

GOLDENE MEDINE, TREYFENE MEDINE: JUDAISM SURVIVES MIGRATION TO AMERICA

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Standing on the corner of Canal and Eldridge Streets on the Lower East Side of New York, one can glimpse three buildings that serve as monuments to contending forces within the immigrant Jewish community at the turn of the twentieth century. In the distance, where Canal meets East Broadway, looms the Forward Building, former home of the *Jewish Daily Forward*, the world's greatest Yiddish newspaper and bastion of immigrant Socialism. Closer on Canal the Jarmulowsky Bank building stands, a monument to immigrant capitalism. Halfway up the block on Eldridge sits the grand Eldridge Street Synagogue, a reminder that traditional Judaism survived the Atlantic crossing to vie with Jewish radicalism and American materialism for the hearts and minds of the Jewish immigrants and their children.

For the Jews of Eastern Europe, America was the *goldene medine*—the golden land—a place of plentiful jobs, material prosperity, and physical security. But for some, it was also the *treyfene medine*—the impure/non-kosher land—where all sorts of pressures pushed newcomers to give up their traditional religious beliefs and practices. From 1783, when none other than patriot Haym Salomon tried to dissuade an uncle from coming to America because there was “*veynig yidishkayt*” (little Jewishness) here, pious observers warned that by migrating to America Jews risked their spiritual health. In turn-of-the-twentieth century Eastern Europe, rabbis as great as the *Hafetz Hayim* (Rabbi Israel Meir Kagan) tried to stem the growing tide of migration, to little avail.



Eldridge Street Synagogue, Forward, Jarmulowsky's Bank

Pious Jews were not the only ones to see in migration a threat to religious tradition. In the nineteenth century, Roman Catholic leaders, too, expressed concern that by crossing the ocean, migrants removed themselves from the authority of the church and thereby endangered their souls. Irish, German, and Italian priests and nuns set up missions in the immigrant neighborhoods of American cities—as if they were remote corners of the world peopled by heathens in need of the gospel. Not only the tribulations of migration and resettlement—the long voyage, the lack of clergy, the difficult struggle to make a living—but also the very things that immigrants sought in America—abundance, freedom, mobility—seemed to religious leaders of many faiths to be secularizing influences.

In retrospect, though, many historians question the pious condemnation of America. While some equate modernity with secularization and America with modernity, and thus agree that religion was a waning influence on immigrant life, others have argued the opposite: that the uncertainties of migration and resettlement often brought immigrants closer to God and to their faith traditions. On the way over, travelers appealed to God to help them through their trials (even as formal rituals were neglected by necessity). Once settled, immigrants were influenced by American habits of congregationalism, often taking the initiative to build religious institutions even before the arrival of clergy. Those institutions frequently became the skeletal frames that gave shape to ethnic communities. Indeed, over time, religion came to define ethnicity, surviving as it usually did peculiarities of language, national sentiment, old-world regional differences, and even common descent.

The classics of American Jewish history, though, come down squarely on the side of the rabbis, ironically since historians Moses Rischin and Irving Howe hardly share the rabbinical agenda. Though they agree that America was indeed a *treyfene medine*, Rischin's *The Promised City*, and Howe's *World of Our Fathers* celebrate the decline of traditional religion and its replacement by a progressive and secular ethnic culture. Rischin only discusses Jewish religious institutions and practice in the context of their retreat in the face of commercial opportunities, Americanizing pressures, and radical critiques. His section entitled "Religion at Half Mast" covers fewer than four pages, and non-Jewish holidays from May Day to St. Patrick's Day receive as much attention as Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Howe

acknowledges that most immigrants had a sentimental attachment to tradition and recognizes religion as part of the perennial background noise in the immigrant community. But he still contends that "the Lower East Side was a secular community. It could not be otherwise." The importance he attributes to the various expressions of Jewish identity can be gleaned from the attention he pays them: thirteen pages on religious Judaism, seventy-two on the labor and Socialist movements, 137 on secular Yiddish culture.

Rischin and Howe certainly have a point: traditional Judaism was on the defensive at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth. But tradition's retreat was not all the result of migration. Nor was it America's fault. Rather, tradition was under attack from within the Jewish communities of Eastern Europe, and many immigrants had been wholly or partly secularized before they even began their journeys. The nineteenth-century Haskalah (Jewish Enlightenment) called for the modernization of Jewish religious forms. Jewish radicals were even more hostile to religion, which they associated with social hierarchies within the community. Some Jewish women were angry at not having been given any education at all, while some Jewish men resented the sort of education they had been given in *heder*, the traditional elementary school.

Migration and resettlement further eroded religious observance. Hunger drove emigrants to compromise on *kashrut* when kosher food was not available *en route*. People might find themselves with no other choice but to travel on the Sabbath. Then, too, the absence of rabbinical authority and the watchful eyes of family and neighbors allowed those whose religious commitment was already weakening to take the final step in abandoning observance altogether. Arrival in America strengthened this sense of freedom, adding to it the possibility that one could define oneself as one wished, not as others dictated. Commercial entertainments such as the Yiddish theater and the ubiquitous dance-halls competed with the synagogue for attention, and often won. The editors of the Yiddish press competed with the rabbis for authority, and they often won as well. Finally, economic necessity forced many immigrants to work on the Sabbath, whether they wanted to or not.

There is therefore truth to the idea that religion was in retreat, not only in terms of the number of the observant, but also in terms of the power of religious rhythms to regulate communal and individual lives.

And yet...Judaism survived in America to a far greater extent than secularist historians like Rischin and Howe acknowledge. A minority of immigrants strove mightily to maintain their piety. On the trip over, they either found kosher food or limited themselves to bread, potatoes, and tea. Once here, they established synagogues and yeshivas, patronized kosher butchers, and made time to study Talmud in the study halls. Gradually, they formed an Orthodox Jewish milieu that sustained them in their kosher and Sabbath-observant way of life. Most immigrant congregations met in storefronts or lofts. A few, whose members had begun to move up in the world, purchased old church buildings or took over synagogues left behind by German Jews moving out of the neighborhood. The Eldridge Street



Eldridge ark or bimah

Synagogue was the first synagogue in New York built from scratch by East European immigrants who had done so well for themselves that they could afford to proclaim the continuing presence of Orthodox Judaism through a beautiful and imposing structure.

Pious Jews often had to struggle within their own families, with spouses, siblings, children, even sometimes parents, who wanted to give up the old ways—to eat without the blessings, to neglect the Sabbath, or to keep the business open on Saturdays. They imposed their traditionalist viewpoints on their family members with varying degrees of success. Some simply had to look the other way as the



The success of this store—Kalman Paston's Judaica shop— at 18 Eldridge Street testifies to the way in which Jewish immigrants maintained Jewish rituals and customs.

Sabbath was desecrated in their own homes. But others managed to bring their families along with them. Only a small minority of Jewish children received any sort of Jewish education at all, but a minority of that minority were thoroughly educated in Orthodox day schools in which the old values were respected and perpetuated.

The most difficult challenge facing the Sabbath observant was making a living. The normal workweek was six days long, even in Jewish-owned factories, and Sunday blue laws forced stores to choose between losing two days of trade each week or staying open Saturday. A vow not to work on the Sabbath made it difficult to find and keep a job or to maintain a business. But some figured out how to do it. They peddled on the street; they accepted the loss of business in their stores; or they found jobs in the factories, mostly the smaller and more unstable sweatshops, that did close for the Sabbath. Ultimately, through their determination, they constructed an infrastructure of businesses and institutions through which they could make an adequate living without compromising their religious principles.

Probably the majority of immigrants were more than willing to compromise on strict Orthodoxy, but at the same

time rejected the overt secularism of the radicals. They partook of the commercial culture that America offered, but also found time to go to synagogue and to observe holidays. In the freedom of America, a wide continuum of religious observance and attitudes emerged. Some attended synagogue only on Yom Kippur, living completely secular lives the rest of the year. Many gathered with extended family on Rosh Hashanah and Passover. Others attended synagogue weekly, lit candles and said *Kiddush* on Friday evenings, and kept kosher at home (even as they might violate the Sabbath rules in other ways and eat non-kosher food outside the home). Especially in the difficult early years, some immigrants attended services and said *Kiddush* on Friday evenings, only to go to work on Saturday morning—a compromise they justified by its necessity. But even as the realm of necessity shrank, the immigrants and their children retained of the tradition the elements that made most sense to them and that did not threaten their integration into the American cultural mainstream.

In America, the very conditions of voluntarism that allowed some to give up on religious Judaism altogether allowed others to elaborate a variety of new Jewish options. Few East European immigrants were attracted to Reform Judaism, which seemed to them inauthentic and foreign, the creation of upper class German- and English-speakers. But Eastern Europeans, and more especially their American-raised children (some of whom did join the Reform movement), invented forms of Judaism that met their needs as modern and increasingly middle-class Americans. The Modern Orthodox and Conservative movements provided their members with forms of observance with recognizable kinship with East European tradition, but at the same time adapted them to American cultural and aesthetic norms. Above all, they allowed their members to both affiliate Jewishly and to participate fully in American society.

Within those movements, individuals developed all sorts of syntheses of religious and secular thought and practice. Not all those who attended services or lit Sabbath candles believed literally in the words they were reciting, or even in God at all. But in maintaining some level of Jewish practice, they were affirming their connection with Jews in other times and places, with their own parents, and with a tradition they felt was theirs. And then there were social reasons. As the famous anecdote attributed to various authors puts it: A child asks his father why he goes to synagogue when he does not believe in God. "You see my friend Moyshe

Goldberg over there?" the father replies. "Moyshe goes to *shul* to talk to God. I go to *shul* to talk to Moyshe."

A century later, the staying power of Jewish religious identification has proven stronger than that of the secularist options that Rischin and Howe thought so vibrant within the immigrant community. Where Jewish Socialism and secularist Yiddishism have become increasingly marginal, the synagogue remains at the heart of Jewish communal and cultural life. The synagogue has become central even to Jews who do not believe in the traditional articles of Jewish faith. Religion has indeed become the skeleton of Jewish ethnicity in America, even if it has also been infused with values gleaned from secular sources. The resurgence of Orthodoxy in recent decades has drawn more attention to those "Jewish Jews" (as they called themselves) who kept alive the flame of traditional Judaism through the challenges of migration and resettlement. The Eldridge Street Synagogue is their monument.

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