Introduction

*How New York Became a Jewish City*

“Of 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. In the crucible of a devastating world war, many of those cities (perhaps with the exception of Paris, which was not bombed) looked miserable and definitely old, in stark contrast to New York. But even Jews who hadn’t served overseas knew what made New York so desirable. First and foremost was security: Jews could live without fear in New York. Yes, they faced pervasive discrimination and occasional violence from tough and anti-Semitic young men, but in this city of almost eight million residents, many members of other 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 vicious mockery and widespread antagonism in the nineteenth century, and Jews suffered less than African Americans, Latinos, and Asian New Yorkers. Furthermore, Jews could live freely as Jews. Close to two million New York Jews contributed to a pervasive sense of Jewishness in many parts of the city.² Their presence helped constitute much of what was distinctive about New York as an American city. In return, New York’s size and diversity allowed Jews to understand that there were many ways to be Jewish. The city welcomed Jews in all their variety—rich and poor, religious and radical, bourgeois and bohemian. New York Jews saw the city as a place where they could flourish and express themselves. As a result, they came to identify with New York, absorbing its ethos even as they helped to shape its urban character. 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. In contrast to a continent that had become a vast slaughterhouse, where millions of European Jews had been ruthlessly murdered with industrial and military efficiency, America, and specifically New York, glistened as a place Jews could and did call home. Even as they tended to cluster together, Jews navigated shared spaces in New York and lived next door to diverse others: Germans, Italians, Irish, African Americans, Puerto Ricans, Chinese, even white Protestants. The city’s famous skyline had defined urban cosmopolitanism in the years after World War I. Now its thriving ethnic neighborhoods—Jewish and Catholic, African American and Puerto Rican, Italian and Irish—came to represent modern urban American culture.

But as a poster city for immigration, with a majority population composed of immigrants and their children, New York also elicited negative perceptions. Many people in the United States derided New York as “un-American” because of its large Jewish and foreign population. Some even pictured it less as dominating the East Coast of the United States than as unmoored, located mid-Atlantic, halfway to Europe. A city of many languages, New York was, and continued to be, divided along multiple fissures of religion, race, ethnicity, class, and sexual orientation. Jews were part of this complex mix.

New York City represented more than immigrants. Its architecture and geography summoned icons of American culture, society, and economy. Wall Street had long symbolized finance capitalism. Times Square exemplified commercial performance culture, while Tammany Hall described not merely a building but a powerful Democratic political machine. Seventh Avenue named the garment center, Madison Avenue the heart of advertising, and Fifth Avenue elegant retail shopping. The Empire State Building, the city’s and the nation’s tallest in height for decades, stood as an emblem of twentieth-century urbanism and broadcast the global reach of U.S. power and influence. These associations evoked New York as the largest city in the United States, its financial, commercial, and cultural capital, as well as the city’s political identity as a stronghold of the Democratic Party.

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 and benefited from these policies; they supported 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. “Its five boroughs were renowned for excellent public schools, pure and abundant water, spacious and well-kept parks, and matchless mass transit.”4 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—in literature and publishing, theater, music, and visual arts.

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. With tongue in cheek, the poet Milton Klonsky called it “Ghetto of Eden.”5 But by the 1960s and ’70s, increasing numbers of Jews desired something different, a less pressured and more private mode of living. For many of the second and third 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. They aspired to American suburban pleasures of homeownership and privacy, grass and trees that did not have to be shared with others in public parks. This disaffection endured for a generation. But in the beginning of the twenty-first century, Jews, including suburban Jews, increasingly returned to the city. They sought its particular blend of cosmopolitan flair and intense Jewish milieu. There they joined the million New York Jews who had refused to decamp for greener pastures in the 1970s and 1980s. These diehard New Yorkers treasured their city in good times and bad. Throughout, New York City remained the wellspring of Jewish American culture, a resource of authentic Jewishness even for those who lived thousands of miles west of the Hudson River.

As a collaborative effort, this volume recasts the history of New York City by focusing on Jews who became New Yorkers. It puts the history of New York Jews in dialogue not only with Jewish history but also with Gotham’s history and, by extension, American history.
By the beginning of the twentieth century, Jewish New York constituted the largest Jewish urban community in world history, and it retained that distinction for a century. Jews possessed a rich history of living in cities throughout Europe, North Africa and the Ottoman Empire, and as urbanization increased in the nineteenth century, Jewish immigrants to New York drew on that urban experience. Yet despite significant continuities, New York also represented something unprecedented in its size and scale, density and diversity, newness and modernity. More Jews came to live in New York City than in England, France, Germany, Austria, Hungary, or Italy, inviting comparisons less with other cities than with Jewish histories of European nations. Of course, New York’s Jewish history does not exactly tell a “national” story. Rather, it chronicles an urban history of one of New York’s “ethnic” and religious groups: that is, its Jews. But in a way, their history might also be seen as having “national” dimensions, since in 1950, 40 percent of all American Jews lived in New York. For decades in the mid-twentieth century, Jews occupied a singular position as the city’s largest single ethnic group, over a quarter of its population. However, Catholics were the largest single religious group in the city. When coupled with neighborhood patterns of residence that segregated African Americans and separated Jews and Catholics in the city, these ways of thinking about group identity as either racial, religious, or ethnic helped to fashion New York’s particular urban mix.

This book synthesizes varied perspectives of the historians who wrote three prize-winning volumes under the City of Promises umbrella. Despite different emphases, all agreed on the larger rubric of “city of promises” as the proper framework for research, paying homage to Moses Rischin’s pathbreaking study of the Lower East Side, The Promised City. All put the process of urbanization and becoming city people in the forefront of their consciousness. City people learned to live cheek by jowl with others who were different. New York City people especially accustomed themselves to a high-density population, fast pace, noise, and dirt. Even today, outsiders associate these features with New York. But for Jews who settled in New York, the city offered more than overcrowded, hectic, filthy, miserable conditions. It also proffered promises.
New York provided life without a majority population—without one single ethnic or religious group dominating urban society. Jews were used to living as a minority in Europe and the Middle East. Now in New York, Jews could go about their business, much of it taking place within ethnic niches, as if they were the city’s predominant group. 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 to influence 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.

When and in what sense did New York become a city of promises for Jews? It certainly was not in the colonial era. Yet during that period, seeds for future promises were planted, most importantly political, economic, and religious rights. While the city’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 American Revolution. They incorporated ideals of the American Enlightenment into their Jewish lives.

During the nineteenth century, these changes attracted increasing attention from European Jews. New York gradually acquired a reputation as a destination in itself. Arriving from Europe at Castle Garden at the foot of Manhattan, increasing numbers of Jewish immigrants decided to stay. Enticed by New York’s bustling streets, with their opportunities for commerce and crafts, they put off riding west or south to peddle or settle. Sometimes, older brothers decided to stay, 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. More than any other industry, garment manufacturing transformed New York into a city of promises.

What did the city promise? First, it promised a job. Close to half of all Jewish 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. Next, it promised a place to live. True, the overcrowded Lower East Side bulged with residents, even its modern tenements straining to accommodate a density of population that rivaled that of Bombay. Yet soon 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, it promised food. Jewish immigrants hadn’t 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. They savored meat regularly, often a rare treat in Europe. Fourth, it promised clothing. It didn’t 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.11

Such promises might be quotidian, but they opened Jews’ eyes to other ones. Young Jewish immigrants embraced the city’s promise of free education; they could attend public institutions starting in elementary school, ascending to secondary school, and culminating in college. However, a family economy privileged sons over daughters when decisions about post-elementary education had to be made. Nevertheless, while costs of forgoing income from teenaged children often required Jews to go to work and not attend school or to combine labor and learning, New York Jews increasingly enrolled in 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 onstage, in Yiddish, Hebrew, German, Ladino, and English. Some conceived of the city’s rough political democracy as holding a promise of solidarity among working
men and women, an opportunity to promote radical social change, to overturn capitalism or at least to modify its worst excesses. 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 developed 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.

This volume narrates the history of New York Jews with an eye to their distinctive story as well as a consciousness of how Jews embedded their particularity within the city’s contentious past. New York has attracted extraordinary historical attention from its earliest existence as a small Dutch seaport to its current state as a world city, “capital of the American century.” New York Jews, by contrast, tend to figure most often in accounts of the heyday of immigration to the city, starting in the 1840s and extending until Congress cut it short in 1924. Historians of immigration continually have mined the rich and complex Jewish immigrant era. Far less often have historians of American Jews turned either to the colonial years that preceded it or to the rest of the twentieth century that followed. Each of those periods presents challenges. In the early period, Jews were such a small minority that it is hard to recognize their significance in establishing patterns of difference that gained acceptance by the majority and exerted a lasting impact. In the latter decades, Jews were so well integrated as a part of New York politics, economy, and culture that it was far easier for scholars to treat them simply as New Yorkers, without any identifying label. This volume argues that distinctive Jewish bonds did not dissolve even when Jews appeared to act largely as New Yorkers. Urban historians overlook critical sources of political, economic, and cultural productivity by ignoring those ethnic connections.

In order to present New York’s Jewish history in its many aspects, this book moves thematically within a broad chronological framework.
The four parts of the book delimit overlapping eras in New York Jewish history. Part 1 covers the colonial period through the Civil War. Part 2 focuses on many features of the immigrant era, from 1865 to 1925, while part 3, from 1885 to 1975, develops themes that begin during immigration but extend through much of the twentieth century. The final section, part 4, from 1960 to 2015, brings the story into the twenty-first century, reaching back into mid-twentieth-century developments and carrying them forward. Chapters treat significant themes as they relate to both Jewish and American urban history.

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.