EDUCATION

Letters from a Bintel Brief

Saluting the flag, 1902. Jacob Riis.
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, 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 even 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 borders 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,

S.
Dear Editor,

Since I do not want my conscience to bother me, I ask you to decide whether a married woman has the right to go to school two evenings a week. My husband thinks I have no right to do this.

I admit that I cannot be satisfied to be just a wife and mother. I am still young and I want to learn and enjoy life. My children and my house are not neglected, but I go to evening high school twice a week. My husband is not pleased and when I come home at night and ring the bell, he lets me stand outside a long time intentionally, and doesn’t hurry to open the door.

Now he has announced a new decision. Because I send out the laundry to be done, it seems to him that I have too much time for myself, even enough to go to school. So from now on he will count out every penny for anything I have to buy for the house, so I will not be able to send out the laundry any more. And when I have to do the work myself there won’t be any time left for such “foolishness” as going to school. I told him that I’m willing to do my own washing but that I would still be able to find time for study.

When I am alone with my thoughts, I feel I may not be right. Perhaps I should not go to school. I want to say that my husband is an intelligent man and he wanted to marry a woman who was educated. The fact that he is intelligent makes me more annoyed with him. He is in favor of the emancipation of women, yet in real life he acts contrary to his beliefs.

Awaiting your opinion on this, I remain,

Your reader,

The Discontented Wife
Dear Editor,

I am a newsboy, fourteen years old, and I sell the Forverts in the streets till late into the night. I come to you to ask your advice.

I was born in Russia and was twelve years old when I came to America with my dear mother. My sister, who was in the country before us, brought us over.

My sister worked to support us. She didn’t allow me to go to work but sent me to school. I went to school for two years and didn’t miss a day, but then came the terrible fire at the Triangle shop, where she worked, and I lost my dear sister. My mother and I suffer terribly from the misfortune. I had to help my mother and after school hours I go out and sell newspapers.

I have to go to school for three more years, and after that I want to go to college. But my mother doesn’t want me to go to school because she thinks I should go to work. I tell her I will work days and study at night but she won’t hear of it.

Since I read the Forverts to my mother every night and read your answers in the “Bintel Brief,” I beg you to answer me and say a few words to her.

Your Reader,
LOVE

Letters from a Bintel Brief

Postcard bearing a Yiddish love poem, 1906.
Dear Editor,

I am a young man of twenty-one; I have a seventeen-year-old cousin, and she and her parents would like me to marry her. I like the girl. She’s educated, American-born, not bad-looking. But she’s quite small.

That is the drawback: for her age, she is very short. And I happen to be tall. So when we walk down the street together, people look at us as a poorly matched couple. Another thing: she is very religious, and I am a freethinker. I ask you, esteemed Editor, could this lead to an unpleasant life if we were to marry? I wait impatiently for your answer.

Sympathetic
1907

Worthy Editor,

I was born in America and my parents gave me a good education. I studied Yiddish and Hebrew, 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’ home town in Russian Poland. My mother’s family in Europe had invited my parents to a wedding, but instead of going themselves, they sent me. I stayed at my grandmothers with an aunt and uncle and had a good time.

It was lively in the town. There were many organizations and clubs and they 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. I had noticed that he was not indifferent to me, and I liked him as well. I looked up to him and respected him, as did all the townsfolk. My family became aware of it, and when they spoke to me about him, I could see they thought it was a good match.

He was handsome, clever, educated, a good talker and charmed me, but I didn’t give him a definite answer. As my love for him grew, however, I wrote to my parents about him, and then we came officially engaged.

A few months later we both went to my parents in the states and they received him like their own son. My 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 fiance?” 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 coffled 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. In Europe, where everyone admired him and all the girls envied me, he looked different. But, here, I see before me another person.

I haven’t 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 choke it all up inside myself, and I beg you to help me with advice in my desperate situation.

Respectfully,

A Worried Reader

GLOSSARY

**Greenhorn:**
A person who is naïve or easily tricked. It is often used as a derogatory term for a personal who is in a new place and is unfamiliar with the language and customs.
Young laborers strike for better working conditions, 1909. Library of Congress.
Dear Editor,

I am one of those unfortunate girls thrown by fate into a dark and dismal shop and I need your counsel.

Along with my parents, sisters and brothers, I came from Russian Poland where I have been well educated. But because of the terrible things going on in Russia we were forced to emigrate to American...I went to work in a shop. In this shop there is a foreman who is an exploiter, and he sets the prices on the work. He figures it out so that the wages so that the wages are very low, he insults and reviles the workers, he fires them and then takes them back. And worse than all of this, in spite of the fact that he has a wife and several children, he often allows himself to “have fun” with some of the working girls. It was my bad luck to be one of the girls that he tried to make advances to....

Though my hard-earned dollars mean a lot to my family of eight souls, I didn’t want to accept the foreman’s vulgar advances. He started to pick on me, said my work was no good, and when I proved he was wrong, he started to shout at me in the vilest language. He insulted me in Yiddish and then in English, so the American workers could understand too. Then, as if the Devil were in me, I ran home.

I am left without a job. Can you imagine my circumstances and that of my parents who depend on my earnings? The girls in the shop were very upset over the foreman’s vulgarity but they don’t want him to throw them out, so they are afraid to be witnesses against him. What can be done about this? I beg you to answer me.

Respectfully,

A Shopgirl
Dear Editor,

I am an operator on ladies’ waists for the past four years and I earn good wages. I work steady but haven’t saved money, because I have a sick wife. I had to put her in the hospital where she lay for four weeks, and then I had to bring her home.

Just after I brought her home, the General Strike began and I could see that I was in trouble. I had to go to the union to beg them not to let me down in my situation. I just asked for some money to have a little soup for my sick wife, but they answered that there wasn’t any money. I struggled along with my wife for four weeks, and when I saw that I might lose her I had to go back to work at the shop where we were striking. Now my conscience bothers me because I am a scab.

I am working now, I bring home fifteen, sometimes sixteen dollars a week. But I am not happy, because I was a scab and left the union. I want to state here that I was always a good union man.

Dear Editor, how can I go back to the union and salve my conscience? I am ready to swear that I will remain a loyal union man forever.

**GLOSSARY**

**Operator on Ladies’ Waists:**
This refers to a person who operates a sewing machine. “Ladies’ waists”, or shirtwaists, were a popular style of women’s blouses in the early 1900’s.

**General Strike:**
In 1910, trolley workers in Philadelphia went on strike. They refused to work until they received better pay and regulated work hours. In an act of solidarity over 60,000 workers in other industries joined the trolley workers in the strike.

**Union:**
When a group of workers in a particular trade or industry join together for the purpose of securing improvements in worker’s pay, safety conditions and benefits.

**Scab:**
A derogatory term for a person who works despite an
IDENTITY

Letters from a Bintel Brief

Worshippers on the Jewish New Year, 1907. Library of Congress.
Should Children Play Baseball? A father writes to ask advice about baseball. He thinks that baseball is a foolish and wild game. But his boy, who is already in the upper grades, is very eager to play. He’s not the only one.

The majority of our immigrants have the same idea about it. They express it in an interesting fashion, in such a way that it’s possible to see in him clearly how the parents in the Yiddish neighborhood feel about baseball. “It is said the one should teach their child how to play chess or checkers or goat & wolf \([\text{tsig un volf}]\) or at least a game that sharpens the mind. That would be appreciated” writes the father in his letter. “But what value does a game like baseball have? Nothing more than becoming crippled comes out of it.

When I was a young boy we used to play ‘rabbits’ chasing and catching one another \([\text{tag?]})\. But when we got older we stopped playing. Imagine a big boy in Russia playing tag, we would have treated him like he was crazy. And here in this highly educated America adults play baseball! They run after the stupid ball made of hide and are as excited about it as little boys. I want my boy to grow up to be a mentsh not a wild American runner. He’s making me miserable, I can’t take it anymore.

**GLOSSARY**

**Tsig un volf:**
Yiddish for ‘Goat and wolf.’ A type of game.

**Mentsch:**
The Yiddish word for a person of integrity and honor.
Worthy Editor,

We are a small family who recently came to the “Golden Land.” My husband, my boy and I are together, and our daughter lives in another city.

I had opened a grocery store here, but soon lost all my money. In Europe we were in business; we had people working for us paid them well. In short, there we made a good living but here we are badly off.

My husband became a peddler. The “pleasure” of knocking on doors and ringing bells cannot be known by anyone but a peddler. If anybody does buy anything “on time,” a lot of the money is lost, because there are some people who never intend to pay. In addition, my husband had trouble because he has a beard, and because of the beard he gets beaten up by the hoodlums.

I don’t know what to do. My husband argues that he doesn’t want to continue peddling. He doesn’t want to shave off his beard, and it’s not fitting for such a man to do so. What can I do? I beg you for a suggestion.

Your constant reader,
Worthy Editor,

I am sure that the problem I’m writing about affects many Jewish homes. It deals with immigrant parents and their American born children.

My parents, who have been readers of your paper for years, came from Europe. They have been here in this country over thirty years and were married twenty-eight years ago. They have five sons, and I am one of them. The oldest of us is twenty-seven and the youngest twenty-one.

We are all making a decent living. One of us works for the State Department. A second is a manager in a large store, two are in business, and the youngest is studying law. Our parents do not need our help because my father has a good job. We, the five brothers, always speak English to each other. Our parents know English too, but they speak only Yiddish, not just among themselves but to us too, and even to our American friends who come to visit us. We beg them not to speak Yiddish in the presence of our friends, since they can speak English, but they don’t want to. It’s a sort of stubbornness on their part, and a great deal of quarreling goes on between our parents and ourselves because of it.

Their answer is: “Children, we ask you not to try to teach us how to talk to people. We are older than you.”

Imagine, even when we go with our father to buy something in a store on Fifth Avenue, New York, he insists on speaking Yiddish. We are not ashamed of our parents, G-d forbid, but they ought to know where it’s proper and where it’s not. If they talk Yiddish among themselves at home, or to us, it’s bad enough, but among strangers and Christians? Is that nice? It looks as if they’re doing it to spite us. Petty spats grow out of it. They want to keep only to their old ways and don’t want to take up our new ways.

We beg you, friend Editor, to express your opinion on this question, and if possible send us our answer in English, because we can’t read Yiddish.

Accept our thanks for your answer, which we expect soon,

Respectfully,

I. and the Four Brothers
HISTORIC RESPONSES

Listed below are the corresponding editorial responses originally printed in the Jewish Daily Forward for each letter.

Education

Letter 1
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.

Letter 2
Since this man is intelligent and an adherent of the women’s emancipation movement, he is scolded severely in the answer for wanting to keep his wife so enslaved. Also, the opinion is expressed that the wife absolutely has the right to go to school two evenings a week.

Letter 3
The answer to this letter is directed to the boy’s mother, whose daughter was one of the shopworkers who perished in the Triangle fire. The unfortunate woman is comforted in the answer, and she is told that she must not hinder her son’s nighttime studies but must help him reach his goal. And an appeal is made to good people who are in a position to do something for the boy to come forward and help him further his education.

Love

Letter 1
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 opinions 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 laugh and laugh at those who call him “greenhorn.”
Letter 2
Love conquers all. Many such couples live happily, and it is better for the man to be taller and the woman shorter, not the opposite. People are accustomed to seeing the man more developed than the woman. People stare? Let them stare! Also the fact that the girl is religious and the man is not can be overcome if he has enough influence on her.

Labor

Letter 1
Such a scoundrel should be taught a lesson that could be an example to others. The girl is advised to bring it pit into the open, the whole story about the foreman because there in the small shop town it shouldn’t be difficult to have him thrown out of the shop and for her to get her job back.

Letter 2
Neither the operator nor the union is guilty. During the strike thousands upon thousands of workers complained that they were in need, but at the beginning of the strike there really was no money. It is now the duty of the union to investigate the case, and if it is shown that circumstances were as the operator describes, they will certainly forgive and he can become a good union man.

Identity

Letter 1
Let your boys play baseball and even become outstanding players as long as it doesn’t interfere with their studies and doesn’t make them keep in the company of bad influences. This issue arises for nearly half the families of the Jewish quarter. And this is the writer’s advice to all of them. Think this issue over carefully...Baseball is a good way to develop the body. It’s better than gymnastics. First of all it’s out in the fresh air. Secondly it develops the hand and feet and the reflex responses of the limbs and eyes. Why shouldn’t the children play this these days? Football, the “aristocratic” sport of the colleges ... now there is a wild game. You fight with each other like Indians and often one is left with a broken foot or hand or gets wounded. But there is no danger in baseball.

Letter 2
We see absolutely no crime in the parents’ speaking Yiddish to their sons. The Yiddish language is dear to them and they want to speak a language to their children and all who understand it. It may also be that they are ashamed to speak their imperfect English among strangers so they prefer to use the mother tongue. From the letter we get the impression that the parents are not fanatics, and with their speaking Yiddish they are not out to spite the children. But it would certainly not be wrong if the parents were to speak English too, to the children. People should and must learn the language of our country.