Emerging Metropolis

*New York Jews in the Age of Immigration, 1840–1920*
The premier Jewish immigrant aid organization, the Hebrew Sheltering and Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS), established a kosher kitchen on Ellis Island in 1911. It also took charge of the Passover seders that had been occurring since the beginning of the century. (Archives of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, New York)
On April 10, 1906, 160 detained eastern European Jewish immigrants gathered in the Great Hall of the immigration center at Ellis Island for a Passover seder, the traditional ceremonial meal that commemorates the flight of the children of Israel from Egyptian slavery. Alexander Harkavy, a member of a delegation of immigrant communal leaders, welcomed the detainees by drawing parallels between the Israelites of the Exodus and the Jews of Ellis Island: whether fleeing the oppression of Pharaoh’s Egypt or Tsarist Russia, both groups sought freedom in a Promised Land. A few days later, Yiddish journalist Yakov Pfeffer described the moving seder, proclaiming that the poor, bedraggled immigrants—no longer fearful of blood-libel accusations or pogroms—had celebrated the Passover holiday as bene horin, children of freedom. In addition to linking these Ellis Island immigrants to the Haggadah’s ancient Israelites, Pfeffer argued that the contemporary immigrants merited their own mention in the chronicle of Jewish history: “When the future historian tells the story of the freedom of the Jewish people, when that person has the good fortune to tell not only of the sorrows but also the joys of the Jewish nation, . . . he will need to tell of the Seder night on Ellis Island.”

The Jews who celebrated the seder on Ellis Island in 1906 arrived in the United States at the crest of a century-long wave of Jewish immigration from Europe. Beginning in the 1820s, economic change in their European homelands drove many Jews out of their accustomed trades and, along with political and religious persecution, sent them in search of new livelihoods. By contrast, the burgeoning United States needed workers and offered unparalleled
political freedom. Early on, most Jewish immigrants came from central Europe, particularly the German lands. By the end of the nineteenth century, eastern European Jews predominated. One-third of eastern Europe’s Jews uprooted themselves. The vast majority headed for the United States.

Most of these immigrants entered the country through New York Harbor, which by the second decade of the nineteenth century had overtaken Philadelphia as North America’s busiest port. New York’s rise was conditioned by its natural advantages, which included access to a large hinterland via the Hudson River and Long Island Sound; deep channels; and a well-protected harbor. But innovative business practices and government support also played an important role. The introduction of regularly scheduled transatlantic departures in 1818 and the opening of the Erie Canal in 1825 drew shipping to the city. New York’s status as the country’s largest port made it the most important textile and financial center, as well as the main point of entry for European news and fashion. The port of New York became the dominant entry point for people as well as goods. Three-quarters of the thirty-three million immigrants who entered the United States between 1815 and 1915 came through New York. Many supplied the cheap labor that enabled the city to grow into a major manufacturing center. New York’s streets led from the docks to the garment shops that produced most of the country’s ready-made clothing.

In 1855, faced with an ever-increasing influx and almost complete lack of oversight by the federal government, New York State established an immigrant processing center at Castle Garden off the southern tip of Manhattan. Castle Garden had a varied history, each stage of which left a mark on the building’s unusual shape. Built on an artificial rocky island some one hundred yards off shore, its original round masonry walls and twenty-eight guns formed part of the harbor’s defense system. In 1823, it was decommissioned and turned into a “resort, theater, and restaurant.” In 1845, a domed roof was added, along with additional tiers of galleries, transforming Castle Garden into a popular concert hall. By the time the state took it over for an immigration station, landfill had moved the shoreline closer to the Garden, and soon Battery Park completely surrounded the old fort. To placate respectable local residents, who feared that placing the immigration station in Castle Garden would cause disagreeable immigrants to overrun the Battery, a twelve-foot
Between 1855 and 1890, the state of New York operated an immigration station at Castle Garden, offering immigrants information on jobs and housing in an attempt to help them avoid the “runners,” “scalpers,” and “loafers” who took advantage of vulnerable newcomers. (Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC)

fence was erected around the building. A number of smaller structures completed the complex.³

For the next three and a half decades, this odd structure—like a “huge reservoir or gas-holder” in appearance—was the first American building encountered up close by millions of immigrants. By establishing the station, the state aimed to protect immigrants from the “runners,” “scalpers,” “loafers,” and prostitutes who frequently robbed and cheated them while offering to find them work, transport, or lodging.⁴ At Castle Garden, immigrants could receive reliable information about jobs and housing, exchange money at official rates, acquire railroad tickets without exorbitant surcharges, receive decent medical care, buy food at reasonable prices, and even take a bath. The centralization of services also allowed the state to collect comprehensive data on immigration for the first time. Some of the newcomers stayed overnight at Castle Garden, preparing coffee on coal stoves from the piped-in Croton water and
In 1892, the newly built federal facility at Ellis Island assumed control of immigrant processing. The strenuous inspection process there engendered fear among immigrants that they might be returned to their point of origin. But after the turn of the century, dozens of ethnic and religious aid associations established posts on the island, helping newcomers navigate entrance into their new country. (Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC)

exchanging intelligence on the economic situation in the city. Castle Garden closed in 1890, but so ingrained had it become in the immigrant consciousness that Jewish immigrants referred to New York’s subsequent immigration station as “Castle Garden” for years thereafter.

A massive new federal installation opened on Ellis Island in 1892, replacing Castle Garden. The Ellis Island station’s original wood-frame structures, “wretched barns” that were “monuments to ugliness,” burned down in 1897, replaced in 1900 by the buildings that have become iconic in the collective memory of American immigration. The fireproof new main building, constructed in French Renaissance style, sported a steel frame trimmed with brick and limestone, and four hundred-foot domed towers. The giant central “registry room,” where new arrivals lined up to be processed, was surrounded by
offices, hearing rooms, dining rooms, and dormitories. Eventually, a total of thirty-three structures dotted the island, which had been expanded to meet the needs of the station. Ellis Island ironically became practically synonymous with the giant wave of (mainly) European immigration of the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth, despite its role in enforcing a growing number of regulations aimed as much at keeping certain kinds of people out as admitting them in.

Ellis Island became known to Jews as the “Island of Tears,” a place from which arrivals judged deficient would be returned to the countries they had hoped to escape. In truth, most people’s experience of the island was not nearly so bad. True, immigrants endured intrusive (and quick) medical examinations and oral questioning that might concern their intended destinations and livelihoods, mental state, family situation, and politics. But although treatment fluctuated with government policy, officials, many of them multilingual, were generally polite and efficient. They were assisted—and watched—by representatives of ethnic aid organizations such as the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS) and the National Council of Jewish Women. As Aaron Domnitz, an immigrant from Belarus later recalled, the first impression was not necessarily a bad one:

My first contact with my new country was the short conversation between me and the immigration officials. We were put into short lines as we entered the large buildings at Ellis Island. Each line had to go by a small table next to which officials sat who questioned each immigrant in his language. The new immigrant felt right at home. My line spoke Yiddish. Hence, a big, strange country recognized my language that I had brought here with me from abroad as an official language. In Russia and Germany, I did not receive any such privilege.

One official asked me what I would do in America. I told him that until then I had been a Hebrew teacher. He smiled, “A rebbe?”

“No,” I said, “A teacher!”

A second official called out, “What’s the difference?” I explained that a “rebbe” is hasidic. They laughed at me. “Go, go,” they said, “you’ll be a great rebbe in America,” and pushed me aside. I looked around. Here I am on the other side of the railing, among those who have been let in. But why did they laugh at me? It’s nothing. People are good-natured here and they were joking. I liked the reception.
Arriving from Warsaw, Minnie Goldstein had a different experience. When her relatives failed to pick her up at the station, she was left behind, “along with the people who were being sent back home”: “When I saw them wringing their hands and crying, I was overcome with fear.” This fear of being among the 2 percent who were rejected gave Ellis Island its dubious reputation. But most, like Goldstein and Domnitz, found themselves “on the other side of the railing” within eight hours of arrival.7

Tens of millions of people flowed through Castle Garden, Ellis Island, and New York on their way to other cities, towns, and rural settlements. But most Jews stayed in their port of entry, joining a population that consisted largely of immigrants from Ireland, Germany, England, the Russian and Austro-Hungarian Empires, and Italy, along with their children. If the Passover detainees conformed to the general pattern among Jewish arrivals, approximately 40 of them (25 percent) traveled to other U.S. cities, while 120 of them (75 percent) followed Harkavy and Pfeffer back to New York’s immigrant neighborhoods, where they started the process of adjustment to American life.

Jewish immigrants wove a dense network of formal and informal support systems in their new neighborhoods. Often, in fact, they found their way to the neighborhoods with the help of relatives, friends, and communal organizations. HIAS helped Domnitz find his cousin in Brownsville. His cousin helped him find a job. Ben Reisman’s brother-in-law was late in picking him up, so the immigrant from Galicia found his way to his sister’s apartment with the aid of strangers:

[An immigration official] told them to show me where the ferry was and they took me and showed me. I took my suitcase and went out. I saw many people going to the ferry. I followed them. On the ferry I recognized a Jew and asked him how to get to Eldridge Street. He told me that he would put me on the right streetcar himself and wrote on a piece of paper for me to show the conductor. The conductor let me off at Grand Street and showed me which way to go.

There followed a whirl of activity, as relatives and people from the same hometown came to hear reports of “the old home” and to give the newcomer advice on life in the new country. Buying the “greenhorn” a new suit of American clothes was a common important symbolic first step in the adjust-
ment process. Getting him or her a job and housing were important material steps.5

People seldom remained in their first work and living arrangements for long. New York promised mobility—social and residential, the two often coupled. Even by 1881, when Harkavy arrived in the vanguard of the eastern European wave, most of the central European Jews who had lived in Lower Manhattan’s Five Points and Kleindeutschland neighborhoods as glaziers and tailors had resettled in Upper Manhattan as merchants and professionals. A few had even become spectacularly wealthy, as the owners of major department stores such as Macy’s or as financiers. By 1906, when the Ellis Island seder took place, even many of the early eastern European arrivals had moved uptown or to neighborhoods in Brooklyn and the Bronx, since 1898 joined with Manhattan in the consolidated city of Greater New York. New York City rapidly became a patchwork of Jewish neighborhoods ranging from areas of first immigrant settlement, such as the Lower East Side in Manhattan, Brownsville and Williamsburg in Brooklyn, and the East Bronx, to upper-middle-class and even upper-class sections such as the Upper West Side, the Bronx’s Grand Concourse, and Brooklyn’s Eastern Parkway.

New York also promised freedom. But from what? Of what? Pfeffer folded the American immigrant experience into the broader scope of Jewish history and argued that the new immigrants stationed at Ellis Island, “the border between the land of goles [exile] and the land of freedom,” would soon leave the shadow of exile for the safety and security of America. To Pfeffer, precisely this safety and freedom from violence and persecution represented a new chapter in Jewish history. Sheer numbers introduced another new factor in Jewish life. In 1840, there were perhaps seven thousand Jews in New York City. By 1920, there were over a million and a half. Along with the conditions of relative security noted by Pfeffer and the loosening of traditional communal constraints, which he did not mention, their numbers gave New York Jews freedom to hammer out a staggering variety of expressions of Jewish identity—religious and secular. New York became the capital of the Jewish world, providing leadership to American Jewry and relief to Jews abroad in periods of calm and crisis.

Over the course of this century, the majority of New York’s Jews were immigrants and working class. Even as many Jews ascended a ladder of economic
and social mobility, the city continued to attract Jewish newcomers, replenishing the ranks of its working class. Sometimes, there was interclass cooperation, as more established members of the community assumed obligations to aid those less fortunate. But often conflict erupted: eastern Europeans founded parallel institutions that they thought could serve them better than those formed by the earlier arrivals; largely Jewish unions struggled against mainly Jewish employers in predominantly Jewish trades; ideologues with differing views of what it meant to be Jewish and what the Jewish future should hold clashed over the shape that the Jewish community should take.

The struggle of a largely immigrant and working-class community to define itself and work out its place in American culture and society produced a tremendous amount of creativity. In this period, Jews began to carve out prominent places in the arts that they later occupied so conspicuously. They produced theater and literature in German, Yiddish, English, and other languages. They wrote hit popular songs and helped introduce modernism into the American visual arts. Some of these artistic expressions focused on Jewish subjects, some did not. Some were in Jewish languages and intended for Jewish audiences, but some were not. Taken together, Jews helped to make New York the American cultural capital, just as the city introduced them to modern urban life. Similarly, Jews promoted a political style that emphasized social solidarity and justice and became associated in particular with New York.

This volume explores the central European and eastern European Jews’ encounter with New York City, tracing immigrants’ economic, social, religious, political, and cultural adaptation between 1840 and 1920. By looking at New York’s department stores, sweatshops, settlement houses, newspaper buildings, banks, synagogues, schools, and streets, it shows how Jews wove their ambitions and aspirations—for freedom, security, and material prosperity—into the very fabric of the city. Each chapter explores the mark left by immigrant and native-born Jews on the streets of New York, examining the commercial activity, political protest, consumer unrest, and religious devotion that characterized their engagement with the city. Despite their numbers, Jews never became a majority in New York City. A history of Jewish New York therefore necessarily includes other people, non-Jews, with whom Jews interacted, sometimes harmoniously and sometimes in conflict. New York promised its Jews the ability to integrate into society and at the same time
to maintain a vigorous independent existence. The New York Jewish story is therefore one of both Jewish distinctiveness and Jewish absorption into the city as a whole. It is the story of how New York became the greatest Jewish metropolis of all time.
In this 1878 drawing, hook-nosed Jewish merchants manipulate unsuspecting Americans into purchasing ill-fitting used clothing. Caricatures of immigrant groups—whether simian Irish or beer-drinking Germans—commonly appeared in the nineteenth-century press and theater. (New York Public Library, New York)