

THE NEW BOOK OF LAMENTATIONS

A Letter from Russia to M. Rosen

Translated from the Hebrew. Published in Hadoar, New York, March 23, 1928

Our good and beloved brother:

... Having no other alternative, I am compelled to turn to you with this letter. But this is not a letter! This is a second book of lamentations, which even surpasses with its laments the first one. The first is read only once a year, and the second is read every day throughout the Jewish dispersion in Russia.

Pardon us, our dear brother, for sending you letters and Books of Lamentations which embitter your life. I certainly know that I am not the only one who is suffering from the misfortune and affliction that befell the Russian Jewry; I know that you have many many brothers who are in distress, and who pour into your bosom their embittered hearts and fill your own cup of sorrow with their tears, evening, morning, and noon; I also know that your own cup of tears is already overflowing. The death of your righteous father, the death of your half-brother, Jacob Wasserman, who passed away in the prime of his life in the city of Basel -- whenever I speak of them and whenever I think of them my heart moans within me! -- the banishment of your younger brother to Siberia! You have a large bundle of trouble and pain of your own that presses upon your shoulders with its heavy load -- why should I add to it?

But this time I am not complaining about my own individual troubles and misfortunes. I have already resigned myself to the idea of abandoning any hope of living a life without trouble. I have listened to your advice and have become a farmer in one of the settlements of Cherson. I have sold my house and personal property, and I, together with my gentle wife and tender children and several families from our city have become farmers. I ploughed

and sowed; and reaped thorns and thistles. We are literally dying with hunger. The severe cold is destroying us completely. Every day I go to the forest, a distance of four Russian miles from our hut, and cut fire-wood which I carry back to my hovel upon my shoulders, to warm my tender and unfortunate children. But even this I can forgive; for I am living among my own people in Russia, and like them, I have to suffer and to bear all their sorrows and afflictions. I did not mean to enumerate to you in this letter my own troubles and afflictions, but those of the entire Jewish people; of the groaning and sighing of our brothers, and the crying of our dear friends. The cry of despair and complete despondency is now heard even from those who have been fighting with the greatest of vigor and strength the battle for our Torah and our Hebrew language. They were full of hope that they would finally gain a victory over their enemies; but now out of distress and anxiety they have put away all their weapons from their hands. We have gone through many bitter experiences and trials during the last ten years; but how fearful is this last trial - seeing your dearest ones stretch their hands out to you for a piece of bread to appease their terrible hunger, and you cannot help them! To whom shall I turn and to whom shall I relate our bitter complaint, if not to you?

Therefore, my good and faithful brother, you, who suffered with us the pain and trouble during the war and the terrible pogroms of Petlura, Denikin, and the tyranny of the Poles during the time of their conquest; you, who together with us have seen the downfall of our people, during the time when they were fugitives and were migrating, in the years of 1920-21; - we turn to you that you should be out mouth and relate to the public our troubles and afflictions which are bearable no longer. Cry aloud! Spare not! Lift up your voice like a horn, for this is the cry of millions of groaning and

sighing Jews; the cry of a large part of a nation which stands at the mouth of the pit. Perhaps this will bestir someone whose heart is pulsating with Jewish feelings to try and spare the remainder of the Jewish people in Russia. Perhaps one may find some device and plan of how to deliver this remnant from the teeth of destruction. Rescue while there is still time; while some limbs are still quivering and struggling in the sick dying body; before the agony of the death-throes enters into our hearts. Rescue while here and there our Lamp, which spreads light throughout the darkness of our long exile is still smoking. Who knows whether there will be anything to rescue afterwards?

Two years ago when I was travelling through the Jewish cities of Ukraine for the purpose of our esteemed work, I still saw some light in many places, sparks of hope, which showed that the God of Israel had not forgotten His people. I had found in almost every city and town eminent men who protected and sheltered with all their power and might our spiritual acquisitions, our Torah and our Hebrew tongue, and were ready to wage war against the impudent of our brethren who rose up against us as enemies. In attics, in cellars, in cowhouses, in stables, in the morning with the rising of the sun, during terrible stormy nights -- these noble men taught and spread the Torah among the Jewish children. They laughed and mocked at every shot and bomb that the terrible enemy fired at them. It even happened that some of them penetrated into the enemy's camp and with self-abandonment rescued from them, by force, the children-prisoners whom they had taken in captivity. All possible ways and means were used to save the "Holy sheep" from the mouth of the devouring lion. Two years ago during Hanukkah when I was in the city of B----, I went to pay a visit to one of my young friends at the school where he was principal. He was a very pious and devoted Communist; a perverse, deceitful and stubborn "yevseki". We went into one of the classes where the teacher

was of "our people", a faithful Jew and a good Zionist. He pretended that he did not know me at all. He was teaching his pupils a lesson in history. The principal ordered him to continue with the lesson. "History", began the teacher, "before the Communistic Revolution is a product of the bourgeois; all of it is based on lies; what the bourgeois and their writers invented out of their own mind; and there is not a grain of truth in it. The true history begins with the entrance of Communism into the world. Behold, the bourgeois are celebrating this week the festival of Hanukkah; they light candles and place them at the windows in their houses". At this point the principal was called to his office. The teacher then closed the door of his room hastily and began to tell his pupils with great inspiration and special stress of the great significance of this holiday for the Jewish people; of Judas Maccabee; of the faithless Jews who denied the Torah and went over to the side of the wicked and tyrannical Antiochus. When the teacher was telling them of how Judas Maccabee fell on the battle field, my eyes began to fill with tears. One boy jumped from his seat and called out: "Comrade! Teacher! I wish I could be a bourgeois as Judas Maccabee was." A second boy called out with childish simplicity: "But the comrades too are giving out decrees which are as ~~am~~ cruel and as murderous as those of the wicked Antiochus!" How many dear and beloved teachers like this one, did we have in their schools? -- Hundreds of them! and thus we have been fighting the enemy in his own camp and with his own weapons. But all this was two years ago, when <sup>we</sup> were not under such a heavy yoke of poverty and want as we are now. Then, we still had our measure of carrobs from Sabbath to Sabbath; there was still something left for the pawn-shop. But now everything is gone! -- famine and all that follows with it is destroying us. Our tender children, our little babies are asking for bread! Many of our best friends died; many of them were exiled

to Siberia, and there, in the plains of Siberia they are dying off very quickly. Those who are left have given up hope and have put away their weapons; our ranks grow thinner from day to day -- from hour to hour. The number of the slain is increasing, and the cruel and mocking enemy is rejoicing over our ruin and destruction. My heart is broken because of this prolonged agony.

A bitter despair now prevails over the camp of the faithful fighters who fought with all their courage and strength, with the risk of their lives for the maintenance of the Torah and the Hebrew language. The flocks are now without a shepherd and the devouring wolf is consuming them. There is none to stop and to save them. Our hope is lost, our spirit fails us, and our will-power is gone. Our body and spirit are both being exterminated. We, who see the dreadful death throes of the three million Jews, envy those who have already died... I myself pray to die, so that I may not see with my own eyes the closing of the tomb.

Prosperous people, who have plenty and enjoy everything in the world; who eat like men and have the pleasure of the brightness of the modern world, come and offer their good advices to us who live in darkness and who are discouraged in spirit and embittered at heart. They tell us to become farmers - to go back to the soil - to stop being merchants in whose hand is a false balance. They tell us; you have inhaled enough of the suffocating air of the cities and towns. These are very fine and clever words of advice. Crimea, Cherson, and now they give us a new "child", Amur-Siberia! Our "kind" deliverers Marjin, Litwakow, are already prophesying in their "false" paper of a Jewish Republic somewhere beyond the dark mountains. Everything is already prepared for the banquet by the serpents and scorpions, but they are only waiting that the rich Jews of America, who provided everything for

them, would open their pockets. Oh, God of Abraham! We live in an age when everything is open and known; nothing is hidden and secret from the eyes of the critic. A man can now live at one end of the world and see and hear what takes place at the other end. Still, everything that takes place in the movement known as: "The Settlement of the Jews upon the soil," is a secret and is concealed from the eye of the critic. Moreover, even the tourists who have come, and continue coming to visit the New Russia to see the new events which are occurring there - even they do not see what should be seen.

You surely remember the preparations made in the times of the Czar to meet the district officer who was expected to come to a city or town. An order was given to the inhabitants to sweep the streets, to paint their houses, to clean their windows and to light their lanterns; and by the way, they used to announce that anyone who had a complaint for the officer should first relate it to the city officer and the latter would turn it over to the district officer. This same type of preparations is going on in the Jewish settlements. Three days before an honored guest from abroad would arrive, announcements would be sent out that on such and such a day a certain visitor from America would pay a visit to the colonies; a certain writer from London, etc. All men were then compelled to be in the fields, some to plough, some to sow or plant, some to weed, and some to dig the ground. The women were to stay in their houses or in their tents, which were made of rushes, and to milk their cows, or shear their sheep, etc. You were not to complain before the guest concerning your misfortune; that the soil did not yield its produce; that you have no bread to eat; nor that there is insufficient grass in the field for your cattle; but on the contrary, if the guest were to ask you about your life as a farmer, you were to tell him that everything is all

right, that you have no wants; that your "redeemers" and benefactors are taking care of all your necessities. In case anyone would dare bring a complaint before the guesst about the terrible poverty in his home, about his children who grew up crudely - without Torah and without manners - about the lack of medical help; about the terrible pestilence which took place in his herds, - his blood would be upon his head. And with great humbleness and submission they would accept the order of the officer (the announcer), and would say: "we shall do and listen"... Once it happened that a writer for an important English newspaper went in his carriage from colony to colony without any "watchman" - he came across a farmer who was sitting with his little children on the border of his field, eating dry bread dipped in water. The writer left his carriage and asked the farmer several questions. The farmer knew what punishment to expect if he were to tell the truth and he answered these questions as he had been instructed. He said he was well satisfied to be a farmer and that he had everything - even more than enough. But one son began to weep and turned to the writer and said: "If you want to know our terrible condition - look at us. We are as naked as new born children; the lice and the vermin are eating our flesh; during the summer we get light and warmth from the sun, but in winter we freeze and are petrified from the cold in our huts. The writer made public in his paper the words of the boy. When the "Yevseki" learned of it, a tumult broke loose and a cross examination took place, to find out who was the counter-revolutionist who came to destroy the foundations of the Soviet Government. It was the good fortune of the farmer that the writer did not publish his name.

Our benefactors from America and Europe, who think that the salvation for the Jewish people will come from Crimea, Siveria, and Amur, and that the

money which they give continually for the building of the colonies will save their brothers from the pangs of hunger are mistaken. Not only I, but the next and even the third generation will not derive sufficient food from the soil that was given to us in Cherson and in Crimea. We plough and plant with tears, and we harvest with despair, and when autumn comes we and our children have to seek for bread. Even if the fourth or the fifth generation shall be able to eke out a livelihood from the product of the soil of Cherson and Crimea, it will no longer be ours, for the Jewish people will have no part there-in. Who can tell if any of the farmers will then know that they are descendents of the Jewish people? They will be Ukrainians and Russians but not Jews. This is actually the object of the "Yevseki", who aim through this colonization in Cherson and Crimea to make an end to the Jewish spirit, to assimilate them among the Christians and to wipe out their existence as a nation - as a people who have a Torah, a literature and a culture. It was the intention of the Soviet government in the beginning to better our miserable conditions and to save us from certain destruction. For, commerce, which was the main source of our income had come to a halt. But the "Yevseki" came and spoiled these good intentions by bringing in their party politics with all its evils and cruelty. They were interested in the colonization only in order to realize their evil plans to break down and destroy the Jewish spirit - to realize their old rooted hatred toward Judaism and all its doctrines. The "Yevseki" said plainly and openly that any Jew who comes to settle on land in Cherson and Crimea cuts off all his relations with Judaism and its literature. "Let him assimilate with his neighbors the Christian farmers, and let him learn from them and be like them." It is a fact, when the inspector of our settlement was a Christian, an honest communist, we could teach our children a little Hebrew, Bible, and history; once

when he found me teaching a group of children Hebrew, he kept silent. "The education of your children", he said, "is in your own hands, farmers, and do as it pleases you." But when that inspector left the settlement and a Jewish one took his place - a pious and stubborn "Yevseki" - he began to persecute not only the teachers, but also the parents who were trying to teach their children Hebrew; he curtailed the wages of the farmers who brought "Clericalism" to the settlement, and was not appeased until one farmer, who was a good Zionist and who previously had been a teacher in the colony, was punished by exile to Siberia.

Before I finish my Book of Lamentations I wish to tell you, my first faithful friend, that all the chastisement mentioned in the Torah has been carried out literally on us. The wrath of God poured down upon us in its fullest measure, and we drank the dregs of the strangling cup. You have not the least conception of what takes place in the Jewish dispersion in Russia. The poverty and need is so great and so widespread, that there has been nothing like it since the days of creation and nothing similar to it has taken place in any section of the globe. If anyone who lives in a civilized country would want to know the real definition of the words, "poverty" and "distress" let him come and visit the Jewish cities in Russia and Ukraine; then he will learn their meaning. Therefore, I even stop to accuse our good nationalistic friends, who sell themselves to the peasants and hand over their children to Woloch; who make themselves abominable by doing things which are against our Jewish ethical conceptions - things which the Jewish soul despises. Such things must now be excused for man will transgress for a piece of bread.

A few weeks ago I went back to my city. I thought that I might be able to get some winterclothes for myself, my wife and my children; but I trembled when I beheld the city. The streets were desolate and deserted. Everything

was as in the days of the Pogroms. The people were hidden in their houses without clothes on their bodies and without shoes on their feet. An entire household was using one ragged garment. I did not see living people but shadows of people and whomever I met and asked, "How are you getting along?" the answer was "Why tarry the death to come? Why should we live such a bitter and fearful life? The fear is great during the day, but more fearful and more terrible are the nights." The city looked like a burial ground. The air of death prevailed as during those nights when our city was besieged by the enemy, or when the Petlurias slaughtered, butchered, tortured and raped the daughters of Israel. It was dark outside and it was darker inside for there was no oil to light the lamps. One evening I was spending my time in the house of my dejected friend "B" when suddenly I heard a scream. A woman was crying in a bitter voice: "Have pity, merciful Jews! rescue my children from death! Hurry! Hasten and give me a morsel of bread to bring my children back to life! All are fainted from hunger!" And when my friend's wife, a tender and good-hearted woman gave her the one half of a loaf of bread which we had, my friend turned towards me and whispered into my ear: "It may be that she, my wife, will cry tomorrow and ask pity for her children, for we too are in want." People have lost the feeling of being ashamed of acting as paupers. Men who were well thought of, honored, learned men, modern and refined go from door to door and beg for bread. And there is no one among the Jewish people to help them even with a crust for most of the Jews in the city are poor and homeless and are in want themselves. Jewish people are now begging for bread from the Gentiles. In the villages, on the cross-ways, we met groups of Jewish children stretching out their hands to every passer-by. Woe to the eyes that see this! One who has not seen the little, thin, consumptive hands grabbing the pieces of bread from the peasants or farmers can have no conception of the meaning of being exhausted by hunger. The merciful God is

destroying us completely, the God who takes pity on the birds in their nests and feeds and nourishes the embryo of a louse as well as the horns of a wild ox has removed his mercy from us. But the worst is He does not destroy us at once - why does He prolong our agony? Destroy us quickly, O, good God; ~~mercy~~ merciful God! and put an end to our misery!

On my return to my hut at Cherson, I heard two Jews in the wagon conversing about the terrible situation. "The Progrorns of Petlura and Denikin," said one to his neighbors, "were not so bad as the decrees of the Bolshevik Government. Then, the murder came into your house and cut off your head - that was the end. But now, they tear and cut your flesh into pieces and do not let you die! A story is told about a certain righteous man who lived during the reign of Nicholas I. It was in the days of the "Cantonists". Children of poor Jewish parents were hunted and taken by force from the arms of their mothers and given over to military service.

Once, there came an unhappy mother, whose beloved only child had been siezed from her by "catchers" and she cried bitterly before the pious man. She tore the hair of her head because of her misfortune. The righteous man shed tears and tried to comfort the "childless" mother. "Calm yourself, good woman, acknowledge God and justice and say that God dealt justly with you even in your terrible anguish. Are you not better off than your neighbor whose only son died a few days past?" "Heaven grant me this also," answered the unfortunate woman, "I would rather my son were dead than live among the Gentiles. My neighbor's son died as a Jew and went to his resting place among his fathers; but my only son, the light of my eyes, must now live as a Gentile among Gentiles, to be converted to Christianity."

The righteous man then lifted his eyes towards Heaven and cried aloud: "Oh, God! Look down upon us and see how degraded we are become. The only

kindness we can now attribute to your great Name is that you lay us in our graves; for in the grave we find the realm of your faith." He finished with a verse of the Psalms: Shall Thy mercy be declared in the grave? Or Thy faithfulness in destruction?

I recalled to my memory this chasidic story while listening to the conversation of the two Jews in the wagon; how they were ascribing kindness to Petlura and Denikin - let their names be blotted out - they were praising the cruel murderers! They were envying the dead who gained their death in a single moment - not those who die now, not those whose death-agony is prolonged with harsh and terrible torture!

My good and beloved friend, you are surely happy that you do not see with your own eyes the downfall of our people. Oh! woe to me, who lives to see it! With the tears of my eyes and with the blood of my heart, I write this letter; with a prayer to the living God that He shall hasten the day of my death; that I shall not stand at the closing of the grave of the three million Jews of Russia!

Yours,