

# IDENTITY

## Letters from a Bintel Brief

זי האָט אַלס עלטער מיידעל  
חתונה געהאַט מיט אַן

און מיט ליבשאפט וועגן אייער  
מאַגן ערשטער פרוי, וועט אין



Worshippers on the Jewish New Year, 1907. Library of Congress.

DEAR EDITOR  
Letters from a Bintel Brief

*This question did not appear in A Bintel Brief, but rather in an editorial written by Abraham Cahan in 1903. The original piece also included a diagram of the baseball field with the fundamentals of baseball explained in Yiddish. Although it was in a different section of the newspaper, its tone and theme very much align with the issues chronicled in A Bintel Brief's letters.*

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 [*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 [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.

# 1906

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,

## GLOSSARY

### Golden Land:

The name many immigrants called the United States. It is tied to the misconception that the streets in America were paved with gold.

### Peddler:

Peddlers sold food, clothes or household items. Some traveled across the country selling their wares. In New York City immigrants often sold items from carts in the street.

### Beards:

For religious Jewish men it is a tradition to grow a beard. This practice comes from the Torah (The Jewish Bible) and many Jewish men consider the beard to be sacred. As religious men immigrated to America, pressure was placed on them to shave their



# 1933

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