

‘The fruits are very good and inexpensive’: Natural history and religious ideology in the book *Shaarei Yerushalayim*

**Author:**Abraham O. Shemesh¹ **Affiliation:**¹Israel Heritage Department, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Ariel University, Ariel, Israel**Corresponding author:**Abraham Shemesh,
avi0603@013.net.il**Dates:**

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The book *Shaarei Yerushalayim*, written by R. Moshe Reicher, contains contemporary information on 19th-century Eretz Israel. Reicher perceived his compilation as a religious cultural moderator between the Holy Land and the Jews in the Diaspora, in which he reported to the Jews of Galicia on various aspects related to the land. This article discusses his descriptions of local food crops and the messages he attempted to convey to his readers through botanical means. Reicher describes some 70 species of fruits and vegetables that were available in Jerusalem’s markets. The occupation with local fruits is part of a ‘covert campaign’ for Eretz Israel and Jerusalem. Reicher tells his listeners about the good cheap local fruits; he stresses their uniqueness and describes their qualities and the dishes prepared from them, and also compares them with the crops in Galicia.

Keywords: Moshe Reicher; *Shaarei Yerushalayim*; Land of Israel; Jerusalem; Rabbinic literature; 19th century; natural history; religious ideology; Ottoman bazaars; fruit and vegetables.

Introduction

R. Moshe Reicher (1840–1880) is an author and researcher of Eretz Israel in the 19th century. He was born in Rzeszów (in German: Resche` in Yiddish: Reicha, Reisha), Galicia, to the Hassidic Nussbaum family. After immigrating to Jerusalem as a child with his family, in 1865 at the age of 25, he reached an independent decision to become an emissary of Eretz Israel (Hebrew acronym: *shadar*) and thus returned to Galicia. R. Joseph Saul Halevi Nathanson, one of the most prominent halakhic adjudicators of 19th-century Galician Jewry, referred in his recommendation of Reicher’s book to the reasons for this trip to the Diaspora congregations, stemming from the grave situation in Jerusalem:

[Reicher] Was compelled to travel far and wide, to leave the Holy Land for other countries due to the hard times, in order to seek help and support from our Jewish brethren. (Reicher 1868:1; for more on R. Nathanson, see Rosenthal & Waldstein 1906:IX, 186)

R. Nathanson added that in the cold winter months in Eastern Europe, when Reicher was unable to travel from one congregation to another to gather donations, he used the time at his disposal to write the book *Shaarei Yerushalayim* [*The Gates of Jerusalem*] because ‘he was asked by those who wished to hear what he had to say about the Holy Land and its virtues and the qualities of its residents’ (Reicher 1868:1). Namely, the European Jews he met were eager to hear about Eretz Israel, its condition and its physical features, and his contemporary book aimed to enrich their knowledge. It is also possible that the book was written not only as a result of the physical circumstances and demands by the local communities but from personal motives. Reicher may have found his writing about Eretz Israel a nostalgic way of reminiscing and a comfort that compensated him for his forced departure from Eretz Israel.

Reicher also composed other books such as *Holiness of Eretz Israel* [*Kdushat ha-Aretz*, Jerusalem 1870] and *Fondness of Israel* [*Aavat Israel*, Jerusalem 1873], but the most well known is undoubtedly *Shaarei Yerushalayim*, which, according to Abraham Yaari, a well-known bibliographer and researcher of Hebrew books, is ‘one of the most important books in the literature promoting Eretz Israel’ (Yaari 1997:96–97). The book was first published in Warsaw in 1868 (in Egelbrand Press) and printed in more than 10 editions, indicating its popularity and appreciation by the readers.

The book includes a selection of midrashim on the nature of Eretz Israel as well as contemporary historical information, such as concerning the murder of Christians in Damascus in 1860 (Reicher 1868:58a–b) and the epidemic that spread throughout Jerusalem in 1865 (Reicher 1868:39b). The

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information is based on the author's memories of Jerusalem and on knowledge he acquired during tours of Eretz Israel, Lebanon and Syria. The significance of the compilation is not only because of its wide scope, but also because of its lively and dynamic style. Reicher combines literary material side by side with memories and testimonies based on personal experience and direct contact with the land, and thus the book is a cultural-religious mediator between the Holy Land and Eastern European Jews, presenting various aspects related to the land: geography, nature, places and sites, the state of the Jews and their customs.

Purpose of the article

The life, personality and literary work of R. Reicher have been the subject of quite a few studies by researchers such as Zeev Vilnai and Avraham Yaari (Vilnai 1984:X, 721–722; Yaari 1997:96–97). The current article focuses on Reicher's descriptions of food crops in Eretz Israel. A close reading of his words on local botany shows that they also include valuable historical testaments on the various fruits and vegetables sold in local markets in the mid-19th century, together with distinct ideology of promotion of Eretz Israel and Jerusalem. The questions we shall discuss are:

1. What is his contribution to historical knowledge of contemporary crops in Eretz Israel?
2. What trends and changes occurred in the botanical field in Eretz Israel in modern times?
3. How does Reicher utilise the vegetative world to enhance the reputation of Ottoman-ruled Eretz Israel?

The agricultural crops in the book *Shaarei Yerushalayim*: General and methodological aspects

Shaarei Yerushalayim is divided into 12 chapters ('gates') that deal with various aspects related to the physical study of the land: historical, cultural, religious and folklore. (1) Affection for the land – essays commending Eretz Israel; (2) Borders of the land; (3) Nature in the land (rains, agriculture and animals); (4) Settling the land (history of the Yishuv, number of Jews and more); (5) Praise for the land; (6) Fruit of the land (fruits and vegetables); (7) Food of the land (family needs, income and expenses of the 'kolels', droughts, epidemics); (8) Local sacred sites (graves of the pious); (9) Customs of the land (customs of ethnic groups and communities – Muslims, Jews); (10) Fables of the land (legends, stories of miracles and holy places); (11) Song of the land (poetry and songs sung in the land, such as songs of redemption, Lag Ba'omer); and (12) Consolations of the land – a chapter on the redemption of the Jewish people that forms an optimistic conclusion, considering the reality of Ottoman occupation and control of the land.

The sixth chapter, 'Fruit of the land', is completely devoted to the botanical-agricultural dimension of Eretz Israel and it primarily includes information on local vegetation. In addition, the book contains other information on Eretz Israel's flora also in many different contexts. For instance,

Reicher mentions that in Kiryat Arba, that is, Hebron, 'there grow grapes that are sweeter than honey' (Reicher 1868:29b). Indeed, the grape industry and the quality of the grapes in this area were described and praised in the accounts of Christian travellers. According to travellers, the agricultural area around the city of Hebron included many fruit groves, mainly of grapes and olives, and also fig trees, pomegranates and other fruits that are plentiful in this area (Ben Arieh 1980:92; Olin 1843:II, 70–84; Robinson & Smith 1841:I, 314–316; II, 429–433; Thomson 1859:II, 380–410).

Reicher also reports that the four species utilised on the Festival of Sukkot grow in abundance in the vicinity of Safed, from where they are sent to all parts of the country (Reicher 1868:30a), a historical fact also mentioned in other contemporary compositions. In fact, myrtle grew wild in the vicinity of Safed and according to historical testimonies, residents would cover their Sukkot booths with myrtle branches (Meirovich 1892; Elyashar 1892: Orach Haim, Siman 4; Luntz 1899:34; Amar 2009:55–56). According to his testimony, citrons (in Hebrew: *etrogim*) can easily be obtained in Eretz Israel. There are very large citrons that are edible, and these are sold before the holiday by Arab merchants (Reicher 1868:38a). Citrons did not grow in Eastern Europe, and only a small number that were relatively small in size and bitter reached Jewish communities from Italy, Greece and Eretz Israel. Reicher insinuates that Eretz Israel has an advantage over the Diaspora and that it is where this religious precept can be observed on the highest standards (on the difficulties involved in finding citrons for Sukkot in Jewish European communities and bringing them by special messengers (*etrogarim*), see Ashkenazi 1977:72–98; Berling 1947:4, 109–110; Salmon 2000:75–106; Tolkowsky 1966:227–233).

The sixth chapter on the fruit of the land is divided into two main parts:

1. The first part presents biblical verses praising the fruit of Eretz Israel, as well as midrashim telling of outstanding plants that grew in Eretz Israel in the past and were known for their exemplary size and flavour (Reicher 1868:36b–37a). Considering the nostalgic memories of the impressive fruit that used to grow in the land, Reicher notes that the fruit in Jerusalem's current markets is indeed small but flavourful, or in his words, '[t]hey are not even one hundredth of what they were in the past, but still sweeter than honey and the very best' (Reicher 1868:37a).

On the one hand, in order to stimulate and arouse the imagination of readers in the Diaspora, he brings exaggerated descriptions from the Bible and from rabbinical literature of the large, sweet, rich fruit that grew in the land in olden times (Nm 13:23; Babylonian Talmud 1982, Ketubot 111b–112a). On the other hand, he presents positive descriptions of the present-day local fruit in order to make a good impression on the readers. Accordingly, he notes that despite the discrepancy with the land's golden era, the fruits are tasty, as befits the Holy Land. Further on in the first part of the chapter, Reicher

describes the land's fertility and the general abundance of fruits and vegetables. Moreover, the land is well known for the high quality of its produce, and therefore some of it is exported to England. He writes:

[T]he land is very plentiful. Though the fields are full of stones they still produce crops that have a good taste and appearance, so much so that they are much sought after and most of the crops are shipped to England. (Reicher 1868:37a; for more on the trade between England, France, Swiss and Land of Israel in the 19th century, see Ben Arieh 1977:58–59)

2. In the second and main part of the chapter, Reicher enumerates different types of fruits and vegetables that can be found in Jerusalem's markets in various seasons. He usually refers to the plants and crops in three languages: Hebrew, Yiddish and Arabic. Although European readers were unfamiliar with Arabic, Reicher made a point of mentioning the names of the crops in this language, apparently as part of his attempt to present the information authentically and tangibly, taking into account the dominant Muslim-Ottoman atmosphere in the country, and he may have also seen this as a bridge to a more diverse audience, to be comprised in the future of others aside from Galicians. Another possibility is that his book was designed as a type of guide for potential immigrants to Eretz Israel, providing information that would help them find their way around the markets.

Lists and information on Eretz Israel crops exist in other Jewish compilations from the 17th to 19th centuries (Boyim 1946:77; Shapira 1891:25b; Yaari 1976:278–279, 337–338; and Rozen 1984:255). However, compared to other descriptions, Reicher's list seems to be more comprehensive and extensive. Reicher does not present the major prominent local crops, rather he offers a long list of about 70 plant species. He seems to have believed that a well-established list is an indication of a blessed land that features a variety of food crops. The plants are presented concisely, and in most cases he provides a small number of details concerning each plant and its qualities.

Reicher lists the crops by order of value: firstly, the Seven Species, then other fruit and, finally, domesticated vegetables and field vegetables. This manner of presentation is based on the traditional Jewish hierarchy evident, for instance, in the laws of food blessings (the Jewish Practice of saying blessings before and after eating), a hierarchy that was familiar to Jewish readers in the Diaspora (Shemesh 2014:16).

The Seven Species represent the crops for which Eretz Israel was praised and they include basic Mediterranean crops that have religious and ritual priority (Felix 1994:28), followed by fruits considered important from a nutritional medical perspective (Felix 1994:30; Shemesh 2005b:89–110), and finally, vegetables that held low value for the ancients (Broshi 1987), particularly field vegetables that grew wild, such as tumble thistle (*Gundelia tournefortii*) and bull mallow (*Malva nicaeensis*) (Reicher 1868:39a; for details on these wild plants in the ancient Israeli kitchen, see Shemesh 2014:373–374).

Crops of Eretz Israel: Outlines and features

According to historical testimonies of 19th-century travellers, some of the crops on Reicher's list grew in orchards in the vicinity of Jerusalem and were brought to the city by villagers who lived in the area (Bartlett 1844:92; Buckingham 1821:188–189; Paxton 1839:122–123; and Ben Arieh 1977:58–60, 1979:II, 80–90). Fruits and vegetables were also brought to Jerusalem's markets from more distant areas, for instance, from the Jordan Rift Valley and the Dead Sea Valley, by the Bedouin (Seetzen 1854:26, 206). Reicher contended that spices, perfumes, tea, coffee and sugar were brought from England and other countries, probably as part of the trade between Mediterranean countries and in ships hailing from European ports (see below).

Reicher notes crops that were not mentioned elsewhere as growing in the country in medieval times and in early modern times, such as chestnut (*Castanea sativa*) and coconut (*Cocos nucifera*) or even earlier. In practice, his description reflects a wide range of fruits that were available throughout the land and not only in Jerusalem, probably with the intention of praising the city for its abundance.

Information on new crops originating from America

Reicher's list of crops includes traditional crops (e.g. olive tree, cereal and grapevine) side by side with relatively new crops such as tomatoes, potatoes, prickly pear and hot peppers (*Capsicum* sp.) that reached the Old World from America following Columbus' voyages in 1492 (for more on the introduction of American food crops to the Old World, see Foster and Cordell 1992; Harrison, Masefield & Wallis 1969:195–196; Shemesh 2001:219–226). About the peppers that were used in local cuisine as a hot spice, he writes: '[I]ong peppers in Ashkenazic *Tirkeshi peper* [טיירקיש פּעפּער] that are green and turn red on their own. They are abundant and cheap, and they are pickled with *ugerkes* [אוגערקס=cucumbers]' (Reicher 1868:39a). The hot peppers were a local crop and they served as a cheap alternative for black pepper (*Piper nigrum*) that was brought from distant tropical areas (Southeast Asia).

Reicher describes them as long peppers, unlike black peppers whose fruit is small and round, and notes that they were called 'Turkish peppers', probably because the Ottomans brought it to the Mediterranean region as a result of their conquests. It should be noted that in the 19th century, another food crop was called 'Turkish', such as the Hazelnuts (*Tirkeshi nisalach* [Turkish nut]) and corn (in Yiddish: *tirkeshi vayitz* [Turkish wheat]) (Shemesh 2010:198–216). Reicher notes that one of the pepper's culinary functions was to pickle cucumbers and to lend them a spicy Eastern flavour that was apparently not customary in Europe (for more on pickling cucumbers in Europe in the 19th century, see Shemesh 2014:309–311).

In his detailed description of the tomato, Reicher stressed several aspects: its names, shape, colour, taste, culinary usages and also the problems it caused when entering various Old World cuisines. He writes:

Tomatis [טאמאטיס] – resemble small red apples that contain a slightly sour resin and they are full of seeds and they are prepared with onions and olive oil and vinegar and eaten with bread and also cooked with olive oil and onions and spices and their taste is like a jam. In Arabic they are called *Bandora* [بندورة], and there are none abroad [=in Europe], only a few can be found among the *paritzim* [=immoral people] and the Jews are afraid to eat them. And I find them funny. (Reicher 1868:38b)

From his impressions, it is evident that tomato served as a common culinary element in mid-19th century local cuisine. In contrast, in Europe, tomato was not common, and it was consumed primarily by *pritzim*, that is, people perceived as immoral, as it was considered an aphrodisiac eaten to arouse passion and love, concepts that contradicted the values of conservative society (compare to its Italian name *pomo d'amoro*, which is Love apple; see Nutman 1990:XII, 58–57).

Reicher mentions the Jews' revulsion at eating tomatoes, but he is scornful of this rejection. His words show that although Europeans displayed reservations concerning tomatoes, in the East Jews ate them and enjoyed their culinary qualities. Hence, although Reicher's descriptions are usually laconic and matter of fact, when presenting the tomato, he mentions its more interesting aspects to arouse the interest of simple European readers who may have never seen one and only heard of it because of the associated controversies.

Exposure of fruits and vegetables that were not familiar to Jews in the Diaspora

Side by side with fruits and vegetables that were familiar to his readers, Reicher presents several crops that were not part of the mid-19th century European agricultural and culinary culture. In these cases, he usually lists unique features of the crops as well as how the plants are prepared.

When describing the coconut, for instance, he notes its unusual size and weight, as well as its spherical shape and hairiness, resembling a human head (in Portuguese and Spanish, 'Coco' means skull or head; see Dalgado 1919:I, 290–291; Skeat 1993:91). Reicher (1868) also discerns between nuts that resemble men and women:

Cocis nis [קאקיס=Coconuts] are a species of nut that weigh about one funt [=Russian pound (Фунт), equal to 409.51718 grams], and its shell has a strong human resemblance; some are male with beard-like hair and some are female. (p. 38a)

Taro (*Colocasia esculenta*) is a perennial plant with fairly wide leaves that is common in tropical areas, and it has a starchy edible corm (Fahan, Heller & Avishai 1998:515; Post & Dinsmore 1932–1933:556). The taro was known in Mediterranean countries and it is mentioned in ancient and late Jewish sources (Shemesh 2005a:95–108). It was not grown in cold Europe and for the sake of those who were not familiar

with it, Reicher defined it as a 'type of potato', citing an agricultural crop that was common in Europe (see below). In this case, Reicher focused mainly on how to prepare the corm, while utilising this opportunity to present a new recipe for potatoes as well. He writes:

Colicos [קאליקאס=*Colocasia*] is a type of potato (ערד עפיל = earth apple) that is black on top and white inside and to cook it one must cut it up and boil it in hot water. Then the water is poured out and replaced and it requires lengthy cooking [...] and then it is mixed with lemon juice and olive oil and it is good with bread. (Reicher 1868:38b)

The difference between crops cultivated in Eretz Israel and in the Diaspora

Aside from emphasising the uniqueness of the local fruits and describing the dishes made from them, Reicher compares domestic crops with those of Galicia. He writes about European crops that do not exist in Eretz Israel, those that have only a limited presence and others that are utilised differently in Eretz Israel than in Europe. Reicher notes that certain species of grain (such as Rye [*Secale cereale*]), deciduous trees (Rosaceae family), fruits and berries that are very common in Eastern European forests are absent from the agricultural scenery of Eretz Israel. He writes: '*Korshin* [קארשיין = Cherries], *Winshell* [וויינשל = hackberries], *Yogidis* [יאגידיס = blueberries], *Weinferlich* [וויינפרליך = red currants] do not exist in this country' (Reicher 1868:38b). In the entry for apples, he adds: 'Apples – in Arabic Tufah (تفاح) they are few there and expensive' (Reicher 1868:38b). The crops mentioned above, which require cold weather in order to produce good fruit, occupied a prominent place in Eastern European cuisine and diets and were used to prepare a variety of dishes and jams (Harrison et al. 1969:80–82; Shemesh 2014:387), and therefore their absence from Eretz Israel agriculture was prominent and significant.

Horseradish (*A Armoracia lapathifolia* = *A. rusticana*) is a plant from the Cruciferae family that was cultivated throughout Europe (De Candolle 1959:468). It is a plant with large leaves and a thickened rhizome that contains strong essential oil. In the past, horseradish was considered a routine relish for European dishes and today it is eaten by Jews of Ashkenazi origins mixed with beetroot, mainly on Seder Night (Courter & Rhodes 1969; Shaffer 1981). However, Reicher notes for his readers: '[t]here is no in *Chrein* [in Yiddish *Chrein* or *Mertich* (in German: *Meerrettich*) is horseradish], in the entire country' (Reicher 1868:39a).

Potatoes respond well to a temperate climate; therefore, in cold northern countries (Europe and North America), they are grown as a summer crop. After potato was introduced in Europe, it became a major crop and a basic consumer product in Eastern European cuisine (McNeill 1999). The starchy tuber was used to prepare a variety of dishes, and even bread was baked from flour made of the tubers. The situation in Eretz Israel was completely different. Reicher writes that it is grown in the country in limited amounts and therefore is expensive: '*Bolbes* (באלבעס) or *eard epil* (ערד עפיל) are potatoes,

in Arabic *batata* (البطاطا =potatos) are fairly rare and they are expensive' (Reicher 1868:39a). Reicher's testimony is compatible with other sources which relate that potatoes were not grown much in 19th century Eretz Israel and they had a marginal place in the local agriculture and cuisine. They also indicate the hostile attitude towards its cultivation (Avitzur 1972:200).

Another culinary element mentioned by Reicher is beer. A considerable part of the barley grown in Europe was used in the beer industry, and to a lesser degree, it was also used to produce grits for porridge or to cook in broth. However, in Eretz Israel, Reicher notes that, because of the absence of the *Humulus lupulus* used in the process of preparing beer, there was no large-scale beer production (for more on the use of *H. lupulus* in flavouring and bittering beer, see Schönberger & Kostelecky 2011). In this context, Reicher does not refer to the influence of the Muslim culture that prohibits drinking alcoholic beverages, which was another cause of the limited amount of beer produced in the country. Nonetheless, he refers to the barley itself and says that it was mostly used to feed farm animals, horses and donkeys. Reicher (1868) writes:

The barley is large and is used for nothing other than to feed donkeys and horses, because liquor made of barley is not prepared there in the absence of *Hopfin* [האפין] from German: Hopfen = *Humulus lupulus*. And pearl barley [פערל גרויפין] from Yiddish: *pearl groypen*] too is not grown. (p. 37b)

Another conspicuous difference between the European and Eretz Israel food industries is related to oil production. One of the main oils in the cuisine of European Jews was an oil made of goose fat (Boyim 1946:72). This oil was considered a high-quality kosher alternative used instead of oil made of pig's fat, a major farm animal in Christian lands. Reicher notes in this context that the sesame oil of Eretz Israel, which was not particularly common in Europe, is as good as goose oil:

[T]here is also sesame, which is a type of legume and [its seeds] are small, long, and flat and in Arabic they are called *simsin* [سَمْسِيم. סימסין]. It too is used to prepare a type of oil [...] and it is as good as goose oil. (Reicher 1868:38a. For more on the sesame oil industry in the Land of Israel in the 19th century, see Avitzur 1972:254)

The price of fruits and vegetables in the Jerusalem markets

In some of his entries, Reicher refers to the price of products sold in Jerusalem markets. He writes:

'*Mishmus* [מישמוש=Apricots, *Prunus armeniaca*] are a species that resembles *perishkishi* [פערשיקיש=peaches, *Prunus persica*] and they are cheap and tasty'. 'Chestnuts, in Arabic *kishtani* [كشتان], are very good and extremely cheap'. (Reicher 1868:38a) 'Hazelnuts in Arabic *Bunduk* [بندق=Corylus avellana] are also called *Tirkeshi nisalach* [=Turkish nuts] and they are very good and inexpensive'. (Reicher 1868:38a)

Considering that the two latter crops were apparently not grown in the country but were imported, the fact that they were cheap is surprising (for more on the distribution of

Chestnuts and Hazelnuts in Europe, see Tutin et al. 1964:60–61; Zohary & Hopf 1994:178–179).

The emphasis on the price of fruits and vegetables in the markets is a customary practice in travel journals and memoirs of European Jews who visited or immigrated to Eretz Israel in the 17th – 19th centuries, such as in the descriptions of Rabbi Moshe Poriat from Prague (1650), R. Gedalia mi-simiatetz (1699–1706), R. Menachem Mendel Mi-Kamenitz (1833) and others (Boyim 1946:77; Rozen 1984:255; Yaari 1976:278–279, 337–338).

Reicher and others note the low price of the fruits and vegetables on sale in the markets with admiration in comparison to their high price abroad. It is to be assumed that the cost of living was of interest to the Galicians because of the high poverty in their region in the latter half of the 19th century and because immigrating to Eretz Israel was a practical option for at least some of them (Bornstein 1985:288; Ettinger 1969:76–85; Mishkinsky 1981:25).

Identification of plants in ancient Jewish literature

Another aspect that arises from Reicher's writings is the identification of plants mentioned in ancient Jewish literature. This is indeed an esoteric dimension from amongst all the aspects he discusses, but it serves one of the book's goals – to link the historical past of the sages' time with the contemporary reality in Eretz Israel.

One example of this is the erroneous identification of the prickly pear cactus, which was introduced to Eretz Israel in the new ear, with an ancient plant mentioned in the literature of the Tannaim (approximately 1st–2nd centuries). Reicher notes the names of the plant and the characteristics of the fruits – their shape, taste and the unusual way of picking them. He writes:

'*Sabar* in Arabic [صبير], called Adam's figs, and I think that this is the *shitin* mentioned in the Mishna' [...] and they are large as goose eggs and grow on thick trees and the leaves are full of needle-like thorns [...] and the figs have a thick peel full of very thin thorns and they can only be picked with a thick rag and then they are peeled and their taste is sweet as honey. (Reicher 1868:38b)

The origin of the name 'Adam's figs' is the wrong belief that Adam and Eve ate from the fruit of the prickly pear (Shemesh 2001, 2018). The *Shitin* were mentioned in the Mishna (Damai 1:1), and they are identified as an inferior species of fig (*Ficus carica*) (Felix 1994:88). Their identification with the prickly pear is not possible as this plant only reached Eretz Israel after the discovery of America and did not grow in the country during the Roman–Byzantine period.

Summary and conclusions

R. Moshe Reicher wrote his book *Shaarei Yerushalayim* in the mid-19th century when serving as a Jerusalem emissary to Galicia, his family's country of origin. The volume,

containing contemporary information, is based on Reicher's memories from his life in Jerusalem and based on knowledge that he acquired during tours of Eretz Israel, Lebanon and Syria. From Reicher's perspective, his book constitutes a religious cultural mediator between the Holy Land and Jerusalem – and members of the Diaspora, and he uses it to report to Galician Jews on various aspects related to Eretz Israel: geography, nature, places and sites, the state of the Jews and more.

Reicher enumerates some 70 types of fruits and vegetables, which he says were sold in Jerusalem's markets. Some of the crops were local and others were brought to the city from elsewhere. The list includes veteran food crops side by side with relatively new crops, such as tomatoes, potatoes, prickly pear and hot peppers, and even wild crops that were part of the local diet, such as tumble thistle and bull mallow.

Reicher presents a long list of plants and in most cases provides a small number of details concerning each plant and its features. His occupation with Eretz Israel agriculture and with praise for its fruit is part of the promotion of Eretz Israel and Jerusalem. Reicher claims that the agricultural circumstances and farming in Eretz Israel are more comfortable than in Europe: '[a]nd what the people of Europe produce by hard labor and the sweat of their brow, the earth of the Holy Land brings forth with no hard work' (Reicher 1868:37a).

With regard to the fruit, he emphasised their uniqueness, qualities and the dishes prepared from them, as well as their cheap price in the markets. The reports of Jerusalem's markets, aimed at Jews in the Diaspora, may have been intended not only as a response to their curiosity and desire to know about events in Eretz Israel. Reicher may have also seen in this a potential for practical benefit – urging Jews to immigrate to Israel, on the one hand, and a potential orientation guide for Jews immigrating to Israel, on the other hand.

The occupation with the fruit of Eretz Israel and their qualities, both positive and negative, is a very ancient element. In the biblical story of the scouts, the unusually large fruits of the land are perceived by the scouts and the people as strange and frightening (Nm 13:23–33). In contrast, in rabbinical literature (Mishnah and Talmud), the fruits of Eretz Israel are described at times as excessively large, a manifestation of the country's uniqueness and blessing (Babylonian Talmud 1982, Ketubot 111b–112a). Reicher says that the fruits and vegetables of Eretz Israel were indeed particularly large in the past, and at present they are small, but they are tasty and of good quality. With regard to the price of fruits and vegetables, quite a few species are cheap but he has no problem saying that others are more expensive than in Europe, for instance, turnips and cabbage that were common vegetables in European agriculture, and also wheat that is expensive because of the export to European countries (Reicher 1868:37a, 38b).

The questions to be asked are whether Reicher is objective in his description of conditions in the country or whether he is presenting an overly ideal picture to emphasise positive aspects. Moreover, are there historical sources that portray a different reality?

It appears that Reicher is capable of presenting a complex picture. On the one hand, in chapter 5 entitled 'Praise for the land', he notes that there are many markets and shops in the city that offer a variety of expensive goods (silk), perfumes, fresh and dried fruits and vegetables, and clothing, as well as silversmiths and goldsmiths (Reicher 1868:26a). But in chapter 6 entitled 'Food of the land', when he wishes to urge Diaspora Jews to support the Jewish settlement in Eretz Israel, he describes tough life circumstances – poverty, drought, hunger, plague and locusts that accosted the settlement (Reicher 1868:39b–41a). Are the descriptions contradictory? Not necessarily. It seems that in routine times, food may have been cheap and one could enjoy the variety of fruits and vegetables with which the land was blessed. However, uncontrollable natural events and elements were the cause of harsh living conditions, which were the reason that Reicher himself had left the country in search of donations.

Notably, some Christian travellers describe the routine state of Jerusalem's markets as glummer than that described by Reicher. For instance, the German theologian Friedrich Adolf Strauss (1817–1888), who visited Jerusalem towards the mid-19th century, claims that commerce in the city is very poor. The markets (bazaars) are much more decrepit than in other large cities throughout Syria, and they offer only the few basic products most needed by the residents. He relates that the neighbouring villagers bring their produce to the markets, consisting of cucumbers, watermelons and onions, but vegetables customary in Europe are not available. Strauss stresses that when the crops grow well, prices are cheap, namely, the cost of living varies (Strauss 1847:278–280).

In the preface to his compilation, Reicher portrays the positive change in the state of the Jews as a result of the capitulations and the increased control of the consuls in Jerusalem over the Muslims. As stated, the economic situation was indeed grave, but he detects signs of positive change, manifested in the immigration of many Jews to the country and the building of Jerusalem's ruins (Reicher 1868):

The voice of the turtledove is heard in our country. As the Jews have been released from their enemies and our Israelite brethren from all countries of the world are settling in Jerusalem and other towns by the day and the ruins are being filled with nice buildings, in the holy city of Jerusalem more than others. (p. 2)

The rabbinical literature included the outlook whereby the fruits of Eretz Israel are an indicator of the coming of the Messiah. Namely, when the fruits are good and of high quality, this attests that the Messiah will soon come. The Babylonian Amora R. Abba, a well-known third generation, who emigrated to Eretz Israel says:

[Y]ou have no more explicit manifestation of the end of days than this following phenomenon, as it is stated: 'But you, mountains of Israel, you shall give your branches, and yield your fruit to My people of Israel, for they will soon be coming' (Ezekiel 36:8). When crops will grow in profusion in Land of Israel, it is sign that the Messiah will be coming soon. (Babylonian Talmud 1982, Sanhedrin 98a)

See also the commentary of R. Shlomo Yitzchaki (Rashi, 1040–1105) to this Talmudic source: '[w]hen Eretz Israel will give its fruit abundantly, then the end [of days] will be near and you have no [more] explicit [manifestation of the] end'). When Reicher speaks about local agriculture, he does not state outright that the condition of the fruits attests to redemption or to a new spiritual era in the history of the land, but as a promoter of Eretz Israel, he emphasises the good taste of the fruit, attesting to the special nature of the land.

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I declare that I am the sole author of this research article.

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