

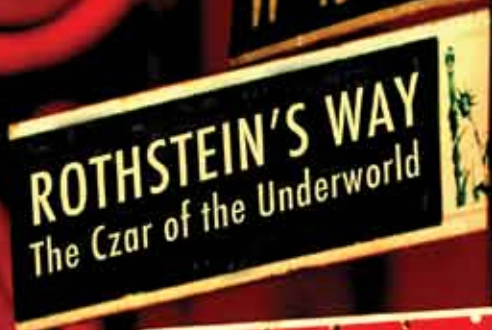
Segula

THE JEWISH JOURNEY THROUGH HISTORY

Tammuz 5772 • July 2012 • 3324 from Exodus • www.segulamag.com • Issue 11

Only in
NEW YORK

Jews in the
Big City



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osh Hashana, the Jewish New Year, 1949. All over New York – downtown, uptown, Bronx, Queens, and Brooklyn – stores closed for the High Holy Days, as the devout went off to services in shuls and temples of every size and denomination. But outside the synagogue walls, along the boulevards, many more Jewish men, women, and children promenaded, dressed in their holiday best, eager to see and be seen. Strolling through their Jewish city, these masses had nothing against religion per se; they just felt it was not for them. Of all the images typifying New York's hustling, bustling Jewish community of Gotham, as New York City was affectionately nicknamed, this scene is perhaps the most enduring, still playing itself out on the upscale streets of Manhattan today.

Rhapsody in Bronx

For more than a century, New York City boasted the world's largest Jewish community. (Only in the new millennium has Tel Aviv surpassed it.) Of the 2.25 million immigrants



Facing page: Jewish storefront on Broome Street in Manhattan. This street is also home to a sizable Jewish community from Janina, Greece. Until the mid-20th century, New York Jews were identified by their communities of origin
Photo: Marjorie Collins, Library of Congress Collection

Passing judgment. Left, worshippers gather outside a New York synagogue on Rosh Hashana, 1907; and below, Jews celebrate the New Year by strolling the streets, dressed to the nines
George Grantham Bain Collection, Library of Congress

STRENGTH IN NUMBERS

In New York circa 1900, Jewish identity was in the streets and in the air; one in four New Yorkers was Jewish, and formal religious affiliation felt unnecessary. Fifty years later, suburban Jews needed communal institutions - and today's urban, multicultural Jews need them even more | **Jeffrey S. Gurock**





to the United States between 1881 and the First World War, close to two-thirds came through Castle Garden and later Ellis Island in Manhattan's harbor. (See "Off the Boat," p. 51.) From there, the Lower East Side became their home. By 1917, there were 1.5 million Jews in Gotham, living not only downtown but in new areas in Upper Manhattan – most notably Yorkville and Harlem – and in Brooklyn's Williamsburg and Brownsville districts. One out of every four New Yorkers was Jewish. This numerical strength persisted through the prosperous 1920s as well as the vicissitudes of the Great Depression and the war years.

More often than not, when New York Jews relocated, they did so together. In the 1920s, they flocked to the Bronx, to Manhattan's West Side and Washington Heights, and to the new Brooklyn communities of Flatbush, Boro Park, and Bensonhurst. And they sank deep roots in these enclaves. In the late 1940s and 1950s, suburban life lured many to Nassau and Suffolk Counties, to Westchester, or over the George Washington Bridge into northern New Jersey. At the same time, Queens became, as its boosters put it, "a suburb within the city limits," promising all the bucolic advantages of life outside New York City without the

hassles of commuting to Manhattan for work or entertainment. Notwithstanding these attractive options, even more Jews stayed where they and their parents had lived. As of the late 1950s, Jews were still close to a quarter of New York's residents. And more than one out of every four New York Jews lived in predominantly Jewish neighborhoods.

In 1949, writer and historian Ruth Glazer explained what had, for example, kept the Grand Concourse Jewish three decades after the neighborhood along that wide north-south Bronx thoroughfare first became upscale. She rhapsodized in *Commentary* magazine that there was still

more life, vigor, and excitement in one single Bronx apartment house at six o'clock in the evening than in a thousand elm-lined Main Streets on a Fourth of July. What streets anywhere can match [the] sheer number of food stores, ice cream parlors, delicatessens, restaurants, specialty shops for women and children...? The role of the Concourse in

There was more life, vigor, and excitement in one single Bronx apartment house than in a thousand Main Streets on a Fourth of July

Bronx life, like its geographical location, is central....

Glazer observed that "the present generation is only the continuator and the embellisher of the Bronx style." In the Bronx one could imagine, as she and many other memoirists did, that "the whole world was Jewish," at least until one ventured out by foot, bus, or subway into often hostile Irish, German, or Italian preserves. WASP (white Anglo-Saxon Protestant) communities were a vague image, out there somewhere in the vast spaces of America.

The Jewish market on Hester Street, on the Lower East Side, at the beginning of the 20th century. Hester Street was filmed here in the 1970s. The Jewish immigrant community once centered here has been replaced by other new immigrants, and the street has become part of Chinatown
Courtesy of Stephanie Comfort, jewishpostcardcollection.com

A Jewish family working on garters in its tenement kitchen in New York, 1912. Like other immigrants, the Jews lived in terribly crowded conditions. While the first generation focused on economic survival, the second and third left the "ghetto" for the more spacious suburbs
Photo: Lewis Wickes Hine, Library of Congress Collection

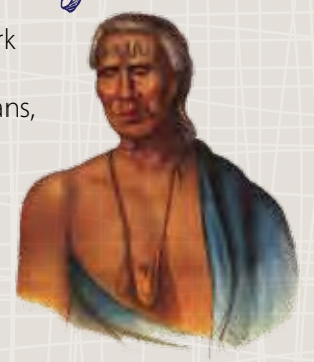
The language gap was the most basic divide between first- and second-generation Jewish immigrants. An ad from the 1930s declared in Yiddish and English: "Learn to speak, read, and write your children's language"
Library of Congress Collection



From the
Lenape Indians
to the
Twin Towers
Milestones in the History of New York

★ **17th Century** ★

The territory in which New York would eventually be built was first inhabited by Lenape Indians, who called it Lenapehoking ("Lenape country")



★ **1524** ★

A French delegation headed by the Italian explorer Giovanni da Verrazano surveys the coasts of the future New York

★ **1609** ★

A delegation of the Dutch East India Company headed by the British cartographer Henry Hudson explores the area. Four years later, the company establishes a fur trading station on the eastern shore of the island later to become Manhattan



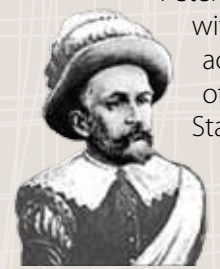
★ **1624** ★

The East India Company establishes Port Amsterdam, a large trading station, on the southern tip of Manhattan. The first convoy of black slaves is brought from Africa and begins building the station walls



★ **1626** ★

Peter Minuit barter with the local Indians, acquiring the territories of Manhattan and Staten Island. The city of New Amsterdam begins to develop near Port Amsterdam



★ **1654** ★

The first Jews, refugees from Portuguese Brazil, settle in already cosmopolitan New Amsterdam

★ **1664** ★

The British conquer New Amsterdam and rename it New York



★ **1783** ★

The last of the British forces sail for England from New York Harbor, thereby concluding the American War of Independence and clinching the colonists' victory over the British Empire

★ **1792** ★

Beneath a sycamore tree on Wall Street, merchants sign the "Buttonwood Agreement" forming the precursor of the New York Stock Exchange, destined to become the most important stock market in the world

★ **1811** ★

New York City Hall adopts the Commissioner's Plan, an architectural blueprint laying out Manhattan's famous grid pattern of streets and avenues. Manhattan was gradually built according to this plan, with minor revisions



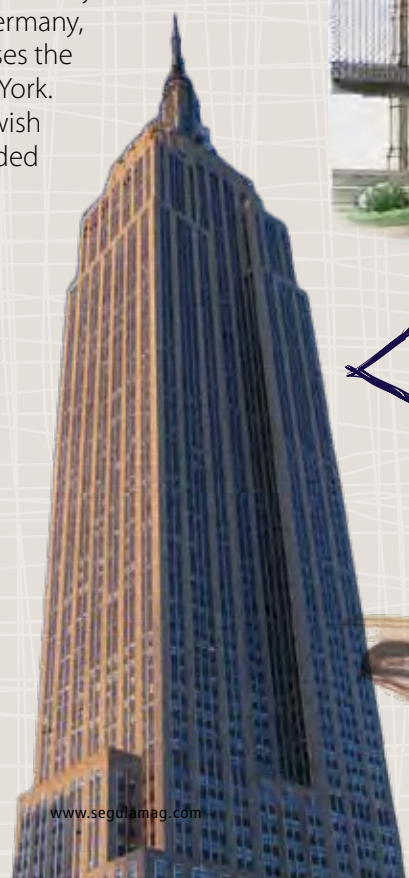
★ **1835** ★

Much of New York is destroyed by fire. A citywide water system is created in the wake of the disaster



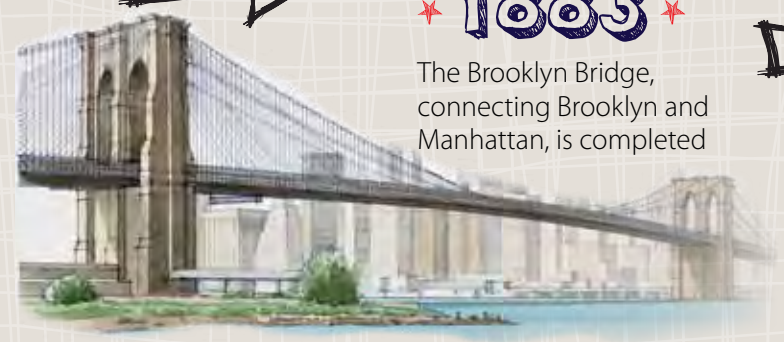
★ **1840-1860** ★

Mass immigration, primarily from Ireland and Germany, dramatically increases the population of New York. A large German-Jewish community is founded



★ **1883** ★

The Brooklyn Bridge, connecting Brooklyn and Manhattan, is completed



★ **1880-1920** ★

A huge wave of immigration from eastern Europe further increases New York's population. Many Jewish immigrants settle in the city, until they number roughly a quarter of its population



★ **1888** ★

After a series of expansions and annexations, the various quarters of the city are combined to form Greater New York

★ **1904** ★

The first subway line comes into operation



★ **1931** ★

The Empire State Building, the tallest skyscraper in the world at the time, is completed

★ **1975** ★

Severe economic and social problems and rising crime bring New York to the brink of bankruptcy

★ **2001** ★

A terrorist attack on the World Trade Center destroys the Twin Towers, the two highest structures in New York, built in 1970-1





A taste of the old country. At the turn of the 20th century, New York's numerous kosher restaurants offered traditional eastern European Jewish food with American flair
 Courtesy of Stephanie Comfort, jewishpostcardcollection.com

The salubrious suburbs offered better schooling and a higher quality of life - even if parents had to brave daily traffic jams in order to get to the city

Organizations at Every Corner

This strength in numbers, a rarity in the diaspora, connected Jews in the most organic, informal way. For generations, Jews met in the elevators and stairwells of their apartment buildings, on park benches, or near Bronx bandstands. In February 1960, *Fortune* magazine reported that the city's open-air concerts were "the only place in the world where...you can pick up a girl by whistling a Beethoven quartet at her." New York housed almost every conceivable national, regional, and local Jewish organization - religious, fraternal, Zionist, philanthropic, or radical. Ensnared within America's communications capital, these bodies were ideally positioned to get their message out. However, success was far from assured. Out on the streets, many

Laying the groundwork. Throughout New York, land was cleared for tenement construction to house the growing flood of immigrants. Decades later, these tracts were filled to capacity with high-rises
 Courtesy of Stephanie Comfort, jewishpostcardcollection.com

sauntered blithely past the committed Jews reaching out with their placards, handbills, and petitions. Organized Jewish life just did not appeal to them. Their indifference challenged all three major Jewish denominations, which sought to expand their core constituencies and built rabbinical schools and teachers' colleges in Manhattan, at the epicenter of Jewish life.

The last half century witnessed the racial crises of the 1960s, the mid-1970s financial meltdown, and the roller-coaster ride of the reemergence, regression, and reestablishment of New York as a city of glittering promises and harsh realities. Amid trials and transformations, the Jewish neighborhoods declined. Many Jewish centers in the Bronx, for instance, are no more. Young families in the 1960s and 1970s abandoned them (and the older generation residing there) for the more salubrious suburbs, which offered better schooling and a higher quality of life - even if parents had to brave daily traffic jams in order to get to work or spend an evening on the town. In their new setting, Jews got along not only with fellow Jews but with non-Jewish





neighbors, so formal Jewish identification became more important. With few apartment buildings and cul-de-sacs, and with walkways and driveways instead of sidewalks, it was far more difficult for Jews to link up. Synagogue and community affiliation therefore grew more significant as the Jewish community dispersed.

Though New York City remains home to close to a million Jews, Jewish neighborhoods today are frequently characterized not only by numbers but by religious commitment. Orthodox leaders in Brooklyn and elsewhere have many devoted followers, who naturally gravitate to synagogues and study houses. If rabbis ever roam the streets in search of congregants, they do so to compete with storefront *shtetlach* providing almost round-the-clock prayer services. Liberal-minded innovators and community-builders face greater challenges, but their message resonates with those seeking a place where they truly “belong.”

Then there are the unaffiliated Jews, who have left their parents’ suburbia for a gentrified New York. Like many others drawn to the city from all over America, these Jews blend in with diverse ethnic groups to create a new cultural texture. With friends of all sorts and

**Rosh Hashana in New York
is an unofficial civic holiday,
with numerous stores,
businesses, and schools
closed**

backgrounds, they do not sense that their whole world is Jewish, or even that it should be. They do, however, maintain one long-standing tradition from the Jewish days on the Grand Concourse. On Rosh Hashana, shunning synagogues that would welcome them with open arms, many stroll around their quiet neighborhoods. On this unofficial civic holiday, numerous stores, businesses, and schools are closed for lack of customers, students, and faculty. But the resulting promenade is now likely to include non-Jewish

Tenement yard in the heart of New York, 1910. New immigrants and underprivileged transplants from other parts of the U.S. have transformed once Jewish neighborhoods into crime-ridden areas. Only recently have housing prices begun rising due to overcrowding elsewhere in the city

Courtesy of Stephanie Comfort, jewishpostcardcollection.com

friends – and relatives. For the Jews among them, their identity is far more “New Yorker” than “Jewish.” If anything, this disposition has intensified in the decade since 9/11. New Yorkers are convinced that the city still offers them the most profound opportunities to live safe, secure, and meaningful lives. Such has always been New York’s foremost promise. ■

Further reading:

Jeffrey S. Gurock, *Jews in Gotham* (New York University Press, 2012); Irving Howe, *World of Our Fathers* (New York: Harcourt Brace, Jovanovich, 1976); Deborah Dash Moore, *At Home in America: Second Generation New York Jews* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981); Annie Polland and Daniel Soyer, *Emerging Metropolis* (New York University Press, 2012); Beth S. Wenger, *New York Jews and the Great Depression* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996).

Many of New York’s Jewish immigrants supported themselves by peddling their wares on street corners. Selling towels on the East Side, and a pickle vendor, 1914

Courtesy of Stephanie Comfort, jewishpostcardcollection.com

