“[O]f all the big cities,” Sergeant Milton Lehman of the *Stars and Stripes* affirmed in 1945, “New York is still the promised land.”1 As a returning Jewish GI, Lehman compared New York with European cities. Other Jews also knew what New York offered that made it so desirable, even if they had not served overseas. First and foremost, security: Jews could live without fear in New York. Yes, they faced discrimination, but in this city of almost eight million residents, many members of its ethnic and religious groups encountered prejudice. Jews contended with anti-Semitism in the twentieth century more than German Protestants or Irish Catholics dealt with bias, perhaps; but the Irish had endured a lot in the nineteenth century, and Jews suffered less than African Americans, Latinos, and Asian New Yorkers. And New York provided more than security: Jews could live freely as Jews. The presence of a diverse population of close to two million New York Jews contributed to their sense that “everyone was Jewish.”2 New York Jews understood that there were many ways to be Jewish. The city welcomed Jews in all their variety. New York Jews saw the city as a place where they, too, could flourish and express themselves. As a result, they came to identify with the city, absorbing its ethos even as they helped to shape its urban characteristics. When World War II ended in Europe with victory over Nazi Germany, New York’s promises glowed more brightly still.

New York’s multiethnic diversity, shaped in vital dimensions by its large Jewish population, shimmered as a showplace of American democratic distinctiveness, especially vis-à-vis Europe. In contrast to a continent that had become a vast slaughterhouse, where millions of European Jews had been ruthlessly murdered with industrial efficiency, New York glistened as a city Jews could and did call their home in America. The famous skyline had defined urban cosmopolitanism in the years after World War I. Now the city’s thriving ethnic neighborhoods—Jewish and Catholic, African American and Puerto Rican, Italian and Irish—came to represent modern urban culture. New York’s economy responded robustly to demands of war production. By the end of hostilities, its per capita income exceeded the national average by 14 percent.
But as a poster city for immigration, with a majority population composed of immigrants and their children, the city had to contend with negative perceptions. Considered undesirable by many Americans, Jews and other foreigners in the city contributed to impressions that New York seemed less American than other cities with large percentages of native-born residents.

As the city flourished during and after the war, it maintained its political commitments to generous social welfare benefits to help its poorest residents. Jews advocated for these policies, supporting efforts to establish a liberal urban legacy. In modeling a progressive and prosperous multiethnic twentieth-century American city, New York demonstrated what its Jews valued. Versions of Jewish urbanism played not just on the political stage but also on the streets of the city's neighborhoods. Its expressions could be found as well in New York's centers of cultural production.

By the middle of the twentieth century, no city offered Jews more than New York. It nourished both celebration and critique. New York gave Jews visibility as individuals and as a group. It provided employment and education, inspiration and freedom, fellowship and community. Jews reciprocated by falling in love with the city, its buildings' hard angles and perspectives, its grimy streets and harried pace. But by the 1960s and '70s, Jews' love affair with the city soured. For many of the second generation who grew up on New York's sidewalks, immersed in its babel of languages and cultural syncretism, prosperity dimmed their affection for the working-class urban world of their youth. Many of them aspired to suburban pleasures of home ownership, grass and trees that did not have to be shared with others in public parks. Yet New York City remained the wellspring of Jewish American culture for much of the century, a resource of Jewishness even for those living thousands of miles west of the Hudson River.

Jews had not always felt free to imagine the city as their special place. Indeed, not until mass immigration from Europe piled up their numbers, from the tens of thousands to the hundreds of thousands, had Jews laid claim to New York and influenced its politics and culture. Its Jewish population soared from five hundred thousand at the turn of the twentieth century to 1.1 million before the start of World War I. On the eve of World War II, Jews, over a quarter of New York's residents, ranked as the largest ethnic group. Demography both encouraged many outsiders to perceive New York as a Jewish city and underwrote local cultural productions, such as a thriving theater scene, a
flourishing popular music business, and extensive publishing in several languages. Jews were used to living as a minority in Europe and the Middle East. New York offered life without a majority population—without one single ethnic group dominating urban society. Now Jews could go about their business, much of it taking place within ethnic niches, as if they were the city’s predominant group.

When and in what sense did New York become a city of promises for Jews? Certainly not in the colonial era. During that period, seeds for future promises were planted, most importantly political, economic, and religious rights. While New York’s few hundred Jews lived in the shadow of far more prosperous Jewish communities in London and Amsterdam, New York Jewish men enjoyed citizenship rights and responsibilities that their peers in London could only envy. These rights gradually led New York Jews to emerge from a closed synagogue society and to participate with enthusiasm in revolutionary currents sweeping the colonies. Jews in New York absorbed formative ideas regarding human rights; they tasted freedom and put their lives on the line for it during the Revolution. In the decades that followed, they incorporated ideals of the American Enlightenment into their Jewish lives.

Sometime during the nineteenth century, these changes attracted increasing attention from European Jews. New York began to acquire a reputation as a destination in itself. Arriving from Europe at Castle Garden, increasing numbers of Jewish immigrants decided to stay. New York’s bustling streets enticed them, so they put off riding west or south to peddle or settle. Sometimes, older brothers made that choice, as did Jonas and Louis Strauss, who sent their younger brother Levi to the West Coast via steamship in 1853 to open a branch of their New York City dry-goods firm. Levi Strauss did better, perhaps, than they expected when he went into manufacturing copper-riveted denim work pants after the Civil War. But such a move into garment manufacturing from selling dry goods and, especially, used clothing had already taken root in New York prior to the war. It formed the basis of an industry that became the city’s largest, and more than any other, it made New York the city of promises.

In 1962, the historian Moses Rischin published his pioneering book, *The Promised City: New York’s Jews, 1870–1914*. Rischin aimed to “identify those currents of human and institutional vitality central to the American urban experience that converged on the Lower East Side in the era of the great Jewish migration just as New York emerged as the nation’s and the world’s most
dynamic metropolis.” The interlocking themes of Jewish immigration from eastern Europe and the rise of New York as a “city of ambition” led Rischin to cast his account as a “revolutionary transformation” not only in American urban history but also in Jewish history. Rischin saw a universal paradigm of modernization unfolding in the very particularistic experiences of New York Jews. His vision of democratic urban community remains relevant to contemporary scholars.

What did the city promise? First, a job. Close to half of all immigrants sewed clothing in hundreds of small-scale sweatshops that disguised an ever-burgeoning industry that soon became one of the nation’s most important. Second, a place to live. True, the overcrowded Lower East Side bulged with residents, even its modern tenements straining to accommodate a density of Jewish population that rivaled Bombay. Yet by the early twentieth century, bridges to Brooklyn and rapid transit to Harlem and the Bronx promised improvements: fresh air, hot and cold running water, even a private toilet and bathroom. Third, food. Jewish immigrants had not starved in Europe, but New York’s abundance changed their diets and attitudes toward food and its simple pleasures. In New York, a center of the nation’s baking industry, Jews could enjoy a fresh roll and coffee each morning for pennies. Fourth, clothing. It did not take long, especially laboring in the garment industry, for Jews to trade their old-world clothes for the latest ready-made styles. Thus properly attired, they looked and felt like modern men and women, able and willing to make their way.

Such promises might be quotidian, but they opened Jews’ eyes to other more important ones. Young Jewish immigrants embraced the city’s promise of free public education, from elementary school to secondary school, all the way through college. Only a handful of Jewish immigrants in the nineteenth century and years before World War I ever managed to take advantage of such a magnificent offer. Although a family economy that privileged sons over daughters when decisions about post-elementary education had to be made and costs of forgoing income from teenaged children often required Jews to go to work and not attend school, increasingly Jews flocked to the city’s free schools. Some immigrants, especially women, thought the city promised freedom to choose a spouse, though matchmakers also migrated across the ocean. Still others rejoiced in what they imagined was a promise of uncensored language: written and spoken, published and on stage, in Yiddish, Hebrew,
German, Ladino, and English. Some conceived of the city’s rough democracy as holding a promise of solidarity among working men and women, while a significant number demanded extension of civil and voting rights to women.

Then there were more ambiguous promises. Did New York offer Jews a chance to live without a formal, legally constituted Jewish community? Did it suggest that Jews no longer needed to practice Jewish rituals or observe the Sabbath? Some Jewish immigrants thought they could leave behind old-world ways of thinking and acting; they secularized their Jewish lives, often starting the process in Europe even before they emigrated. Others fashioned ways of being Jewish, both secular and religious, in tune with New York’s evolving cultures. Both groups identified their own visions of what it meant to be Jewish in America with New York itself.

That New York City bloomed with such promises would have been hard to anticipate in 1654. Then the ragged seaport only reluctantly welcomed its first contingent of miserable Jewish migrants. In fact, not receiving permission to settle, Jews had to petition to stay, to live and work in the outpost. They agreed to practice their religion in private even as they participated in civic culture. When the British turned New Amsterdam into New York, they accepted these arrangements, giving Jews unprecedented legal rights. Here lay hints of future promises. Gradually the British increased opportunities for public religious expression and extended to Jewish men civil rights, including citizenship, the right to vote, and the right to hold office. When Jews founded their first congregation, they called it Shearith Israel (Remnant of Israel), an apt name for the handful living in a colonial town far from European centers of Jewish life. Yet during the eighteenth century, Jews integrated into the fabric of New York life. They faced challenges of identifying as Jews within a free society. As the first to enjoy such political freedoms, they struggled to balance assimilation with Jewish distinctiveness. By the time of the Revolution, many New York Jews felt deeply connected to their city and fellow American patriots, enough to flee the British occupation for Philadelphia. The end of the war marked a new democratic consciousness among New York Jews who returned to rebuild their city and community.

A democratic ethos pervaded Jewish urban life in the new republic, opening possibilities for individual and collective ambition as well as cooperation. This republicanism changed how Jews organized themselves religiously and how they imagined their opportunities. Shearith Israel incorporated and
drafted its own constitution, modeled on the federal example. Republicanism animated women, inspiring them to establish charities to help succor the poor. Once Jewish immigration brought sufficient ethnic and economic diversity to New York in the 1830s and 1840s, Jews started to build a different type of community. They forged bonds based on intimacy, gender, shared backgrounds, common aspirations, and urgent necessities. Jewish religious life became increasingly diverse, competitive, and strident. Democracy without an established religion fostered creativity and experimentation. Congregations multiplied in the city, but most Jews chose not to join one, despite variety ranging from Orthodox to Reform. The city saw a fierce battle between proponents of orthodoxy and advocates of reform. These debates engaged Jews deeply but did not lead the majority to affiliate. Still, increasingly synagogue buildings formed part of the cityscape, an indication of Jewish presence. Democratic freedoms permitted a new type of urban Jewish life to emerge. Lacking formal communal structures, Jews innovated and turned to other forms of organization as alternatives. They established fraternal orders and literary societies, seeking a means to craft connections in a rapidly growing and bewildering city. Yet soon they multiplied these activities as well. Pleas for charity and education, hospitals and libraries, mobilized Jewish New Yorkers.

With the extension of the franchise, more Jewish men acquired the right to vote, irrespective of their economic situation, encouraging them to enter political debates with enthusiasm. They paid attention to events overseas affecting fellow Jews, especially examples of anti-Semitism, and tried to convince the president to help. New York Jews mastered the arts of petition and protest. They took sides as individuals in election cycles, first between Federalists and Jeffersonians, later between Democrats and Whigs, and finally between Democrats and Republicans. Domestic issues divided Jews; even the question of slavery found supporters and opponents. Rabbis debated the subject in pulpit and press until the Civil War ended their polemics and both sides rallied to the Union cause. Politics necessarily pushed Jews into public consciousness; non-Jews noticed them. Prejudice began to appear in social life, and stereotypes started to circulate in the press. Yet Jewish New Yorkers were hardly the retiring sort, and many gave as good as they got.

Jewish immigrants readily found employment, entering the city’s expanding economic marketplace as they carefully tested its promises of personal fulfillment. Although the Panics of 1857 and 1873 threw thousands out of work,
during normal times, Jews coped with capitalist volatilities. Many gravitated to small-scale commerce and craft production. Men and women both worked and drew on family resources, especially the labor of their children, to help make ends meet. Jews saved regularly to withstand seasonal swings in employment. Within the city’s diversifying economy, they located ethnic niches that became occupational ladders of advancement for many. Some of the merchants trading in old clothes around Chatham Street initiated manufacturing of cheap goods. A garment industry took shape; it received a big boost with demand for uniforms in the Civil War. As the industry grew, its need for workers increased steadily, employing an ever-greater proportion of Jewish immigrants to the city. Small shops and a competitive contracting system continued to dominate the industry. Despite miserable conditions, the system tempted many workers with a promise of self-employment. Taking a risk, some immigrants borrowed money, often from relatives and fellow immigrants from the same European town, to supplement meager savings. Then they plunged into contracting, trying with a new design idea to secure prosperity. As often as not, they failed, falling back into the laboring class. But success stories trumped failures; they stood as reminders that the city had fulfilled its promise.

Merchants and peddlers, who occupied another popular Jewish economic niche, viewed the rise of department stores as an urban achievement. These commercial emporiums proffered a magical array of goods under one roof and represented the pinnacle of success for local hardware-store owners or dry-goods shopkeepers. Retail establishments proliferated around the city as it grew; Jewish entrepreneurship flourished on local shopping streets in the Bronx and Brooklyn. Pitkin Avenue in Brownsville and Fordham Road in the Bronx could not rival Manhattan’s Fifth Avenue or even Fourteenth Street. But they provided a measure of prosperity and independence to Jewish merchants, enough so that they could enjoy some of the perquisites of middle-class living, such as sending one’s sons and even one’s daughters to high school and college. Mobility came in many forms, and often immigrant Jews achieved economic and social mobility first through business and then through education.

New York’s explosive growth at the turn of the twentieth century produced radical social movements based on class struggle and politics. For many Jewish immigrants, becoming a small manufacturer paled beside a larger vision of a just society, one without workers living in overcrowded, filthy tenements, exposed to disease, and wracked by despair. Hedging their bets, they dreamed of
becoming capitalists even as they sought in socialism better living conditions, fair wages, and reasonable working hours. Socialism as a utopian ideal promised equality, an economic system that took from each according to his or her ability and returned to everybody whatever he or she needed. Even some Jewish capitalists subscribed to such an ideal. But on a pragmatic level, socialism appealed to Jewish workers for its alternatives to unrestrained capitalist exploitation. Paths to socialism led through union organizing, the polling booth, fraternalism, and even cooperative housing. Jewish immigrants embraced them all. They forged vibrant garment-workers unions, as well as unions of bakers and plumbers, teachers and pharmacists. They voted for Socialist candidates, sending Meyer London in 1914 to represent the Lower East Side in Congress. They organized the Workmen’s Circle, initially in 1892 as a mutual-aid society and then in 1900 as a multibranch fraternal order in which they could socialize with fellow workers and receive health and social welfare benefits not provided by a wealthy but stingy city government. And after World War I ended, New York Jews pushed for legislation that would allow them to build cooperative housing projects, so that they could enjoy living in decent apartments together with other Jewish workers. These examples of democratic community radically reshaped the city and contributed to its progressive commitments even as Jewish struggles for social justice empowered them both individually and as a group.

For several centuries, until the beginning of the twentieth, most New York Jews lived in Lower Manhattan, with smaller numbers residing in Williamsburg and Bedford, in the city of Brooklyn. The consolidation of New York with Brooklyn and the creation of a city of five boroughs, including the Bronx, Queens, and Staten Island, stimulated construction of subways and bridges which expanded opportunities for Jewish immigrants to leave the constricted quarters of the Lower East Side. Once they started to move, only the Great Depression, discrimination, and wartime constraints made Jews pause. New neighborhoods held out hopes of fresh beginnings. Adjusting to the strangeness of a neighborhood invited ways to reimagine one’s relationship to New York City. Jews adopted different perspectives on themselves and their city as they exchanged views out kitchen windows. Modern tenements, with steam heat, hot and cold running water in the kitchen sink, and an icebox, proclaimed a sense of accomplishment worth the pain of dislocation produced by immigration. Modern apartment buildings with parquet floors, windows in
every room, and the latest conveniences announced a form of success. It did not matter that these apartments were rented; home ownership did not rank high on Jewish New Yorkers’ requirements for either the good life or economic security—better to be able to catch the express train and in ten minutes travel two stops on the subway to reach the Midtown garment district than to own a house in the suburbs with a commute of an hour to work each day. And renting let Jews move as their finances fluctuated, freeing funds for other purposes.

New York Jews committed themselves to a wide array of neighborhoods, reflecting different desires. Did one wish for a neighborhood filled with modern synagogues and kosher butcher shops, bakeries, and delicatessens? There was a range of choices based on how much rent one was willing to pay. Did one seek a lively center of radicalism where socialism was considered “right wing” in comparison to “left wing” communism, an area filled with union activities, cultural events, and places to debate politics? A slightly narrower number of neighborhoods fit the bill. Did one yearn to speak Yiddish or German or Ladino or Russian, to find traces of the old home in familiar styles of shopping and praying? Neighborhoods, not just a block or two but a cluster of them, catered to those who yearned for what they had left behind in Europe or the Middle East. Did one seek a yeshiva for sons and eventually for daughters, as well as intimate congregations for daily study and prayer? New York made room for these as well. In all of them, Jews had neighbors who were not Jewish, but that mattered less than the neighbors who were Jewish. Jews lived next door to other white ethnics, as well as to African Americans, and, after World War II, Puerto Ricans. While most Jews tolerated their non-Jewish neighbors, economic competition, national and international politics, and religious prejudice ignited conflict. An uneasy coexistence among neighbors characterized many New York neighborhoods. Despite this diversity of residential neighborhoods, Jews stayed in an area usually only for a generation. New neighborhoods beckoned constantly; children moved away from parents; parents lost money or made money. Primarily renters, unlike other groups, Jews did not remain committed for long to a neighborhood. They were ready to move elsewhere in the city, to try something different. Such was New York’s promise of community for Jews.

New York Jews began to leave their city in the 1960s, a process that continued for the rest of the century. The largest decline in Jewish population occurred in the 1970s when the city’s fiscal crisis arrived, just in time to welcome
Abe Beame, New York’s first Jewish mayor. As Jews departed, African Americans and Puerto Ricans moved into the city in ever-greater numbers. By the mid-1950s, a million African Americans lived in New York. After liberalization of immigration laws in 1965, an increasingly diverse array of immigrants from Asia, especially China, and also from the Caribbean, Latin America, and Africa arrived in New York. Jewish immigrants figured among them, most prominently from the Soviet Union; these new immigrants brought some of the same drive and energy that had made New York a city of promises a hundred years earlier.

At the start of the twenty-first century, New York still lacked a majority population. In contemporary ethnic calculus, Jews made up a significant percentage of white New Yorkers. But whites constituted a minority in the city, hence Jews’ overall percentage of the population declined. Most Jews were college educated; many had advanced degrees. Having overcome occupational discrimination that endured into the 1960s, Jews held jobs in real estate, finance, publishing, education, law, and medicine in this postindustrial city. They still congregated in neighborhoods, but Queens attracted more Jews than the Bronx did. They still worked in commerce, usually as managers of large stores rather than as owners of small ones. New York Jews still debated how to observe Jewish rituals and holidays. Most declined to join a congregation, yet many retained a consciousness of being Jewish. Often awareness of Jewish differences grew out of family bonds; for some, their sense of Jewishness flowed from work or neighborhood or culture or politics. A visible minority rigorously observed the strictures of Judaism, and their presence gave other Jews a kind of yardstick by which to judge themselves. Despite Jews’ greatly reduced numbers, the city still honored Jewish holy days by adjusting its mundane rhythms. New York Jews knew they lived in American Jews’ capital city; the cluster of national Jewish organizations announced this fact. These organizations, able to mobilize effective protests or to advocate for a cause, focused on problems facing Jews throughout the world. Jewish cultural creativity also endured along with effervescent, experimental, multiethnic commitments to new forms of democratic urban community.

City of Promises portrays the history of Jews in New York City from 1654 to the present. Its three volumes articulate perspectives of four historians. In the first volume, Howard Rock argues that the first two centuries of Jewish presence in the city proved critical to the development of New York Jews. He
sees an influential template in communal structures created by colonial Jews and elaborated in the nineteenth century by Jewish immigrants from central Europe. Rock emphasizes the political freedom and economic strength of colonial and republican Jews in New York. He shows that democratic religious and ethnic community represented an unusual experiment for Jews. Using American political models, Jews in New York innovated. They developed an expansive role for an English-language Jewish press as a vehicle for collective consciousness; they introduced fraternal societies that secularized religious fellowship; they crafted independent philanthropic organizations along gendered lines; they discussed the pros and cons of reforming Judaism; and they passionately debated politics. They were the first American Jews to demonstrate how political and economic freedoms were integral to Jewish communal life. Although many of them arrived as immigrants themselves, they also pointed a path for future migrants who confronted the city’s intoxicating and bewildering modern world. In so doing, these eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Jews laid the foundations for the development of a robust American Jewish community in New York.

In the second volume, Annie Polland and Daniel Soyer describe the process by which New York emerged as a Jewish city, produced by a century of mass migration of Jews from central and eastern Europe as well as from the Middle East. Focusing on the urban Jewish built environment—its tenements and banks, its communal buildings and synagogues, its department stores and settlement houses—the authors convey the extraordinary complexity of Jewish immigrant society in New York. The theme of urban community runs like a thread through a century of mass migration beginning in 1840. Polland and Soyer revise classic accounts of immigration, paying attention to Jewish interactions in economic, social, religious, and cultural activities. Jews repeatedly seek to repair fissures in their individual and collective lives caused by dislocation. Their efforts to build connections through family and neighborhood networks across barriers of class and gender generated a staggering array of ethnic organizations, philanthropic initiatives, and political and religious movements. Despite enormous hardship and repeated failures, Jewish immigrants in New York developed sufficient institutional resilience to articulate a political vision of social solidarity and reform. New York Jews also stepped forward into national leadership positions by establishing organizations that effectively rallied American Jews on behalf of those still suffering in Europe.
New York City became the capital of American Jews in these years and the largest Jewish city in history.

In telling the story of twentieth-century New York Jews in the third volume of the series, Jeffrey S. Gurock looks to the neighborhood, the locale of community and the place where most Jews lived their lives. Jews liked their local community and appreciated its familiar warmth. But New York Jews also faced demands for political action on behalf of a transnational Jewish world. During the crucial decade from 1938 to 1948, New York Jews debated what course of action they should take. How should they balance domestic needs with those of European Jews? World War II and the Holocaust demonstrated the contrasts between Jews in New York and Jews in Europe. Gurock shows how Jewish neighborhoods spread across the boroughs. He describes Jewish settlement in Queens after World War II, illuminating processes of urban change. Ethnic-group conflict and racial antagonism left deep scars despite efforts to overcome prejudice and discrimination. New York Jews were found on both sides of the barricades; each decade produced a fresh conflagration.

Yet Jewish New Yorkers never ceased to lead movements for social change, supporting women’s rights as well as freedom for Soviet Jewry. New York City retained its preeminence as the capital of American Jews because of deep roots in local worlds. These urban neighborhoods, Gurock argues, nourish creative and unselfconscious forms of Jewishness.

Each volume contains a visual essay by art historian Diana L. Linden. These essays interpret Jewish experiences. Linden examines diverse objects, images, and artifacts. She suggests alternative narratives drawn from a record of cultural production. Artists and craftspeople, ordinary citizens and commercial firms provide multiple perspectives on the history of Jews in New York. Her view runs as a counterpoint and complement to the historical accounts. Each visual presentation can be read separately or in conjunction with the history. The combination of historical analysis and visual representation enriches the story of Jews in New York City. In the first essay, Linden emphasizes the foreignness and loneliness of being Jewish in the colonial and republican periods, even as Jews integrated themselves into Christian society. They were the first to create a new identity as “American Jews.” The second visual essay chronicles the challenges of navigating a rapidly expanding city. It explores contrasts of rich and poor. Jews in immigrant New York fashioned new charitable, educational, and cultural institutions as they established the city as the capital of the
American Jewish world. The third visual essay takes as its theme New York Jews in popular American imagination. It presents many meanings and identities of “New York Jew” over the course of the twentieth century and the beginning years of the twenty-first century.

These different viewpoints on Jews in New York City situate their history within intersecting themes of urban growth, international migration, political change, economic mobility, religious innovation, organizational complexity, cultural creativity, and democratic community. Jews participated in building the Empire City by casting their lot with urbanism, even as they struggled to make New York a better place to live, work, and raise a family. Their aspirations changed New York and helped to transform it into a city of promises, some fulfilled, some pending, some beckoning new generations.

DEBORAH DASH MOORE