

The Letters of Yankev Alperowitz

[Written some time after 1904]

To my brother Simcha:

[The first five lines of this letter, a formal greeting, were written in Hebrew. The remainder of the letter, in Yiddish, follows.]

I can't do what's required of me on the job. My health is weak, both my head and my heart. I take medicine from the doctors around here... It's been eight days that I've felt pretty well; I seem normal for a while and then it hits me again. I think I'll travel to Vilna at Passover. The job is a hardship, but what can you do? Without health you can't fulfill your obligations.

My children are all, thanks to the Living One, in the best of health. My youngest daughter, Yehudeske, may she thrive, has no desire to travel to America. She can sew well, but what shall I do with her? I can't even give myself advice. There's nothing to be done here, yet if I should quit the job - which would make me happy - then what would I do? I want to be able to do something for her, be able to pass something on to her. She'd need a good deal of money from you if I can't save any.

Since you'll see my son Simcha, may he live, show him this letter and tell him that millions of people live in America and among none of them do you find one who would forget a father, a brother, a sister. A person doesn't do that to another in this world. When people ask me "What's going on with your children; you have children in America, don't you?" I'm ashamed to say that I haven't had a letter now for two years already. But you see, my dear brother, this is also probably God's will. The Living One gives a human being a heart, which can feel so much, so much compassion... Enough to write that my heart is weak, to write that you should show him the letter. He should remember that he has a father, brothers and sisters.

My dear beloved brother, write and tell me how you are, how your business is going, your health and if you have a little bit of help yet from your son Reuven, how you live. You know, Praise God, that we're only two, two brothers who once lay under a single heart, that each of us must know how the other lives.

I had a card from Sosenka, from Yankev, saying that our sister Chivia and her children are well, and from America, from our sister Leah, may she live, I also had a greeting; and from Velayne and from Smorgon word that everyone is in the best of health. Be well and happy and answer me at my daughter Shprintze's address. Y.A.

April 24, Fashtef [circa 1907]

To my dear daughter Shprintze, her husband Yankev and my darling grandchild. May you live happily with good fortune, say the prayer that blesses a grandfather - that will certainly, God willing, bring long years and good fortune:

My dear beloved daughter, your letter and my son Simcha's came yesterday. It had been lying around and then forwarded from Komai to Fashtef. Since I was in the forest for ten days and not in Fashtef, I only received it yesterday. I read it with great joy and cried that the Almighty has separated us by such a distance, across oceans, that we cannot see each other, and speak only with our pens - and at that not always when we want to.

I send you greetings now from my daughter Shayne, her husband and children. I have good news about Eliohu. Today I'm sending out invitations to his wedding which will, with luck, take place after the Shabbos after Shavuous - that's the 12th of May. He'll be married to a girl from a very fine place, from Sharkuse. She and Eliohu were with us at Passover. We liked her alot. She's intelligent.

Reuven is studying at the Yeshivah at Dolhinow. He visited us and after Passover went back to Dolhinow to study. He's a fine boy, grown up so well, we delight in him. For the wedding we'll travel, Auntie, Yehudeske and I to Dahlavetz and from there to Dveletz and from Dveletz with Shayne and her children to Sharkuse, with luck.

Now to write you about my health. I've taking medicine for two months and thanks to the Almighty I'm better. But as usual when you need something to sustain you you've got to walk through puddles on muddy roads, never closer than 15 or 20 versts¹ each day, to get even a little bread. It's hard for an old person. You find things are tough for younger people, too - they can't find jobs. I've been without work for a month, but will soon begin a four month stint at Fargament's. It's not a very good position, not more than 25 a month.² The inflation is awful - whole wheat flour, 130 a pood.³ Everything's extremely expensive. A garment costs twice as much as it used to, a pair of boots three times as much and what I make isn't worth a *tooth*. I thank the Almighty, though, for the little prosperity earlier; if not, I wouldn't be able to afford this wedding today, and Yehudeske traveling to America. I haven't seen her since Passover. I write this letter from Fashtef; if, God willing, I'm at Komai at Shavuous, I'll write you all immediately of the details of Yehudit's travel plans, how things can be worked out.

1. A Russian unit of distance equal to .6629 mile.

2. Yankev's references to currencies are in U.S. dollars, Russian rubles and German marks where appropriate. He also refers to another currency that is undecipherable, perhaps Polish or Lithuanian funds. Monetary amounts mentioned with no specific currency type refer to these units.

3. A Russian unit of weight equal to about 36 pounds.

Auntie is in Dvinsk, at her son's Menachem. She isn't in good health. Today I received a letter from her saying she's feeling better, and that, God willing, she'll come Shavuous and we'll all travel to the wedding.

I thank you now, my dear daughter, for your letter, and pray that the Almighty will show you His compassion, bring you much joy and happiness just as you've brought me with your letter. About my daughter Yehudeske's going away - my heart weeps, for who is to remain with me? What can you do, though, when you're old and weak? Look my dear daughter, when the time comes to see an engagement and wedding through, it simply has to be done. What's the point of toiling away otherwise? You get older, and *that's* the worst fault in the eyes of the world; so today, *now* is the time, and not when you and my son Simcha will have to act as mother and father. May the Almighty help you. He knows, of course, that I won't be able to help, but with His succor, His influence on your good, pious hearts, you can be like parents to the others. I write and the tears run from my eyes.

May the Living One bring you much joy. Concerning our separation, if I wasn't responsible for my son Eliohu, I wouldn't, believe me, remain in Russia a single day more. I don't place much hope in Shayne's business ventures, either. I think that with time, they'll travel to America. Who I'll remain with, God only knows. Since Eliohu is not fit, there's nothing for us to talk about further - we have to do as the Creator wishes.

Nothing else to write. Be well, my dear beloved children. From your father who wishes you happiness from deep in his heart. Y.A.

Regards to my dear brother Simcha, his wife and children. Write me once again what's going on with him. To my son Simcha and to my daughter Hannah, if she's not yet arrived in Bangor, write to my daughter in [undecipherable] and to my son Simcha in [undecipherable]. My daughter wrote me that she was thinking of going back to Bangor soon. If she's not there though, send this on to her immediately. She's very unhappy when she doesn't receive any mail from us.

April 24, Fashtef [circa 1907]

To my dear daughter Hannah, may you live with much happiness:

I'll write you now of each thing that's happened here. For two weeks I was ill and taking medicine. I walked in the woods and that sufficed, but now, thanks to the Living One, I'm better. Oh, I choked on that charlatan's medicine!

After Passover, Fargament calculated that he had too many people working for him, so what does he need one as feeble as me for? I've been on the job for one month and now I have only until the first of August to work for him - four months from now. After that, may the Almighty worry about me. Maybe He'll provide something.

Auntie is in Dvinsk, at her son's Menachem. She's not well and has been seeing the doctor for a couple of weeks, but today she writes that she's better and she will, God willing, come for Shavuuous.

Shayne, her husband and children are in the best of health, but as usual, what they're making from their store isn't very much, though this year, thanks to the hordes of people on the train he was able to make back his losses and come out with a profit of 120 rubles. He heard from Kovno that my son Eliohu will be married the 12th of May, to a lovely girl with very fine in-laws. He and his fiance were with us at Passover, and after the marriage he'll continue, with luck, to work with Lanker this summer and she will sew - she's a good seamstress. They'll have, God willing, up to seven [unknown currency] a week and with a percentage of the take they can make quite a good living. She's quite bright and we're very fond of her.

Write me immediately about when she's going to travel. [The text is garbled here; Yankev seems to be referring to Yehudeske.] We'll travel, God willing, with luck Auntie, Yehudeske and I to Dveletz. Then we'll all go together, God willing, to the wedding at Sharketzne in May.

Reuven was with us at passover in Komai, thanks to the Living One and after Passover he went off to study at Dolhinow, but he'll come at Rosh Hashanah and we'll see each other and try to get him a job at Dvinsk. I don't know how I'm going to manage though; he's going to have to be dressed properly - one has to be dressed right in the city - then the wedding, May the Almighty bless it, will cost up to [undecipherable amount] and then to travel back happily will cost too. Thank God that in these four months I'll make 100, but maybe He'll provide more.

My dear daughter Hannah, you are a child. Shprintze wrote that they've spoken to you of a fine engagement. Everyone knows that it would be the worst thing you could do to turn it down, now when you are young and pretty, for you know that nothing pleases the world like a young woman, but it has no use for a hard old maid. Look my daughter, do not delay. When the Living One presents you with your chosen mate, you must take the opportunity.

Nothing more to write. Be healthy my dear daughter.

From your father who wishes you all happiness, Y.A.

August 2, Komai [circa 1910]

To my dear daughter Shprintze, your husband Yankev and child Itinke, may you all live with much happiness, to my daughter Yehudeske, may she live:

I received your letters along with the photos from Yehudeske. They gave me great pleasure. The photo of Yehudeske is very fine - for this photo may the Living One never withdraw His mercy from you. We'll send you photos immediately of Auntie, Sarah, Peske and one of my dear son Reuven.

My health is weak. I'm sure, praise God, that my heart is out of whack. Time goes by and I feel pretty well, then all of a sudden it goes crazy.



Two views of Yankev Alperowitz. (Courtesy of Carla Cohen and Pauline Cohen)

About business, it's not much, Praise God, to think about. This year I was able to lay by quite a few rubles, and yet each day that you live you have to stay alive. If only, perhaps, the Living One will have mercy on us and improve the situation.

Auntie returned from Dvinsk, and, thanks to the Almighty, is better. Her son Menachem managed to spend quite a few of my rubles taking her to the finest doctors and professors. She was in Dvinsk for four weeks and she's better.

My son Reuven is working for Kotler near Disna. When he'll be able to come he doesn't know himself. My children in Dvelevetz, Shayne and her three kids are in the best of health. You saved her with the money you sent. For every ruble of it the Living One will repay you a thousand. My son Eliohu, his wife and child are in the best of health and are making a living.

I was in Dveletz a day ago. From the bridegroom Luba [Louis Bromberg] there was a letter saying he's already in Chicago, but he has no news to write.

Nothing else to write about. Write me about yourselves. Tell me everything that's going on there. News from you is my whole portion of satisfaction. The Almighty alone knows how my son Simcha is. I've wept plenty over his bad health. I have arthritis in my right hand, so I know what it feels like. My regards to my dear son Simcha, his wife and their child, to my brother Simcha and his family. Be healthy my beloved children and live happily.

From your father, Y.A.

July 6, Faletz [circa 1911]

Greetings to Shprintze and her children, may they live long years with great good fortune:

I am, thanks to the Living One, healthy, not any worse. Auntie isn't well. She takes medicine continually but it doesn't help very much. The Living One, perhaps, will provide her a real remedy...

My son Reuven was here, God bless him, after Passover, in good health, in high spirits. He's working at the same job at Fargaments where he makes 25 a month with which he's content. You know I got even with Fargament. He bought 460,000 rubles worth of forest from Fashtef, then he had to pay 20,000 more and since he's had another setback - his wife died - he'll probably have to come up with several thousand more to cover her illness. He's really down at the mouth, and he decided to cut back on his surveyors. He cut back Zalevanna to 10 a month; he wanted to cut me back too, but I wouldn't let Vellvell work for nothing.

I was working for two weeks after Passover and then I came here to Kotler's. He's from Fashtef and this business is 160 versts from Fashtef. I've rented a place until Rosh Hashanah. The job takes alot out of me, and I don't have that much strength to start with. The demands are enormous. I'll go to Fashtef for Rosh Hashanah and put this work behind me. Otherwise between old age and drudgery - who knows whether the Almighty will grant me an-