

Forgotten Zions

Jewish Agricultural Colonies in Kansas in the 1880s

by Donald M. Douglas

We live with stereotypes embedded in our consciousness. The rational part of us knows how idiotic all this is, but the images persist. Whatever your stereotype of the Jew is, it is probably safe to assume that it does not include a farmer, a homesteader, breaking the sod of western Kansas. Nonetheless, in the 1880s Jews were there—on the High Plains in Beersheba, Montefiore and Lasker, Leeser and Touro, and down in the Gyp Hills at Gilead and Hebron—and in significant numbers.¹ Viewed in isolation or viewed as a single phenomenon, the story of the seven Jewish agricultural colonies that were born, grew, and perished in Kansas in the 1880s appears as a small blip on the larger screen of Kansas history, a bit of historical exotica of mild but passing interest. Viewed in the

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1. Perhaps the earliest mention of the colonies appeared in Gabriel Davidson and Edward A. Goodwin, "The Jewish Covered Wagon," *Jewish Criterion* (January 1932), also included in the supplement to Gabriel Davidson and Edward A. Goodwin, *Our Jewish Farmers and the Story of the Jewish Agricultural Society* (New York: A. B. Fischer, 1943), 221-24. Leo Shpall, "Jewish Agricultural Colonies in the United States," *Agricultural History* 24 (July 1950): 120-46, includes Kansas' Beersheba colony, best known of the state's Jewish settlements; see also A. James Rudin, "Beersheba, Kan.: 'God's Pure Air on Government Land,'" *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 34 (Autumn 1968): 282-98, who utilized Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise's contemporary newspaper the *American Israelite* and the diary of Charles K. Davis (American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati) to produce the standard account of the colony's brief history. The first mention of Kansas source material, other than Rudin's citation of *Kansas: A Guide to the Sunflower State*, 1939, is Elbert L. Sapinsley, "Jewish Agricultural Colonies in the West: The Kansas Example," *Western States Jewish Historical Quarterly* 3 (April 1971): 157-70. He cites the *Dighton Herald* and the *History of Finney County Kansas*, but adds little to the Rudin account. Ten years later the story of Beersheba reappeared in L. David Harris, "Lest We Forget Beersheba," *The Wichitan* (February 1981), 48-51, 60-61. Harris picked up where the others had left off, thoroughly researching his subject. The result was "Sod Jerusalem: Jewish Agricultural Communities in Frontier Kansas" (Unpublished manuscript, Library and Archives Division, Kansas State Historical Society, 1984).

The Jewish Agriculturists' Aid Society of America.



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larger context of the history of Jews in America, the Kansas colonies are all but invisible. Yet here in these seven colonies, in this one decade, on the Plains of Kansas, can be seen four major threads of Jewish American settlement and a tangential relationship to the utopian socialist communities that proliferated in the United States in the last half of the nineteenth century.

The first of the colonies was Beersheba, founded in

the late summer of 1882 in Hodgeman County, north of Cimarron and a few miles northeast of what is now Kalvesta. Twenty-four families of Russian Jews sponsored by a Cincinnati Jewish organization and led by two Americans, Charles Davis and the son of the Cincinnati rabbi, came west to found the new community of Beersheba. They built sod houses, a sod synagogue, and a schoolhouse. By the spring of 1883, they had plowed and planted over two hundred acres, mostly sorghum.

Beersheba was in part the reaction of earlier Jewish immigrants to the latecomers of the 1880s. The reaction was not a wholly admirable one. Numbering some two hundred thousand, the American Jewish community of 1880 was mainly of Sephardic or German origin. Some of the Sephardic community dated back to colonial America, even to Peter Stuyvesant's New Amsterdam. Much of the German community came from the fifty-thousand-plus that arrived in the 1840s and 1850s in that wave of central European immigration. The overwhelming majority lived in urban areas and had become integrated into the general society.²

In the early 1880s they were faced with an enormous influx of eastern European Jews. The newcomers came by community, not as family units; they wore distinctive garb, spoke Yiddish, and were, for the most

part, orthodox in their religious practice. These Jews were not welcomed by most of their coreligionists.³

One type of Jewish immigrant was welcomed, at least in the pages of Isaac Wise's newspaper the *American Israelite*, and that was what he called the class of agriculturalists. Wise was the founder of the American reform Jewish movement. Together with Moritz Loth, president of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, Wise organized the Hebrew Union Agricultural Society (HUAS)

to encourage and assist eastern European Jews to establish agricultural careers. It was this committee that sponsored Beersheba.⁴

The Emigrant Aid Committee of Cincinnati provided the settlers with wagons, horses, harnesses, agricultural implements, some livestock and poultry. It also provided them with a Cincinnati-appointed supervisor for the colony, authorized to withhold provisions, implements, or livestock to maintain his authority; the goods were owned by the committee not the individual settlers. When some of the colonists leased part of their holdings to a cattle syndicate, orders came from Cincinnati for the supervisor to reclaim all farming implements and livestock from those individuals and sell them, which he did. That marked the beginning of the end.⁵ The seeds for Beersheba's demise lay as much in Cincinnati as in the barren soil of Hodgeman County.

Beersheba was a failure, but it picked up the thread of a Jewish dream that had seen earlier, brief fruition in the Sholem, New York, agricultural colony that began in 1837 and lasted perhaps a decade. It served also as a forerunner to other experiments and more sophisticated efforts such as the Jewish Agricultural Society begun in 1904, which could lay claim to some successes.

2. Howard Morely Sachar, *The Course of Modern Jewish History* (New York: Dell, 1977), 160-79.

3. *Ibid.*, 305-21.

4. Rudin, "Beersheba," 283-84.

5. *Ibid.*, 286-97.

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Beersheba had been the child of American parents, the Cincinnati based HUAS and its Emigrant Aid Committee. Montefiore and Lasker, on the other hand, were the children of Russian parents, a group called Am Olam.⁶ Am Olam, which means "The Eternal People," was one of two groups organized in Russia in the 1870s in response to that country's growing unrest and pogroms. Both groups built upon dissatisfaction with emancipation and assimilation as solutions to Jewish problems. Both called for a Jewish national revival in the form set forth in Leon Pinsker's "Autoemancipation," a widely distributed pamphlet in which he advocated training Jewish agriculturalists to collectively farm land purchased in countries other than Russia. As Pinsker had recommended, both groups sought to learn agricultural skills, secure funds, purchase land, and set up cooperative farms as the necessary first step toward Jewish self-emancipation. Like Pinsker, both groups saw only emigration as a solution to the problem of the Jew in Russia. One group sought its future in Palestine. The other, Am Olam, looked to America where it hoped to establish a home for the Jewish people. Am Olam's immediate task, as members saw it, was the normalization of Jewish economic life by adding to it a productive base in agriculture. Their emblem was a plow and the Ten Commandments. Their motto was Jewish colonization.

The leadership of Am Olam came from the ranks of the Russian Jewish intelligentsia in Odessa, Kiev, and Yelizavetgrad. The membership included artisans, craftsmen, teachers, and students.⁷ They not

only stressed agricultural work but insisted that the colonies in the United States be modeled on the Russian mir rather than on the system of individual private property. They were, intellectually, close kin to the utopian socialists who had earlier made their mark in the United States in some two-hundred-plus utopian communities.

Impelled by the pogroms, these groups, like other Russian Jewish emigrants, made their way across Europe by way of Brody in the Habsburg domains and Berlin

to New York.⁸ The first group left Odessa in September 1881, and others were soon to follow. They paid their own way to New York and on arrival there rented a house. They divided household tasks, pooled earnings, and some went out to work on farms in Long Island, Connecticut, and as far away as Indiana. They also sent out two groups, one to the Midwest and Texas and the other to the Pacific Northwest, to work on the land and report back to New York. On the basis of these reports, colonies were to be established.⁹

The first of these was at Sicily Island in Catahoula Parish, Louisiana. Founded in late 1881, it got off to a promising start only to be completely destroyed by a flood in 1882. The colonists returned to New York, regrouped, and set out for Arkansas in the early spring of 1883.¹⁰ This was to be a timber enterprise established in virgin forest and colonized by members of the New York Am Olam, some of whom had been a part of the Sicily Island group. The land was ill-suited for agriculture, and the colonists' problems were compounded by intense heat, insects, and malaria. By July 90 percent of the

6. There are other spellings but Am Olam is the one favored by the *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 2:861. For the most complete account of Am Olam, see Abraham Menes, "The Am Oylem Movement," *YIVO Annual of Jewish Social Sciences* 4 (1949): 9-33; Uri D. Herscher, *Jewish Agricultural Utopias in America 1880-1910* (Detroit: Wayne State Press, 1981), 32-48; Louis Greenberg, *The Jews in Russia: The Struggle for Emancipation* (New York: Schocken Books, 1979), 166-67.

7. Odessa, a cosmopolitan port city, provided a special window on the world for its Jewish community. Steven J. Zipperstein, *The Jews of Odessa* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1985), offers an excel-

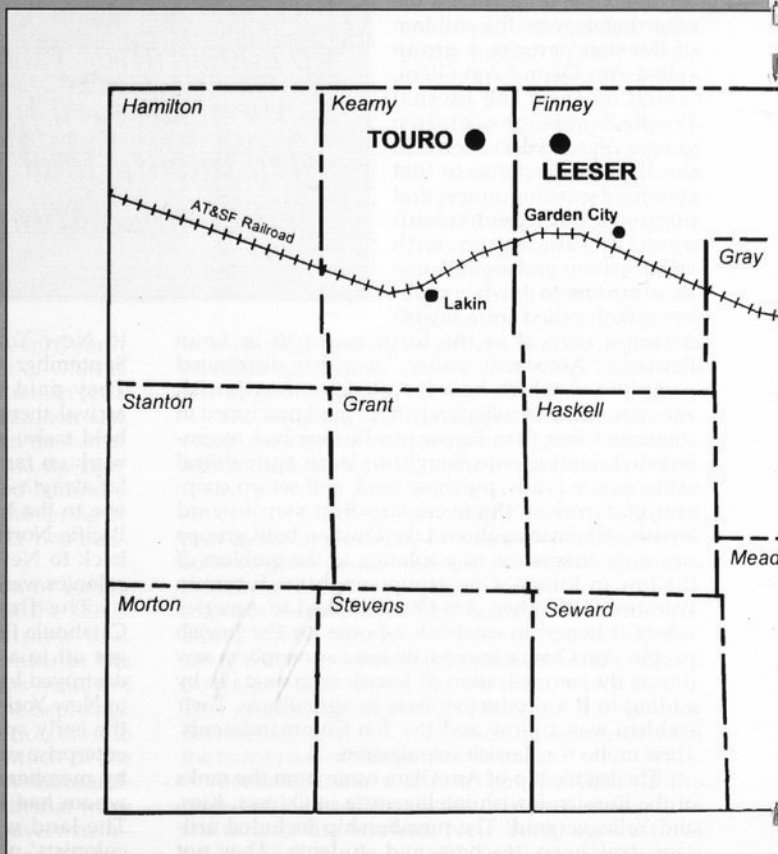
lent study of that community and its special relationship to that Galician Jewry that found its center in Brody.

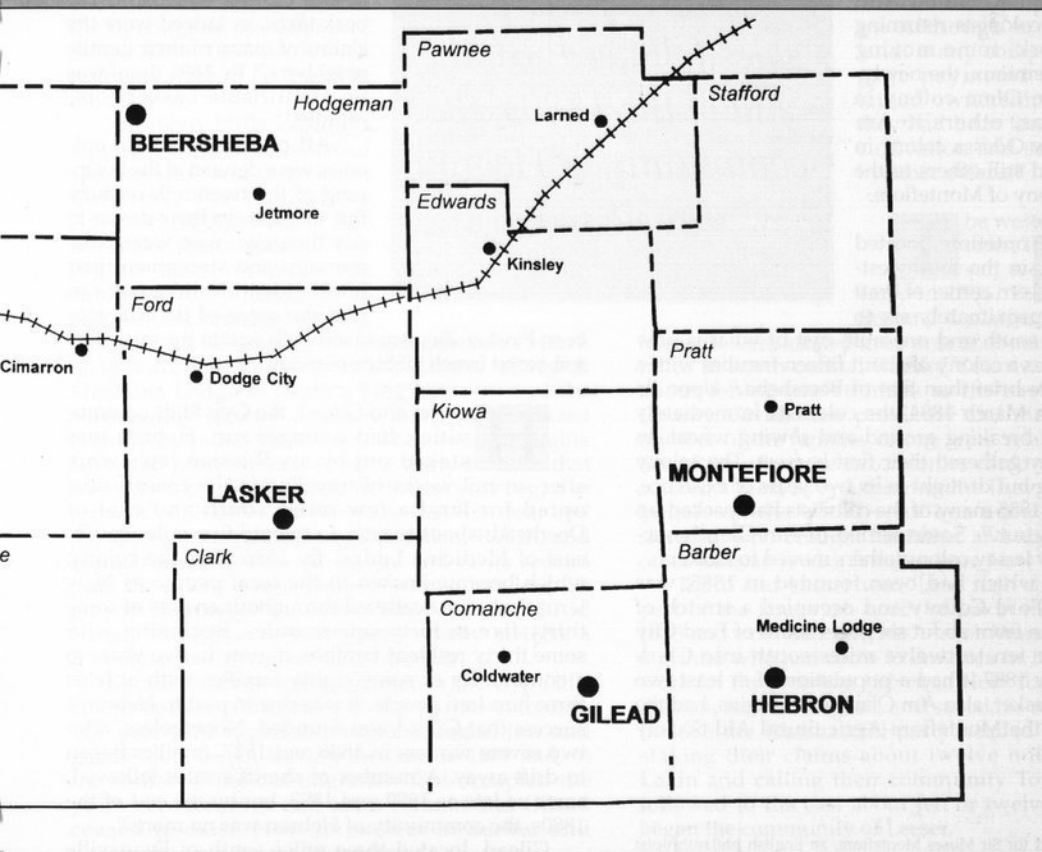
8. Menes, "The Am Oylem Movement," 9-33; Herscher, *Jewish Agricultural Utopias*, 32-48; Greenberg, *Jews in Russia*, 166-67.

9. Herscher, *Jewish Agricultural Utopias*, 37-39.

10. The best account is Shpall, "Jewish Agricultural Colonies," 129-32; see also Menes, "The Am Oylem Movement," 23-24; Herscher, *Jewish Agricultural Utopias*, 32-37.

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colonists were ill and some twenty of the original 150 colonists had died. By September 1883 the Arkansas experiment had ended with part of the colonists returning to New York, some moving north to Cremieux, the newly-formed Am Olam colony in the Dakotas, others to Am Olam's New Odessa colony in Oregon, and still others to the Kansas colony of Montefiore.

Montefiore, located in the southwest corner of Pratt County, approximately six to eight miles south and one mile east of what is now Cullison, was a colony of about fifteen families with a history more brief than that of Beersheba.¹¹ Upon its founding in March 1884, the colonists immediately set to work breaking ground and sowing wheat. In autumn they gathered their first harvest. The colony saw nothing but drought in its two years of existence, and by late 1885 many of the colonists had packed up and moved out.¹² Some settled in Am Olam's successful New Jersey colony, others moved to Lasker.

Lasker, which had been founded in 1885, was located in Ford County and occupied a stretch of land that ran from about six miles south of Ford City for another ten to twelve miles south into Clark County.¹³ By 1887 it had a population of at least two hundred. Lasker, also Am Olam in its origins, had the support of the Montefiore Agricultural Aid Society

and managed to achieve a degree of prosperity. But it too succumbed to drought at the end of the decade, and many of the claims were sold for back taxes, as indeed were the claims of many of their gentile neighbors.¹⁴ By 1891 there was no identifiable Lasker community.

All of the Am Olam colonies were defunct at the beginning of the twentieth century. But in them, in their desire to pay their own way, work communally, and strengthen their Jewish identification, one can find the seeds of the Russian-

born Pinsker Zionism that dwells within the muscular, soil-based Israeli kibbutz of today.

Hebron and Gilead, the Gyp Hills communities, had a longer run. Hebron was staked out by six Russian Jews who, after several weeks of traveling in the countryside, opted for land a few miles south and east of Deerhead, about twenty to twenty-five miles southeast of Medicine Lodge. By 1886-1887 the colony, which became known to the local people as New Jerusalem, was scattered throughout an area of some thirty-five to forty square miles. Beginning with some thirty resident families, it grew in two years to a community of some eighty families with at least three hundred people. It was due in part to Hebron's success that Gilead was founded. Nonetheless, after two severe winters in 1886 and 1887, families began to drift away. A number of sheriff's sales followed, some as late as 1892 and 1893, but by the end of the 1880s, the community of Hebron was no more.¹⁵

Gilead, located three miles south of Evansville on the banks of the Salt Fork River, was begun in

11. Named for Sir Moses Montefiore, an English philanthropist who had been particularly active in championing the cause of fellow Jews. Davidson and Goodwin, *Our Jewish Farmers*, 209-12; see also Herscher, *Jewish Agricultural Utopias*, 53-55.

12. Shpall, "Jewish Agricultural Colonies," 140; see also George M. Price, *Russkii Yevrei V Ameriku* (St. Petersburg, 1893), trans. Leo Shpall, *The Russian Jews in America in Publication of the American Jewish Historical Society* (September 1958 to June 1959), 87; Harris, "Sod Jerusalem," 89-92.

13. Named for Eduard Lasker, a German liberal economist who had died in New York City while on an American lecture tour just preceding the formation of the colony. The most complete available account is Harris, "Sod Jerusalem," 89-92; see also Shpall, "Jewish Agricultural Colonies," 140.

14. Harris, "Sod Jerusalem," 93-102; see also Davidson and Goodwin, *Our Jewish Farmers*, 221-25; Shpall, "Jewish Agricultural Colonies," 140-41.

15. Harris, "Sod Jerusalem," 103-20; see also Sapinsley, "Jewish Agricultural Colonies in the West," 159; *Chosen Land: A History of Barber County, Kansas* (Medicine Lodge, Ks.: Barber County History Committee, 1980), 42. The latter item is headed "New Jerusalem," but it is clearly Hebron.

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March 1886 by about a dozen families of Rumanian Jews, but it soon died. From 1887 to 1897 was a decade of drought, and many left to take part in the opening of the Cherokee Strip. After 1895 no Jewish residents were to be found in the area.¹⁶

The Gyp Hills colonies represent a mix of enlightened sponsorship and individual initiative. The Montefiore Agricultural Aid Society did not make the mistake of trying to micro-manage the colonies from a distance as had the Cincinnati group. Nor did it set up its colonies on lands unseen. In March of 1884 six Russians, sent by the society, arrived in Medicine Lodge to begin a long inspection of the surrounding country, a survey that was conducted entirely by journeys on foot. They found suitable land, and soon the first of some thirty families that were to make up the colony in its first year began to arrive. Conditions were favorable that first year and the colony attracted others, Rumanian, Polish, and Hungarian Jews as well. By the end of its second year, the colony numbered at least two hundred. Its growth encouraged the Montefiore Agricultural Aid Society to begin a second colony nearby in 1886, a Rumanian Jewish colony called Gilead.

Kansas weather was no kinder to the Gyp Hills colonists than it had been to the earlier colonists. The year 1887 began a ten-year drought. Jew and gentile both began leaving the land in 1889 and, in the course of the out-migration that occupied the years between 1889 and 1891, Hebron and Gilead ceased to exist. New Jerusalem in Barber and Comanche counties was no more.

In the Gyp Hills, the Jewish colonists' experiences more closely paralleled the American gentile homesteader experience. Granted, initial support came from an eastern organization, but families set-

tled as individual families. The communities were an expression of their common faith, not common ownership nor common utopian ideology. Although most left the land, many completed mortgage payments and maintained ownership long after they had been forced to cease cultivation and seek a living by other means.¹⁷

The westernmost colonies, Touro and Leeser, were founded early in 1886. Touro was the first and the larger of the two.¹⁸

Its farms were located in an area of about nine square miles in north-central Kearny County. Leeser was about ten or twelve miles to the east in Finney County. Given their proximity and the fact that a number of the families of one were related to families of the other, the two colonies could well be considered almost as one community. They were begun largely on the initiative of one man, Jacob Warshawski, who brought his father and about a dozen other Russian Jewish families from New York.

Touro and Leeser were land rush communities, part of the land rush north of Lakin that began in 1885 and extended into 1887. Jacob Warshawski was a printer who had come to America in 1883, gone to work for the *American Hebrew*, a New York City publication, learned English, and saved his money. Early in 1886 the Warshawski party headed for Kansas, staking their claims about twelve miles north of Lakin and calling their community Touro. Others followed to the east about ten or twelve miles and began the community of Leeser.

17. Harris, "Sod Jerusalems," 102-23. Except for a brief reference in Sapinsley, "Jewish Agricultural Colonies in the West," 159, and the names on a list in Davidson and Goodwin, *Our Jewish Farmers*, 221, these colonies are absent from the other accounts of Jewish agricultural settlement.

18. The communities were named for two prominent American Jewish leaders, Judah Touro of New Orleans and Rabbi Isaac Leeser of Philadelphia, editor of the *Occident*, a magazine that championed Jewish causes.

16. Harris, "Sod Jerusalems," 120-23; see also Sapinsley, "Jewish Agricultural Colonies in the West," 159.

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As with all the earlier colonies, sod houses were built and wells sunk. Wells in that area were necessarily deep, thus time consuming and costly. Few were completed, and water was shared by hauling it through the countryside in a barrel on a wagon. The blizzard of 1886, a damaging tornado in the spring of 1887, and a continuing drought commencing in 1888 ended the agricultural phase of the colonies. Backing the wrong town in the county seat struggle of 1887 terminated town dreams as well. Many of the settlers left the area when lands were opened for settlement in Oklahoma. Others drifted away to urban occupations in successful towns. By 1890 Touro and Leaser were gone.¹⁹

There is little to distinguish between the Jewish experience in Touro-Leaser and that of their gentile neighbors. Like these neighbors, Hebrew colonists formed a Home Protection Association, planned for a post office, and became involved in town planning. Together with their gentile neighbors, the colonists entered into the race for a county seat. Apparently little was made of their religious differences, and the local press almost always referred to them as "our Russian neighbors," which would lead one to believe that their primary identification was that of national origin rather than belief.²⁰ Here the Jewish experience blurs and merges with the larger Kansas homesteader experience.

Beersheba, Montefiore and Lasker, Hebron and Gilead, and Touro and Leaser were fundamentally different from one another. Beersheba was largely the child of Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise of Cincinnati and the American reform Jewish community there. Montefiore and Lasker found their roots in a Russian intellectual movement

and in Leon Pinsker's Zionism as expressed in the Am Olam organization. Hebron, or New Jerusalem as it was known to its gentile neighbors, and Gilead reflect a combination of American Jewish group sponsorship and individual initiative. Touro and Leaser belong more in the land rush tradition of individual American pioneer enterprise.

Each of the threads represented by the Kansas Jewish agricultural colonies was part of a much larger tapestry. The Cincinnati Emigrant Aid Committee was only one of

several such single city committees that emerged in the 1880s and again at the turn of the century. They in turn could tap into larger organizational bases. Two European organizations, the Alliance Israelite Universelle and later the Baron de Hirsch Fund, made funds available for American efforts; American organizations such as the Hebrew Emigrant Aid Society and the Montefiore Agricultural Aid Society were active in promoting agricultural settlement. The Hebrew Emigrant Aid Society was founded in the winter of 1882 as a joint effort of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations and the United Hebrew Charities to aid and support refugees coming into the United States. It established temporary shelters and kitchens, which was its primary goal, but it also sought to find work for Jewish tradesmen and to establish agricultural colonies. This last activity, however, was to be carried out by separate organizations created for that purpose. One such organization, the Montefiore Agricultural Aid Society, was founded in March 1882.²¹

19. Harris, "Sod Jerusalem," 124-33; Sapinsley, "Jewish Agricultural Colonies in the West," 159.

20. A series of brief paragraphs from the *Kearny County Advocate*, quoted in Harris, "Sod Jerusalem," 128, consistently so identifies them.

21. Herscher, *Jewish Agricultural Utopias*, 32-35; Shpall, "Jewish Agricultural Colonies," 126-29; Price, *Russian Jews in America*, 115-20. The Alliance Israelite Universelle was organized in 1860 by a group of Franco Jewish philanthropists to promote educational, industrial, and agricultural work among needy Jews. The Baron de Hirsch Fund, founded by a single philanthropist Baron Maurice de Hirsch, was a bit later in the field than the AUI, but it did set aside moneys for American colonization.

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Early colonization efforts were not confined to Kansas but included colonies at Clarion, Utah; Cotopaxi, Colorado; Chananel and Iola, North Dakota; New Odessa, Oregon; and Palestine, Michigan.²² Later, turn-of-the-century efforts included colonies in Wisconsin, Wyoming, Texas, Pennsylvania, Connecticut, New York, and New Jersey.²³

Am Olam had burned itself out by the end of the century but not before following up its Louisiana, Arkansas, and Kansas efforts with the colonies of Cremieux and Bethlehem-Jehudah in South Dakota; Painted Woods, North Dakota; and New Odessa, Oregon.²⁴ Like their Kansas counterparts, most of these were short-lived.

Beersheba, Montefiore, Lasker, Touro, and Leaser were all Russian colonies. Hebron, in the Gyp Hills, was primarily Russian but included some Rumanian and Hungarian Jews. Neighboring Gilead was almost wholly Rumanian. All were eastern European, almost all were Russian, and all were orthodox.

As one might expect from communities built upon a common religion, a house of worship was among their first priorities. Beersheba built a sod synagogue very early and followed with a sod schoolhouse shortly thereafter.²⁵ The same was true of Montefiore and Lasker.²⁶ In the Gyp Hills, Hebron built a synagogue, but there is no mention of a synagogue for Gilead.²⁷ That the two were close together

suggests that the Gilead settlers may well have come to Hebron to worship. Neither is there any mention of a synagogue in the westernmost colonies, Touro and Leaser. Local newspapers indicate, however, that the colonists spent the high holy days with fellow religionists in Garden City and observed Passover in their homes.²⁸

The reasons offered for the failures of the colonies are uniform. Poor site selection was of major consequence. Almost all

the colonies were located in cattle country, some on or along cattle trails and some in what had been the Comanche Cattle Pool, a large Gyp Hills cooperative. The pool, which had included the stock of at least fifteen ranchers, was formed in April 1880, and by the spring of 1884 it contained some eighty thousand head of cattle. The unusually harsh winter of 1884-1885, which preceded the even more severe blizzard and disastrous cold of 1886, took a heavy toll on the herds. The ranchers were unable to recover from this loss and the land was opened to settlers.²⁹ It was a land where wood was scarce, water had to be taken from deep wells, and settlers had to break tough buffalo grass sod to begin cultivation. In addition, none was close enough to a market or railroad to sell profitably what they did manage to produce.³⁰ Many of the colonies were beset with natural disasters: blizzards, bitter cold, and tornadoes. All were plagued by the scarcity of lumber and fuel and by the necessity of living in soddies. All faced difficulties in obtaining water and the expense of digging deep wells.

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22. Everett L. Cooley, "Clarion, Utah, Jewish Colony in Zion," *Utah Historical Quarterly* 36 (Spring 1968): 113-31; Herscher, *Jewish Agricultural Utopias*, 37-72; Shpall, "Jewish Agricultural Colonies," 133-37; Helen Blumenthal, "The New Odessa Colony of Oregon, 1882-1886," *Western States Jewish Historical Quarterly* 14 (July 1982): 321-32; Menes, "The Am Oylem Movement," 28-33; Price, *Russian Jews in America*, 89-92.

23. Herscher, *Jewish Agricultural Utopias*, passim.

24. *Ibid.*, 48-52, 70-71; see also Menes, "The Am Oylem Movement," 25-28; and Shpall, "Jewish Agricultural Colonies," 132-33, 137-38. Herscher also mentions failed colonies in California, Nevada, Maryland, Virginia, and South Carolina.

25. Rudin, "Beersheba," 292.

26. Shpall, "Jewish Agricultural Colonies," 140.

27. Harris, "Sod Jerusalems," 108.

28. *Ibid.*, 128.

29. *Comanche County History* (Coldwater, Ks.: Comanche County Historical Society, 1981), 48-51; Mary Einsel, ed., "Some Notes on the Comanche Cattle Pool," *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 26 (Spring 1960): 59-66.

30. Price, *Russian Jews in America*, 87.

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war decade had staked out their claims, and substantial groups of Europeans had followed. Significant Swedish immigration into Kansas began in 1868. Mennonites from Russia arrived in large numbers in 1874 to be followed in the next two years by other Russian Germans. In addition, a number of black colonies were begun in the late 1870s. The Jews, as latecomers, had to choose from what was left.

Beersheba, Montefiore, Lasker, Touro, and Leeser were all High Plains colonies, with Beersheba on the borderline between the High Plains and the Smoky Hills. All but Lasker were located in what was to become the 1930s Dust Bowl. Hebron and Gilead were in the Gyp Hills, an area geologically classified as red hills. The soil of Beersheba, Montefiore, Touro, and Leeser was classifiable either as chestnut soil or brown soil. Lasker, Hebron, and Gilead were on soil classifiable as reddish chestnut. All three soil types tended to be low in nitrogen and to have a high rate of evaporation. They were not the best of lands for cultivation in a semiarid area.³¹

United States Department of Agriculture soil surveys provide more precise designations within these general soil groups. Beersheba's soil is subclassified as Richfield type soil, and Touro and Leeser soils are identified as Richfield-Ulysses. The soil in the Lasker area is identified as Harley-Spearville-Ulysses, and that in the area of Montefiore is identified as Bethany-Ost. All are rated as having severe limitations that reduce the choice of plants, require special conservation practices, or both. The soils of the Hebron and Gilead areas are subclassified as Quinlan-Woodward-Grant or Albion-Shellabarger. Both are rated as having severe limitations that make them generally unsuitable for cultivation. According to the surveys, the only important crops

suitable for dryland farming in any of these areas are wheat and sorghum, on fallow ground, and if rainfall is average or above. The native vegetation in all these areas was short grass or a combination of short grass, bunch grass, and shrubs. By 1914 most of the land was again covered by native grasses with small acreages in forage or feed grain.³²

The timing of the Kansas colonization efforts could not have been worse. The colonies were started at the end of a period of abnormally high rainfall when western Kansas was showing its best face to the prospective colonists. After 1885 Kansas was to show a grimmer countenance. The great blizzard of 1886 worked grievous hardships on man and beast alike with tens of thousands of cattle perishing. Then in late summer of that year, Kansas dried up. No significant moisture fell in southwestern Kansas from September 8, 1886, to mid-April 1887. By mid-June of that year, another long dry season had begun. The combination of blizzard, drought, repeated crop failures, and a deflation of agricultural prices broke the colonies before they had a chance to establish themselves firmly.³³

32. *Soil Survey, Hodgeman County, Kansas* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, June 1973); *Soil Survey, Kearny County, Kansas* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, November 1963); *Soil Survey, Finney County, Kansas* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, November 1965); *Soil Survey, Ford County, Kansas* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, August 1968); *Soil Survey, Pratt County, Kansas* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, September 1968); *Soil Survey, Barber County, Kansas* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, February 1977); *Soil Survey, Comanche County, Kansas* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, June 1989).

33. "Original Record of Meteorological Observations Made at Dodge City, Kansas, 1881-1891" (Unpublished paper, Weather Data Library, Kansas State University, Manhattan); see also William F. Zornow, *Kansas: A History of the Jayhawk State* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1957), 165-69; Walter T. K. Nugent, *The Tolerant Populists: Kansas Populism and Nativism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 41-45; Robert W. Richmond, *Kansas: A Land of Contrasts* (Arlington Heights, Ill.: Forum Press, 1974), 131-32; Kenneth S. Davis, *Kansas: A Bicentennial History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1976), 126-27.

31. Huber Self, *Geography of Kansas* (Oklahoma City: Harlow Publishing Corporation, 1960), 51-53.

The same difficulties were faced by gentile settlers, and the same conditions forced a great many of them to leave the land at the same time. "In God we trusted, in Kansas we busted" is not a Jewish slogan. Indeed the only Jewish reason that fits our stereotype is that these colonists were lacking in agricultural skills. This is generally the case, but not universally. Nor were all gentile settlers skilled. Those who had such skills apparently tried to share them with newcomers, Jews and gentiles alike.

Complicating the problem for the Jewish colonists was that, unlike most other immigrant groups, the Russian Jew lacked the peasant experience. There is a rhythm of the seasons to which one becomes attuned only by living on the soil. The Russian Jew, confined to the pale of settlement and denied farming experience in an eastern orthodox Christian Russia that had been serf-farmed until 1862, lacked that oneness with the seasons. His was the tradition of the shtetl, the small market village. He may have been an artisan, craftsman or small trader, but he was not a farmer. Even further removed from the soil were the urban intellectuals and students who made up the bulk of Am Olam. That they lasted as long as they did is, in itself, a tribute. The out-migration that they joined at the end of the decade was not merely a Jewish out-migration, it was a general economic collapse. It was an equal opportunity disaster.

The colonies disappeared. All the settlers did not. Many individuals who had skills moved to Dodge City, Lakin, or Garden City to find employ-

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ment. Descendants of those early settlers remain. In the Gyp Hills colonies were a number of families with some means of their own who were able to prove up on the land and pay off their mortgages by finding employment elsewhere. A number of those families remain prominent in Wichita and Kansas City. The broad hats, boots and "shoot irons," as Charles Davis had called them, of Kansas had a leavening of yarmulkes and tallit katans. There was room for the sons and daughters of David. The colonies died, but

many of the colonists remained to enrich our Kansas cultural heritage.

These seven "forgotten Zions" in Kansas exemplify, as perhaps nowhere else, all of the facets of the Jewish agricultural effort in the nineteenth-century United States. Beersheba was built upon individually-owned land farmed with sponsor-owned equipment and was managed by the sponsoring agent. Montefiore and Lasker were utopian Am Olam communities with all held in common. Hebron and Gilead consisted of partially subsidized individual farms, while Touro and Leaser represented complete individual initiative. All failed in the face of a hostile and uncompromising nature that drove them, and thousands of gentile settlers, from Kansas soil; but their story is a vital element in the state's ethnic history. It is important that we not forget the seven Zions of Kansas.

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