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Agricultural Achievements
in Palestine

by

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It is impossible to understand Jewish colonisation in Palestine without first fully realising the hold which *Eretz Yisrael*¹ has always had upon the consciousness of Jews throughout the world. The primary motive that led many Jews to emigrate from Europe to Palestine was not a desire to improve their economic position but a longing for the land where they once had formed an independent nation and for whose re-establishment they had prayed daily for two thousand years.

Up to the middle of the nineteenth century the active interest in Palestine shown by European Jews was confined to *Haluqqa*, contributions for the support of Palestine pilgrims. The first decisive step to make these pioneers self-supporting through agriculture, however, was taken in 1870 by Charles Netter, who had been sent to Palestine by the Alliance Israélite Universelle. He requested and obtained on lease from the Sultan an area of about 2,000 dunams in extent, near Jaffa. There he founded the Agricultural School of Mikve Yisrael, which still exists and where thousands of young people have been trained.

It was not until 1882, however, that the beginnings of agricultural settlement in Palestine were made. The Russian pogroms in 1881 and the growing anti-Semitism of the Czarist government led Russian Jews to despair of any improvement in their political status. Thus the idea of mass emigration crystallized into decision. Hundreds of thousands became pilgrims. Their goal, above all, was the United States of America and the liberal European countries where immigration was comparatively easy and economic prospects were good. Nevertheless, a relatively small number, actuated by the desire to live and work in the Holy Land, chose the far less promising way to Palestine.

In order to aid and encourage this movement an Association of Friends of Palestine (*Hovevei-Zion*) was established with a central office in Odessa. The first young immigrants (called *Bilu* after the initial letters of the words in Isaiah: "*Bet Yaakov lekhu venelkha*"²) arrived in Palestine in 1882, simultaneously with groups from Rumania. With great difficulty they managed to purchase some land in Judaea, Samaria and Upper Galilee, where they founded the villages of Rishon le-Zion, Z'khron Yaakov and Rosh Pina. Despite the heroic efforts of the pioneers, lack of funds, inexperience in farming, and malaria would soon have put an end to their settlements had not Baron Edmund de Rothschild in Paris, hearing of their desperate struggles, generously come to their assistance. From 1885 onward he sent them money and instructors, urged them to make vine-growing the basis of their agricultural system and built large wine cellars at Rishon le-Zion and Zikhron Yaakov.

In spite of this aid, the villages failed to show progress, and their circumstances twenty-five years after the establishment of the first ones were so desperate that many settlers — and their children in particular — left for neighbouring towns, or other countries. One factor in the situation was, ironically enough, the increasing harvest from the vineyards which formed the basis of the farming system. A serious marketing problem was created by this development, especially since the margin of return was very small in any case. The danger inherent in every one-crop system of cultivation became evident when the settlers found that there was no other form of agriculture to which they could turn. Secondly, most of the administrators and instructors sent from France by Baron Rothschild considered it their duty merely to act as inspectors and to see that their orders were carried out to the letter. The settlers were allowed no freedom in the management of their farms, with the result that all creative joy in their work was killed. Instead of an opportunity to become independent farmers, they faced the future only as wards of the Baron, carrying out the orders of his administrators in order not to lose their dole.

The third major difficulty lay in the fact that nearly all the administrators were assimilated French Jews whose attitudes were alien to the settlers and who considered it their right and duty to instil into the youth of the settlements the higher French culture. In this effort they were successful, for the young people saw no future in the villages, believing rather that a knowledge of the French language and culture would help them find more remunerative positions in the outside world. With their departure all initiative and

¹ *Eretz Israel*, literally "The Land of Israel", the traditional Hebrew name for Palestine.

² "House of Jacob! Come, let us go forth!"

enthusiasm went out of the villages. The settlers who remained did practically none of their own work, preferring instead to hire cheap Arab labour for their vineyards.

In 1900, the Jewish Colonisation Association (ICA), of Paris, assumed responsibility for the Baron Rothschild villages and those of the affiliated Palestine Jewish Colonisation Association (PICA). New villages in Lower Galilee were also founded by ICA, although instead of viticulture they concentrated on corn growing and thus repeated the fundamental error of the earlier settlements. Consequently, when the harvest failed, the villages were impoverished. The ICA, furthermore, continued the administrator-inspector system of the Rothschild villages and therefore failed to gain the confidence and co-operation of the settlers.

The year 1903 saw in Russia a repetition of the events of 1881: pogroms, terroristic acts inspired by the government, and consequent mass emigration. From 1903 to 1914 approximately 20,000 persons entered Palestine from Russia. They were young people of all professions and enthusiastic Zionists: students, merchants, artisans, *yeshivah*³ students, and workers. All had one thing in common, namely, that they had spent their youth in Russia during a period of social ferment and were fired with the desire to create in Palestine, within the framework of a Jewish commonwealth, new and better social conditions. To this cause they were ready to sacrifice their personal interests and devote all their energy.

In 1907, when the Zionist World Organization, created by Theodor Herzl, decided to foster agricultural settlement in Palestine, it had to learn from the experience of previous attempts, experience which indicated the steps to be avoided rather than the positive measures to be taken. New methods, partly derived from the old, were developed; the result was a system based on the following administrative, juridical and economic principles:

(1) Co-operation on the basis of mutual responsibilities.

(2) A settler's wife was to receive agricultural training in order to do her share of the work on equal terms with her husband.

(3) Mixed farming, including the growing of corn, fodder, vegetables and fruit, was to supplant the one-crop system. Moreover, semi-industrial undertakings were to be run by farms wherever feasible.

(4) The size and nature of the farm were to be in keeping with the working capacity of the settler and his family alone.

(5) The number of families in each settlement, whether it be a *kvutzah*⁴ or a *moshav ovdim*, were to be not less than sixty (in exceptional cases, forty) to prevent monotony from stagnating the cultural and social life of the settlers and to reduce the share of each family in the communal budget.

(6) Co-operative societies were to be formed for purchase and sale.

(7) The land was to be acquired through the Jewish National Fund⁵ and properly demarcated.

(8) As a rule each settler was to receive either 18-25 dunams (5-7 acres) of irrigated land or 90-120 dunams (22-30 acres) of unirrigated land (in the *kvutzah* one man and one woman represent a settler unit). In most cases each settler received both.

(9) From a technical-agricultural point of view, the following guiding principles in the establishment of a new settlement have been developed:

Town planning. A town planning expert is to prepare a layout of the settlement (roads, arrangement of living quarters and farm buildings, etc.) on the basis of a topographical map. Climatic conditions are to be taken into consideration.

Removal of natural obstacles. Natural obstacles likely to impede normal agricultural work excessively are to be removed. Swamps harbouring malaria must be drained; scrub

³ *Yeshivah*, a Talmudical Academy.

⁴ *Kvutzah*, a collective settlement; *moshav*, a co-operative small-holders' settlement.

⁵ Jewish National Fund, a fund for purchasing land as the inalienable possession of the Jewish people. This land cannot be sold, but is leased out on hereditary leases to settlers. The Jewish National Fund was founded in 1901.

which prevents ploughing cleared and stones removed. (In many cases the Jewish National Fund also undertakes the afforestation of a part of the land.)

Central water supply. A central water work is to be provided.

Suitable farming scheme. For every settlement a suitable farming scheme (with estimate of costs) is to be drawn up by the Agricultural Experimental Station in Rehovot (founded in 1922 by the Jewish Agency⁶ on whose behalf it acts) with the assistance of a special planning commission.

Settlement loan. The settlers are to receive from the Jewish Agency a promise that, as soon as its funds will allow, it will place the amounts required for the establishment of the settlement at their disposal in the form of a loan to be redeemed in forty-nine yearly instalments, at an interest rate of 2%.

Selection of settlers. The choice of settlers for every new community is to be made by the Agricultural Department of the Jewish Agency in agreement with the Central Agricultural Organisation of the General Federation of Jewish Labour (*Merkaz Hakl'd'i*) or the Mizrahi Labour Federation (Federation of Religious Workers) acting as representatives of all candidates for settlement.

Alternative sources of income. Opportunity must be found to help tide the settlers over their initial period on the farms. Work can sometimes be found for them outside the settlement; as a rule, however, they can be put to work erecting their own buildings and in drainage, afforestation and road building, for which they are paid.

It is noteworthy that whenever these principles have not been followed, either because of exceptional circumstances or undue haste, the settlement has suffered.

Up to 1920, the Zionist Organisation could raise only a minimum of the funds needed for agricultural colonisation. While the Jewish National Fund, according to its statutory task, could purchase and prepare the land, there was no special fund for the erection of buildings and the acquisition of live stock. This position was changed in 1920 when the Zionist Organisation founded the Palestine Foundation Fund (*Keren Hayesod*) which, by annual campaigns throughout the world, collects contributions for the upbuilding of Palestine. This body provides the long term loans at low interest rates which enable settlers on Jewish National Fund land to proceed with the establishment of their farms.

Prospective settlers are free to choose one of two types of settlement, a co-operative smallholders' settlement (*moshav ovdim*), or a collective settlement (*kvutzah*). These two types have developed into the characteristic social forms of colonisation. The *kvutzah* is a large-scale farm in which all the settlers work as equals; officially it is registered as a co-operative society. In the *moshav ovdim* every settler owns his house and farm, which he manages independently according to his own judgment. It often happens, however, that all the settlers of a *moshav ovdim*, or part of them, join together in order to run certain activities in common. For instance, irrigation in all *moshvei ovdim* is managed by a settlers' co-operative; settlers do not buy water from a private company. Similarly, in most *moshvei ovdim*, there is a credit co-operative and a co-operative for purchase and sale, etc. Many of these latter serve not only one settlement but several neighbouring settlements, or even — as does the *Mashbir* (Central Purchasing Company), or the *Tnuvah* (Central Sales Company for Agricultural Products) — all the settlements of the type of *kvutzah* or *moshav ovdim*.

The choice between the *moshav* or the *kvutzah* form of settlement depends first of all on the attitude of the settler. As a rule, young settlers between the ages of 20 and 25 prefer the *kvutzah*. On the other hand, settlers nearing or in their thirties prefer the *moshav ovdim* because they feel equal to the task of running their farms independently. Moreover, since most of them are married and have children, they prefer an opportunity to live privately. This the *moshav* can offer them more readily than the *kvutzah*, where husband and wife, though having a room of their own, must conform to the communal discipline.

⁶ The Jewish Agency for Palestine is the central body representing Jews all over the world interested in the upbuilding of the Jewish National Home in Palestine.

Both the *kvutzah* and the *moshav ovdim* are still in a state of development. For example, the settlement of Shavé Zion, founded in 1938 by German-Jewish immigrants, has adopted the principle of collective production in all its work (which the *kvutzah* follows) while retaining the individual homestead policy of the *moshav ovdim*.

In the *kvutzah*, all the settlers and the adult members of their families take their meals together in the common dining room and are allotted certain living and sleeping quarters in the communal houses. Private property does not exist, all the settlers being members with equal rights and receiving from the communal budget everything needed for themselves and their families. The *kvutzah* must not, however, be confused with the state-controlled *Kolkhoz* or *Sovkhoz* systems in Soviet Russia. The *kvutzah* are autonomous bodies which determine their activities on their own responsibility and independently of any governmental interference.

Doubts have often been expressed whether the equipment in the *kvutzah* would be used with sufficient care. Compared with the state of affairs in a large private farm, however, the *kvutzah* members' sense of responsibility toward their farming stock and machinery is more highly developed than that of privately hired workers, and the treatment they receive more considerate. The fact that the *kvutzah* are autonomous societies with a specific character of their own explains the pride taken in their development and why economic initiative thrives there as nowhere else. Many *kvutzah* have established canning factories for the production of jams; some have started fisheries; others produce building materials, keep a fleet of trucks, or run machine, carpentry and shoemaking shops, the products of which in many cases are for sale outside the settlement.

Like the *moshav ovdim*, the *kvutzah* is managed by a committee chosen by all the settlers. This committee manages the entire farm and allocates work to all its members, whereas in the *moshav ovdim*, the committee handles only such communal responsibilities as medical service, payment of government taxes, maintenance of school, library, etc.

New members are accepted in the *kvutzah* only after a vote has been taken at a meeting of all members and usually only after a probationary period of six months to a year. In the *moshav ovdim*, the conditions for the acceptance of new settlers are not quite so strict. Nevertheless, here also the settlers take care that the applicants for a new unit or a vacant one are acceptable in character, mentality and agricultural experience.

Experience has shown that it is vitally important for the success of the settlement to choose men who can work and live in harmony with each other. This first generation of farmers in Palestine generally come from different countries with different cultural and economic environments and therefore must adapt themselves to the new community. The ideal situation, of course, would be one in which each settlement contains a core of members who have previously known each other. It must always be borne in mind that the *kvutzah*, and to a lesser extent the *moshav ovdim*, is not just a community with a *material purpose* in common, but a community *living* in common. It demands, therefore, a far greater measure of spiritual affinity on the part of all concerned than would be necessary in a purely economic undertaking. The result of this winnowing process is that, as a rule, every settlement has a definite political and religious character.

The failure of some colonising efforts by Jews outside Palestine was often due to the fact that the technical-agricultural standpoint was overstressed. Colonisation, however, is not only a matter of promoting agricultural development but of creating genuine communities. Its primary object must, therefore, be the creation of such conditions as will enable people to live together with a minimum of friction. Wherever the general social requirements are not properly satisfied, colonisation must fail, however well it may have been planned.

The *kvutzah* also selects its female members with the same care that it does its men. The Zionist Organisation has always attached great importance to the help which a settler's wife can render in making the farm a success and has from the beginning provided agricultural training for girls. With the assistance of the WIZO (Women's International Zionist Organisation) and Hadassah (The Organisation of Zionist Women in the U.S.A.), it has set up special agricultural schools and training farms.

The *kvutzah*, moreover, can take in additional members without difficulty by reducing

the acreage per settler through intensive agriculture. In the *moshav ovdim*, where every settler controls his own land and farm, expansion is much more difficult.

In addition to these colonists who form the majority of the settlers, there has always been a smaller group who entered the country with sufficient means to establish themselves. It was usual for these capitalist settlers to become orange growers in preference to the more difficult mixed farming with its small returns, in spite of the warnings issued on the dangers of citriculture as a one-crop system of farming. It was not until some years ago, when the problem of marketing the enormously increased orange crop became more and more difficult, that these settlers turned away from citriculture and took up mixed farming. Their number has been increased by many well-to-do Jews from Germany, Austria and Czechoslovakia, most of whom are people of middle age. Only in rare cases are they able to undergo the several years of practical training which is required of all prospective agricultural workers in the co-operative settlements. What they need is advice, instruction and organisation on group lines.

The Jewish Agency provides for the middle-class settler in two different ways. A special department organises them into groups; gives them, if desired, an opportunity to obtain some training in agricultural management; advises them on the best form of settlement; and grants them, should their own capital be insufficient, additional credits up to £P.200 per settler. Another division, the Rural and Suburban Settlement Company (RASSCO), founded by the Jewish Agency, contracts with these middle-class settlers to establish settlements on the basis of a certain budget, thus providing them with farms ready for occupation.

The value of irrigated and non-irrigated land leased by the Jewish National Fund to the settlers during the period 1920-40 amounted to £P.200-300 per settler. The initial costs of establishing a settler family in a *moshav ovdim* amounted, during the period 1935-38, to £P.750-850, in the *kvutzah* £P.650-750. For the sake of comparison it may be noted that the settlement of British veterans in Australia during 1919-22 cost over £2,000 per man, including land, and that the cost of settling a European in Kenya is, according to the latest information, also put at £2,000.

In the *moshav ovdim*, the costs of one farm include the following: house, £P.150-200; farm buildings (cow-shed, poultry house, barn), £P.100; contribution toward the construction of a school and other communal buildings, £P.25; contribution toward water supply and roads, £P.150; contribution to working capital of the co-operative societies, £P.25; livestock and machinery, £P.150-200; plantations, £P.50; maintenance until the first full harvest, including working capital and preparatory work, £P.100.

These costs cover only the minimum needed by the settler to build and equip his farm. During the first years he must make further investments out of his own income. For this reason, it is difficult or almost impossible for him to pay the rent due to the Jewish National Fund or to amortise instalments on the settlement loan of the *Keren Hayesod*. Settlements which have already passed through the initial period and possess their full equipment show earnings which enable them in most cases to raise the payment needed for rent and settlement debt, besides giving the settler a modest subsistence. If the "own consumption" of the settler from the produce of his farm is added to his cash receipts, the result is an income of £P.6-10 per month in addition to living rent free. This is considerably higher than the income of the Arab fellah and suffices to support the settler's family. It also provides for the most essential cultural and other requirements (medical treatment, school).

The monetary contribution which prospective settlers of the working class can make toward their farms is in most cases negligible. The *Keren Hayesod* must place at their disposal almost the entire amount of capital needed. If the settler, after exhausting his initial sum, should need further loans, he can turn to the Palestine Agricultural Settlement Association (PASA), which provides agricultural credits up to twenty years at 4.5% interest. Such organisations as the Central Bank for Co-operative Institutions, the Workers Bank, the Anglo-Palestine Bank, as well as independent bankers, are also prepared to furnish loans on short and intermediate terms (up to about ten years) at 6.8% interest.

Since the funds at the disposal of PASA are limited, the settlements avail themselves in large measure of these short and intermediate term credits. This applies particularly to the *kvutzoth* which, in their endeavour to give work to immigrants or to the unemployed in the towns, in times of economic crisis, have absorbed many more people than was provided for in their original settlement scheme. This obliged them to extend their activities and to raise loans on short or intermediate terms at 6.8% interest. It must be admitted that since these loans served productive ends there seems to be some justification in the claim made by the *kvutzoth* that the *Keren Hayesod* or PASA should convert their loans into long-term credits at low rates of interest.

As will be seen from the table below, during the first twenty-five years of colonisation (1882-1907) under the aegis of Baron Rothschild, altogether about thirty settlements were established, covering an area of 320,000 dunams. In these settlements there lived in 1907 seven thousand persons, about five thousand of whom (including dependents) were engaged in agriculture and two thousand in other occupations (artisans, teachers, medical workers, etc.).

Growth of Jewish Agricultural Settlement

Year	No. of Settlements	Area in Dunams ⁸	Population in the Settlements ⁷	
			Agricultural	Total
1882	6	25,017	about 400	480
1890	14	107,117	2,160	2,960
1900	22	220,657	3,398	5,210
1907	30	320,000	about 5,000	7,000
1914	44	420,587	7,500	11,990
1918	43	421,000	7,500	12,000
1922	75	594,016	9,900	14,782
1927	110	903,074	18,000	30,329
1931	124	1,058,508	24,723	41,349
1936	203	1,393,652	55,370	98,558
1940	257	1,570,000	70,000	142,000
1942	276	1,640,000	—	154,000

During the second period (1907-31), the number of settlements rose to 124, the area to 1,058,508 dunams, the number of inhabitants to 41,349, of whom 24,723 (including dependents) lived by farming. This period embraces the beginning of Zionist colonisation, particularly in the Valley of Jezreel, and the extension of citriculture.

The third period (1931-40) covers the acquisition and the establishment of settlements over larger stretches of land in the coastal plain (e.g., Emek Hefer, Emek Zebulun), in the Beisan district and in Upper Galilee. The number of settlements reached 257, and the population 142,000, of whom 70,000 lived by farming; the area amounted to 1,570,000 dunams.

Interesting is the acceleration in the tempo of colonisation to be seen from the figures mentioned above. The average yearly increase in the agricultural population amounted during the period 1882-1900 to 170 persons; 1900-22 to 320 persons; 1922-31 to 2,000 persons; and 1931-40 to 3,700 persons.

This increase is characteristic not only of colonisation in Palestine but also of that in other countries. In the beginning, until the settlers have collected the necessary experience and adapted themselves to the climatic conditions, agricultural settlement can progress but slowly. Not until these difficulties have been overcome is any substantial and rapid development possible. The average yearly increase of 3,700 persons in the period 1931-40 does not by any means represent the peak of this development and may be considerably exceeded during the course of the next decades.

⁷ Including Petah-Tikvah which, in recent years, has become a municipality. In 1940, it had about 17,000 inhabitants. Several other agricultural settlements have also assumed a semi-urban character.

⁸ One dunam = 1,000 sq. metres, or approximately ¼ acre.

This favourable prognosis is based in the first instance on the fact that during recent years the quest for new water supplies has been crowned with undreamed-of success. It seems almost certain that the amount of water available for irrigation can serve four or five times the 400,000 dunams cultivated today. Secondly, the increase of population (1,500,000 at the end of 1940 as compared with 1,000,000 in 1931 and 783,000 in 1922) has greatly enlarged the local market for agricultural products. Thirdly, many new crops have been introduced (ground nuts, potatoes, subtropical trees, medicinal plants, etc.), which were formerly unknown or rare in Palestine.

Detailed statistical data available for settlements founded by the Zionist Organisation from Keren Hayesod funds show that their number in September 1940 was 134, consisting of 79 *kvuzoth* and 55 *moshvei ovdim*.⁹ These settlements covered an area of 390,000 dunams and had a population of nearly 40,000.

A very marked increase in the output of all settlements has been recorded in recent years. Receipts from the sale of milk, dairy products, eggs, poultry, vegetables and fruit of the 134 Keren Hayesod settlements, which sold their produce through *Tnuva*, the co-operative marketing organisation, increased from £P.141,586 in 1930-31 to £P.1,056,000 in 1940-41.

Tnuva sales, however, form only part of the total earnings of these settlements. In addition, income is derived from the sale of such products as grain and fodder (marketed chiefly through the *Hamashbir Hamerkazi* [Co-operative Wholesale Society]), oilseeds, citrus fruits, fish, part of the banana crop, etc. In 1939-40, income from these products amounted to £P.521,000, while industries and handicrafts operated by the settlements accounted for £P.284,000. Finally, £P.346,000 was earned through outside work (wages, cultivation contracts, transport, etc.). The total revenue of the 134 Keren Hayesod settlements for 1939-40 thus reached £P.1,874,000. Their assets, it should be noted, had a total value of £P.4,535,000, according to the latest annual report of the Workers Bank in Tel-Aviv.

The progress of Jewish agricultural settlement has both refuted the gloomy prophecies of the sceptics and opponents, and surpassed the expectations of its friends. It has provided conclusive proof of the qualities of the Jew as a pioneer colonist and of the feasibility of large-scale Jewish agricultural resettlement on economically productive foundations.

The success of the Palestine settlements is not accidental. It has its roots in specific underlying factors which distinguish Palestine settlement from similar ventures elsewhere. For one thing, it derives its motive power from the high national ideal of the reconstruction of a Jewish homeland, which has been the source of that inspiration and enthusiasm without which the initial difficulties, hardships and disappointments of pioneering could not have been surmounted. The Jewish pioneer settler in Palestine knew that toil and sacrifice, not profit or comfort, would be his lot. Fired by devotion to an ideal, he was determined to stick through thick and thin to his task, even if from the purely material point of view it represented the most difficult and least profitable of the occupations he might have chosen. This devotion continues to be the prime condition for progress in the future.

The growth of a sturdy and devoted second generation is perhaps the most valuable of the results of Jewish settlement. Their upbringing is designed to make them familiar with and attached to agricultural life, and by the time they reach sixteen they are much better trained and equipped for farm life than their parents. The rise of this second generation justifies high hopes of even greater achievements in the future than have been secured by the present pioneer farmers. It must be mentioned, however, that their upbringing and education represents a heavy financial burden. As a result, the birth rate in the settlements is comparatively low, and two children is usually about all the settler can afford. Consideration should therefore be given to the question of special contributions from the central institutions which would help shoulder part of the expense in raising larger families.

In conclusion it may be said that perhaps the greatest asset acquired by Jewish settlement is the vast pioneering and agricultural experience which it has accumulated. Jewish agricultural settlement in Palestine has definitely emerged from the experimental stage, and it may look forward with confidence to future progress and growth.

⁹ The other Jewish settlements in Palestine, which are not included in these statistics, have either been founded by private initiative or by such settlement agencies as Baron Rothschild and the PICA.