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## The Continuing Exodus: The Synagogue and Jewish Urban Migration

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# THE CONTINUING EXODUS: THE SYNAGOGUE AND JEWISH URBAN MIGRATION

Does a Jewish neighborhood define its synagogues, or do synagogues define a Jewish neighborhood? In traditional Jewish communities, the two have always by circumstance been inter-dependent. Historically, synagogues were usually erected by the community (or wealthy patrons) within the pre-existing Jewish quarter. Only rarely were synagogues built before a Jewish community existed. Jewish settlement was sometimes determined by non-Jews, who set quotas on how many Jews could live in a particular place; or by Jews seeking better economic opportunities and civil protections. Once built, synagogues, the traditional centers of Jewish communal activity embodied the neighborhood's most essential characteristics.

For Jews, the synagogue was their most public place. It often served as a meeting place for secular affairs even while Jewish quarters also maintained community offices, hospitals, old age homes and ritual baths. As such, it was most likely to receive special architectural attention, including a more prominent or protected location, greater size, more lavish or durable materials and decorations. For non-Jews, who have limited knowledge of Jewish religious and societal requirements, the synagogue is usually understood in relation or opposition to the church. Looking back, these buildings are often the only easily identifiable Jewish element of a once Jewish neighborhood, so their defining role increases even after the population changes.

American Jewish communities have pulled up roots numerous times, continuing a tradition of migration to safer, more comfortable places. Jewish immigrants between 1880 and 1914 considered the crowded tenement ghettos of port-of-entry cities as temporary abodes on their way to the American Promised Land. The migration away from first-generation ghettos continued through successive generations, as Jews moved further and further from their places of embarkation. The effect of this movement on cities has been mixed. In some places Jewish migration has been part of the continuing process of ethnic settlement, allowed African-Americans and

newer immigrant groups to settle in relatively inexpensive neighborhoods. In other places, it has strengthened older neighborhoods abandoned by earlier immigrant groups - and served as a catalyst for the formation on new urban centers. But Jewish out-migration from American cities altogether has transformed Judaism. The process has created, for the first time in millennia, a dominant non-urban Jewish culture. In the process, the suburbanization of Jews has atomized traditional communities and has weakened the broader cultural and economic life of many cities.

For most of the history of the Diaspora, and until the nineteenth century in Europe's Jewish quarters, geographically well-defined communities, were often required by the authorities of the non-Jewish majority culture. Segregation, while at times self-imposed, changed to forced separation as the situation of Jews worsened in Europe from the thirteenth century on, as Jews were expelled from many lands. In Italy, beginning in the sixteenth century, Jews were increasingly required to live in crowded ghettos established to protect Christians from Jews, not vice-versa. Their rights were severely restricted. It was only at the end of the eighteenth century that the severity of restrictions eased. The Napoleonic conquests initiated a period of emancipation, including the demolition of Ghetto walls and new freedoms of settlement.

Jews, however, have also preferred to separate themselves to promote the religious and social cohesion of the community. Communities concentrated in a particular street or neighborhood in order for men to be able to walk to religious services on the Sabbath or for convenient access to a mikveh, a ritual bath. Even when allowed to move more freely, Jews preferred to live according to Jewish laws and customs, and for defense against hostile attacks. In the nineteenth century, as European urban Jewish populations grew in places like Berlin and Warsaw, Jewish neighborhoods remained remarkably cohesive. But with Jewish emancipation in Europe, and more expansive freedoms in America, small but growing numbers of Jews settled in areas apart from the Jewish

majority. Reversing centuries of anti-Jewish discrimination, many newly secular-leaning Jews wanted to remove themselves from Jewish communal restrictions, and began the first out-migrations from Jewish quarters.



Migration from inner cities, to streetcar suburbs, to freeway exurbs and beyond is the result of opportunity not oppression. It is mostly an American phenomenon, due to the vast amount of open land that has beckoned sprawl of all sorts, and evolving modes of transportation throughout the 20th century. Only in England, Canada and a few other places have large numbers of Jews moved from place to place within a short period of time, transforming neighborhoods and reinventing Jewish identity in the process.

Even now, Jewish imagination remembers the distinctive, traditional ambiance of historical Jewish neighborhoods. The sounds, sights and smells of Manhattan's Lower East Side or Brooklyn's Williamsburg; Philadelphia's South and Bainbridge Street; Los Angeles's Boyle Heights and Boston's North Side come to mind even when replaced by more recent immigrant groups, or or destroyed by the wrecking ball of urban renewal. Indeed, as American Jews have become increasingly dispersed there has been a reciprocal nostalgia for old Jewish neighborhoods. This is nowhere more dramatically evident than in New York, where the restricted geography of Manhattan precipitated rapid demographic shifts. The continuing arrival of new immigrant groups and the steady encroachment of commercial districts into residential neighborhoods, has stimulated, decade after decade, a New York City's hyper-demographic change.

New York's oldest Jewish congregation, Sephardi Shearith Israel, was founded soon after the arrival of Jews in New Amsterdam in 1654 and before 1897 the congregation had moved three times—always further uptown. It finally settled into a classically inspired building by architect Arnold Brunner

*New York City, the former Anshe Chesed Synagogue, now the Orensanz Foundation. photograph by Julian Voloj*

in 1897. The congregation began in rented quarters and built its first synagogue around 1730 on Mill Street in the heart of the British colony in Lower Manhattan. As the only synagogue in New York, Shearith Israel served all Jews, including Ashkenazi Jews from Central Europe. In 1825, however, when a request by these members to hold Ashkenazi services within the congregation was denied, and the “Polish” and “German” Jews succeeded to form their own synagogue—B'nai Jeshurun.

The route uptown for B'nai Jeshurun was not unlike Shearith Israel. The new congregation first occupied a former African-American church on Elm Street, just north of Canal Street, and then moved in 1850 further uptown to Greene Street, when more space was needed to accommodate the large numbers of German Jews flooding into New York after the failed revolutions of 1848. The new building was used for only thirteen years, and then the congregation moved further north to 34th Street. Finally, B'nai Jeshurun had a synagogue built on the Upper West Side between 1916 and 1918. In the 1970s it looked like this synagogue, too, might be abandoned; it needed serious repairs and the congregation had dwindled, its so many middle-class Conservative Jewish had moved out of Manhattan.

All that changed, however, a decade later, due to charismatic leadership, and a strong outreach program to the many young

unaffiliated single professional Jews moving into the City. Now, in the newly restored historic synagogue, the thousands of congregants can not fit into the 850 seats. In its diverse programming, which includes traditional prayers and non-traditional philosophic seminars and singles nights, B'nai Jeshurun best represents its neighborhood, and the rediscovery of Judaism among the recent generation.

Like B'nai Jeshurun, many synagogues have changed their religious rite and their denominational affiliation as they moved from building to building. Orthodox synagogues move least. To change buildings is possible; but to move out of a neighborhood is totally disruptive to the congregation, and generally requires that congregants move, too. This has happened; but most often, Orthodox congregations either hold on or eventually just fade away. Typically, as communities age and change, the younger, more affluent and assimilated Jews move on while the Orthodox are more likely to stay, attached to their shul.

In the past several decades, however, Orthodox Jews have become suburban, too, achieving some success in recreating the cohesion of older immigrant neighborhoods in new suburbs, complete with kosher pizza and falafel shops and internet cafes.

Among the aging Orthodox congregants one used to hear the half joke, half lament, "Will the last one out [of the synagogue] turn off the light?" Some of these congregations have just barely survived, though they no longer represent the neighborhood at large, which often has lost its Jewish character except in the memory of those left behind. In New York and a few other cities, amid the Chinese, Korean and Spanish signs, a few small Orthodox synagogues remain as vestiges of the past. Sometimes outside preservationists will take note of some of the grander synagogue buildings falling into decay around the heads of the aged worshipers, and try to intervene. At the Eldridge Street Synagogue in New York, and at B'nai Israel in Baltimore, non-Orthodox groups established preservation efforts for those buildings, creating successful, but often fragile partnerships with the resident congregation. In Baltimore, the Orthodox congregation adapted to new needs. Because of drastic changes in the area over the past thirty years they do not live nearby, and hence do not walk to services.

In the nineteenth century, when Orthodox synagogues did move out of older neighborhoods, further from their traditional membership, they often redefined themselves

as Conservative or Reform. Beside following basic trends of assimilation and Americanization that played down traditionally distinctive features of Jewish worship in favor to greater conformity and decorum, the shift in denomination allowed congregants to ride to synagogue, rather than walk. B'nai Jeshurun, for example, had been founded as a traditional synagogue, but by the late nineteenth century there was strong pressure to modify its ritual and requirements. Today's nomenclature for the branches of Judaism did not yet exist. But Jews wanting a fully reformed service could join Rodeph Shalom or Emanu-El. B'nai Jeshurun looked for a middle way, incorporating modest changes, such as allowing family pews where men and women could sit together, an organ and mixed choir. The service, however remained traditional. Thus, B'nai Jeshurun became a leader of the Conservative movement in the 20th century.

Also in New York is Congregation Rodeph Shalom, founded on the Lower East Side in 1842 by Orthodox Central European Jews. Each move uptown, and further in time from its founders, included a shift in religious practice. In 1875, the congregation became Conservative under the leadership of Rabbi Aaron Wise, and that allowed, in 1891, the move uptown from the old neighborhood to to 63rd and Lexington on the Upper East Side. The Lower East Side was by this time home to thousands of Eastern European Jews, from whom, one could imagine, the old congregation appeared to be fleeing. In 1901, the congregation joined the Reform Union of American Hebrew congregations and moved to new quarters in 1930 on the Upper West Side. It is the Upper West Side that gives character to these synagogues, with their liberal politics and support of social outreach programs. The synagogues themselves, however, as buildings and as religious, social and cultural institutions, impart a strong sense of Jewish organization and cohesion to an area that otherwise might be overwhelmingly secular in its outlook.



In Cleveland, the process of migration is documented through the history of Temple Tifereth Israel. Founded in 1848 when forty-seven members of Anshe Chesed split in favor of greater reform, the congregation moved among a series of magnificent buildings. In 1854 a small synagogue was erected at the corner of Huron and Miami Streets, but then, in 1894 a new and impressive Romanesque Revival structure was built at the corner of Central Avenue and East 55th Street. Tifereth Israel kept moving, however, as its members left the Central Avenue district for Wade Park and Cleveland Heights. First a move to Ansel Road at East 105th St. in the University Circle area 1924, to the marvelous domed structure by Charles R. Greco, still known as the Temple. Following continued moves away from the city, the congregation established a new facility in the Jewish enclave of Beechwood in 1969.

Of particular importance to synagogue architecture was the prosperous 1920s generation of third generation Central European American Jews, but also of Eastern European Jewish families who had arrived since the 1880s. Tram lines, subways and then new roads for automobiles encouraged the development of new commuter suburbs. Land was open, houses were detached, and Jews—like many others—wanted to move. Synagogues, frequently erected in the spirit of large public works projects, faced new parks and were approached by parkways, rather than from residential streets in the immediate vicinity. While many could walk if they desired, facilities were established for car travel and parking.

As mentioned above, the 1924 move by Tifereth Israel, and the establishment of the nearby Cleveland Jewish Center and Congregation Anshe Emeth in 1921, was typical of what went on in the first decades of the century, particularly after the First World War, in cities throughout America. The new locations and the architectural style echo similar episodes in Pittsburgh (Rodef Shalom, 1907, in Oakland), St. Louis (United Hebrew Temple, 1927, facing Forest Park), Chicago (Temple Isaiah in Highland Park, 1924), Brooklyn (Temple Beth El, Borough Park, 1920), Brookline, Mass. (Ohabai Shalom, 1924) and somewhat later, in Washington, DC (Adas Israel in Cleveland Park, 1950s) and elsewhere where the synagogue styles were often inspired by Byzantine central-plan buildings, soon to be a recognizable Jewish building type.

*Cleveland, a former Mikveh in Glenville, now Morrison Avenue Missionary Baptist Church, photograph by Samuel D. Gruber*

More like public buildings rather than neighborhood synagogues, these new buildings were centers rather than shuls. They included offices, libraries, school facilities, chapels, museum and often gymnasias and swimming pools; and effectively redefined the Jewish presence in many urban centers. The new synagogue-centers, rather than giving definition to an urban neighborhood by architectural accent, attempted to actually become a “neighborhood,” at least in the Jewish sense, absorbing activities that once took place along the streets of denser, more active, pedestrian urban districts. Naturally, these synagogues, once they moved did not look back. Those individuals that would not, or could not move with the synagogue, affiliated elsewhere. The synagogue buildings left behind often reverted to Christian use, as with the site in Cleveland at East 55th Street. The continued use by the University Park synagogue by Temple Tifereth (as a museum and office) after its 1969 move is an exceptional (and expensive) case of bi-polar congregational affiliation.

In the Boston area where by 1918 there were five major suburban congregations, all eventually to affiliate (at least for awhile) with the Conservative movement, and all occupying impressive new architectural complexes. These new synagogues grew from the Jewish population surge of the great age of Eastern European immigration at the turn of the century, before which there had been few Jews in the Boston. In 1875, only about 3,000 mostly Central European Jews living in the South End. From there Jews moved to the upper South End and others moved even further to Roxbury and Brookline. But in the North End, where most new immigrants settled, from 1880 to 1895 the population of Eastern European Jews increased from a few hundred to 6,200 creating a dense but cohesive Jewish neighborhood. Overall, between 1880 and 1910 Greater Boston’s Jewish population increased from 4,000 to 100,000.

Boston serves as an interesting example for another reason. In a rare reversal of what we now see as the norm, African-American churches were sold to Jews to be used as synagogues. Jews moved from the North End to the West End and to Beacon Hill, displacing African-American communities that had existed since the early 19th century. Elsewhere in the city, 3,500 African-Americans then moved to the upper South End, where many Central European Jews had settled in the 1870s. Here, it was the Jews that were selling houses of worship, and in 1903 Adath Israel became the A.M.E. Baptist Church, which had just seen its North End building converted to synagogue use. This trend continued and the prosperous Upper South End congregations moved to the new suburbs of

Brookline and Roxbury, where the Central European Jews were joined by ever increasing numbers of their Eastern European brethren, who soon dominated the older institutions.

Aspiring middle-class Eastern European Jews moved first, often directly from the North and West End, omitting the transitional stopover on the periphery of the old city made by a generation of earlier arrivals. Dorchester and Upper Roxbury became Jewish centers of Boston. 77,000 Jews lived along Blue Hill Avenue in the 1920s and 30s. The neighborhoods changed quickly, from predominately middle-class enclaves to working-class districts. Residential streets were converted to commercial use. Historian Theodore White recalled that storekeepers had transformed Eire Street from the quiet residential neighborhood of his grandparents into “semi-permanent bazaar.” In part because of the arrival of the street car—what had been suburban became urban. Single family houses became multiple dwellings, and three-decker houses filled empty green spaces. As the middle class left, three of the major synagogues retrenched and re-embraced Orthodoxy, better to serve the newer generally poorer, and mostly more devout, population.

Roxbury’s loss was Brookline’s gain, as that suburb went through a similar transformation, and three new synagogue-centers were built between 1925-29. Similar centers developed in Newton still a country suburb in the 1930s, and elsewhere, settled by Roxbury refugees. Unlike Roxbury, Brookline has retained a vibrant Jewish community, one of the most prosperous urban Jewish enclaves in America. But like Roxbury before it, Brookline become much more Orthodox in its arrangement. Orthodox congregations and Jewish day schools have flourished as the larger Conservative synagogues have declined due to further migration to places like Sharon, which has become home to 10,000 Jews and six congregations.

Similar trends could be documented across the country, from larger established but more diverse Jewish populations in Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Detroit to relatively small Jewish communities such as my own, in Syracuse New York, where Jews settled in the first half of the nineteenth century in the downtown area, not far from the new Erie Canal from which they derived their livelihoods and have gradually migrated outside the city, mostly to the eastern suburbs. The first purpose-built synagogue was erected in 1851 by the Temple Society of Concord on the today’s I.M. Pei-designed Everson Museum of Art. Concord adopted Reform Judaism after the Civil War, and by the end of the nineteenth-century several other congregations, comprised of more traditional German-

speaking Jews and newly-arrived Yiddish speakers, clustered in the area. In 1910, a shift just slight east began, first with Temple Concord erecting a fine Classical-style building at the foot of University Hill. In the 1920s new and impressive Orthodox and Conservative synagogue were built nearby, designed by noted local architects. Though these buildings still exist, only Temple Concord continues its intended Jewish use. Beginning in the 1960s and accelerating afterward due to the proposed and realized demolitions for a new highway and hospitals, most Syracuse’s Jews moved east again, many just a few miles away, but over the city line.

In the 1980s Temple Concord’s considered moving, too, but the history of the place was strong, and it was decided to tough out the tough times. For the most part, the congregation has been vindicated. New settlement patterns in the region have dispersed Jews not just east, but in every direction, and the University location is now reasonably central. The city, too, has rebounded some, and the University area is now a prime location. Still, most congregants commute by car, but even for the most distant members, driving times around Syracuse are short.

Meanwhile, the fate of the congregations that left the old neighborhoods has varied. The Orthodox synagogue Beth El, formed by congregational mergers and the erection in 1965 of an expansive modern-style sanctuary and school, has closed. The building is now occupied by the Slavic Pentacostal Christian congregation. But Temple Adath Yeshurun, the city’s Conservative synagogue has thrived on its 1970s campus, with a Percival Goodman sanctuary easily recognized by its shining pyramidal form (Adath’s 1922 building recently re-opened as LEED-certified hotel). Another Conservative congregation has split off from Adath Yeshurun; it thrives in a purpose-built synagogue, just further southeast. Typical of many small American Jewish communities, all the congregations acknowledge and respect each other’s’ efforts, collectively support a Jewish Community Center and small Hebrew Day School, and work together on many communitywide endeavors.

Jewish migration away from city centers accelerated again after the Second World War. External factors which lured Americans to new suburban subdivisions such as the Federal highway program, guaranteed mortgages, the GI Bill, and the overwhelming mentality that believed that newer was better, affected Jews, too. The new suburbs were perhaps the most ethnically (but not racially) mixed housing experiments in American history. The attractiveness of neighborhoods



Boston, Temple Ohabei Shalom,  
photograph by Samuel D. Gruber

and the commonality of neighbors were based on shared experiences, such as a public education and the War, but also on shared goals and desires. With the exception of communities like Sharon and Beechwood, religion played a small role in these dreams and was not a determining factor in one's existence. In suburban America, one was more likely to have a religious affiliation than a religious conviction.

For Christians and Jews alike, moving into these new suburbs was very much a process of starting over. New churches and synagogues were built, serving ever wider areas since the communities were widely spaced, and heterogeneous. While a few of these churches and synagogues did have deep roots and long histories most of the congregants, like the buildings and furnishings, were likely to be new.

Hillel Levine and Lawrence Harmon have documented this process in Boston, where they maintain the 1960s Jewish flight Roxbury and Dorchester coincided with Federally sponsored fair housing initiatives which were manipulated by Boston bankers, realtors and politicians who resisted racial integration in other neighborhoods (especially the Irish and Italian sections of the city) but saw an opening in Jewish Roxbury and Dorchester. Thus race became an added stimulus in convincing people to move. The decision by some institutions to move to the suburbs (after these had resisted earlier departure), were seen as racially motivated. The message of fear and abandonment created a first wave of out-migration by Jews. Then a second, later, wave came from the despair in the face of real hostility against Jews by African-Americans who saw themselves as abandoned and victimized by the whites with whom they had hoped to integrate. Gerald Gamm, who has outlined the settlement patterns and distribution of community services of Boston Jews believes,

however, that by the mid-1960s, the disintegration of the Jewish community in Dorchester was already well advanced. Out-migration of more prosperous Jews had begun in the 1920s, and growing affluence was the primary factor that drew people out and away from traditional neighborhoods. Most likely, the truth is somewhere in between these views. Affluence was the carrot that drew Jews away, but fear-mongering was the stick that sped them along. Significantly, today, younger educated Jews are among the many who are fleeing the suburbs (a return albeit in still small numbers) to the cities, sometimes close to where their grandparents settled a century ago.

Today, too, traditional synagogue labels are again in flux. Where before there were often blurred lines between Orthodox and Conservative (many congregations were known as Conservadox), today Orthodoxy is fractured into many pieces, and the distinctions between Reform, Reconstructionist and Conservative congregations are sometimes hard to discern. Some congregations, especially newer ones formed in areas previously uninhabited by Jews, such as newly settled areas "among the cornfields," and informal *minyans* in gentrified urban areas, strive for a post- or mixed-denominational identity in order to attract as many members as possibly from a limited geographic pool.

Jewish congregations have redefined the American urban and suburban landscape in many ways. As poor immigrants and as affluent citizens, Jews have defined neighborhoods through their movements, their buildings, and their communities. For more than three hundred years the continuing exodus has been a process of migration, discovery, identify and invention at the core of the American Jewish experience; and it still is today.