Translation / Traduction
Translated by Laura Wiseman, York University

Introduction to Yampolsky’s “Letters from Canada” in *Ha-Dror*
**Ha-Dror** was an early 1900s Hebrew periodical published in New York. It circulated in major Jewish populations in Canada and the United States and covered everything from politics to poetry. Reuben Brainin (1862–1939, b. Lidy, now Belarus), the author, intellectual and Hebraist, edited *Ha-Dror* as well as several other Hebrew and Yiddish newspapers. Brainin’s education and work took him to Vienna, then Berlin, New York and Montreal. His studies covered classical Hebrew religious texts, *Haskala* literature, and the work of modern Zionist thinkers, Herzl among them. His Yiddish publications, such as the *Keneder Adler* (The Canadian Eagle), helped Yiddish-speaking new Canadians stay *au courant*. *Ha-Dror* (The Swallow) apprised readers of the status and civic activity of Jews in their respective North American environments. In general, Brainin was dedicated to both Yiddish writing and promoting literary activity in early modern Hebrew.

Judging by the tenor of the introduction to the first “Letter(s) from Canada” below, Brainin might have persuaded Isaac Yampolsky to serve as the Canadian Hebrew correspondent. He otherwise appears to have been a Yiddish journalist. Yampolsky depicts early twentieth-century Canadian and American Jews as being at identical stages of Jewish development in terms of immigration, acculturation, and involvement in public life. Present-day demographers, however, would contest some of his analogies. Yampolsky affords us a look at some “routine” internecine strife in organized societal and synagogue life. He presents insight into the latest developments in North American Jewish education as well. *Imagine*: schools with principals, as opposed to *batei midrash* with a Rosh Yeshiva.

In the second “Letter,” Yampolsky examines the 1911 parliamentary election results from several points of view. In the process, he notes Canadian Jewry’s outlooks on shifts in the Conservative and Liberal parties’ positions, and provides a window into Jewish reactions to Canada-U.S. trade reciprocity.

Yampolsky adopts an expressive, flowery Hebrew, pollinated with biblical, hermeneutic, and talmudic legal phrases. Several factors inform his style. One is Yampolsky’s conversance with the written Yiddish of his day, some of it similarly flowery. A second is the interpolation of idioms drawn from classical Hebrew. Their intertextual echoes enrich the articles’ meaning and texture. A third factor is that Yampolsky wrote during the revival phase of communicative Hebrew; writers often improvised with more, rather than fewer words, until shorter neologisms and loan words took root.

There’s a twofold challenge in translating Yampolsky’s work: one, reducing his copious verbiage sufficiently for today’s reader, yet remaining faithful to the correspondent’s sense; and two, maintaining *enough* verbiage to impart Yampolsky’s personal flair. His style runs to assonance and alliteration, with double and triple examples.
Translated by Laura Wiseman, York University / Yampolsky’s “Letters from Canada” in Ha-Dror
Translation

There is no appreciable difference between American and Canadian values other than variations in some areas. It is nevertheless an American newspaper’s prerogative to designate a separate column for Letters from Canada. Since, however, Ha-Dror’s esteemed editor’s directive is the mandate with which he has charged me, I can hardly refuse. My obligation is to him.

Canada, despite being almost Europe’s size, constituting an independent domain distinct from the United States, with seven million inhabitants, is only a small settlement under the rule of the Union Jack. Nevertheless, in matters of intellect and economy, Canada functions under the influence of America, its big sister in terms of population, wisdom and might. The same applies to our fellow Jews who have come to Canada, numbering approximately seventy thousand. Owing to proximity, they function under American influence as well. There is, consequently, no perceptible difference in the Jewish life of our people in Canada and Jewish life in America: they are alike in style, situation and sentiment. They are one in spirit.

And should the reader question me, wishing to know: In what direction does the thinking of our people in Canada incline? I shall reply: Akin to lekh lekha—en route to our brothers in the United States and to discovering their views.1 If their Jewish life is not yet imprinted by history with a fixed form, why would you expect this of our people, Canadian Jews, only a fraction of American Jews in number, and hardly distinguishable among them.

Indeed, Canadian Jewry may deserve a modicum of consideration in Ha-Dror as a microcosm of a big picture, whose outlines are more discernible in small scale. If there is an explanation for this hypothesis, we may link America and Canada through analogy:2 in Canada, as in America, all newcomers who arrive with the rucksack of exile still on their shoulders—upon seeing our many institutions, synagogues, their gabbais, societies and leaders, large newspapers and their bureaucrats—are immediately astonished, imagining they have found the new Eretz Yisrael.3 Upon quickly noting, however, the institutions’ emptiness, sensing even one iota of overblown affection for us, they become immediately disillusioned and soon submit to the yoke of the dollar and that’s that.

In Canada, too, there are many Jewish communities, but not even one oriental community among them. And if you really want to know the number of communities, go count all their synagogues and their numerous and various institutions that incite each other, are divided from each other, and are even divided internally into two, sometimes three “sides”—and then you will know how many.
In Canada, like in America, there are rabbis and preachers, reverends and mohalim, cantors and sages, Talmud Torah schools and principals (the latest American trend, unknown in the old world) who compete among themselves, each wishing to gain from the downfall of the other.

Here, too, like in America, laypeople advance to the top, and anyone upon whom the Holy One has conferred an ounce of hutzpa, dares to speak out in public.⁴

Here, too, like there, our Creator has merited young people who envision the advancement of the nation only through violation of religion, or who aspire to the perfection of the world only by means of the destruction of the People of Israel.

Here, too, like there, there are numerous intellectuals who regard this pandemonium with disdain and deep sorrow but fall silent, as it is a “time to keep silent.”⁵ For here, too, like there, the masses unabashedly spurn all their prophets, and are hungry for revelation that revives the soul and touches the heart, but there is no prophecy in these days of fury.⁶

Just a general observation regarding the spiritual situation of Canadian Jewry! In regard, however, to our people’s prosperity here, suffice it to say that they are no worse off than American Jews, and perhaps even better off. Regarding their particular political situation, and the specific details of Canada’s three major cities—Montreal, Toronto and Winnipeg—their societies, institutions, and associations, I shall write in my coming letters.

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2. To convey “analogy” Yampolsky uses the hermeneutic term g’zera shava. It is a methodology of applying an established law to a new legal situation based on parallels in biblical wording.
3. “Rucksack and walking stick” were linguistic signals of long distance, dusty wayfarers who made their way to the temple from afar (see, for example, Deuteronomy Rabba, Va-Ethanan). The terms became incorporated in stock phrases used to describe new arrivals in Eretz Yisrael during the waves of aliya from countries of exile.
4. The original context of Yampolsky’s expression—literally, ascending to the lectern—refers to taking on ritual roles in public such as leading prayer and reading Torah. Here it refers more broadly to holding forth in public or holding public office.
6. The Talmud declares that the “spirit of prophecy departed” after the time of Haggai, Zekharia and Malakhi, corresponding with the early second temple period (BT Yoma 9b; Sanhedrin 11a; Sota 48b).
On Rosh HaShana eve our parliamentary elections ended with a great victory for the Conservatives, to the deep sorrow of the Liberals who had governed firmly for fifteen years. This, despite our Jewish people’s propaganda, shaking up worlds not their own, and expending all their energy trying to restore the Liberals to their glory.

And now, after the commotion, it is fitting to contemplate in earnest whether it was indeed worthwhile for our people, some unemployed, whose opinions are of little consequence, to have intervened between these two major parties who control our wellbeing, given that they and only they pull the reins of government as they see fit.

In truth, Jewish members of the upper echelons, wealthy and longstanding citizens, kept their distance and did not feel obliged to intervene in the conflict between the parties. With their developed political sensibilities, they keenly sensed the danger for their brethren, were they to have placed themselves between a rock and a hard place. Recent arrivals from countries of exile, however, who had barely become citizens, were foolish enough to go galloping blindly after our civic businessmen, filling the air with raucous politics, arousing the mirth and contempt of our neighbours. They regarded us dismissively, from on high, as if to say: Just who are you to rock the boat?!

As known, the Canadian Parliament fell from grace even before the completion of its term over the trade agreement (Reciprocity) between Canada and America, even though its ramifications pertain only to the captains of industry and farmers in particular. For our brothers, the minor merchants, workers, pedlars and purveyors, there was no reason whatsoever for concern. Under the circumstances, what accounted for all our people’s trepidation directed toward the Conservatives who opposed reciprocity? Ludicrously, only as a result of a mix-up of the concepts underlying the two terms “Liberal” and “Conservative” did our leader manage to portray our votes in this election battle as entirely negligible. The term “Liberal” has since then become a nice expression of love and brotherhood to the Jewish ear, and the term “Conservative” has become a symbol of extremism and anti-Semitism. Here in Canada, however, it is quite the opposite. The fact is that the Liberals are quite simply the French Roman Catholics, and the Conservatives are quite simply the English Protestants, the essence of which proves the truth of my words. Aided by the mix-up of these terms, our businessmen brought a storm upon the Jewish faction, shouting aloud, “Conservatives are upon you, O Israel!” when in truth that was nonsense.

And as proof, who vehemently protested the leader of the ‘Roman citizens’ if not a Jew, a Liberal no less, and became a leader of Montreal’s citizens? Who is impeding the flow of immigration, Williams-style, if not the Liberal government of Canada? Where else do our people dwell in greater security and serenity besides Toronto and
Winnipeg among the English Conservatives, or in Montreal and Quebec among the French Liberals? Nevertheless...

In spite of this, when Mr. Johnson was elected in the Conservative campaign, the Jews made every effort to criticize his position and to portray him as a fanatical priest and anti-Semite. In truth, he is an educated merchant, very wealthy, and removed from all ancient attitudes against our people. It is a known fact that this year when Mr. Johnson was in London he was summoned to dine with Lord Rothschild when he proposed to establish Jewish settlements in the warmer parts of Canada instead of those that were founded in the cold, desolate, far west under the auspices of the J.C.A. And now that the Conservatives have won, the Jews are afraid that the Conservatives will take revenge.

To our joy, however, there is no suspicion that Conservative revenge is in store for us. In their eyes, our efforts were but child's play and they paid us no attention. Apart from that, was there not also a fair number of us who sided with the Conservatives? Indeed, the latter did not turn up altruistically; rather, they intended, as is their wont, to retaliate.

This unsettling fact is proof that there is no “public Jewish opinion” in Canada. Many opinions and various alliances exist, but no single “public Jewish opinion.” This is not a good sign for our participation in politics.

There is, however, no adversity without its virtue. Should the recent elections teach our people how to conduct themselves in the upcoming elections, we'll cut our losses. That will be a sign for good.

1 The writer uses a colloquial Hebrew equivalent: “between the hammer and the anvil.”
3 The writer employs the Hebrew idiom, “no bears and no forest,” to convey no such thing.
4 The Jewish Colonization Association was established by Baron Maurice Hirsch in 1891 to help prepare Jews, particularly those from the Russian Empire, for immigration to, and settlement in Canada, America, and Argentina. For a period in the early twentieth century until World War I, the J.C.A. also helped redeem plots of land in Eretz Yisrael.
5 The writer uses an updated vernacular Hebrew expression for “retaliation,” comparable to “an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth”; “to strike Yossi with Yossi.”