

# Letters as Evidence of Interfaith Relationships

**A small group of letters within the Papers of the Reverend Dr James Parkes (MS 60 18/3/11) offers insights into his interfaith work, both in the UK and in Palestine in the 1940s. The full significance of the letters, however, only becomes apparent when one learns of the background of the letters' writer, a young German Jew, Israel (formerly Eduard) Alexander (1921-2005), writing from Kibbutz Tirat Zvi in Palestine in 1946.**

Early in 1938, Israel took very seriously a warning from family friends that he should urgently acquire a trade or profession for the future – one which would be useful anywhere, especially if forced to flee the country. In the spring of 1938, he began training in agriculture at a *hachsharah* [preparation] farm at Gehringshof, Germany, run by the Orthodox pioneering movement, Bachad (full name: Brit Chalutzim Dati'im – the Alliance of Religious Pioneers). On 9 Nov 1938, (*Kristallnacht*) Israel and his colleagues were rounded up and the following day taken to Buchenwald. They were released in January 1939 on condition that they leave the country as soon as possible. Bachad, meanwhile, had learned of a British government scheme to allow agricultural trainees to transfer to the UK.

By the end of March 1939, Israel found himself employed as a trainee at a number of Bachad's farm centres in the UK. It was during this time that he met Dr Parkes, who had become a friend to Bachad. He even went to stay at the Parkes' family home at Barley, near Royston, Hertfordshire. In July 1945, Israel and his wife, Klara, were among a group of thirty-five Bachad members who made *Aliyah* to Palestine. Most of them settled in Kibbutz Tirat Zvi in the Beit Shean Valley, not far from the Dead Sea. Israel found the conditions very trying indeed – not only physically, but politically, as the kibbutz was under constant threat of attack. The whole situation was very distressing. Crucially, these letters reveal the deep esteem in which Dr Parkes was held – when in Dr Parkes' company, Israel felt deeply valued at a personal level. He felt he could confide his misgivings about the situation to Dr Parkes and hoped that Parkes would use his influence with the authorities to help. One should also be aware, when reading these letters, that Dr and Mrs Parkes had not long before made their first visit to the 'Holy Land', where they paid a visit to Kibbutz Tirat Zvi and renewed their acquaintances with a number of former Bachad members there, including Israel Alexander. Dr Parkes also testified to the Anglo-American Committee of Inquiry on Palestine that same year. The letters provide a rare example of direct, and relatively uninhibited communication between a young, extremely well-educated Jew and Dr Parkes. Sadly, Dr Parkes was too busy to reply to these letters himself – instead, he directed his wife Dorothy to reply as from them both – she, too, had met Israel. Her reply is necessarily concise, but nevertheless would have meant a great deal to its recipient.

## Source commentary provided by Dr Verity Steele

Dr Verity Steele's musical career brought her into contact with the Jewish community in the UK and in Israel, where she was a violinist in the Kibbutz Chamber Orchestra, 1987-88. At this time she first learned of the Jewish pioneering group, Bachad (Brit Chalutzim Dati'im - the Alliance

of Religious Pioneers) that owned and ran a training farm close to her childhood home at Thaxted, Essex. Her subsequent PhD, completed in 2023, is dedicated to Bachad and was supervised at the Parkes Institute by Professors Tony Kushner and Joachim Schlör.

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30-6-46.

Dear Dr. Parkes,

I hope you will forgive my not addressing you "Sir". But the way in which you use to talk to people strange to you is so personal that the address "Sir" seems much too impersonal to me.

Actually, I should have written to you quite some time ago. But with one thing and another I could never manage to do so.

Your lecture, for which I extend my thanks to you, I read with great interest. Excuse ~~me~~ some questions and remarks: 1) In one place you mention that the Soviet State is dominated by a Church. Do you maintain that Communism is a "Church"? —

2) I think you will understand that, as an orthodox Jew, I never can agree that the Pentateuch has not been a document given to Moses by God. I do agree, on the other hand, that a lot of what has been handed down by the Rabbis needs a new interpretation. A

Image reference: MS 60 18/3/11

## Highlights from the letters:

(30. 6. 1946) (from Israel Alexander to Dr Parkes)

'Dear Dr. Parkes, I hope you will forgive my not addressing you "Sir". But the way in which you use to talk to people strange to you is so personal that the address "Sir" seems much too impersonal to me.'

(2. 7. 1946) (from Israel Alexander to Dr Parkes)

'What I have to write to you today is not propaganda, is nothing I have picked up in speeches or from articles – it is what I feel, what I think...

I, as a "Refugee from Nazi aggression" had felt as in "paradise" when I first came to England. And during those 6 years I had stayed with you, I had got to know the English man and his mentality quite thoroughly...

And why do I bother you, why do I write to you? Because I feel great confidence in you. You are the only non-Jew I know who takes up the fight for us whatever may happen. And I am convinced that it is necessary to provide you with some impressions and facts that you, most probably, will not read in any newspaper or other official communication.'

[Subsequent paragraphs provide a detailed account of the grim reality 'on the ground' in Palestine involving members of His Majesty's armed forces and the Palestine Police – behaviour which, in many instances, was contrary to Israel's experience of decent English people in Britain.]

'Please, do excuse this long, long letter. But now I feel a lot better. Gd. bless you and Mrs Parkes. Y.' [Yisrael Alexander].

## Reply from Dorothy Parkes (on behalf of her husband), 14. 7. 1946.

'Thank you so much for your two letters. I am sure you will forgive me for writing in place of my husband, but he is so very busy trying to help in every way he can that I am trying to relieve him of as much correspondence as possible.

We can only say our thoughts are with you all in this time of trial and unhappiness. We cannot express too strongly our admiration of your patience and forbearance during these difficult days – and we can only beg you, difficult as it is, to continue in this way. We feel we have many personal friends in Palestine now that we have visited so many of your settlements, and our affectionate sympathy for you is real and sincere. We can only assure you that we are doing everything in our power this side to help forward a satisfactory solution...

Meanwhile, don't lose heart. The very real achievements of which we had first-hand evidence during our visit cannot be overlooked or nullified – just keep on with the good work, and all good luck to you.

With all kind regards from us both,

Yours ever sincerely' [Dorothy and Rev Dr James Parkes].