# The Myth of No Return: Jewish Return Migration to Eastern Europe, 1881-1914

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REPRINTED FROM
AMERICAN JEWISH HISTORY
DECEMBER, 1981
VOLUME LXXI, NUMBER 2

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No myth stands higher in the pantheon of received American Jewish historical wisdom than the myth of no return:

> The difference between the Jewish and the non-Jewish immigrants can be defined in the following general way; whereas the others, in the main, sought to improve their lot, the Jews frequently looked simply for a refuge. . . . Others could, if they so chose, go back to their old countries; for Jews there was generally no way back. Jews came here to stay. When they left their old countries, they burned all their bridges behind them. . . .[1]

In making this assertion, C. Bezalel Sherman merely echoed conclusions reached by a distinguished coterie of earlier scholars. Samuel Joseph, whose *Jewish Immigration to the United States from 1881–1910* remains a basic work, asserted that "Jewish immigration exhibits a quality of permanence and stability to so great a degree as to render this fact one of its distinguishing characteristics." Demographer Liebmann Hersch found that "the rate of repatriation (emigrants per 100 immigrants) is much lower for Jews than for any other people." Jacob Lestschinsky boldly declared that "Jewish immigrants arrived everywhere with the intent to settle permanently."[2]

Statistics seemingly support these sweeping conclusions. As Lestschinsky demonstrated, from 1908 to 1925, 1,018,878 Jews immigrated into the United States while a mere 52,585 departed, a return emigration rate of barely 5.2%. By contrast, the return migration rate of Italians in this period was 55.8%, and even that of the Germans was 15.3%.[3] More significant data on return migration comes from figures confined to the years before World War One, since later statistics were skewed by wartime conditions and subsequent restrictions.

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1 C. Bezalel Sherman, *The Jew Within American Society* (Detroit: 1961), pp. 55–60.

2 Samuel Joseph, *Jewish Immigration to the United States from 1881–1910* (New York: 1914), p. 139; Liebmann Hersch, "International Migration of the Jews," in Walter F. Willcox, ed., *International Migrations* (New York: 1931), vol. II, p. 478; Jacob Lestschinsky, "Jewish Migrations, 1840–1956," in Louis Finkelstein, ed., *The Jews* (New York: 1960), vol. II, p. 1565. See also Uri D. Herscher and Stanley F. Chyet, *A Socialist Perspective on Jews, America and Immigration* (Cincinnati: 1980), p. 52; Salo W. Baron, *Steeled By Adversity* (Philadelphia: 1971), p. 280; and Peter I. Rose, "Introduction," in Rose, ed., *The Ghetto and Beyond* (New York: 1969), p. 7.

3 Lestschinsky, "Jewish Migrations," p. 1565. Kristian Hvidt, *Flight to America* (New York: 1975), p. 181 suggests that United States figures considerably underestimate the extent of return migration.

Departure of Emigrants, 1908–1914*
(fiscal years ending June 30, absolute figures in thousands)

| | Non-Jewish | Jewish by Origin | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Total | Tsarist Russia | Austria-Hungary | Romania | Other |
| Departures | 1,947 | 46.8 | 28.1 | 11.3 | 0.7 | 6.7 |
| % Distribution | | 100.0 | 60.0 | 24.2 | 1.5 | 14.3 |
| Admissions (immigration) | 6,053 | 656.5 | 471.4 | 96.1 | 15.7 | 73.3 |
| Ratio of departures to admissions (%) | 32.2 | 7.1 | 6.0 | 11.8 | 4.5 | 9.1 |

* *Source:* Simon Kuznets, "Immigration of Russian Jews to the United States: Background and Structure," *Perspectives in American History*, IX (1975), p. 40.

While a slightly larger percentage of Jewish immigrants returned during this period, the rate is still remarkably low, both absolutely and comparatively. Revealingly, Jews overall were almost twice as likely to return to Austria-Hungary, where they were treated comparatively well, than to Russia, where they faced persecutions and privation. In 1912, a recession year, the return migration rate among Austro-Hungarian Jews hit 19.7% (10,757 immigrants; 2121 returnees). The comparable rate for Russian Jews was only 7.6% (58,389 immigrants; 448 returnees).[4]

Unfortunately, government statistics provide no direct information about Jewish immigrants who returned to Europe before 1908. Conclusions about Jewish departure rates are thus based entirely on later figures, the assumption being that earlier ones followed the same pattern.[5] This assumption has never been tested. In fact, it is completely groundless.

Before 1900, nobody seems to have commented on the lack of Jewish returnees; to the contrary, reports declared that the number of those returning was large. The *Jewish Messenger* in 1888 decried the existence of "hundreds of dispirited people who are as eager to

4 Figures calculated from Walter F. Willcox, *International Migrations* (New York: 1929), vol. I, pp. 464, 480. On this important and little appreciated difference between Russian and Austro-Hungarian Jews, see Joseph, *Jewish Immigration*, pp. 135–137; Peter Wiernik, *History of the Jews in America* (New York: 1972), p. 282; Judd L. Teller, *Strangers and Natives* (New York: 1968), pp. 5–10; and more generally, Johann Chmelar, "The Austrian Emigration, 1900–1914," *Perspectives in American History*, VII (1973), 275–378.

5 Simon Kuznets, "Immigration of Russian Jews to the United States: Background and Structure," in *Perspectives in American History*, 9 (1975), pp. 47–48 assumes that return migration in early years was less than in the post-1908 period. No evidence supports this view.

leave the country as a few years or months ago they were so hopeful in reaching it." The newspaper claimed that eight hundred Jews were demanding return, even if it meant their traveling back to Europe in cattle ships.[6] Annual reports of the United Hebrew Charities (U.H.C.) similarly stressed the immigrant desire to return. Dr. George M. Price, who reported on "the tremendous number of those returning to Russia" to readers of the Russian Jewish periodical *Voskhod*, calculated that 7,580 immigrants returned with the U.H.C.'s assistance just from 1882–1889.[7] As late as 1896, Julius Goldman, speaking as a trustee of the Baron de Hirsch Fund, reported to the Jewish Colonization Association in Paris that "Hundreds of these people have said and are continually saying that their condition is worse than it was in Russia, and it is the opinion of those who are acquainted with them that thousands would return to Russia if they had the means and dared to do so."[8]

Such impressionistic reports can, of course, often be misleading. With hundreds of thousands of Jews immigrating to America, evidence that a few hundred or even a few thousand of them returned would hardly blunt existing generalizations. Returning emigrants might have been more noisy than representative, and contemporaries could have been deceived. Both quantitative and qualitative evidence, however, militate against this conclusion.

One indicator of return migration comes from census figures. While not specifically enumerating Jews, they did include tallies of foreign born Russians, of whom Jews comprised better than sixty percent.[9] Resulting figures can only be suggestive, particularly since the accuracy of the census count itself is questionable. But the vast difference between "expected population" (Russian-borns counted in the previous census, minus those who died, plus the decade's Russian immigrants, minus those who died), and the enumerated population as tallied by censustakers does require notice. In 1890, the ex-

6 *Jewish Messenger*, September 14, 1888, p. 4; September 21, 1888, p. 4.

7 George M. Price, "The Russian Jews in America," translated by Leo Shpall, *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society*, 48 (1958), 44–46; *Thirteenth Annual Report of the Board of Relief of the United Hebrew Charities of the City of New York* (New York: 1887), pp. 14–16, 31.

8 Julius Goldman to Jewish Colonization Association (October 6, 1896), Baron de Hirsch Fund Papers, American Jewish Historical Society.

9 On the use of "Russian-origin" census data for Jewish statistics, see Elias Tcherikower, ed., *The Early Jewish Labor Movement in the United States*, translated and revised by Aaron Antonovsky (New York: 1961), pp. 363–365; Kuznets, "Immigration of Russian Jews," p. 41; and Erich Rosenthal, "The Equivalence of United States Census Data for Persons of Russian Stock or Descent with American Jews: An Evaluation," *Demography*, 12 (May, 1975), 275–290.

pected Russian-born population, assuming a mortality rate of 19 per thousand since 1880, equalled 230,429 (29,487 surviving Russians from 1880 + 200,942 surviving immigrants, 1881–1890). Census takers counted 182,644 Russian-borns. The difference - 47,785 - yields a return migration rate of 22.4%. Naturally, American-born children of immigrants, not being foreigners, do not enter into this calculation. Using the same procedure for the next decade, this time assuming an annual mortality of 18 per thousand, yields a return migration rate of 26.46% (152,307 surviving Russians from 1890 + 467,753 surviving immigrants, 1891–1900 = an expected population of 620,060, some 130,693 Russians more than were actually counted).[10] Neither 22.4% nor 26.46% can be considered true Jewish return migration rates, owing to the large number of questionable variables employed, but both figures suggest that return migration before 1900 was much higher than generally assumed, likely in the range of 15–20%. Elias Tcherikower's independent estimate of up to 29% Jewish departures during the extraordinary economic crisis of 1882 lends credence to these figures, as does an estimate that East European Jewish return migration from England, 1895–1902, stood at least as high as 15.3%.[11]

More powerful evidence of Jewish return migration can be found in written sources from the early years of massive East European immigration. In 1882, the Hebrew language newspaper, *Hamagid* (Lyck, Prussia), noting a growing stream of departures, exclaimed "this is what American immigration has finally come to!" The *Boston Hebrew Observer* reported that some seventy-five Boston Jews rushed down to the Commonwealth Alms House in Tewksbury merely on the rumor that the city's Provident Association would pay their way home. A good many other immigrants, Bernard Horwich remembered, remained in America only long enough to save up and head back. Rabbi Moses Weinberger's estimate of the immigrant situation in the 1880's thus seems to have been accurate. Some Jews came to America "only to make money with the thought later of returning." Others, especially intellectuals and teachers, had "trouble finding steady work [and] after a few years shuffling about as if in a

10 I have borrowed some of my procedures here from Simon Kuznets and Ernest Rubin, *Immigration and the Foreign Born*, National Bureau of Economic Research Occasional Paper #46 (New York: 1954).

11 Elias Tcherikower, ed., *Geshikhte fun der yidisher arbeterbavegung in di Fareynikte Shtatn* (New York: 1943) vol. 1, p. 245. British figures calculated from *Report of the Royal Commission on Alien Immigration with Minutes of Evidence and Appendix* (London: 1903), appendix, tables 5, 81; see evidence #15325 and 15515 for the estimate that each case of repatriation involved an average of three people.

world of desolation . . . g[a]ve up and return[ed] shamefacedly to their homelands."[12]

Many immigrants, particularly in the 1880's, were aided in their efforts to return home. Charities provided one way tickets as an investment; those who departed would not become a burden on the community. While Secretary of the Hebrew Emigrant Aid Society Augustus A. Levey claimed that "In no instance is any adult returned, except [if] he has himself urgently requested it," and a United Hebrew Charities report insisted that "In no cases were [immigrants] urged to go," the choice offered probably was "return to Europe or fend for yourself." Leonard L. Cohen's description of how English Jewish charities treated immigrant mendicants likely applies to America as well:

> He tells us he cannot succeed without charity. He has been here, say, nine months. We say "if you cannot succeed here, and as you had nothing to bring you here, you had better go back." He rather demurs the first time, but the second time he agrees and he goes.[13]

Immigrant-run organizations like Philadelphia's Association for the Protection of Jewish Immigrants may have treated East Europeans more respectfully, but their aim was the same. They sought to help immigrants who could not support themselves return to where they thought they would be happier. A typical letter provided by the Philadelphia Association carefully set out why individuals wanted to go back and why they were found worthy of assistance.

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12 *Hamagid*, 26 (November 1, 1882), p. 341; *Boston Hebrew Observer*, November 23, 1883 quoted in Jacob Neusner, "The Impact of Immigration and Philanthropy Upon the Boston Jewish Community (1880–1914)," *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society*, 46 (1956), 73–74; Bernard Horwich, *My First Eighty Years* (Chicago: 1939), p. 126; Moses Weinberger, *Jews and Judaism in New York* (in Hebrew) (New York: 1887), pp. 1, 18. For other references, see Isaac M. Fein, *The Making of an American Jewish Community* (Philadelphia: 1971), p. 148; Israel Kasovich, *The Days of Our Years* (New York: 1929), pp. 179, 277–278; William M. Bolton, "William M. Bolton Looks Back: Extracts From An Oral History," in Barry Herman, ed., *Jews in New Haven* II (New Haven: 1979), p. 133; Marcus E. Ravage, *An American in the Making* (New York: 1971), p. 10; Myron Berman, ed., "My Recollections and Experiences of Richmond, Virginia, U.S.A., 1884–1892 by Joseph Joel," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, 87 (1980), 344, 356; *Report of the Commission of Immigration of the State of New York* (Albany: 1909), pp. 75–88, 221.

13 Augustus A. Levey to Hermann Makower (July 21, 1882) quoted in Zosa Szajkowski, "The Attitude of American Jews to East European Jewish Immigration (1881-1893)," *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society*, 40 (March, 1951), 242; *Thirteenth Annual Report of the Board of Relief of the United Hebrew Charities of the City of New York* (New York: 1887), p. 15; *Report of the Royal Commission on Alien Immigration*, Evidence #15650, 15770, 16442–43.

July 1, 1894

To Whom It May Concern:
This is to certify that Mr. B. Breitbart and wife have been assisted by this Association to reach Europe as they are unable to support themselves in this country on account of their advanced age.
They desire to reach their native country, Russia, where they have children to support them.

Respectfully,
per J. Ehrlich, Agent[14]

In the hindsight of Jewish history even such benign movements to return pauper immigrants find few defenders. We know what happened to East European Jews in the end. American Jews in the 1880's, however, considered the reasons behind Jewish and non-Jewish immigration to be pretty well the same. Persecutions aside, they considered the majority of East European Jewish immigrants to be disenchanted *luftmentschen* seeking gold in a land of opportunity. Available evidence partly supports this view. Early immigrants, unlike more frequently described later ones, were overwhelmingly young, single and male. Many arrived in New York brimming with unrealistic hopes, filled with misinformation, and lacking marketable skills. In numerous cases, family, friends, or organizations had covered the cost of their voyages, and in not a few, immigrants expected to be cared for upon their arrival. So reality came as a shock; for many newcomers, conditions in the New World proved far worse than those they had left behind. They were happy to return.[15]

The existence of Jewish return migration should occasion no surprise. Immigrants have been returning for as long as they have been migrating; indeed, according to demographic theory, "for every migration stream there is a corresponding counterstream flowing in the opposite direction."[16] Native ties do not break easily. Return migra-

14 Association for the Protection of Jewish Immigrants Correspondence, Box 1355, p. 41, American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, Ohio; Richard F. Address, "The Reaction of the Philadelphia Anglo-Jewish Press to the Russian Immigrant Community, 1882-1892," miscellaneous file, American Jewish Archives. For other evidence of return migration, see the papers of this association at the Philadelphia Jewish Archives Center, particularly the passage order books. I am grateful to Harold J. Kravitz for describing these papers to me; see also Steven W. Siegel, "Immigration Records at the Philadelphia Jewish Archives Center," *Toledot*, I (Summer, 1977), 3.

15 Irving Howe, *World of Our Fathers* (New York: 1976), pp. 67-118; Elias Tcherikower, "Jewish Immigrants to the United States, 1881-1900," *Yivo Annual of Jewish Social Science*, VI (1951), 157-176; Tcherikower, ed., *Early Jewish Labor Movement*, pp. 56, 68, 71, 107, 115, 122, 125; Alexander Harkavy, "Chapters From My Life," translated and edited by Jonathan D. Sarna, *American Jewish Archives*, 33 (April, 1981), 35-52.

16 Donald Bogue, "Principles of Demography," p. 765 quoted in Robert Rhoades,

tion from America should also occasion no surprise. Though the topic has only recently begun to be studied by historians, its importance has been recognized by economists and social scientists for years, which is precisely why they kept statistics. Push and pull factors clearly operated on both sides of the Atlantic, motivating people to move now one way, now the other. Ships departing America frequently carried just as many migrants as those that arrived.[17]

Yet Jewish departure from America does evoke surprise, for East European Jews were supposedly fleeing from persecution. From our perspective, the fact that they returned to the land of their affliction seems puzzling. Evidence from the period, however, suggests that contemporaries would not have been puzzled. The *Jewish Messenger*, for example, considered immigration in the 1880's "no question of persecution or involuntary exile . . . [but] the mere seeking of a new home by people who are not satisfied with their lives in their native place." Many disagreed with the *Messenger*, notably former American consul to Rumania, Benjamin F. Peixotto.[18] The existence of the debate, however, is what is significant. In the Russian case, it took the Kishinev pogrom of 1903 to make most people agree that the best solution for Jewish problems was immigration. Before then opinions divided, many thinking that pogroms would pass.[19] As a member of Berlin's Central German Committee for the Relief of

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*The Anthropology of Return Migration*, Papers in Anthropology #20 (Norman, Okl.: 1979), p. 1.

17 Rhoades, *Anthropology of Return Migration* contains a full bibliography. Important recent studies include Betty B. Caroli, *Italian Repatriation from the United States* (New York: 1973), pp. 3-22; Lars-Göran Tedebrand, "Remigration from America to Sweden," in Harold Runblom and Hans Norman, editors, *From Sweden to America: A History of the Migration* (Minneapolis: 1976), pp. 201-227; Bernard Axelrod, "Historical Studies of Emigration from the United States," *International Migration Review*, 6 (Spring, 1972), 32-49; and Sune Akerman, "From Stockholm to San Francisco: The Development of the Historical Studies of External Migrations," *Annales Academiae Regiae Scientarium Upsaliens*, 19 (1975), 10, 19-24.

18 *Jewish Messenger*, September 21, 1888, p. 4; Benjamin F. Peixotto, "What Shall We Do With Our Immigrants?" *The American Hebrew*, April 1, 1887, pp. 114-115.

19 Zosa Szajkowski, "Paul Nathan, Lucien Wolf, Jacob H. Schiff and the Jewish Revolutionary Movements in Eastern Europe (1903-1917)," *Jewish Social Studies*, 29 (January, 1967), 3-26, 75-91; *idem*, "The Impact of the Russian Revolution of 1905 on American Jewish Life," *Yivo Annual of Jewish Social Science*, 17 (1978), 102-109; Philip E. Schoenberg, "The American Reaction to the Kishinev Pogrom of 1903," *American Jewish Historical Quarterly*, 63 (March, 1974), 262-283; I. Michael Aronson, "The Attitudes of Russian Officials in the 1880s Toward Jewish Assimilation and Emigration," *Slavic Review*, 34 (1975), 1-18.

Russian Jews admitted to American investigators, "One part of our committee, in accordance with Baron Hirsch's ideas, wants to clear Russia of Jews altogether; the other to prevent people as much as possible from emigrating."[20] Among Jews in Russia the same debate took place: Jewish notables like Baron Horace Günzberg opposed emigration, Zionists and some Jewish newspapers favored it. Since Russian policies toward Jews fluctuated wildly, both sides in the debate could offer convincing arguments. As a result, even Jews who had fled from persecution could justify returning home, especially if they thought that conditions in Russia had changed.[21] Those who had not fled on account of persecution returned with still fewer qualms. However they justified their actions, returnees merely bolstered the arguments of those who claimed that conditions in Eastern Europe were not so bad after all.

No single factor accounts for all return migration: Jews left America for as many reasons as they came. Deportations, increasing in number after 1897, account for some migrations, but they form a separate subject.[22] Most departees returned of their own free will. Specific events - deaths, business failures, unpleasant encounters, or the like - sometimes occasioned return trips, but deeper causes - social, cultural, economic and political ones - usually lay behind them. From a structural perspective, return migration occurred when push and pull factors, operating in tandem and behind-the-scenes, convinced an immigrant that another arduous journey was in his interest, for he would be better off where he came from. The two factors that particularly affected Jewish migration rates were economic conditions in America and political conditions in Europe: slumps caused return migration rates to rise, pogroms led them to fall.[23] But broad underlying factors of this sort should not obscure other considerations that came into play. Ultimately, each return migrant returned for reasons of his or her own.

Many migrants planned to return temporarily just in order to visit their old home towns. Some had aged relatives whom they longed to see; others sought brides, there being a shortage of Jewish women in America; still others came home merely to show off, to demonstrate that they had somehow made good; and in a few cases immigrants re-

20 *Letter From the Secretary of the Treasury Transmitting A Report of the Commissioners of Immigration . . . .* (Washington: 1892), vol. I, p. 28.

21 E. g., Kasovich, *Days of Our Years*, 179.

22 Zosa Szajkowski, "Deportation of Jewish Immigrants and Returnees Before World War I," *American Jewish Historical Quarterly*, 67 (June, 1978), 291-306.

23 In addition to works cited above in note 17, see Julie DaVanzo, "Differences Between Return and Nonreturn Migration: An Econometric Analysis," *International Migration Review*, 10 (Spring, 1976), 13-27.

turned home to study.[24] The government discouraged all such visits. To be naturalized, one had to have "lived in this country without returning to Europe at least five years continuously." Once naturalized, one's application for a passport could easily be denied.[25] Still, many return visits took place, and not a few turned out to be one-way visits. According to Russian statistics, 12,313 more United States citizens entered Russian territory from 1881 to 1914 than left. According to American government investigators, plenty of Jews living in Russia held United States passports, among the most famous being Cantor Pinchas Minkowsky of Odessa, formerly of New York. In the case of Jews, as in the case of non-Jews, tourists and returnees often proved difficult to distinguish from one another.[26]

Another group of Jewish return migrants might best be termed temporary immigrants, people who came to America intending someday to return to Europe. The hope that Mottel's neighbors expressed in a Sholom Aleichem story - that "we'd arrive in America safe and sound, make good business, earn a lot of money and then return home" - was the hope expressed by many immigrants, and at least some succeeded in achieving their goal. The immigration commissioners reported on one Bialystok native, Mr. Levy, who amassed $20,000 in the New World and returned home to found a factory. Philip Cowen, editor of the *American Hebrew*, quoted a Russian Jewish beggar as saying "I came here five years ago to gather money for a dowry for my daughter. Thanks to you and some of your good neighbors, I have two hundred and fifty dollars together, and now I will have a fine son-in-law, for he is waiting for me in Russia." More enterprising immigrants employed their knowledge of English and Russian to engage in commerce. In 1903, according to Alexander Hume Ford, there was "a Russian American Hebrew in each of the large Manchurian cities securing in Russia the

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24 Alton Goldbloom, *Small Patients: The Autobiography of a Children's Doctor* (New York: 1959), pp. 45-65; Ravage, *An American in the Making*, pp. 3-26; Philip Cowen, *Memories of an American Jew* (New York: 1932), p. 240; Isaac Metzker, ed., *A Bintel Brief* (New York: 1971), p. 63; "Abraham Kaspe," *Universal Jewish Encyclopedia*, VI, p. 331; and *Message from the President of the United States in Answer to the Resolution of the House of Representatives of August 20, 1890, Concerning the Enforcement of Proscriptive Edicts Against the Jews in Russia* (Washington: 1890) contain various accounts of return visits to Eastern Europe.

25 John F. Carr, *Guide to the United States for the Jewish Immigrant* (New York: 1913), p. 34; Reuben Fink, *How to Bring Relatives Into America and How to Travel Out of America* (in Yiddish), (New York: 1919), pp. 5-19.

26 Statistics calculated from Willcox, *International Migrations*, vol. I, pp. 798-799; see also Cowen, *Memories of an American Jew*, p. 228; and Akerman, "From Stockholm to San Francisco," pp. 20-21.

cream of the contracts for American material used in Manchuria." Of course, not all who hoped to get rich and return succeeded in doing so. Morris Raphael Cohen's father intended to "save enough money by hard work in America to enable him to return and set up some business in Minsk," but never did. After several trips back and forth across the Atlantic, the Cohens settled in America for good. Others, particularly Austro-Hungarians, journeyed to and from America numerous times. They expressed with their feet the ambivalence - the tension between love of the Old World and allure of the New - that all immigrants felt. Jewish temporary immigrants sought the ultimate synthesis: an American life-style on European soil. They desired, as poet Mitchell Kaplan expressed it, to journey back home to Vladnick, "and live there with never a care." Whether or not they succeeded in achieving this utopia in the short term, they ultimately faced severe disappointment.[27]

Tourists and prosperous returnees might be considered successful emigrants. They often travelled home in style, as if to publicize the progress they had made since journeying in the opposite direction.[28] Most, however, were not nearly so fortunate. Return, in their case, was by steerage or cattle ship; it symbolized failure. No matter how they explained it away, the fact remained that their hopes had gone unrealized; their American dreams turned sour.

Inability to find work was a prime cause of return migration. Better to return home than to wander the streets of New York homeless and jobless. In many cases, however, it was less the absence of work than the absence of meaningful work that engendered dissatisfaction. Dr. M. Merkin, a chemist and well-rounded intellectual, arrived in America around 1884 from Latvia. Though he made a name for himself as a Social Democrat and incisive thinker, he had to wash dishes in a restaurant for a livelihood. Not surprisingly, he did not remain in the country for long. Many early immigrants, particularly Am Olam intellectuals, told similar stories. Some of those who did find work had trouble adjusting to the demands of American industry. "I had to work very hard in America, so I thought if I had to

27 Sholom Aleichem, *The Adventures of Mottel the Cantor's Son*, translated by Tamara Kahana (New York: 1961), p. 76; Weinberger, *Jews and Judaism in New York*, pp. 26–27; *Letter from the Secretary of the Treasury Transmitting a Report of the Commissioners of Immigration*, p. 88; Cowen, *Memories of an American Jew*, pp. 88, 198; Alexander Hume Ford, "America's Debt to the Russian Jew," *Colliers Weekly*, 31 (June 6, 1903); p. 10; Morris Raphael Cohen, *A Dreamer's Journey* (Boston: 1949), pp. 23–24; Tcherikower, *Early Jewish Labor Movement in the United States*, pp. 121–122; Mitchell Kaplan, "Back Home," *Just Folks* (New York: 1927), pp. 49–52.

28 Edward Steiner, *On the Trail of the Immigrant* (New York: 1906), p. 360.

work so hard I could do better here and I came back," one returnee admitted. Others, especially those unmarried, complained of homesickness and *anomie*: "Ah, home, my beloved home. My heart is heavy for my parents whom I left behind."[29]

Complaints about the harshness of American life - the boom-bust cycle, the miserable working conditions, the loneliness, the insecurity - could not help but cast return migrants in a bad light. In effect, returnees admitted their own weakness; those more fit had stayed where they were, resolving to succeed whatever the odds. Complaints about American religious life, on the other hand, had precisely an opposite effect. The pious migrant could hold his head high: he had spurned the gold of America for the sake of an Orthodox Jewish life. In his own eyes he became a martyr rather than a failure. This, of course, is not to deny that religion influenced decisions to return. Those determined to observe traditional rituals in America, particularly the Sabbath and Jewish holidays, faced enormous hardships, unlike any most had known before. With good reason a returnee called America "a Godless land," where "Jews were losing their religion very rapidly." With similar good reason, a fictional account of "Vichne Devoshe's" disaffection and ultimate return from America concentrates on the country's impieties and heresies. The American way of life posed a significant challenge to traditional Judaism, and those committed to Jewish law certainly faced a harder time in the New World than most had in the Old.[30] But to claim that these people returned on account of religion only leaves too much unexplained; after all, some Americans did manage to lead fully Jewish lives. Return migration more likely resulted from a

29 Melech Epstein, *Jewish Labor in U.S.A.* (New York: 1969), vol. I, p. 139; Cowen, *Memories of an American Jew*, p. 249; Metzker, *Bintel Brief*, p. 114; cf. *Letter From the Secretary of the Treasury Transmitting a Report of the Commissioners of Immigration*, p. 28.

30 F. C. Gilbert, *From Judaism to Christianity* (Concord: 1916), p. 64; Oyzer Blaustein, *Vikhne Dvoshe fort tsurik fun Amerike* (Vilna: 1894). Other references to religious factors in return migration include Joseph Gillman, *The B'nai Khaim in America* (New York: 1969), p. 58; Aaron Rothkoff, "The American Sojourns of Ridbaz: Religious Problems Within the Immigrant Community," *American Jewish Historical Quarterly* 57 (1968), 557-572; Arthur A. Chiel, ed., "An Ethical Will," *American Jewish Historical Quarterly*, 61 (March, 1972), 230; Szajkowski, "The Attitude of American Jews," p. 243; and Alter F. Landesman, *Brownsville* (New York: 1971), pp. 74-76. J. D. Eisenstein, who faced similar pressures, remained in America; see Lloyd P. Gartner, "From New York to Miedzyrecz: Immigrant Letters of Judah David Eisenstein, 1878-1886," *American Jewish Historical Quarterly*, 52 (1963), 239. Rabbis have traditionally had a high rate of return; see Moses A Shulvass, *From East to West* (Detroit: 1971), p. 17.

range of factors, religion being just one of them. Returnees lay particular stress on that one to evoke sympathy and save face.

A full listing of the causes behind Jewish return migration would have to include such diverse grounds as an inability to adapt to America's climate, a cultural aversion to indoor toilets, a patriotic urge to defend a native land in war, and most somber of all, an *agunah's* desperate need to find her missing husband.[31] The specifics, however, merely underline a more general conclusion: that return migration serves as a mirror through which immigrant problems may be viewed. Just as immigration casts into bold relief the hardships faced by Jews in the Old World, so return migration portrays their miseries in the New. That more Jews immigrated than returned, and that quite a few returnees later re-immigrated leaves no doubt as to the final verdict on where conditions were worse and where the promise was greater. But some Jewish immigrants of an earlier day, blessed neither with prophecy nor historical hindsight, discovered that the life they remembered having lost meant more to them than the America they had gained. Particularly in the years before the Kishinev pogrom, numbers of them returned home.

Twentieth Century American Jews, as we have seen, ignored the phenomenon of return migration; indeed, they denied it was a phenomenon at all. In many cases they did so innocently; they simply reported what they thought the statistics said. Those who knew better, however, also kept return migration under wraps. During the years when America was in the midst of a prolonged debate over immigration restriction, discussion of return migration would have been impolitic. American Jews attempted to portray all Jewish immigrants as refugees to freedom, modern day pilgrims. They specifically - and accurately - sought to distinguish Jews from the much maligned transient immigrants "who have no intention of permanently changing their residence and whose only purpose in coming to America is temporarily to take advantage of greater wages paid for industrial labor in this country." Jewish immigrants, Louis Marshall insisted, "can not go back." To suggest in those days that some did go back

31 For climate, see *Letter from the Secretary of the Treasury Transmitting a Report of the Commissioners of Immigration*, p. 28. Regarding toilets, see Gillman, *B'nai Khaim in America*, p. 58; cf. Zane L. Miller, *Boss Cox's Cincinnati* (Chicago: 1968), p. 40; and Richard M. Dorson, *American Folklore* (Chicago: 1977), pp. 94-95. On patriotic returnees, see Metzker, *Bintel Brief*, p. 46; and Louis Greenberg, *The Jews in Russia* (New York: 1976), vol. II, p. 100. On returning *agunot*, see Metzker, *Bintel Brief*, pp. 78-79; Szajkowski, "The Attitude of American Jews," p. 243.

or had done so in the past would have besmirched a carefully nurtured image, at considerable potential risk.[32]

So until our day return migration has remained a neglected aspect of American Jewish history.[33] Rather than analyzing its dimensions, rate, and impact, we glory in its supposed non-existence. This is not to say that the East European Jewish returnee experience parallels that of other groups, for in fact it differs markedly. The time has come, however, to examine these differences, understand them, and place them in context. We shall probably discover that almost as much can be learned from those who left America as from those who stayed.

32 Joseph, *Jewish Immigration*, p. 133; "Hearing on Immigration Bills," (pamphlet in Klau Library, Hebrew Union College, Cincinnati; evidently, Washington, 1910), p. 10; see Charles Reznikoff, ed., *Louis Marshall: Champion of Liberty* (Philadelphia: 1957), p. 140; and generally, Esther Panitz, "In Defense of the Jewish Immigrant (1891-1924)," *American Jewish Historical Quarterly*, 55 (1965), 57-97.

33 The only studies to consider return migration at any length are Jacob Shatzky, "Polish Jews Emigrate from America (in Yiddish)," *Yivo Bleter*, 20 (September, 1942), 125-127; Irving A. Mandel, "The Attitude of the American Jewish Community Toward East-European Immigration, 1880-1890," (Unpublished Rabbinic thesis, Hebrew Union College, 1947), pp. 60-61; and Szajkowski, "Deportation of Jewish Emigrants and Returnees before World War I."