

# A 1903 Hebrew Letter Written by Metropolitan Andrei Sheptytsky

Translated, introduced and annotated by  
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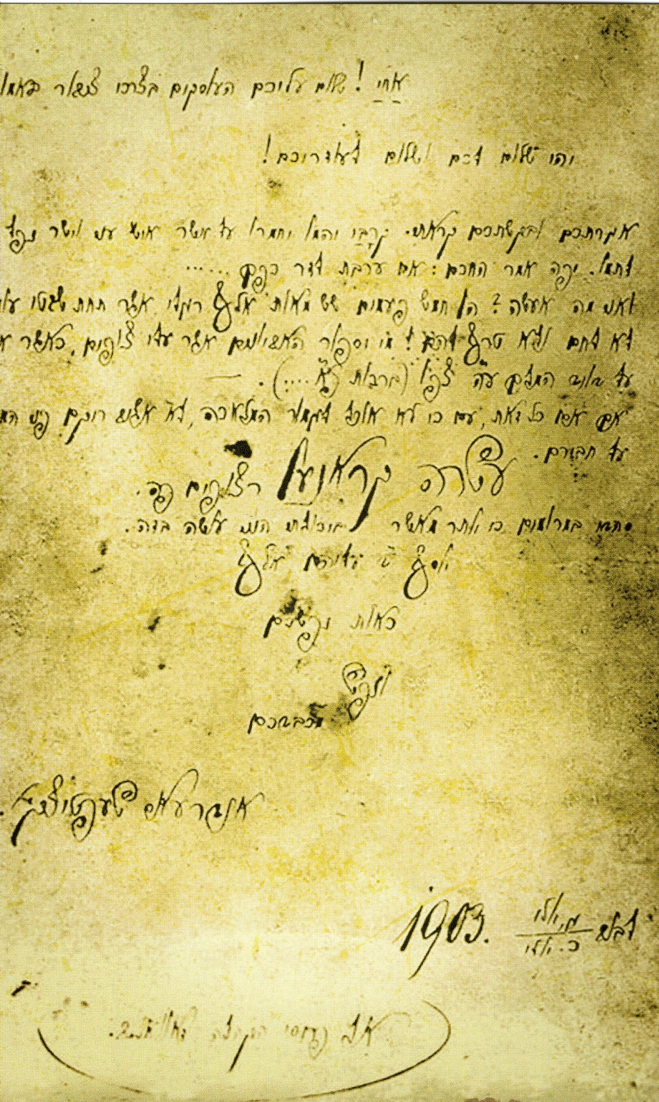
The Hebrew letter reproduced in facsimile on the following page is a remarkable document. It was signed by Metropolitan Andrei Sheptytsky in July 1903.<sup>ii</sup> Yael Lichtenstein from Israel was kind enough to share a copy with me. Her great-great grandfather, Moshe Sonnenschein, was one of the leaders of the Zavaliv [Zawalów] Jewish community to whom the letter was addressed. A photocopy of it has been kept in her mother's family as a treasured memento for four generations.

Hebrew as a spoken language was in its infancy at the beginning of the twentieth century; most Eastern European Jews spoke Yiddish. When writing on religious subjects, rabbis wrote in Rabbinic Hebrew, a mixture of Hebrew and Aramaic, rich in Biblical and Talmudic allusions.

The letter is carefully composed and meticulously written. It shows that the writer had command of Biblical and Rabbinic phraseology and was familiar with Jewish traditions and prayers. The writer assumed that the addressees would be equally familiar with these.

The subject matter is trite. It appears that members of the small Jewish community of Zavaliv [Zawalów] had turned to Metropolitan Sheptytsky for financial help for a member who had fallen on hard times, probably as a result of a poor business decision. The Metropolitan graciously sent a donation of 10 kronen with an apology that his own responsibilities prevented him from sending more.





## Translation of the Letter

With God's help<sup>iii</sup>

My brothers! Peace be upon you who are faithfully engaged with the needs of the community!<sup>iv</sup>

May peace be with you and your helpers!

I have read your words and your request. I am extremely upset<sup>v</sup> that an innocent and upright man has been caught in a net of his own making. The wise man<sup>vi</sup> correctly stated, if one pledges to a stranger...<sup>vi</sup>

But what am I to do? For, five times 600,000,<sup>viii</sup> without bread or sustenance, are under my staff! Who can count the number of desperate people dependent on me, as your ancestors once depended on King David, peace be upon him? (Berachot Chap 1).<sup>ix</sup>

Nevertheless, despite this, even if<sup>x</sup> I cannot complete the task,<sup>xi</sup> I will not turn my face away from those who are praying for their friend.

Ten Kronen are hereby enclosed.

May heaven be my witness<sup>xii</sup> that what I am doing is above my means.

May the Name [God] increase it a thousand fold –

According to your hearts' desires –

And the desire of one who respects you,

Andreas Sheptycki<sup>xiii</sup>

Lwów [Lviv], July 3/July 20, 1903

To the leaders of the Zawalów<sup>xiv</sup> community

<sup>i</sup> When the present translation of the letter was made, I was unaware of the article by Henry Abramson, "Metropolitan Sheptyts'kyl's Hebrew Correspondence, 1903" in *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 15 (1991): 172-76. Abramson notes that Sheptytsky had first begun studying Hebrew in 1884.

<sup>ii</sup> P. Friedman, "Hurban yedei Lvov," in *Encyklopedia shel Galuyot: Levov* (Jerusalem) vol. 4, pt. 1 (1956), p. 670.

<sup>iii</sup> It is common Jewish practice to begin a letter with an abbreviation for "with the help of God." "God" is not spelled out, and "the name" is substituted. The beginning of this letter uses "the name" but spells out "with the help of."

<sup>iv</sup> This is a direct quotation from the Sabbath morning (*Shabbat shaharit*) service prayer for the welfare of community leaders traditionally recited after the reading of the weekly Torah portion.

<sup>v</sup> Literally, "My intestines are roaring and foaming" [*"yehemu yechmru meimav"*], from Psalm 46: 4.

<sup>vi</sup> The "wise man" referred to here is Solomon, the traditional author of Proverbs.

<sup>vii</sup> Proverbs 6: 1 warns: "Takata lazár kapecha," if you have struck your hands for a stranger, i.e. if someone borrowed money for speculation and asks you to be a surety, and then loses. The reference would suggest that the man on whose behalf the community leaders were pleading had guaranteed a speculative loan and was now ruined.

<sup>viii</sup> In Numbers (Bamidbar) 11: 21, Moses says to G-d: "The people among whom I am are six hundred thousand men on foot (*"shesh meoth elef ragli"*). What Sheptytsky is saying is that "I am responsible for five times as many people as Moses," undoubtedly a reference to the hunger that existed in his own community.

<sup>ix</sup> Talmud Bavli, Tractate Berachot (3b), relates King David's daily routine. After dawn's break, the sages of Israel would come to see him and say, "Our lord, king, your people Israel require sustenance." He would reply, "Let them go out and make a living, one from the other" (i.e. Let the poor be supported by the prosperous). After mentioning King David, the author uses the common abbreviation for "May peace be upon him," which religious Jews use when speaking of the dead.

<sup>x</sup> In Hebrew, the word "if" also has only two letters. And this Hebrew word is the only word in the entire document that is misspelled. In the article cited above, Abramson suggests that this proves that the letter was indeed written by the Metropolitan, as anyone who had studied the language since childhood would not have made such an elementary spelling error. The argument has merit.

<sup>xi</sup> In the Mishnah, Pirkei Avot 2:21, Rabbi Tarfon states that not being able to complete a task does not absolve one from the duty to participate in it.

<sup>xii</sup> "Sahadi" is an Aramaic word for witness.

<sup>xiii</sup> It is interesting that Sheptytsky signs his name with the Yiddish, rather than Hebrew, spelling.

<sup>xiv</sup> Zavaliv [Zawalów] is a small town southeast of Lviv, just south of Berezhany. Abramson struggles with the name of the community and wonders whether it is "Ivanovka." He mentions other possibilities as well. A careful study of the individual letters and a comparison with the way the author forms these letters in the rest of the document, leads me to the conclusion that it was Zawalów. This was confirmed when I was told that the family member in whose possession the letter was found was indeed a leader of the Zawalów Jewish community.





"Crystal night"



"Punishment"



"Execution in the Ghetto"



"The deportation"



"The quarry"



"The revolt of the Warsaw Ghetto"



"The final solution"

Anti-Defamation League  
Jan Karski Courage to Care Award  
Presented Posthumously to  
**METROPOLITAN ANDREI SZEPTYCKI**  
For His Efforts to Save Jews During the Holocaust  
October 31, 2013

On October 31, 2013 during its centennial celebrations in New York City, the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith awarded Archbishop Sheptytsky its Jan Karski Courage to Care Award. Past recipients of the ADL Courage to Care Award include: Count Janos Esterhazy, Sir Nicholas Winton, and Emilie and Oskar Schindler. The latter was the subject of the movie, "Schindler's List."