

# THE MEANINGS OF MIGRATION: AMERICAN JEWS, ELDRIDGE STREET, AND NEIGHBORHOODS

DEBORAH DASH MOORE

Usually when we speak of American Jews' migration in the modern world, we place a prefix before the term and discuss either *immigration* to the United States or *emigration* from Eastern Europe. While the trip from the Old World to the New certainly remains a core experience shaping Jewish life in the United States, smaller journeys across rivers and even just to new neighborhoods continued to influence how Jews thought about themselves and the communities they created. Indeed, one of the amazing characteristics of American Jewish life is the ongoing relevance of migration. Arriving in the United States was never quite enough for Jews. No sooner had they settled on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, home at its peak to 75% of all New York Jews, than they picked up and moved. In fact, within less than a decade after raising funds to build a magnificent synagogue on Eldridge Street, several key leaders had decamped for Harlem and were doing their best to convince the congregation to open a branch there. Their loyalty to the Eldridge Street synagogue did not prevent them from leaving the immigrant neighborhood for greener pastures; rather they expressed their dedication to Kahal Adath Jeshurun by urging it to follow them. Community and congregation, they seemed to be saying, should come in the wake of individual decisions to migrate. This would become standard operating procedure for American Jews throughout the twentieth century. But in the early decades, moves often occurred within the same area as families responded to a rise or decline in their fortunes. No wonder Bella Spewack, who had a successful career as a writer of Broadway shows, called her childhood memoir, *Streets*. In it she chronicled her many moves from one tenement to another on the blocks of the Lower East Side. However, Bella and most Jews dreamed of moving out and by that they



**The Eldridge Street Synagogue opened in 1887; by 1900 many of its founding members had moved uptown.**

meant moving up, going from an immigrant slum to a middle class section of the city, not just from a cold-water tenement to a modern apartment with indoor plumbing.

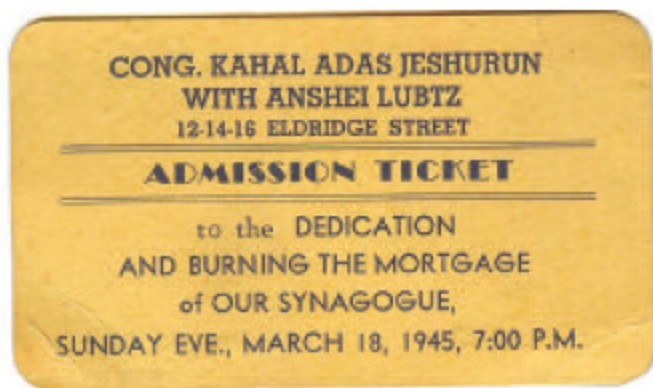
These dreams seemed to have started before Jews ever boarded a boat for New York harbor. They yearned for new possibilities even as they fled poverty, persecution, and declining fortunes. Many immigrants started their migration with a more modest move, from a village to a town, or a

town to a city. Yet this initial dislocation took them away from aspects of the familiar: landscape, school, community, and, of course, extended family. It brought Jews into new networks of friends, co-workers, peers, that is, people like themselves who were also newcomers and who shared bonds forged through ideology, work, and religion. The replacement of family ties with friendships, of intergenerational connections with a single generational cohort of young people, inducted Jews into a peer society. Living in a world of peers, who share similar aspirations, introduced Jews to both choice and chance. Yet much remained familiar: language, status as a Jew, family pressures and responsibilities, gender roles. Of the many who chose to move to burgeoning cities in the Pale of Settlement, to explore new towns like Odessa or Bialystok, far fewer decided to take the more fraught and expensive journey to the United States. Yet of the roughly 2 million—or one third of the Jewish population of Eastern Europe—who came during the era of mass immigration interrupted by World War I, the vast majority landed in New York City and settled, even if briefly, on the Lower East Side. They carried in their baggage an urge to move that never quite left them, a desire that they would transmit to their children. Migration seemed to be an answer to life's problems: to poverty, to prejudice, to violent neighbors, even to getting old.

I spent a year teaching at the Hebrew University on a Fulbright in the mid-1980s that made me realize just how distinctively American was this itch to migrate. My students couldn't understand why Americans, let alone Jews, would want to leave a perfectly nice neighborhood where their parents lived for a new one. Why move away? Their persistent questions forced me to explain. Migration meant mobility, and mobility meant socio-economic mobility, or a chance to set out on one's own to make something of one's self as the old myth of the frontier had implied. Mobility also connected with another powerful American myth: the idea of an errand into the wilderness that would lead to the creation of an ideal society, a city on a hill. It wasn't just individual ambition, although that played a role. Collective dreams propelled Americans, including Jews, to move to new city neighborhoods, to start cooperative housing projects, to migrate to the suburbs, to build gated retirement communities. Yet I had to admit that some immigrants and their children resisted these temptations. Italians, for example, stayed put and remodeled tenements into middle class housing.



*In the 1930s the congregation held an anniversary party to launch a fundraising drive to pay off the mortgage on the synagogue. In March of 1945, they held a party to celebrate their success, and happily burnt the mortgage, whose remnants are kept in this jar.*



*This ticket gained entry to the March 1945 party celebrating the burning of the mortgage.*

Catholics generally preferred not to forsake their parish church, unlike Jews who easily picked up a portable Torah scroll and built a new congregation around it. Catholics maintained a strong sense of sacred space within parish boundaries and a church hierarchy that made decisions often against abandoning substantial investments in real estate and infrastructure. By contrast, Jewish congregationalism empowered wealthy members and encouraged a mobility that left poorer Jews behind.

Eldridge Street Synagogue's history reveals the tug of migration and its costs, even as it speaks to a counter-trend of loyalty to congregation and neighborhood. The costs of moving were evident within a decade: new members constantly had to be recruited and integrated into congregational life in order to maintain adequate support for religious activities because old members left the Lower East Side. The decision to merge with another shul, that of Anshe Lubz, helped to sustain the synagogue during the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when the neighborhood population began gradually to shrink. But very early a counter-trend emerged, one evidenced in decisions by members who had moved away to Brooklyn and the Bronx to return to Eldridge Street for rites of passage such as bar mitzvah and weddings as well as for the high holidays. This trend revealed the depth of connection to the congregation, the power of friendship circles, and the spiritual influence that radiated from the synagogue. With a wider circle of former members, what might be called the Eldridge Street diaspora, to complement active members still living on the Lower East Side, the congregation developed a message appealing to those who had moved away for financial

support. Thus the Eldridge Street synagogue resisted the dominant pattern where American Jews took their institutions with them and transplanted them in new soil. Instead it proclaimed its significance for New York Jewish history, arrogating to itself layers of meaning as a place of spiritual beauty and solace beyond that of a holy congregation, an Orthodox synagogue. It was, in Rabbi Idelson's words, "among the first that were built in holiness from the foundation." In such ways the congregation mitigated the social costs of migration by transforming Eldridge Street into a heritage site to be partially sustained by a diaspora.

Such strategies of recruiting migrating Jews to maintain their ties to a congregational community depended in part upon sentiments of nostalgia and a yearning for what had been left behind that complemented the appeal of moving, the excitement of something new, a chance to reinvent oneself, an opportunity to forge a fresh peer group society and to narrow the circle of friends and family. Migrations from the Lower East Side took Jews into less dense neighborhoods, less dirty, crowded, noisy, tough, and, less Jewish neighborhoods. All of those attributes attracted Jews, who wanted new neighbors as well as fresh views from their kitchen windows. Yet much as Jews sought to leave old worlds behind, whether in Europe or in Manhattan, they also tried to rebuild institutions that would proclaim their arrival. Thus the Eldridge Street synagogue served as a model for a second generation of Jews, who fashioned new congregations in urban neighborhoods with suburban residential characteristics. These congregations catered to families rather than deriving from landsmanshaftn. They aimed to become a surrogate for Jewish community since the neighborhood itself lacked sufficient density of Jews. Although they espoused different ideals from Eldridge Street—many joined the Conservative movement—they replicated its ambitions to speak for an authentic Judaism.

Of course, the process did not stop with the second generation. After World War II the circle of migration widened not only to include suburbs beyond city limits but also to embrace such distant cities as Miami and Los Angeles. Enticed by many of the same allures as drew their parents and grandparents to migrate, Jews left behind their old homes (though often they were less than three decades old) for new ones. And once again they built houses and synagogues that reflected their dreams of arrival, security, and permanence. Perhaps, in the back of their minds, they

knew it would last fifty years if they were lucky, half that if new neighbors started to move next door, but they acted as if it would be forever. Meanwhile, they looked back longingly not only on the Lower East Side and the Eldridge Street synagogue, but on their childhood neighborhoods in Brooklyn, the Bronx and Queens where Jews had lived in apartments, shared rooms with siblings, played games on the sidewalks, borrowed books from public libraries, and took subways or buses to school and work. For men and women who drove in their automobiles to work and shop and school and sports, it seemed so different, so far away, so much another world and era. And yet, these Jews were replicating continuities of behavior, building congregations and communities, establishing peer group societies.

Thus migration constantly reshapes American Jewish life, sparking innovation as well as reproducing patterns of action. It behooves us to look for meanings in migration, seeking to explain why American Jews moved so readily. What did they desire? What were the attractions of moving, and what were its costs? It is worth asking if other synagogues can reproduce the strategy of Eldridge Street. And what about recent trends that are taking some Jews back to inner city neighborhoods? Do they reflect similar desires, not to mention the role of wealthy Jews in setting communal priorities? How does the self-selective process of migration, the primacy it gives to each individual to make choices about where to live, affect collective decisions about the character of Jewish religious life? There are many questions, and the history of the Eldridge Street synagogue holds answers to some of them.

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