

The RYS Daily 4/5/07 Public Problems I - Settling in EY

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### HIS PRACTICAL APPROACH TO ALL PUBLIC PROBLEMS

R. Israel was blessed with a healthy and developed political instinct. His approach to all problems was completely realistic. He examined every life situation minutely and took full account of all the angles. Hence communal leaders would converge from near and far to seek his advice on current problems and paid the closest heed to his advice.

It is worthwhile to place on record the report of an interesting encounter between him and one of the leaders of the Yishuv in Eretz Israel, A. L. Frumkin, so as to reveal how R. Israel really approached questions addressed to him. The meeting took place at the beginning of 5680 (c. Sept. 1880). The pogroms and the vicious anti-Jewish decrees in Russia had stimulated a mass migration from that country, and the idea of settling in Eretz Israel had begun to take hold. At the same time a society had been formed in Jerusalem, comprised of some fifty families, with the aim of establishing an agricultural colony. R. Frumkin had been dispatched as an emissary to Western Europe to enlist financial backing for the project. En route, he stopped in Koenigsberg. Hearing that R. Israel was there, he came to see and consult with him. R. Frumkin's account of the conversation runs as follows :

"The next day, I arrived in the city of Koenigsberg. There it became known to me that the authentic Gaon, Rabbi of all Israel, R. Israel Salanter... was staying with R. Jacob Krushkal. I accordingly went to pay my respects to his holy presence, and to seek sacred counsel concerning the journey I had undertaken. Before revealing my inner thoughts to him, however, I asked for practical advice in respect of those who had already made up their minds to settle abroad and would ask us whether they should choose America or the Holy Land.

"How astonished was I to see how this question seized hold of the Gaon's entire thinking, how with his breadth of comprehension and reflection, he delved into the depth and breadth of all aspects of the problem, and was like a man possessed. I set my heart to test all his thought and feeling processes which this question had aroused in the inner recesses of his heart, and it was most surprising and astounding in my eyes. His brow became wrinkled and relaxed time and again, and the light of his face changed from minute to minute, as he paced the room with powerful steps and reflected profoundly with his mighty spirit on what to answer. After a protracted silence, he gave his reply: 'Let them go to America!'

"I countered: 'What does the Master believe? Will they remain faithful to their holy religion over there?' 'It is difficult to believe that,' he sighed: 'And those who wander to our Holy Land, what does the Master believe of them?' 'It is very probable that they and their posterity will remain faithful Jews.' 'If so', I said, 'Why does the Master say that they should choose to go to America?' 'My dearest friend,' he answered me bitterly, 'How can we mislead these wanderers with advice that is not to their benefit? The very day of their arrival they will lack bread and water to sustain themselves, since there is nowhere

to earn a penny there. The Moslem inhabitants and the fellahin won't buy anything from them. Not so in America. Although, there too, one cannot earn a living respectably, nevertheless they will be able to still their hunger in the grocery store the very first day they come there. As for observing the Jewish religion, this will depend upon their will power. There, too, it is possible for them to remain Jews faithful to their G-d and King. Poverty, may G-d for-fend, is not so. It perforce confounds one's belief in G-d. If these wanderers will move about like shadows in the Holy Land for a month or two and spend all their money, they will finally be forced to seek their sustenance wherever they can find it.'

"But if the leaders and wealthy Jews will set their mind to this great matter,' I asked, 'to establish these immigrants in special colonies and provide them with their needs, until G-d remembers them and they sustain themselves and their families from the fruits of their own labors, would our Master still recommend America?'

"G-d forbid! If the matter will be set on a firm and enduring footing, then everyone will have to make an honest assessment of his possessions and capabilities. If he can establish himself, then undoubtedly it would be a mitzvah to flee from these places even to forests and deserts, so as to observe the Torah of our G-d.'

"Thereupon, I disclosed my thoughts and my mission to awaken and rouse the hearts of the rabbis and pious of Germany to induce wealthy donors to provide the means for at least one colony of fifty Jewish families. Whereupon, he blessed me: 'May G-d be with you and establish the deeds of your hands.' And so I departed from him in peace." [1]

From R. Israel's delving into this problem, it is possible to see how sensitive he was to human suffering and poverty. With all his love for the Holy Land and his anxiety for Jewish spiritual welfare, he would not ignore the economic factor in human life. [2] He would never allow idealistic aspirations to blind his eyes. Worrying about the material welfare of the emigrants, he reached the seemingly strange conclusion that America was to be preferred to Eretz Israel as their destination, with all the negative aspects entailed in such a choice, because in America one could earn one's keep. He made his approval of settlement in Eretz Israel conditional upon the assurance of a livelihood for the immigrants.

[1.] R. Frumkin's letter dated Sivan 10, 5642 (May 28, 1882) is printed in A. Druianov, Historical Documents pertaining to the Chibbat Zion Movement and the Jewish Settlement in Eretz Israel (Hebrew), III, p. 410. As a result of R. Israel's encouragement, R. Jacob Chvas (mentioned above), who would never take any step without R. Israel's approval, joined A. L. Frumkin in approaching the philanthropist, Ovadiah Lachmann known to us as the provider of the financial backing for the Kolelim (Chap. 14). The last-named contributed 10,000 marks towards the founding of the colony, and the income it produced was to be used to maintain Torah students. R. Ezriel Hildesheimer and Dr. Lehmann also joined the campaign. As a result a sizeable tract of land was purchased in Petach Tikvah. For a considerable time, it was managed by R. Frumkin, and this is how Petach Tikvah began. R. Eliezer Jacob visited Eretz Israel several times on behalf of the

project. (For details, see The Fiftieth Anniversary of Petach Tikvah [Hebrew] and the introduction to Frumkin's Toledot Chachme Yerushalayim ["History of the Sages of Jerusalem"]).

[2.] Cf. his Musar doctrine, below Chap. 23, according to which one is not permitted, in matters affecting someone else, to advise asceticism or trust in G—d, but must first of all attend to that person's material needs.