
6. By the term 'farmers' I basically refer to peasant cultivators.
7. Marcin Wodzinski, 'Clerks, Jews and Farmers: Projects of Jewish Agricultural Settlement in Poland', *Jewish History*, 21 (2007), 279–303; Salomon Salit, *Kolonja Izaaka* (Warszawa, 1934); David Biale, 'Those who Sow in Tears Shall Reap with Joy: Agriculture and Jewish Culture in Interwar Poland', *Tikkun*, 16 (2001), 53–9; Slawomir Tokarski, *Ethnic Conflict and Economic Development: Jews in Galician Agriculture 1868–1914* (Warszawa, 2003).
8. P. S. Borowoj, 'Die jüdischen Kolonien nach der zweiten Aussiedelung aus Weissruthenien', *Zeitschrift für Jüdische Geschichte, Demographie und Statistik, Literatur, Sprachforschung und Ethnographie*, 2–3 (1928), 111–38.
9. Jacob Lestschinsky, *Hatfutsa hayehudit* (Jerusalem 1960), p. 118.
10. Ber Brutskus, 'Moshvotenu be-Russia vehitnahalutenu beretz Israel', *Ha'adamah*, 1 (1920), 457.
11. Isaac M. Rubinow, 'Economic Condition of the Jews in Russia', *Bulletin of the Bureau of Labor*, 72 (1907), 506.
12. Levinsohn, *Beit Yehudah*, p. 180.
13. On this see David Meyers, *Re-Inventing the Jewish Past: European Jewish Intellectuals and the Zionist Return to History* (New York, 1982); Evyatar Friesel, 'The "Return of the Jews to History": Considerations about an Ideological Concept', in Lauren B. Strauss and Michael Brenner, eds, *Mediating Modernity: Challenges and Trends in the Jewish Encounter with the Modern World. Essays in Honor of Michael A. Meyer* (Detroit, 2008), pp. 133–42.
14. Haim Yashinovskiy, 'Bobruisk', *Hakarmel*, 2 (1862), 296.
15. On this organisation see Eli Bar-Chen, 'Prototyp jüdischer Solidarität: die Alliance Israélite Universelle', *Jahrbuch des Simon-Dubnow-Instituts*, 1 (2002), 277–96.
16. Alexander Zederbaum, 'Oved admato yisba lachem', *Hamelitz*, 21 (1878), 405–11.
17. Isaac Kaminer, 'Al dvar avodat ha'adamah leyehudei Russia', *Hakol* 4 (1879), 105.
18. Isaac Abrabanel, *Sefer Mashmia Yeshua* (Offenbach, 1777), p. 33; Zadok Hakohen, *Sefer Pri Tzadik: Kdushat Shabat* (Lublin, 1902), p. 45.
19. On him see David C. Jacobson, 'Fiction and History in the Writings of Micha Yosef Berdyczewski', *Prooftexts*, 3:2 (1983), 205–10
20. Micha Joseph Berdichevsky, *Sipurim* (Tel-Aviv, 1960), p. 5.
21. See, for instance, Abraham Ben-Shalom, *Deep Furrows: Pioneer Life in the Collective Palestine* (New York, 1937).
22. Marcus J. Kurtz, 'Understanding Peasant Revolution: From Concept to Theory and Case', *Theory and Society*, 29 (2000), 94; David Moon, *The Russian Peasantry 1600–1930: The World the Peasants Made* (London and New York, 1999), p. 13.
23. Judah L. Jonathan, *Nof vageza* (Tel-Aviv, 1956), p. 32.

24. On him see Shimon A. Shur, 'Shmaryahu Levin y la victoria de la lengua hebrea', *Kivunim* (1997), 95–135.
25. Shmaryahu Levin, *Childhood in Exile* (New York, 1929), pp. 23–33.
26. William Cronon, *Uncommon Ground: Toward Reinventing Nature* (New York, 1995), p. 25.
27. On the role ideology plays in shaping the representations of reality see Roz Ivanic, *Writing and Identity* (Amsterdam, 1998), p. 17.
28. Yashinovskiy, 'Bobruisk', 296.
29. See, for instance, Meir Elazari-Volcani, *Baheder* (Tel-Aviv, 1934).
30. Abraham Singer, 'Havat Reshaim', *Kneset Israel*, 2 (1887), p. 139.
31. *Ibid*, p. 28.
32. James Duncan and David Ley, *Place / Culture / Representation* (London, 1993), p. 12.
33. Esther Kingston-Mann, 'Breaking the Silence: An Introduction', in Esther Kingston-Mann and Timothy Mixer, eds, *Peasant Economy, Culture, and Politics of European Russia, 1800–1921* (Princeton, 1991), pp. 15–16.
34. Levin, *Childhood in Exile*, p. 24.
35. Hirsz Abramowicz, *Profiles of a Lost World: Memoirs of East European Jewish Life before World War II* (Detroit, 1999), p. 42.
36. See Stephen Fischer-Galati, 'Jew and Peasant in Interwar Romania', *Nationalities Papers*, 16 (1988), 201–8; William O. McCagg, 'Jews and Peasants in Interwar Hungary', *Nationalities Papers*, 15 (1987), 90–105.
37. Levin, *Childhood in Exile*, p. 25.
38. Emilio Willems, 'Peasantry and City: Cultural Persistence and Change in Historical Perspective, a European Case', *American Anthropologist*, 72 (1970), 528.
39. Sergey Stepanyak-Kravchinsky, *The Russian Peasantry: Their Agrarian Condition, Social Life and Religion* (New York, 1888), p. 72.
40. Moon, *Russian Peasantry*, pp. 66–117; Sawa D. Purlevskii, *A Life under Russian Serfdom* (Budapest and New York, 2005).
41. Ben Eklof, *Russian Peasant Schools: Officialdom, Village Culture and Popular Pedagogy, 1861–1914* (Los Angeles and London, 1986), p. 1. See also Paul Freedman, *Images of the Medieval Peasant* (Stanford, 1999), pp. 134–43. On the negative image of the Polish peasant immigrant in late nineteenth-century New England see Stanislaus A. Blejvas, 'Puritans and Poles: The New England Literary Image of the Polish Peasant Immigrant', *Polish American Studies*, 42 (1985), 46–88.
42. Zvi H. Lipschitz, *Midor ledor* (Warsaw, 1901), pp. 29–30; Olga Semyonova Tian-Shanskaia, *Village Life in Late Tsarist Russia* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1993), pp. 44–5.
43. Zalman Shneur, *Ktavim*, vol. II (Tel-Aviv, 1960), p. 233.
44. Miroslav Hroch, *Social Preconditions of National Revival in Europe: A Comparative Analysis of the Social Composition of Patriotic Groups among the Smaller European Nations* (Cambridge, 1985), p. 90; Theodor R. Weeks, 'Russification and the Lithuanians, 1863–1905', *Slavic Review*, 60 (2001), 96–114.
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46. Wendy Salmond, 'A Matter of Give and Take: Peasant Crafts and their Revival in Late Imperial Russia', *Design Issues*, 13 (1997), 6.
47. Moon, *Russian Peasantry*, pp. 97–101.
48. Joseph Klausner, *Z. Shneur* (Tel-Aviv, 1947), p. 6.
49. Eliezer Yerushalmi, *Miya'arot hatsafon ad horshot hakarmel* (Tel-Aviv, 1962), p. 44.
50. Brutskus, 'Moshvotinu be-Russia', p. 459.
51. Yerushalmi, *Miya'arot hatsafon*, p. 45.
52. Haim Z. Sinai, 'Hamoshava Sinaiskaja', *Heavar* 14 (1967), 231.
53. Willems, 'Peasantry and City', p. 528.
54. Kurtz, 'Understanding Peasant Revolution', 94, 98–9.

55. Ivan G. Marcus, 'History, Story and Collective Memory: Narrativity in Early Ashkenazic Culture', *Prooftexts*, 10 (1990), 365–88.
56. Jerome Blum, *Lord and Peasants in Russia from the Ninth to the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton, 1961), p. 461.
57. See Barbara Ching and Gerald W. Creed, 'Recognizing Rusticity: Identity and the Power of Place', in Barbara Ching and Gerald W. Creed, eds, *Knowing your Place: Rural Identity and Cultural Hierarchy* (London and New York, 1997), p. 6.
58. Abraham Aviel, *A Village Named Dowgalishok* (London and Portland, 2006), pp. 5–6.
59. Abramowicz, *Profiles of a Lost World*, pp. 48–9.
60. Arie Aharoni, *Ben bli bayit* (Givat Brener, 1991), pp. 15–25.
61. Eliezer E. Friedman, *Sefer Hazichronot* (Tel-Aviv, 1926), p. 45.
62. Moon, *Russian Peasantry*, pp. 123–4.
63. Uri D. Herscher, *Jewish Agricultural Utopias in America, 1880–1910* (Detroit, 1981), p. 82.
64. A private Jewish elementary school, providing basic studies of Jewish canonic texts.
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66. Willems, 'Peasantry and City', p. 529.
67. Mordechai Zalkin, *El heichal hahaskalah* (Tel-Aviv, 2008), pp. 40–47.
68. Yashinovskiy, 'Bobruisk'.
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70. On this see Shmuel Feiner, *The Origins of Jewish Secularization in Eighteenth-Century Europe* (Philadelphia, 2010).
71. Kazimier Dobrowolski, 'Peasant Traditional Culture', Teodor Shanin, ed., *Peasants and Peasant Societies* (Harmondsworth, 1971), pp. 277–98.
72. Kurtz, 'Understanding Peasant Revolution', 100.
73. Frederick J. Turner, *Rereading Frederick Jackson Turner: 'The Significance of the Frontier in American History' and Other Essays* (New Haven and London, 1994), p. 33.