Letters to the Jewish Daily Forward (1906-1907)

The Jewish Daily Forward was a Yiddish-language newspaper that served New York’s Jewish immigrant community. In 1906, Abraham Cahan, the editor, introduced a column called “A Bintel Brief,” meaning “a bundle of letters.” Cahan wrote the responses to the letters, as well as some of the letters themselves. However, in the early years of the column the bulk of the letters were written by young, newly arrived immigrants. Some of these letters dealt with personal problems: love, jealousy, intermarriage, affairs between boarders and the married women in whose homes they lived. Others discussed poverty, unemployment, and sweatshops. All of these letters provide a valuable perspective on the process of adjusting to life in the United States.

Dear Editor,

I am a Russian revolutionist and a freethinker. Here in America I became acquainted with a girl who is also a freethinker. We decided to marry, but the problem is that she has Orthodox parents, and for their sake we must have a religious ceremony. If we refuse the ceremony we will be cut off from them forever. Her parents also want me to go to the synagogue with them before the wedding, and I don't know what to do. Therefore I ask you to advise me how to act.

Respectfully, J. B.

Answer: The advice is that there are times when it pays to give in to old parents and not grieve them. It depends on the circumstances. When one can get along with kindness it is better not to break off relations with the parents.

Worthy Editor,

Allow me a little space in your newspaper and, I beg you, give me some advice as to what to do. There are seven people in our family – parents and five children. I am the oldest child, and a fourteen-year-old girl. We have been in the country two years and my father, who is a frail man, is the only one working to support the whole family. I go to school, where I do very well. But since times are hard now and my father earned only five dollars this week, I began to talk about giving up my studies and going to work in order to help my father as much as possible. But my mother didn't ever want to hear of it. She wants me to continue my education. She even went out and spent ten dollars on winter clothes for me. But I didn't enjoy the clothes, because I think I am doing the wrong thing. Instead of bringing something into the house, my parents have to spend money on me. I have a lot of compassion for my parents. My mother is now pregnant, but she still has to take care of the three boarders we have in the house. Mother and Father work very hard and they want to keep me in school. I am writing to you without their knowledge, and I beg you to tell me how to act. Hoping you can advise me, I remain,

Your reader.

Answer: The advice to the girl is that she should obey her parents and further her education because in that way she will be able to give them greater satisfaction than if she went out to work.
Worthy Editor,

I was born in America and my parents gave me a good education. I...finished high school, completed a course in bookkeeping and got a good job. I have many friends, and several boys have already proposed to me. Recently I went to visit my parents' hometown in Russia Poland. My mother's family in Europe had invited my parents to a wedding, but instead of going themselves, they sent me…. I had a good time. Our European family, like my parents, are quite well off and they treated me well. The indulged in everything and I stayed with them six months. It was lively in the town…. [T]hey all accepted me warmly, looked up to me – after all, I was a citizen of the free land, America. Among the social leaders of the community was an intelligent young man, a friend of my uncle's, who took me to various gatherings and affairs. He was very attentive, and after a short while he declared his love for me in a long letter…. As my love for him grew, however, I wrote to my parents about him, and then we became officially engaged. A few months later we both went to my parents in the States and they received him like their own son. By bridegroom immediately began to learn English and tried to adjust to the new life. Yet when I introduced him to my friends they looked at him with disappointment. "This 'greenhorn' is your fiancée?" they asked. I told them what a big role he played in his town, how everyone respected him, but they looked at me as if I were crazy and scoffed at my words. At first I thought, Let them laugh, when they get better acquainted with him they'll talk differently. In time, though, I was affected by their talk and began to think, like them, that he really was a "greenhorn" and acted like one. In short, my love for him is cooling off gradually. I'm suffering terribly because my feelings for him are changing. I'm not the courage to tell him, and I can't even talk about it to my parents. He still loves me with all his heart, and I don't know what to do. I choked it up inside myself, and I beg you to help me with advice in my desperate situation.

Respectfully,

A Worried Reader

Answer: The writer would make a grave mistake if she were to separate from her bridegroom now. She must not lose her common sense and be influenced by the foolish opinion of her friends who divided the world into "greenhorns" and real Americans. We can assure the writer that her bridegroom will learn English quickly. He will know American history and literature as well as her friends do, and be a better American than they. She should be proud of his love and laugh at those who call him "greenhorn."

Document Analysis

What type of advice does the editor of the Jewish Daily Forward offer? Would an editor give the same type of advice today?

Why might this type of newspaper have been popular with immigrants?