

Chapter 3



Zion in Utah:  
The Clarion Colony and  
Jewish Agrarianism

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## Introduction

The history of the Jewish agricultural colony at Clarion, Utah, presented by Robert A. Goldberg is somewhat special, for western Jewish history has been notably small town and urban. In painstakingly reconstructing the story of those who organized, settled, and finally failed at Clarion, Goldberg places the Clarion experiment within the larger framework of the Jewish Back to the Soil Movement and attempts to isolate those factors that explain the failure of a long train of Jewish efforts to settle on the land in the United States and elsewhere.

Goldberg's analysis of Clarion and comparison of its fate with that of other Jewish agricultural colonies leads him to the conclusion that the positive interaction of five elements was crucial to eventual success: farming experience, favorable environmental conditions, sufficient capital availability, morale, and the availability of alternatives. The colonists of Clarion, unfortunately, lacked these in the right combination, although Goldberg concedes that their farming experience increased and the environmental conditions did improve.

Placing the history of the Clarion colony within a general explanatory model rooted in the American Jewish agricultural experience, Goldberg concludes that Clarion reflected no patterns distinctive to the West. If the myth of the West as a Garden of Eden—in Henry Nash Smith's classic conception in *The Virgin Land*—played any role in Jewish colonization in the region, it was peripheral. If the Clarion story is not emblematic of the western Jewish experience, Goldberg's account demonstrates once again that the history of Jews in the region is inseparable from the total Jewish experience. Like other Eastern European immigrants, the colonists were eager to escape the constraints of the New York and Philadelphia ghettos; they professed various and conflicting ideologies that they brought with them from the Old World to the New World; they remained financially dependent on the sup-

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port of their well-wishers in the East; and they turned for aid on occasion to the established Jewish community of Salt Lake City.

Despite Goldberg's virtual rejection of the idea that the West had any impact on Clarion, its short history and its eventual failure—and the failure of others like it—may serve as a reminder that it has been almost impossible to reverse long-term patterns that have resulted in the decline of the American farm population to a very small minority. Yet, despite its failure, the utopian dreams that informed many of the pioneers who invested their lives in Clarion and other agricultural colonies are a tribute to the social idealism that has illumined many phases of American Jewish history and that has made its most pronounced contribution to the labor and socialist movements.

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More so than most Americans, even of the last century, America's Jews have been a predominantly urban people. Leaving the *shtetls* and cities of Eastern Europe, they migrated to the urban centers of industrializing America where they attempted to rebuild their lives and to renew their sense of community. On the Lower East Side of America, in the tenements, factories, and streets, immigrant Jews adjusted to the rigors of life on America's urban frontier. For them and their descendants, greater metropolitan America remained their natural habitat and gained immeasurably from their presence.

Only occasionally is the modern Jew reminded of his agrarian biblical roots. On Succoth, the Feast of Tabernacles, Jews still construct booths to commemorate the final gathering of the harvest in ancient Israel; and, of course, the Five Books of Moses, the words of the Prophets, and the Psalms abound with agricultural allegories and allusions. American Jews look with pride upon Israeli farmers and boast of their ability to make the desert bloom. Few American Jews realize, however, that they need not look back thousands of years to their biblical ancestors nor across thousands of miles to the Israeli *kibbutz* to come face to face with their Jewish agrarian heritage, for no group in modern America was more obsessed with the agrarian idea in their fashion than their forefathers who between 1881 and 1915 founded over forty agricultural colonies across the length and breadth of the

American continent. This collective effort in America was ideologically inseparable from an international Jewish Back to the Soil Movement that saw Jews establish dozens of farming settlements that extended from Argentina to Palestine, from Russia to Canada as well as in America and elsewhere.

The back-to-the-soil call attracted support across the whole spectrum of American Jewish opinion. German and Eastern European Jews, rich and poor, conservatives and radicals, Yiddishists and Zionists, the religious and the apolitical saw settlement on the land as a remedy to Jewish problems. To end urban overcrowding, to restructure Jewish economic life, to "productivize" the Jew immigrants were encouraged to take up the plow. Farming would decrease the oversupply of labor and congestion in the cities, create a proper environment for child rearing, and accelerate Americanization. Furthermore, the farm would inhibit anti-Semitism by countering the stereotype of the Jew as a commercial parasite. A return to agriculture would, moreover, bring about a Jewish spiritual and physical revival, restore a sense of dignity, free Jews from the economic uncertainties of the sweatshop, and demonstrate to Christians the Jewish stake in America. Finally, philanthropists were attracted to the agrarian solution because it emphasized self-help and work rather than charity or perpetual dependency for the Jewish poor. The agrarian impulse, then, cannot be understood except as a product of the European past, the American present, and the spiritual heritage of world Jewry. It was a current of energy—moral, intellectual, emotional, and material—that flowed back and forth between Jews wherever they lived.<sup>1</sup>

To explore this neglected chapter in American Jewish history in depth, let us look at Clarion Colony. Founded in 1911, some 135 miles southwest of Salt Lake City, Utah, it was the last major effort to settle Jews on the land in the United States before the Great Depression. Largest both in population and in land area, this colony proved to be the most long-lived Jewish settlement west of the Appalachians. Thanks to a unique data base, consisting of journals, diaries, organizational records, and interviews, it has been possible to reconstruct the Clarion experiment in remarkable detail. The values and ideals of the colonists, their daily rhythm of life, their struggle for survival, and the causes of their failure are open to examination. From the Clarion experience can be discerned the factors that determined the life cycles not only of western Jewish colonies but of Jewish settlements throughout the country.

The Clarion Colony arose first in the mind of Benjamin Brown. Born in Russia in 1885, Brown migrated to America at the age of fif-

teen, and following a short stint as a peddler, obtained a job as a farm laborer near Philadelphia where he acquired a passion for agriculture that would inform his entire life. Believing that the farm offered Jews an escape from the ghetto and the prospect of prosperity, in 1909, he began agitating for the organization of a nonreligious Jewish farming colony that he was certain would serve as a model for a wave of Jewish farm settlements throughout the United States.<sup>2</sup>

In an effort to mobilize men and money for his Jewish Agricultural and Colonial Association, Brown addressed large and small gatherings in Philadelphia and New York City. In his speeches, the outlines of the future colony grew more distinct. What Brown sought was 150 to 200 young married men with approximately three hundred dollars each whose savings would generate an operating capital of between forty-five thousand and sixty thousand dollars for the purchase of land, equipment, livestock, and building equipment—a substantial outlay for the time that would prove insufficient. Initially, the colonists were to work the land communally and be paid wages. At a later date, the colony was to resemble the Israeli *moshav* with privately owned land and equipment and cooperative buying and selling. Politics and religion would be “private things” in the colony.<sup>3</sup>

Benjamin Brown suggested a western location for the colony because land was cheaper; the temptation to return to the city, less; and the likelihood of the settlement becoming a boarder-resort, as had occurred to Jewish farms in upstate New York, remote. His message was always multifaceted, extolling the good life on the farm but reminding his listeners of the impelling need to ameliorate the Jewish condition in the eastern cities.<sup>4</sup>

Brown's message obviously touched a wide range of people. The colony's idealistic and cooperative features drew socialists like Esther and Joseph Radding, for whom this was an opportunity to “work out our special Jewish problems. To devote our entire life by becoming farmers, by working with the soil.”<sup>5</sup> Although Zionist David Boyarsky hoped to train himself in the colony for eventual migration to Palestine and anarchist Isaac Isgur saw the colony as a working model of a society without laws, government, or violence, the majority of recruits put more practical considerations first. For them, the project promised freedom from sweatshop and slum and a life of good health, clean air, and economic security. Carpenter Barnet Slobodin joined because “it was hard to make a living. We were working for practically nothing.”<sup>6</sup> The Mastrow family feared for their future in the city: “How could we ever acquire anything? How could we ever hope to raise our life standards? This was our chance.”<sup>7</sup> Thus, a combination of ideals

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and practical needs drew together a heterogeneous coalition of socialists, Zionists, the religious Orthodox, and those who perceived no higher loyalty than to family or circle. With each group conceiving a colony in their own image, the weed of dissension was well fertilized.<sup>8</sup>

On April 17, 1911, Brown and civil engineer Isaac Herbst boarded a westbound train to inspect land for the proposed colony. After viewing property in New Mexico and Colorado, where land prices were too high and transportation facilities inadequate, the men traveled to Utah where Jewish friends in Salt Lake City had informed Brown that the state had opened a prime tract of land that would be irrigated with water from a canal under construction. State officials boasted the canal would provide abundant water and eliminate the caprice of weather.<sup>9</sup> The more than eight thousand acres offered for sale, described by Utah's governor William Spry as "among the very choicest agricultural lands in the state,"<sup>10</sup> were located in south-central Utah, three miles from the small town of Gunnison.

Brown and Herbst were quite impressed, for the land, sufficiently large for their colony, was in the midst of a valley turning green with cultivated crops and near a railroad depot that put Salt Lake City within marketable range. Both men believed that the Mormons would be receptive to the project because they, too, had experienced the rigors of colonization and suffered religious persecution. The association agreed to purchase more than six thousand acres with 10 percent of the price due immediately and the rest, with interest, payable in equal installments over ten years. Unfortunately, the initial bank draft did not clear because of insufficient funds in the association's account. This served as a premonition of things to come.<sup>11</sup>

The key to the colony's future was the state canal. Begun in 1908, by 1911 it had reached the southern one-third of the eight-mile-long tract of Jewish colony land. Although it was predicted that all Jewish land would be irrigated by the canal by 1913, construction had only passed the middle one-third by 1914 and was not completed until 1918, more than two years after the settlement's demise. The newly built canal, with sides and bottom of dirt, lacked the gates and weirs necessary to regulate the water received by each farmer. Moreover, because there was no past data concerning canal capacity, state engineers could only estimate the extent of water seepage and the water quantity available for delivery.<sup>12</sup>

The first twelve colonists, chosen for their mechanical skills, experience with horses, and "seriousness," arrived at the settlement on September 10, 1911; they erected four large white tents to serve that winter as communal living and dining shelters. Although lacking in

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The original settlement in the southern part of Clarion: a frame structure and tents, 1911. (Courtesy of Sarah Sack Bober.)

farming experience, the men became concerned. The land, remarked Barney Silverman, sloped steeply, "resembling the sides of a saucer."<sup>13</sup> The "raw earth," as Isaac Friedlander described it, was covered by sagebrush, tall grasses, and weeds.<sup>14</sup> Large patches of ground were bare of any vegetation. Closer inspection of the soil revealed a sandy, gravelly consistency underlain by a hardpan subsoil. The state of canal construction had fixed the initial area of cultivation in the southern section of the colony on some of the worst land in the tract. Although the colonists were unaware of it at the time, the area had a short growing season, with a late spring, an early fall, and minimal rainfall. There was not a single well. Water had to be hauled in a large tank from Gunnison twice a week, a six-mile round-trip that consumed most of a day.<sup>15</sup>

Despite their initial concerns and lack of experience, the colonists began the very next day, September 11, to clear the land for cultivation. Working collectively for fifteen dollars in weekly wages, that fall the men prepared fifteen hundred acres for the coming spring's planting and laid out and dug irrigation channels from the canal to the



fields. They eagerly accepted the advice of local Mormon farmers and followed the instructions of a professor sent at the governor's insistence from the state agricultural school at Logan.<sup>16</sup>

Any trepidation the colonists might have had about the Mormons quickly disappeared. Mormons welcomed Jews as neighbors, tendering advice, food, friendship, tools, hired and voluntary labor, and moral support. "They acted to us," recalled Nathan Ayeroff, "not as strangers but as brothers."<sup>17</sup> The Mormons saw the Jews as biblical brethren descended from Joseph, their mutual ancestor. Their own recent history of midwestern pogroms, an exodus across the Mississippi River into the wilderness, and the settlement in a promised land with its own Dead Sea confirmed in Mormon minds a similar chosen destiny. Mormons respected Jewish beliefs and attempted no proselytizing; the economic stimulus the Jews brought to the area facilitated their reception. Still, the sense of common identity, past and present, religious and pioneering, united the two peoples. Difficulties that arose resulted primarily from mutual ignorance and personality conflicts rather than from anti-Semitism.<sup>18</sup>

When winter's cold made farm work impossible, the colonists retired to their tents and hammered out the principles and purposes of their experiment. They anticipated that their colony would be the first of a multitude of similar Jewish settlements throughout the United States. Initially, the colony would engage solely in the cultivation and marketing of agricultural produce. Later, the settlers would diversify and establish a canning factory to process their crops. From these beginnings, a town would grow where every branch of agriculture, commerce, manufacturing, and mining could be undertaken. A new society rooted in all of these economic endeavors would revitalize the Jew in his as well as in others' eyes. Perceiving themselves as the harbingers of the economic and social future of Jewish America, they appropriately named their colony Clarion.<sup>19</sup>

That winter the colony was struck by the first of many economic crises. Payments for land, tools, wages, and livestock had drained the association of its financial resources. It owed the state of Utah the initial 1912 installment for land and water, and material bought on credit required additional sums. To raise money Ben Brown returned East to recruit new members and reinforce in old members the need to fulfill their financial obligations. The appeal was successful, the money raised, and the colony's economic health restored, briefly.<sup>20</sup>

Work began again in earnest at the end of February 1912. By late March, the plowing and planting of wheat, oats, and alfalfa was com-



Riding a disk harrow: Samuel Sack, in Russian worker's cap and peasant blouse, prepares the land for planting, c. 1913. (Courtesy of Sarah Sack Bober.)

pleted; by May, green sprouts had broken through the soil. The happiness produced, however, proved short-lived. Strong winds, dust storms, heat, flies, and mosquitoes plagued the colonists. The colony's tractor broke down, leaving only continued payments in its wake. Water still had to be transported from Gunnison. With the arrival of additional families, water trips had become more frequent and, thus, more burdensome, and the effort to alleviate the shortage by the digging of wells proved unsuccessful.<sup>21</sup>

Worst of all were the problems infesting the colony's lifeline, the state canal, for the canal engineers had proven unduly optimistic about the quantity of water that could be delivered and even about the quality of the canal itself. In the summer of 1912, the canal's banks burst six times and left the colony without water for thirty-five days. When the canal was in repair, less than one-fifth of Clarion's water needs

could be met. For only two days during that summer was the water flow sufficient to irrigate all the colony's fifteen hundred acres.<sup>22</sup>

In any case, an additional water supply would not have solved all of the colony's troubles. The area initially cultivated consisted of marginal land, used even today for grazing only. The combination of poor soil, scarce water, and inexperience doomed the first year's harvest. Half the crop was lost, and six hundred acres produced only half the expected yield. The loss in costs and labor stunned the colonists.<sup>23</sup>

Again, the colony was in financial straits. This time, assistance arrived from members of the Salt Lake City Jewish community. From the colony's creation, Salt Lake City Jews had acted as intermediaries with machine and tool suppliers to insure that the settlers received the most favorable terms and the fastest delivery of goods. They had also donated money and material to aid in colony development. To help Clarion over its latest financial hurdle local Jews organized the Utah Colonization Fund, which issued bonds in support of Clarion and thus facilitated Ben Brown's efforts to solicit support from wealthy eastern Jews. Clarion's Jews craved the moral and financial support of the Jews in Salt Lake City and the East, brethren who linked them to the centers of American Jewry and the fabric of international Jewish life, thus bolstering their sense of mission and purpose.<sup>24</sup>

The only crop brought forth in abundance that first harvest was dissension. With the colony's turn in fortune, Brown's judgment and qualifications came under attack. He was accused of mismanagement and dictatorial practices; in addition inaccurate bookkeeping by the colony's secretary generated charges of chicanery. Further exacerbating group tensions was the factionalism inherent in the heterogeneous membership. Anarchists, international socialists, Jewish socialists, and Zionists quarreled with one another, and the religious Orthodox minority, with its requests for a ritual slaughterer and a *Sefer Torah*, added to the turmoil.<sup>25</sup>

With dissension simmering and the poor harvest a major setback, the settlers moved as planned into the colony's next phase, with individual land ownership replacing collective work and control. On October 15, 1912, each of the association's members drew lots to select his own forty-acre farm. This produced further bickering over the comparative quality of the land of each farm. Unfortunately, the forty-acre plots proved far too small to support a family. Even worse, rocky soil cut by dry washes made sections of each plot unsuitable for farming.<sup>26</sup>

The farming cycle began again in spring 1913. The farmers performed the usual chores on their individual plots, and the colony as

a whole worked to complete two long-delayed tasks. First, the settlers had to locate a source of water in the colony and end the practice of transporting it from Gunnison. In May, the association bought a well-drilling rig and began searching for water. After several failures, water was found two hundred feet below the surface. The water was welcome, even though it was always covered by an oily blue film. This proved, however, to be the colony's only successful well.<sup>27</sup>

Also related to Clarion's future was the colony's second task, the construction of a school. The local school board, in light of the colony's growing population, created a Clarion district and appointed a teacher, with the provision that the settlers were to erect a building. The Mormon board also allowed the colonists the option of hiring a second teacher to provide a religious education for the children. In a common effort and with great hope, a one-room school, housing grades one through five, was built to accommodate the colony's twenty-eight children. What began in harmony and cooperation degenerated into bitter feuding when the program of Jewish education was considered. Again, the dissension and debate can only be understood in the context of the ideological diversity that pervaded the whole Jewish immigrant world. Nationalists wanted to hire a teacher who would support Jewish identity through instruction in the Yiddish language, literature, and folklore. Radicals felt that an emphasis on "Jewish" subjects would distract students from the international struggle for socialism. The religious minority sought instruction in the Hebrew liturgy. Finally, some were content to employ only the Mormon teacher selected by the school board. A compromise was eventually reached: It called for a teacher who would support Jewish identity through Yiddish language, literature, and folklore and at the same time interpret Jewish history from an international socialist perspective. Hardly anyone was satisfied. Colonist Abe Wernick wrote, "Long after these meetings there was tension in the air and the opposing factions did not look at each other when they met." After just eighteen months, the ideological cracks had grown wider and more exposed.<sup>28</sup>

Yet, for the colonists, the schoolhouse and the well symbolized an increasing permanence. There were other signs in 1913 that the colony might survive the dangerous period and achieve some stability. By the spring, Clarion's population had grown to 156 persons living on thirty-six farms. Almost twenty-four hundred acres had been planted in alfalfa, wheat, and hay, and the canal finally appeared to be functioning. Between October 1912 and June 1913 only 5 colonists left, and they were promptly replaced by settlers with sufficient funds to establish themselves without association aid.<sup>29</sup>

Still, life in the colony was hard. Each colonist family lived in a one-room shack, twenty-five-feet square and set on a concrete foundation. The wood-burning stove served all heating and cooking functions, for coal was too expensive. The builders left the walls unfinished, with upright two-by-fours exposed. Heat and cold cracked and shrank the lumber, allowing the wind to whistle through the chinks in the walls. Many of the children still remember the high-pitched wail of the wind and the blankets covered with snow that fell through the warped wallboards. In Clarion, where "a piece of string became a treasure," money was scarce, and eggs, milk, and cheese were bartered in town for needed commodities.<sup>30</sup>

The optimism born of struggle received a series of crushing blows during the summer and fall. Heavy rains in the mountains sent torrents of water into the dry washes and toward the colony. The water blocked the conduits under the canal, flowed over its walls, and flooded the hay, wheat, and alfalfa fields. Rocks, sand, and gravel covered the land, and gullies cut some farms in two. "The place," wrote Isaac Friedlander, "looked like the aftermath of an earthquake."<sup>31</sup> Another storm in the fall followed by an early frost further devastated crops. The colony's greatest tragedy occurred that August when one of the original twelve colonists was killed in a logging accident.<sup>32</sup>

The succession of catastrophes led to soul-searching meetings, planned and spontaneous, in which the settlers asked: Is Clarion worth more work and hardship? Should we give in? With only a few dissenters, the group decided to continue on the land and not to return in defeat to the city. Colonist Nathan Ayeroff spoke for the group: "To be on the land, to be free, to work for yourself . . . to breathe fresh air all the time, how could you leave[?]"<sup>33</sup> The colonists gathered up the rocks and again cleared their fields. But the optimism of the first years vanished, to be replaced by a fatalistic determination to survive. In order to continue on the land, the colonists were forced to market all their grain, leaving nothing for seed. Anything of value was sold to raise money for food and clothing; funds from eastern relatives tided some over the difficult months. To stave off hunger the Ayeroff family remembers eating cats.<sup>34</sup>

The colony's future again rested upon Ben Brown who returned to the East to sell Clarion's bonds and succeeded in raising six thousand dollars, sufficient to purchase seed, to forestall the repossession of wagons and tools, and to buy time. Yet everyone agreed with colonist Moshe Malamed that "the knife [is] at our throats."<sup>35</sup>

The water appeared in the canal on schedule in the spring of 1914. But again, as in the first year, the flow was insufficient and ir-



Isaac Herbst and a surveyor team affix the farm boundaries and mark off Clarion's main road, c. 1913. (Courtesy of Sarah Sack Bober.)

regular: The soil cracked under the sun and the crops withered. The problem this time was unrelated to construction. Rather, the colonists experienced a water shortage because of the greed of neighboring farmers, living just below them, who took advantage of the absence of locks on the canal gates and used more than their allotted share of water. After repeated appeals to state officials brought no redress, thirty frustrated and angry colonists led by Brown marched along the canal, seized control of the water gates, and closed off those belonging to the Mormon farmers. Order was eventually restored, but no one had benefited. It was clear long before threshing time that the harvest would not carry the colony into the next year.<sup>36</sup>

Fifty-two families remained on the land during the colony's last spring. Incredibly, association members still were arriving from the East as late as January to replace those who had departed. What happened in the last year is not entirely clear. Ben Brown resigned as president in reaction to popular dissatisfaction and his own sense of personal failure. Owing to a late frost, a hay crop planted in March

proved sparse when cut in June. Creditors demanded their money and more repossessions of equipment and livestock occurred. A poor harvest in the fall forced approximately thirty of the families to accept funds raised by Salt Lake Jews to buy railroad tickets to Los Angeles, Chicago, Philadelphia, and New York City.<sup>37</sup>

Seventeen families remained, but on November 25, 1915, a state order terminated the colony's title for nonpayment of monies owed. Chosen to represent the remnant, Brown cajoled the state into a last concession that allowed those who remained to retain ownership if they made a token payment immediately and met the prescribed financial schedule in the future.<sup>38</sup>

In January 1916, the state auctioned the colony's land and managed to sell just over one-tenth of the tract. All houses and barns were sold to satisfy creditors. Most of the remaining colonists left after three or four years, although some of them continued to farm nearby. Others took up land in New York, Michigan, California, and Pennsylvania. The last Jews left the Clarion area in the mid-1920s because they feared for the loss of their children's religious identities through assimilation.<sup>39</sup>

How are we to account for this dismal failure? It appears that five interrelated variables were crucial in determining Clarion's fate: farming experience, environmental conditions, capital availability, colonists' morale, and the existence of alternatives. Clarion's people were urbanites familiar with the sweatshop, store, or pushcart. Even the few with farming experience were unprepared for the semiarid conditions of Utah. Added to the heavy toil attendant on colony ground-breaking, their inexperience ill-fitted them for pioneering. A poor site choice exacerbated the problems generated by inexperience. Water scarcity, an undependable irrigation canal, marginal soil, and capricious weather drained the colony of enthusiasm and of its meager supply of monetary resources.

Yet neither the lack of experience nor the environment are sufficient explanations for Clarion's fall. Each day on the land increased the colonists' store of agricultural knowledge. Hard work, trial and error, and the aid and advice of the Mormon farmers strengthened the colonists in their physical, emotional, and mental ability to stay on the land. The success of those colonists who remained in the Clarion area for a decade after the colony's demise or who took to the land elsewhere is evidence of their will to adapt to farming. Moreover, those who persisted were adapting to an environment that had begun to shed its harshness and was becoming more predictable. The most difficult tasks had been accomplished. The land had been cleared and

fields created. Fences and outbuildings had been erected. The canal had become increasingly dependable.

Clarion's life could have been extended if it had had the capital and esprit to sustain it through the difficult years. Adequate financial resources would have bought the settlers time to survive the early colonization period, allowing them to gain the required experience to control their environment. The patronage of a generous outside benefactor alone would not have assured the colony's future, for to root the colonists to a harsh land also required a morale that was intense and cohesive. The harship, denial, and self-doubt that accompany any colonization project can be held at bay, if not dispelled, when men and women are passionately bound to a common goal. The colony's avowed purpose was to rebuild the Jewish people through agriculture, but the colonists lost sight of this mission when personal animosities, ideological conflicts, and cultural disagreements caused diverse factions to direct their energies against one another and thus to dissipate trust, goodwill, and strength. Further eroding morale was the indifference of the outside world. The Mormons did not threaten the colony and so offered no common ground to the quarreling groups. When Clarion's call was ignored and financial contributions failed to materialize, their greatest fears were realized; their mission had no meaning. This sense of meaninglessness cannot be overemphasized. The moral and financial threads that tied Clarion to the East and beyond to their brethren in Europe strengthened resolve and fired the cause. When cut, there was little in reserve to cushion the fall. Finally, for the Clarion majority, idealism had always exerted less influence upon thought and action than had self-interest. When conditions worsened, they could find few things to justify continued allegiance.

Directly related, yet separate, was the existence of alternatives. New York City, Philadelphia, and Los Angeles called to the Jews as they did to Gentiles, offering rescue and release from farm life. The familiar urban world, even with its drawbacks, promised relief from economic uncertainty, deteriorating relations with fellow colonists, and idealism gone sour. Without the bulwarks of high morale, financial security, and agricultural achievements, the siren of alternatives could not be silenced. Clarion's obstacles to economic self-reliance and ethnic viability had proven too formidable to conquer.

With Clarion as a model and the five variables as a framework, let us briefly review the Jewish colonization experience in America historically, for regardless of region, the factors influencing the success and failure of the American Jewish colonies were similar.

The first attempts to settle groups of Jews on the land go back to



the 1820s when colonization was undertaken in Florida, but unfavorable environmental conditions led to its discontinuance. In 1825, Mordecai M. Noah's purchase of over two thousand acres of land on Grand Island in the Niagara River near Buffalo, New York, as an agricultural refuge for Jews proved chimerical. A decade later, marginal soil and poor harvests drove thirteen Jewish families to abandon the Sholem Colony in New York state.<sup>40</sup>

Large-scale colonization began only in the 1880s, with the onset of the great Jewish migration, when the Hebrew Emigrant Aid Society, the Russian Emigrant Relief Committee, the Hebrew Colonization Society, and the Montefiore Agricultural Aid Society in New York City and Philadelphia prepared to direct and fund the colonization movement aided by the Alliance Israélite Universelle and the Baron de Hirsch Fund. In addition, philanthropic agencies appeared in Cincinnati, Boston, New Orleans, St. Paul, and St. Louis. The work of these organizations combined with the desires of individual immigrants and more organized groups of settlers activated the Back to the Soil Movement in America.<sup>41</sup>

The first colony of Russian Jews was planted on Sicily Island, Louisiana, in 1881, when the Alliance Israélite Universelle and the New Orleans Agricultural Society aided sixty families to establish themselves on twenty-eight hundred acres of land. Despite adequate supplies, a forbidding environment of swamps, oppressive heat, floods, snakes, and malaria-carrying mosquitoes proved devastating. Most of the colonists returned to the city. Others journeyed to South Dakota in 1882 to participate in the formation of Cremieux, which grew to include two hundred people and to encompass five thousand acres. Yet by 1885 it, too, had disappeared, succumbing to drought, prairie fire, hailstorm, and insufficient funds. In the same year, the nearby settlement of Bethlehem Yehudah also perished after an eighteen-month existence, the victim of crop failure and factionalism.<sup>42</sup>

Of the six North Dakota colonies, Painted Woods established in 1882 was the most substantial. Initially, the colony consisted of twenty-two families, each homesteading a 160-acre tract. At its height, 232 colonists plowed and planted wheat, their operations subsidized by the Baron de Hirsch Fund and the Montefiore Agricultural Aid Society. This support, however, proved insufficient. Fire, drought, crop failure, and severe winters ravaged the colony. After four years, nearly all the colonists had surrendered to the elements.<sup>43</sup>

Second to the Dakotas, Kansas, with seven settlements, was the most active western site for Jewish colonization. In 1882, the Hebrew Union Agricultural Society placed sixty Russian Jews on 160-acre

farms in the Beersheba Colony. The society maintained strict supervision of the project by appointing a manager and placing the settlers on a weekly ration. The *American Israelite*, a newspaper, boasted, "The Superintendent of the colony at Beersheba has the people completely under control, and they obey the word of command as soldiers; they were at first unruly and self-willed, but by a systematic course they now are tractable and docile."<sup>44</sup> To the chagrin of its patron Beersheba had ceased to exist by 1886. A poor location, marginal soil, parsimonious support, and friction between the colonists and their overseer all contributed to its decline. Even less was accomplished in the Hebron, Montefiore, and Lasker colonies, all organized and funded by the Montefiore Agricultural Aid Society and all suffering from undercapitalization because of the overextension of their sponsor. None of these efforts lasted more than four years. Touro Colony died within a year of its birth. Little information has survived concerning the two other Jewish colonies in Kansas.<sup>45</sup>

A similar tale is to be told for the Cotopaxi Colony of Colorado. With support from the Hebrew Emigrant Aid Society, thirteen immigrant families, only one with prior farming experience, settled on government land in the central part of the state. "It was," said an observer, "the poorest place in the world for farming, poor land, lots of rocks and no water."<sup>46</sup> The colony vanished in a year, its members returning to the East or relocating in Denver.<sup>47</sup>

A decade after the colonization surge of the early 1880s, settlement was attempted in Michigan where a group of peddlers sought financial security in farming by purchasing sixteen farms on marginal land that lumber companies had cut and burned over. Begun in 1891, the Palestine Colony experienced difficult times, suffering crop failures in 1893, 1894, and 1897. Yet the colonists refused to give up, supplementing their meager incomes by peddling and by securing emergency grants from the Baron de Hirsch Fund and the Detroit Jewish community. Only in 1899, unable to maintain themselves and their families on the soil, did they cease their struggle.<sup>48</sup>

The Arpin Colony in Wisconsin also was situated unwisely on cutover land, with blackened tree stumps offering an additional obstacle to successful farming. In 1904, the Milwaukee Jewish Agricultural Society obtained 720 acres and installed eight families on farms. By 1906, three more families had joined the project, all receiving five dollars per week from the society. Little favorable news, however, was received from the colony where inexperience, loneliness, and low morale sapped energy from the effort: "The Russian and Roumanian immigrants who settled in the colony did not care about farming at



Communal mealtime for the original colonists, c. 1913. (Courtesy of Sarah Sack Bober.)

all and accepted the chance to get on farms only because there was nothing else for them to do."<sup>49</sup> By 1909, just three families continued to till Arpin's soil.<sup>50</sup>

Clearly this brief overview of the Jewish American colonization effort offers a litany of idiosyncratic causes for failure. Despite much sacrifice, marginal soil, malaria, hailstorms, floods, prairie fires, inadequate water and fuel supplies, factionalism, high interest rates, inexperience, and meager capital resources prevented the colonies from taking root in American soil. Agricultural societies acted too hastily and with too little foresight when choosing site and settler and in estimating project costs.

Concentration on the particular or specific, however, conceals as much as it reveals, for patterns that highlight the common features of events can easily be observed. Moreover, without a broad context, we are no closer to an understanding of why Gentile settlements in the United States or Jewish colonies elsewhere that operated under similar conditions were able to survive. The capsule histories pre-

sented reveal that lack of farm experience, environment, capital availability, the existence of options, and morale all played a role in the destinies of the colonies, and varied one from another. Thus, Sicily Island's failure, although certainly tied to environment, must also be understood in terms of decaying morale and the existence of urban or other colonial options. Capital was available to the Sicily Island Colony and, although important, was less critical in determining its fate than that of less favorably endowed settlements. The negative interaction of all the variables is apparent in the Beersheba Colony, although internal friction and factionalism clearly give greatest significance to the morale factor. Arpin's history, too, should emphasize a lack of will without overlooking the other problems that the colonists confronted. Simple explanations of failure, such as inexperience, the absence of water, or prairie fire, will not suffice. Farming ability and environment, although necessary variables, are insufficient as explanations without the factors of capital, morale, and alternatives.

Finally, mention must be made of successful Jewish farm colonies in New Jersey that have led some scholars to single out the East as more conducive to colonization. Yet the relative success of the Jewish effort in New Jersey was less a function of region than the interplay of the variables. Of twenty Jewish colonies dotting the New Jersey landscape, half surmounted the obstacles of the initial settlement stage. Among the largest and most significant of these colonies were Alliance, Woodbine, Carmel, and Rosenhayn. Like most Jewish colonists, these farmers were immigrants who came to the soil with little or no agricultural expertise. Often their small farms were situated on marginal soil that other farmers had avoided as unsuitable for cultivation. Many New Jersey colonists, however, overcame their limitations because they received large infusions of financial aid that enabled them to build capital resources and to acquire the knowledge to surmount crises and gain stability. Philanthropic societies approached their New Jersey colonization projects as "privately subsidized social experiment[s]"<sup>51</sup> whose "model" farms required patient cultivation, careful weeding, and continuous care: "Those who wished to do things differently lacked the power; a few were expelled as troublemakers. Policy decisions usually came from above."<sup>52</sup> Later, when philanthropic aid and direction decreased, farmers and their families supplemented their income with local factory employment. Success, however, cannot be measured solely with a ledger book. The New Jersey colonies did not remain Jewish endeavors, for within two generations the colonies had begun to lose their distinctive religious identities. New Jersey's Jewish farmers could not look beyond their own families and

farms for a rationale to keep them on the land. The neighboring markets of Philadelphia and New York, previously an advantage, now became economic and social magnets strongly attracting Jewish farmers and their children back to the urban world. Self-interest and private need spurred their departure and, thus, the loss of group solidarity.<sup>53</sup>

The Alliance settlement was representative of these trends. In 1882, the Hebrew Emigrant Aid Society, with the support of the Alliance Israélite Universelle, purchased twelve-hundred acres near Philadelphia and placed twenty-five families on fifteen-acre plots. The area was linked to a large urban market by railroad and was spared both flood and drought dangers. To ease the immigrants' transition to agriculture, the society hired a farming instructor, gave each family a monthly stipend, dug wells, built homes, and financed the acquisition of tools and equipment. The following year, cigar and shirt factories were opened to provide additional employment opportunities and income. By 1887, the colony had begun to record good harvests and show a yearly profit, and it numbered 529 people. In the depressed nineties, when farm prices and profits dropped and foreclosure threatened, the Alliance Colony suffered along with the rest of the nation's farmers. In this crisis, the Baron de Hirsch Fund salvaged the colony by refinancing mortgage debt and offering farmers longer payment schedules at lower interest. The opening of another local factory further bolstered the colony, which by 1905 counted 891 inhabitants. Yet three years later, Alliance disposed of its colony and cooperative features and became a community of factories and shops surrounded by private farmers.<sup>54</sup>

Financial security did not ensure ethnic stability. As early as 1919, non-Jewish families comprised one-third of the Alliance population, a demographic shift also apparent in Rosenhayn where eighty-seven Jewish and seventy-eight Gentile families lived, and in Carmel with sixty-nine Jewish and twenty Gentile families. The original Jewish settlers had been supplemented by Italians and Poles. Between 1901 and 1919, the Jewish population in the colonies had become relatively static, with few seeing themselves as permanent settlers. By 1919, only 219 persons of the region's total Jewish population of 2,739 had lived on the land more than fifteen years. With nothing able to slow it down the tide had turned. There was no holding America's Jewish farmers to the farm.<sup>55</sup>

The struggles of the Clarion colonists and their brothers and sisters in the other Jewish settlements suggest an explanation for their success and failure. It does not call for a regional or cultural interpretation, for the histories of the American Jewish colonies were writ-

ten in the interplay of five factors—experience, environment, capital, morale, and alternatives. In the negative or positive interaction of these variables can be discerned the course of colonization. They also reveal why Jews in America failed to achieve economic stability or a secure ethnicity on the land. Further research of Jewish agricultural settlements in Canada, Argentina, Russia, and Palestine may highlight the centrality of these variables for the colonization process in these countries. Perhaps, the Clarions of America and the *kibbutzim* of Israel differ in degree rather than in kind and, thus, represent different stages along the same continuum.

Clarion and the Jewish colonies of America are now forgotten or, at most, command attention as quaint historical sites. Jewish immigrants in the United States, like most of their contemporaries, took to the city, and their descendants have had little incentive to stray from that path. The small minority who dared to farm are lost or misunderstood. Yet the road taken to Clarion and the other doomed colonies needs to be resurveyed and delineated, for it is an essential part of the Jewish American experience. These Jewish farmers, defying stereotypes and risking their all to bring about a restructuring of Jewish society, acted out of a sense of loyalty to their coreligionists who remained in the eastern ghettos. The casualties of Jewish agrarian failure were not confined to the farm. Jews in the cities or Eastern Europe and in America who supported the Back to the Soil Movement with heart and soul as well as with words and funds were deeply affected. They followed developments in the American, Canadian, Russian, and Argentine colonies as they did those in Palestine with pride and joy. Long before the term *global village* gained currency, Jews throughout the world have lived lives interconnected religiously, culturally, socially, and economically. Thus, the farms did not die in silence. In a Jewish world of the spirit, undivided by national boundaries, their deaths were mourned.

Intrinsically valuable as models of courage, determination, and discipline and against all odds, the Clarions of America speak not merely of achievements by Jews, but of Jewish achievements. That these men and women failed is their history. That they dreamed and struggled and were greater than themselves is their legacy.

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