

Ksharim



Lesson 43

Jews in Eretz Yisrael before WWI

1. Outline

2. Introduction

As the ideological and political battles of Zionism were being fought out in Europe, the first mass immigrations to *Eretz Yisrael* formed. Facing incredible hardships – economic deprivations, disease, friction with the local population and culture shock – these immigrations were to form the basis of much of the Israel we know today. In this lesson we will follow some of the history of the new immigrants in Palestine, address some of the dilemmas they faced, and get to know some of the legendary figures of that era.

3. Lesson goals

- a. Knowledge of the history of the first *aliyot* in general.
- b. Familiarity with some of the dilemmas the *olim* faced.
- c. Acquaintance with some of the heroes of the first *aliyot*.

4. Expanded outline

Suggested Methodology:

After a short historical survey (use background essay by MJR attached below), divide the class into 3 groups. Each group reads the biographies and writings of one of the following personalities, answers the questions, and presents a summary in a general discussion. Note that some of the sources are fully attached, and some are links to the internet. The facilitator should be ready to supply additional background information which the participants may require as they read the sources.

Each of the three personalities was chosen both because they constitute an impressive, well-known figure, and because through their life story we can examine one of the central challenges confronting the first *aliyot*. Eliezer Ben-Yehuda's memoirs afford a taste of the pioneering wonder felt by the members of the first mass-immigration to *Eretz Yisrael* in thousands of years, and provide a glimpse at the enormous challenge of the revival of the Hebrew language; Rachel, the poet, describes in her lyrical language the deep connection felt by the *halutzim* [pioneers] to the land, presents a typical story of work in one of the first communal settlements, and facilitates discussion of the personal sacrifices which many of the pioneers gave. And finally, Manya Shochat's exploits in *Hashomer* provides a

convenient trigger for the discussion of the inevitable conflict that arose between the new immigrants and the native population.

This lesson can also be accompanied by a musical component. There is a song about Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, a song about Alexander Zeid – a colleague of Manya Shochat's in *HaShomer*, many of Rachel's poems have been put to music, and many well-known songs were written in or of the era – see list at the end.

Sources:

1. Background essay

When the first Zionist immigrants arrived in the late 19th century, they found Orthodox communities living in poverty in the four “holy cities” of Tzefat, Tiberias, Hebron, and Jerusalem. These Jews were supported mainly by the “*haluka*,” a system of collecting and distributing funds raised in the Diaspora — based on the belief that Jews studying Torah in the land of Israel were fulfilling a *mitzvah* on behalf of Jews everywhere. The Sephardic Jews were Turkish subjects, while *Ashkenazim* were generally under the protection of the various European powers with autonomous consular offices in Jerusalem. Each separate ethnic group had its own fund-raising bureaucracy and its own rabbinical authority.

Some elements of modernization entered the “Old *Yishuv*” (old community) during the second half of the century. The French Jewish philanthropic organization Alliance Israelite Universelle founded the *Mikveh Israel* agricultural school in 1870. Some other modern schools were opened. New neighborhoods were built and various efforts at “productivization” were tried, often with the support of Sir Moses Montefiore, who visited frequently from England. And two unsuccessful attempts at agricultural settlement were made in 1878.

The pioneers of the First *Aliya* (1881-1904) came from Romania and Russia; the impetus to the migration was the 1881 wave of pogroms. They came in organized groups, many with families, with some funding by supporters back home, and limited (i.e. no) experience in agriculture. The first settlers, at Zichron Yaakov, Rosh Pina, Rishon Letzion, Ekron, (and Petah Tikvah, which had been founded in 1878) endured great suffering from malaria, hunger, the climate, insufficient funding, lack of agricultural expertise, and unfriendly natives. Of the 300 settlers at Zichron Yaakov, 10% died during the first year. In 1883, appeals to Baron Edmund de Rothschild for assistance were successful, and he took on the support (and heavy-handed guidance) of these settlements and others that were founded over the next twenty years.

The Second *Aliya* (1904-1914) consisted mostly of young single revolutionary types, seeking not only to build a Jewish homeland, but to make it a socialist utopia. They rebelled against the bourgeois ambitions of the First *Aliya* settlers (and of their own parents) and against the Jewish tradition. They were in some respects the “hippies” of their time, rejecting institutions of property and family,

seeking authenticity in a return to the soil. They created the kibbutz, and with their colleagues of the Third Aliya, after the war, they built many of the institutions that became the core of the Jewish state; they also provided the leadership elite. David Ben-Gurion, Berl Katznelson, Yitzhak BenZvi, Joseph Trumpeldor, A. D. Gordon – all came to Palestine during those years.

The war years were a time of great suffering for the Jewish communities of Palestine. Caught between the Turks and the British, living in the shadow of the Turkish massacre of the Armenians, many Jews were exiled, many died, many fled; the Jewish population dropped by a third.

Nevertheless, once the dust had settled, Jews in *Eretz Yisrael* could claim credit for...

- a growing community of Hebrew-speakers
- about twenty agricultural settlements, including both capitalist and socialist models (see map at <http://www.wzo.org.il/home/aliyah/d146.htm>)
- an education system
- a university and a technical institute
- *Hashomer*, a self-defense organization
- Tel Aviv – "the first Hebrew city"
- Jewish units within the British army

1. Eliezer Ben-Yehuda – reviver of the Hebrew Language

See a biography of Ben-Yehuda at

http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/biography/ben_yehuda.html .



"I am truly, actually, in the land of my forefathers, my feet are treading on the same earth on which my forefathers trod, my eyes are seeing the same sky, the same mountains, hills and valleys that my forefathers' eyes saw, I am breathing the same air my forefathers breathed.

Perhaps the reader wonders, what all this "excitement" is about? Hundreds and thousands of young Jews are coming to *Eretz Yisrael* and this is not so strange, that they need to get accustomed to it? – Let us not forget, that this was in the year 1882, that is 40 years ago. In those days *Eretz Yisrael* was not yet a normal thing, an everyday thing, as it later became. At that time *Eretz Yisrael* was for most Jews more like a legend, hardly more real than the Kingdom of the Sons of Moses over the Sambatyon

river, and people from *Eretz Yisrael*, young men and maids from Eretz Yisrael, one did not meet them abroad as you meet them today almost in every city. And even the name "*Eretz Yisrael*" was not carried on the tongues of a Jewish man except in prayer or reading the scriptures, and such. And in this land, that seemed so far away, so imaginary, I, who only a month ago was in the center of the great, magnificent world of Europe, I am now living in it, it is now not only the land of my forefathers but also the land where I live! In the first two or three days I felt this wonder in my life every minute, every hour, but slowly this feeling dimmed, and at the end of a week there were hours in which I forgot I was in *Eretz Yisrael*...

All our souls in the land then were not more than 30,000 in the whole of the country, of these 16,000 in Jerusalem and 14,000 in the other cities which had a Jewish population of some importance – Hebron, Jaffa, Safed and Tiberias, and a few hundreds in Haifa, Acre and Sidon. And these 30,000 were not united by language. They were truly separated, congregations speaking different languages, each community speaking the language of the country from whence it came, and these languages caused the communities to feel almost as people of different nations. Add to this, that most of these 30,000 were not natural people, leading natural lives, making their living as is customary in the world. Only the Sephardic community, about 7,000 people, were more or less a natural community, for most of its people were simple people, who made their living from artisanship and simple trade, and only a minority of this community, about 300 heads of families, were from the group of "*chachamim*", whose *Torah* is their trade and who make their living from the "*haluka*"... But the *Ashkenazim*, they too about 7,000 people, were at that time almost solely "taught by the Lord" (Isiah 54:13) , whose vocation was the study of Torah and prayer, and who made their living almost solely from the "*haluka*"...

As to the revival of the language there was nothing I could do, save speak Hebrew at home to my wife and the people I met occasionally. But this was not sufficient in my eyes. I felt success depended on the children of the new generation, but this new generation was yet to be. It was on its way. But I could do nothing to speed its arrival. I was angry at the way of the world, that a woman gives birth after 271 days, I was envious of Adam and Eve, who would get into bed two and come out four, but in all my impatience could only wait.

But apart from the sorrow of the long wait, I saw that the new generation alone could spread the Hebrew language slowly. To speed the process of the revival of the spoken Hebrew language, the children already living in the land should be used, and the language should be put in their mouths. But these children – who would put them in my hands? A year ago, in one of my letters from Paris to "*Hahavazelet*" [Jewish newspaper] I said that in *cheders*, *Talmud torahs* and *yeshivas* in *Eretz Yisrael* the teachers should speak Hebrew to their students. The editor answered that this was a false hope. And now I saw that he was right. I saw that it was impossible to convince those in charge of schools in *Eretz Yisrael* to institute in them spoken Hebrew between teachers and students.

But in this I received help from an unexpected quarter. One rainy day in the month of Tevet a man entered my house, spoke Hebrew and said: 'My name is Nissim Becher,

and I am sent from the 'Alliance Israélite Universelle' company to open a boys' school in this city, and I came to you to offer you a post as a Hebrew teacher in my school'. I answered: 'I would gladly accept your offer if it were possible, but I'm afraid it's impossible, as I will only accept on this condition: that I speak to the students only in Hebrew. They will not hear any other language from me, and I will not permit them to speak to me in any other language'.

'That is why I gave my offer' – said Mr. Nissim Becher – 'I have heard of you and your thoughts about the revival of the language, and I wish it too, and so I will give you a chance to execute your idea at the school'.

I agreed... Thus was formed the method of "Hebrew in Hebrew" (*Ivrit be'Ivrit*), and thus began the conversing of student and teacher in Hebrew in our time.

...ships brought to the shores of Jaffa tens of families every week, families of Russian Jews fleeing "*galut*" and coming to settle in Eretz Yisrael, and thus began the second era of the realization of my dream, the era of real action on the Land of the Fathers, the great era – however small and modest – still wonderful and amazing, in all its poverty, the era of the beginning of the new "*Yishuv*", of the founding of our "*moshavot*"...

...on the 15th of Av [1882]... in a dark corner of a small room, close to the site of the temple, the boy was born on which the first trial of the revival of spoken Hebrew would be performed... The mother, who was weak in the first place, was weakened further by poverty, pregnancy and childbirth. Even so, she agreed of her own good will not to take any servant into the house, so that the child would not hear the words of any language except of the Hebrew language. We were afraid of the walls of our house, afraid of the air in our room, lest the sounds of a foreign language would be absorbed as they were uttered by the servant, and their echo reach the ears of the child, and these foreign sounds would disturb the Hebrew sense of listening, and the Hebrew words would not be properly absorbed, and the child would not speak Hebrew..."

Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, in *Memoirs of Eretz Yisrael*, Avraham Ya'ari, Ramat-Gan 1983, part I pp. 349-380 (in Hebrew), written 1881-1882.

- Ben-Yehuda movingly describes the excitement he felt at arriving in *Eretz Yisrael*. Do we feel some remnant of this excitement when we arrive today?
- What picture of the "Old *Yishuv*" arises from Ben-Yehuda's description?
- How does he describe the effects of the multi-lingualism of the *Yishuv*?
- In what ways did Ben-Yehuda strive to revive the Hebrew language?
- Discuss the endeavor of the revival of spoken Hebrew: the challenges, the pros and cons, the methods, the chances of success. Can you picture a non-Hebrew-speaking modern Israel?
- The settlers in the "*moshavot*" suffered great hardship, and many succumbed to disease. One of the first settlers of Hadera describes the first winter:
"The first case of malaria erupted suddenly at the end of the summer. We were woken in the night: 'Lerman is dead!' How? Who? Why? We staggered to the dead man's shack, our heart full of dark forebodings, our mind as if suppressed under a heavy load. We came to the shack, and it was full of people, most of

them young. All faces fearful, everyone apprehensive, depressed... The epidemic began. Sometimes all a shack's inhabitants fell ill, and there was no one to take care of the sick. A heavy cloud rested on the new "moshava"... We were helpless, we walked about pale and stunned, the mark of death on our foreheads, horror in our hearts. Relatives and friends came from all the "moshavot", bearing advice and prayers: 'Leave the place, save your souls...'. Moshe Smilansky, in *Memoirs of Eretz Yisrael*, Avraham Ya'ari, Ramat-Gan 1983, part II pp. 713-717-380 (in Hebrew), written 1891.

The people of Hadera stayed on, despite the hardships. Were they mad? How could they subject their children to these conditions? Do people have a right to risk their families' lives for their ideology? Where would Israel be if not for them? Are there equivalents to these first settlers in modern Israel?

2. Rachel – pioneer and poet

See biography at http://www.ithl.org.il/author_info.asp?id=207.

Read Rachel's description of life and work beside the Kinneret at <http://israel.poetryinternational.org/cwolk/view/24169>.

- What explains Rachel's fascination with the surroundings?



Rachel came to *Eretz Yisrael* with her sister Shoshana, and both worked at the agricultural school for girls at Kinneret. Shoshana writes:

"'Work intelligence' demands not only the 'hands', but also the head and the whole body. 'Everything is important', says Channa [Meizel, founder and teacher of the school], 'even how you tie your kerchief to your head. If it moves every time and you must fix it, that's a loss of time, right'?..."

And along with all this, "tempo", speed. If you approach it with understanding and calm, and you know the work, why should it not be fast? Then the fingers themselves take on a rapid, lively, continuous motion, and you breathe in relief. There is satisfaction in work. You live in it. – What more can there be: life! And thus

you must teach your legs, arms, your whole body to work... And the heart too, it must consecrate itself to the day ahead. If you are irritated, or pursued by dire thoughts, then immediately – your work suffers. The life that depends upon you, your hands, the life that you must create and develop – is spoiled and lost. Shoddy work – that's a sin...

Our social education started from the minutest things. If you're on duty, you must arise very quietly in the morning, so as not to disturb your sleeping friends, for the sleep of the worker is precious. You must fulfill your tasks perfectly. The morning could be spoiled because of your carelessness, or laziness. "Laziness!" Strange word. All yearn

for industriousness, conquest of life, triumph at work. That is the spirit, which speaks to us each day: Work and succeed!

...Each of the women workers felt the torments of adjustment. The men too. There are two approaches... The first: to "sift out" the workers using all manner of sieves until they are found "fit" and "worthy" for work. The second: on the contrary, give every comrade the opportunity to become a "worker". And if they need help, a "bridge" – hand it to them. For it is a great responsibility to cut off a soul from this new world of life."

Shoshana Blaustein, in *Memoirs of Eretz Yisrael*, Avraham Ya'ari, Ramat-Gan 1983, part II pp. 817-819 (in Hebrew), written 1909-1910.

- What explains the stress on the importance of work in Shoshana's description of life at the farm?
- The immigrants of the Second *Aliyah*, who set the pattern of Israeli life for more than half a century, were predominantly socialists, who set great importance on group life. Can you compare their stories and legacy to the individualistic pioneers of the American West?
- Communal forms of settlement, which were to become the basis of the kibbutz movement, were invented by the pioneers of the Second *Aliyah*. What do you think were the advantages and disadvantages of settling the land communally?
- Can you explain and justify both approaches which Shoshana Blaustein describes to potential new workers? Of the 35-40,000 of the Second *Aliyah*, about 4,500 remained 10 years later. Some returned to Russia to build the socialist utopia, some went to America to try capitalism. Yehoash, a Yiddish poet who lived in *Eretz Yisrael* in 1914 and returned to America at the beginning of WWI writes:
"I wanted to know what percentage of the workers who come to *Eretz Yisrael* stay here for good, and I found that it was very small. They come in large parties before Passover, settle in the "*moshavot*" [villages], work by day in the orchards and vineyards, sing and dance by night until their legs collapse, or walk in the hills between the orchards, slightly feverish but accepting it with love, after all, it is *Eretz Yisrael*.
Weeks and months pass and the weak, who are the majority, are tired, their energy gone, and one day they decide to go, some to America, some to Africa, and some return home. They did not stand the test. The chosen remain, those who stood the test, the fighters and pioneers. They send roots into the land and become the best and healthiest element of the "*yishuv*".
In "*Between Zion and Zionism*", Open University of Israel, Unit 10.
- Did the triumph of the few justify the disappointment of the many?

Rachel herself was "sifted out" when she returned from Russia after WWI. Her friends at Degania were afraid that she would infect her neighbors with TB, and she was exiled to Tel-Aviv, where she wrote most of her poems. Many express longing for her days as a pioneer. Some poems:

<http://israel.poetryinternational.org/cwolk/view/24165>

<http://israel.poetryinternational.org/cwolk/view/24166>

3. Manya Shochat – pioneer and fighter

See biographical article at <http://www.jewishmag.com/68mag/many/many.htm>



The youngsters of the Second Aliyah were shocked by the dependence of their predecessors on Arab labor and Baron Rothschild's philanthropy. The following is a description of life in Zikhron Ya'akov, one of the first "*moshavot*", in 1893:

"Every farmer in the "*moshava*" got 12 francs a month for every member of the household, except babies; they received only 6 francs. Medical help – on the Baron's account. Trips to Lebanon for convalescence, lodging and food in an expensive hotel – on the Baron's account. All the work in the farmers' vineyards was done by Arabs – on the Baron's account, and the farmers "supervise".

Two agronomists – on the Baron's account; one for the vineyards, and one for the vegetable gardens and fruit trees. And under the supervision of the two agronomists were ten young farmers' sons, who rode their horses all day in the fields, and with their help the farmers counted the numbers and work of the Arab workers."

Hillel Yaffe, in *Memoirs of Eretz Yisrael*, Avraham Ya'ari, Ramat-Gan 1983, part II p. 739 (in Hebrew), written 1893.

- Judging from newspaper reports, are there parallels to these phenomena in today's Israel? If so, is this process inevitable?

The new immigrants set out to establish "Hebrew work" and "Hebrew guards". The following excerpt tells of one of the exploits of *HaShomer*, the organization of guards founded by Shochat and her colleagues:

"In those days the manager of the lands of the Palestine Jewish Colonisation Association (PJCA), Mr. Yehoshua Chankin, was trying to extract the land which had been previously purchased by the Baron [Rothschild] from the hands of the Arab-Zbeh tribe. The Bedouins inhabited this land without heeding Chankin's demands that they depart, saying that the Jews would not dare evict them by force. After negotiations between Chankin and our "chief", it was decided that we would take upon ourselves to conquer this land from the Bedouins. At our gathering, called for this purpose, our "chief" posed the question: Are we strong enough to go and plow the land, without using arms and without leaving the plow even if the Bedouins attacked.

This step required much deliberation, as the consequences might affect the relations between the Jews and their neighbors in the Lower Galilee. We left the meeting feeling in our hearts that not one of us would leave the plow while he was alive. We sent immediately to rent plows and work animals, quietly made all the necessary preparations, and in Tishrei 1910 went as one under the leadership of the "chief" to the land of the Zbeh, and started plowing it... The Bedouins heard that the Jews were plowing the land, and they all rushed to the field. But when they were still far away they sent two of their men to see who was plowing. When they recognized the members of *HaShomer*, they informed their senders, and much excitement ensued. They argued whether they should attack or refrain, and finally they turned back. This action had a great effect on the whole area. That year there was calm in Hebrew farms in the Galilee. After we finished plowing, the PJCA settled a few young farmers on the land. Chankin saluted us with a "*Mazal Tov*", and our reputation in the "yishuv" increased."

Israel Giladi, in *Memoirs of Eretz Yisrael*, Avraham Ya'ari, Ramat-gan 1983, part II pp. 827-828 (in Hebrew), written 1907-1914.

- What psychological effect did *HaShomer's* activities have on Jews and Arabs? Can you detect similar attitudes in modern Israel?

The next excerpt explains similar incidents from the point of view of the Arabs, even though the author is Jewish:

"It is time to root out the false conviction that has spread among the Zionists, that in *Eretz Yisrael* there is uncultivated land for lack of working hands and because of the laziness of the inhabitants. There are no abandoned fields, on the contrary every (Arab) farmer tries to add to his plot from the uncultivated land adjacent to it, if it does not require too much labor. Near the cities the sloped mountainsides are plowed, and beside the "*moshava*" [village] Metulla the poor farmers plant, as in Lebanon, between the rocks, and leave not a square yard fallow. And so, when we arrive to take hold of the land, the question arises: what will the farmers do, whose fields we shall buy?

Usually we buy the lands from the big estate-holders, who took hold of the land, they or their forebears, by larceny and deceit and lease it to the farmers, and sometimes we buy from the villages which sell part of their lands. The tenant farmer is not an itinerant on the leased land, he is a permanent resident who does not change his location, and some tenants are working land which their forefathers before them have worked. It is customary in this area that when estates pass from one to another the tenants remain. But when we buy such a plot, we remove its former tenants completely. Indeed, we do not send them away empty-handed, we pay the value of the houses and crops handsomely, we do not stint, and from the point of view of customary justice and official integrity we are completely moral, and even go beyond the letter of the law. But, if we do not wish to willfully fool ourselves, let us admit, that we have cast away these poor people from their humble nest and taken their livelihood. Where will the evicted go, who have but little money? Indeed, the Hebrew "*moshava*" offers him work sometimes, whose wages are higher than his income from his humble tenancy. But, first, we cannot guarantee that we can supply him with

regular work, and second, when we do this we deal unkindly with him, as when we supply him with work in the "moshava" founded on his land, he can avoid parting with the land that nurtured and fed him from the day he was born, and he continues to look upon it now as its owner, who has been temporarily exploited by strangers. The work we give the Arab will never, in his eyes, compensate him for his land that was taken from under him; he will accept the good, but will not forget the evil."

I. Epstein, A Hidden Question, published in *Hashiloach* 17, 1907. Reproduced in "Between Zion and Zionism", Open University of Israel, unit 11 p. 50 (in Hebrew).

- From the 3 excerpts above, what were the sources of friction between Jews and Arabs in *Eretz Yisrael*? Could they have been avoided or ameliorated, and if so – how? Which parallels to the hostilities between American pioneers and Indians are you reminded of?

Songs of the first *aliyot* (search <http://www.shiron.net/> for Hebrew words):

Rachel's poems put to music (there's a Chava Alberstein album, but many artists perform single songs):

- רק על עצמי
- הנה אקח
- בלא ניב
- בגני נטעתיך
- הן יצאנו בסך
- יונתן
- עקרה
- ולו
- אני
- זמר נוגה
- כוחי הולך ודל
- ליד החלון
- בלילה בא המבשר
- אל ארצי
- כנרת
- מתי
- ספר שירי
- שי

Other songs:

- אליעזר בן-יהודה. מלים : ירון לונדון. לחן : מתי כספי.
- על גבעות שיך אברק : מלים : אלכסנדר פן.
- פה בארץ חמדת אבות. מלים: ישראל דושמן