Introduction

*Forty Years with the Jews of Harlem—the Old and the Renewed*

In the spring of 2002, David Dunlap, architecture columnist for the *New York Times*, came to my office to discuss an article he was composing about a lost and forgotten Jewish community. The subject of his investigation was Harlem. I was taken aback by the idea that a New York Jewish settlement that once had housed close to 175,000 Jews was not remembered. After all, I had written my first book, *When Harlem Was Jewish, 1870–1930*, in 1978. And for more than the next quarter century, I had reminded everyone who would hear me out—fellow academicians and the general public alike—how important the community had been in the history of Gotham. I argued everywhere that the saga of immigrant Jewish life and advancement in the metropolis during the early decades of the prior century was incomplete without considering Harlem. One of the prime intellectual conceits was that a complex set of forces motivated Jewish relocation from one area of the city to the next and greatly influenced the types of group identifications that were maintained. Prior historians had not been sensitive to the reality that downtown—that is, the Lower East Side—and uptown alike were home, at least after 1900, to both poor and more affluent Jews. Previous scholars also had not discussed how these two sibling communities likewise included both acculturated Jews and those who were just starting to learn American ways. Indeed, the fact was that more immigrants and their children moved to Harlem, or were pushed out of the so-called “ghetto,” before they achieved financial success than as a sign that they had begun to make it in America. The key to comprehending where Jews ended up residing was inexorably tied to their presence in a dynamic and ever-changing city. Training as an urban historian had taught me that improvements in rapid transit, slum removal efforts, and booms and busts in real estate markets—
among many other transformative phenomena—that affected the lives of all New Yorkers were fundamental parts of the Jewish experience in Gotham as well.

In addition, as a student of the history of African American–Jewish relations—a field of study that was only beginning to come into its own in the late 1970s—I argued that this crucial inter-group encounter could not be fully told without reference to where and when large numbers of both groups first lived in close proximity to each other in a twentieth-century neighborhood. Other writers were focusing on the statements that black and Jewish leaders were making about one another and had not paid particular attention to examining how the men and women on the street related to each other, with a particular concern with identifying the dynamics that had led Jews to exit the part of Gotham that became the African American mecca. As it turned out, one of the listeners to my stock-in-trade presentation agreed so heartily with these interests and conceptualizations that he began his own fruitful exploration of the great degree to which Jews and African Americans collaborated in the musical and theatrical worlds uptown from the turn of the twentieth century through the 1930s. Still, I had to agree with David Dunlap that some eighty years had passed since Jewish Harlem’s heyday. And close to forty years had gone by since I had first made much of the neighborhood’s transcendent significance.¹

Anxious to accommodate Dunlap’s desire to see physical remnants of the old neighborhood, we jumped into my car and fifteen minutes after we left my university office in Washington Heights we were standing near the corner of 116th Street and Fifth Avenue. That wide street from east to west was, to my mind, the most important thoroughfare of Jewish Harlem. As we stood on the steps of the Harlem Baptist Temple Church at 18 West 116th Street, which once had been home to Congregation Ohab Zedek, a renowned synagogue, I evoked for Dunlap the sight of thousands of Jewish men, women, and children promenading up and down that street on the High Holidays—perhaps attending services or maybe just strolling to see and be seen by their neighbors. One of this congregation’s greatest attractions during the 1910s was its famous cantor, Yossele Rosenblatt, perhaps known to film aficionados as the voice that chanted “Kaddish” in the original The Jazz

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Singer, which starred Al Jolson. Although the cantor and the actor who played the son of a cantor did not know one another, I mused that they both had Harlem connections. Rosenblatt’s link was obvious; his counterpart’s was somewhat notorious. As a youth, Jolson was captivated by the sounds of black music played in the uptown neighborhood. Later on, he knew of, and frequented, many of the after-hours clubs in Harlem in the 1920s and 1930s where he enjoyed the company of both African American and Jewish entertainers and patrons. I did not mention that it was at Bloodgood’s house of assignation—somewhere in the neighborhood and late in the 1910s—that Jolson heard, for the first time, George Gershwin’s “Swanee,” a song that he would adopt as a signature piece. Jolson’s embrace of that composition would soon make it the songwriter’s first great hit.

Ohab Zedek and its cantor also were the venue and the voice for a public expression of grief at the passing of a very different type of Harlem Jewish celebrity of that era. The great Yiddish writer Sholem Aleichem, renowned as the “Jewish Mark Twain,” lived for two years in the uptown neighborhood before he moved up to the Bronx. When he died on May 13, 1916, at the age of fifty-seven, he was memorialized with a citywide funeral that began on Kelly Street in the Bronx. The cortège’s first stop in Manhattan was Rosenblatt’s synagogue, where the cantor recited the memorial prayer in front of a throng that lined the wide thoroughfare. From Harlem, the mourners traveled to the Lower East Side and ultimately to Sholem Aleichem’s burial place in Mount Neboh Cemetery on the Brooklyn-Queens border.²

Looking to the right of the former Ohab Zedek, to the northeast corner of 116th Street, I pointed out another church—The Church of the Lord Jesus Christ of the Apostolic Faith. Like the Harlem Baptist Temple Church, it stood out amid a group of rundown apartment buildings that, generations earlier, had been new, expensive residences, homes to affluent immigrant Jews and their children. In the early twentieth century, when Jews predominated on that street, the Mount Morris Theatre occupied the space, which eventually was made suitable for a Christian house of worship. That locale had its own Jewish religious history. It was there in the mid-1910s that an ambitious rabbi held what he called “monster rallies,” effectively Jewish revival meetings aimed at “retrieving” Jews who were not attending Ohab
Zedek or for that matter his own, competing congregation situated down the block close to Lenox Avenue and 116th Street. The calling card of Rabbi Herbert S. Goldstein’s Institutional Synagogue was its offer of a multitude of ancillary cultural and recreational activities to the youth of the neighborhood. He hoped that those who came during the week for art and music classes, used the library, and, most importantly, repaired to the pool and gymnasium, would return for services on Sabbath and holidays. The concept—that those who “came to play would stay to pray”—did not originate with Goldstein. His professor at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, Mordecai M. Kaplan, had hatched the idea some years earlier. And in time, the value of secular ancillary activities within Jewish religious space would find its greatest expression in communities both near and far from Harlem. But the first full-fledged experiment in creating what became known as the “Synagogue Center” project began on 116th Street. As I boasted that “there are steps in the evolution of the American synagogue here,” I trusted that Dunlap comprehended that so much of New York and larger American Jewish history had been played out on just this one Harlem street, worthy of remembering for posterity.

As the conversation about Jewish Harlem moved on inevitably to the history of its decline, Dunlap posed a not uncommon question: Which one of the more than one hundred congregations was “the last synagogue in Harlem”? I responded that that distinction—at least as it applied to the shuls that east European immigrants and their children established and attended during its Jewish peak years from 1900 through World War I—belonged to Congregation Tikvath Israel, housed in a narrow brownstone on 112th Street, east of Lexington Avenue in “El Barrio,” Spanish Harlem. The designation of Tikvath Israel was complemented by a personal story. In 1974, when I was working on my book, I became aware of the congregation’s existence and decided to attend services on a Sabbath. I went to East Harlem not knowing whether the shul was operating. When I arrived, I was greeted warmly by a Rabbi Golub, who exclaimed that my presence was “like a miracle,” for without me they had but nine men, one short of the quorum for prayers in this Orthodox synagogue. I was moved when Rabbi Golub requested that I chant the prophetic portion of the
week—the Haftarah. As I descended down the rickety steps from the reader’s desk after my recitation, I shook hands with the other worshippers, elderly gentlemen who lived in the housing project across the street and merchants who came in from their little stores in the area. Before I left, Rabbi Golub allowed that divine powers assisted his synagogue’s survival on an ongoing basis. It seemed fitting that his shul’s name in English means “Hope of Israel.” He explained that “every time we have services, someone unexpected shows up and makes it possible.” But a few years later, when I drove down on a Sunday to 112th Street, I saw that the synagogue’s hope was now gone. It had become the Christ Apostolic Church of U.S.A. David Dunlap liked the story so much that he included the tale of my miraculous appearance in East Harlem in his *Times* piece. And when he launched his comprehensive guide to Manhattan’s houses of worship, he was sure to recount that incident as one of the more intriguing sagas that he had come across in his work.\(^3\)

But the assertion that there were “no synagogues in Harlem” touched off a basically friendly, if public, disagreement with the leaders of the Old Broadway Synagogue of 126th Street, a congregation that is situated off Broadway and right down the hill from Morningside Heights. Soon after Dunlap’s article appeared the synagogue’s president, Dr. Paul Radensky, contended that his institution was “the last and only (perhaps for now) functioning mainstream synagogue in Harlem” and that they had been there since 1923. He was proud that the Old Broadway Synagogue had “been placed on the State and National Registry of Historic Places,” assuring that his building could never be torn down.\(^4\)

I rejoined the discussion about Jewish Harlem’s congregational longevity when another *Times* writer interviewed me in the fall of 2003. Newspaper “stringer” Francine Parnes was crafting a story about Radensky’s efforts to increase membership and asked for a sense of the congregation’s place in history. I made clear that “Old Broadway was at least three blocks west of Jewish Harlem, whose western boundary was Morningside Avenue.” In other words, Radensky’s synagogue was really not part of the community’s scene when Harlem was Jewish. Rather it served Columbia, Barnard, and Jewish Theological
Seminary students who—primarily under the long-term leadership of Rabbi Jacob Kret (1950–1997)—walked down from Morningside Heights to attend services. The Old Broadway Synagogue’s Hebrew name, the Chevrah Talmud Torah Anshe Maarovi (The Congregation of the People Who Study the Torah in the Western [part of uptown]), has an interesting backstory. But its founders did not call themselves a Harlem institution and neither would I. How people who lived in an area defined its geographical boundaries is always the best indicator of where a neighborhood starts and ends. And Harlem’s Jewish history was almost over by 1930, when those who founded the “western” congregation in what is St. Nicholas Heights were just getting started.5

A decade after the discussion with David Dunlap about Jewish Harlem’s past “on location,” I started conducting walking tours of the old neighborhood, which had been renewed and almost completely transformed. Among my tourists was a BBC World Service reporter who eventually broadcasted the walk and talked to audiences across the globe, as well as a correspondent for Swiss public radio who translated my remarks into German for her audience. With gentrification both in the air rights and on the ground, the story of when Harlem was Jewish was back in vogue. Standing on the corner of 116th Street and Fifth Avenue, I pointed out to listeners both in front of me and far away that the Harlem Baptist Temple Church and the Church of the Lord Jesus Christ were the only buildings on the south and east sides of 116th Street that still remained from the old days of Harlem. Every other structure on that block was either a new apartment complex or an upscale emporium or business office.

For a while in 2012, I was concerned that the Harlem Baptist Temple Church was doomed to be demolished and with that destruction the Hebrew writing on the front of the church—the last archeological proof that the street was once Jewish—would be effaced. I did not look forward to pointing out to future groups and radio audiences the building that would take Ohab Zedek’s and Harlem Baptist’s place and lamenting, “That’s where a major synagogue used to be. You cannot see any physical evidence that it once existed. You will have to take my word on this!” Fortunately, some “initial funds were found
to get the work started to repair the main roof . . . sealing and repair of structural cracks on east and west bearing wall” among other necessary improvements. As of autumn 2014, the building remained standing, with repairs ongoing, making it possible to tell the story of Harlem’s Jewish history in front of an artifact of its past. But in a real sense this accounting of the survival of that old church next door to the Harlem Physical Therapy Center—with that health center’s bright purple awning, and the large electronics store with its large red frontage—was also a fitting segue to talking about the area’s future.

Actually, my own personal orientation to a new Harlem and, more importantly, a renewed uptown Jewish community, began in 2008, when a young Jewish couple who had bought a brownstone in the western reaches of the neighborhood read When Harlem Was Jewish and contacted me to unabashedly proclaim that “Jews were back uptown.”

Their basic family saga—which was ultimately recounted in some detail within my later book Jews in Gotham—was the story of a young real estate principal and his wife who resided in a cramped midtown Manhattan apartment and desired a home with a backyard along a street where their youngsters might eventually play. As they contemplated a search for space, Shoshana Borgenicht was pregnant with their first child. She and Yoel found their dream house at 341 West 122nd Street, between Manhattan and Morningside Avenues in the western reaches of Harlem, just one block east of Morningside Park, down the hill from Morningside Heights and Columbia University. A generation earlier, this part of town had been crime riddled. The park was effectively off-limits to the law abiding. But times had changed. The Borgenichts were fortunate enough—and prescient enough about Harlem becoming ever more attractive to middle-class families—to buy an aging three-story house that just a few years earlier had been a single-room occupancy rooming house, home then to the poor and transient. As late as the 1990s, some ten people had shared the living space. The Borgenichts retained, for a while, one artifact of 341’s prior history, a pair of lights outside of the brownstone that when illuminated had told potential customers that rooms were available. When they moved in,
they worked hard to make the residence livable according to twenty-first-century middle-class standards, including updating the hundred-year-old plumbing and constructing a modern kitchen. I got to know the Borgenichts quite well as the family grew to five—Rex came along in 2006, Theo in 2008, and Delia followed in 2009—and they seemed quite happy on a street that is becoming increasingly gentrified.

I have often thought about why Shoshana and Yoel were in touch. Perhaps, through reading my book carefully, they recognized that they were exemplars of a repeating pattern in the history of Jews in Harlem. A century earlier, east European Jewish immigrants on the make financially, invested and settled in Central Harlem. In the 1870s and 1880s, similar decision-making about housing had obtained among central European Jews who felt cramped in the city. Back then—100 and 125 years ago—as now, advertisements and word of mouth drew aspiring Jews in a chain migration to a region of Manhattan that was conveniently situated close to midtown and downtown work places.

Though proud that Jews had returned to Harlem, the Borgenichts were not especially excited that incipient manifestations of Judaism had returned as well. If anything, their very awareness that a Chabad (Lubavitch) outpost had been created just five blocks away from their home was pure happenstance. One Saturday, Yoel bumped into two “Orthodox Jews” who were walking towards him on Manhattan Avenue. After stopping to greet them, Yoel discovered that the renowned Orthodox Jewish outreach movement had recently set up shop in the community. Had this chance encounter led to an extended conversation, the Hasidim undoubtedly would have told their fellow Jew how, in 2005, their leader, Rabbi Shaya Gansbourg, had come to seek out Jews in the neighborhood. The tale that his followers would relate over and over again to those who might be interested “started on a M60 bus ride from LaGuardia Airport down 125th Street” where Gansbourg was struck by Harlem’s street scape and thought “something must be happening here.” He “saw Staples . . . Old Navy” and thought “maybe this is a place to look at.” In time, the ambitious rabbi, in the spirit of Rabbi Goldstein of almost a century earlier, looked to involve—to “retrieve,” so to speak—what he believed to be the two thousand unaf-
filiated Jews in Harlem in Jewish religious activities. Hard numbers on Jewish population are hard to come by.

His work took on two dimensions. He sought out Jewish students for cultural and religious activities at the City College of New York (CCNY), which is situated on the campus bluff of St. Nicholas Heights that overlooks Harlem. Jewish students who once predominated at a school that was known as “the cheder [the Jewish school house] on the hill” were returning in noticeable numbers to this inexpensive mecca of higher education that was reacquiring a reputation as a quality college. For Gansbourg, with CCNY becoming a school of choice for Jews, there was a need to recreate Jewish life on campus. The enrollment of Jews at “City” had dropped precipitously in the 1980s–1990s when the school was tarred in many quarters as an institution that had lost its former robust academic standards. But now, its low tuition and especially its fine engineering and biomedical programs made sense to them.8

And then there was Gansbourg’s larger dream of establishing the first twenty-first-century synagogue in Harlem proper. Shaya and his wife, Goldie, opened their center in 2006 with funding from a real estate developer named Baruch Singer. But the Borgenicht family did not pick up on the invitation to attend the services and classes that were being offered in a modest, first-floor apartment. Chabad of Harlem’s only physical marker was a small handwritten sign that was hung in a window.9

Over time, Chabad of Harlem has made its presence better known through a series of public events that highlighted that a synagogue was growing in the neighborhood. In November 2012, for example, the New York Times and the Daily News, among other general-interest outlets, publicized the dedication of the first Torah Scroll in Harlem in seventy-five years. The media asked me to authenticate the dating of this ritual revival. I commented enthusiastically that “it’s very exciting. There’s a lot of growth potential in Harlem. . . . Having a Torah is a sign of permanence for a community.” Not only that, when the Torah ceremony took place, my wife and I made sure to be there and danced with our fellow Jews, a unique form of participant-observation for a hardboiled academic such as myself.10
On an ongoing basis, Chabad has made itself known to Jews and gentiles through its erection of a sukkah in Morningside Park and its Lag B’Omer (Jewish field day) picnics and barbecues. Sadly, Shaya Gansbourg passed away in February 2013 at the age of fifty-seven, but in all of their activities, he and later his family emphasized to Jews and gentiles alike that “Harlem is a safe place to live and raise children.” Remember that twenty years earlier, Morningside Park was a very scary place. Looking ahead, the Gansbourg family has been talking about “a complete Jewish infrastructure . . . with kosher restaurants, a mikveh, Jewish education and a synagogue with activities around the clock.”

An African American promoter of Harlem noted Chabad’s optimistic take on the neighborhood’s contemporary scene quite approvingly. Publisher Daniel Bretton Tisdale wrote in his *Harlem World Magazine* in March 2012 that “across the street from a once-abandoned building where squatters lived until recent years and drug deals and muggings kept the sidewalks empty after dark, a few dozen people sat and sang and schmoozed for several hours. When they walked out later that night, they joined other people strolling outside, passing a brick-façade doorman apartment building that had just risen across the street.”

The Jews who as of the mid-2010s were linked to the Harlem Chabad community were a diverse group. Congregants included “a professional poet, a dermatologist and a public school teacher.” These and other members hailed “from Mexico, the Dominican Republic, France and Great Britain.” One worshipper—of a traditional bent—found the Gansbourgs online when he “was looking for someone to check his mezuzah and tefillin [phylacteries].” Others who were not especially committed to Jewish ritual were recruited by the energetic Hasidic couple and later other family members through phone conversations and chance meetings in local cafés. For most families, Chabad’s program for small children was a prime attraction, along with their desire for a “sense of community.” Notably, one participant in this incipient revival of Jewish life in Harlem reflected publicly that he was “returning to a neighborhood as important to American Jewish history as the Lower East Side. It’s a place where the Jewish community left a footprint.”
We will never know whether the ever-increasing Jewish action on the streets near their home, or in the safe and rehabilitated park where their children and their neighbors played, would eventually have enticed the Borgenichts to check out the Chabad outpost. For in 2012, the family, notwithstanding Yoel’s frequent assertion that he and his loved ones “still loved Harlem” and his continuing to work in real estate and construction in the neighborhood, departed for even “greener pastures.” The Borgenichts relocated to Montclair, New Jersey. For them, “the lure of suburbia” with its promise of “better public schools” for their three youngsters was all too compelling. Perhaps, as they packed up for their move, Yoel and Shoshana might have contemplated for a moment that they were reliving another major part of Harlem’s earlier Jewish story. So many Jews did not stay long in that uptown part of town as they were attracted—as it was said back in the pre–World War II period—to “more salubrious settings.” Back then, the Grand Concourse in the Bronx, the Upper West Side and Washington Heights in Manhattan, and neighborhoods in Brooklyn—most notably Flatbush, Boro Park, and Bensonhurst—and parts of Queens like Astoria and Long Island City beckoned. Jews of that era did not reside either in Jackson Heights or in Forest Hills, which were restricted. Social anti-Semitism kept them out. In our present day, the Borgenichts were off to settle beyond the George Washington Bridge. But Yoel would be back, on an ongoing basis, to make his deals and to check out his construction work, not unlike Jews who maintained businesses in Harlem long after they stopped living in the community.  

Interestingly enough, had the Borgenichts tarried in the city a year or so longer, the family might have found that a new public school in Harlem was a perfect fit for their children’s educational needs. When Yoel and Shoshana first settled in the neighborhood their prime concern was finding the right kind of Jewish-multicultural preschool program for their older boy. As it turned out, in 2013, thanks to funding from a major Jewish philanthropic foundation, the Harlem Hebrew Language Academy Charter School was established at 147 St. Nicholas Avenue, a mere six blocks from the Borgenichts’ brownstone. That school teaches the Hebrew language to children of all racial backgrounds but stays clear of promoting the Jewish religion among its
pupils. The financial supporters’ far from hidden agenda included developing “understanding for Israel . . . and Jewish culture among non-Jews.” But as important, it promised that the institution would be a vehicle for “cultural respect in general.” Given the values that Yoel and Shoshana desired to inculcate in their youngsters, Rex, Theo, and Delia would have been very much at home within a student body that was “one third white . . . 44% black and 10% Latino.”

As Harlem's Jewish historian, I have had a forty-year relationship with this neighborhood. From this unique vantage point, I recognize not only how history is repeating itself in the neighborhood but also how different the Jewish scene is today from what it was eighty years or a century ago. It is from that experience and perspective that I write about Harlem and its Jews, certain that a new generation of readers, beginning with those who have once again moved “uptown,” desires to know not only how Jewish Harlem rose, what life was like on its streets and in its institutions, how Jews got along with their neighbors, and when and why Jewish Harlem declined, but also what is contributing to its ongoing reemergence.

To tell the community’s once and present story, of course, requires us to delve into the interrelated histories of the metropolis, with its own rises and declines; of its Jews, with their multiple identities and commitments to this city; and of New York’s African American community, with its unique burdens and challenges. This present volume benefits from the wealth of new knowledge that has emerged since I wrote When Harlem Was Jewish back in 1978. While still focused on social and political relationships, this work also synthesizes cultural and intellectual trends within and among groups who shared neighborhood space. Essentially, the book first explores Harlem Jewry’s life as it rose to prominence within the metropolis. It points out how this community’s innovations in attempting to address the problems of group identification eventually contributed so much to American Jewish life beyond its neighborhood and city. From there, the volume looks at Jews, as friends and as foes, to African Americans, during the years after 1920 when Harlem became the black mecca. It accounts for how in the 1960s the name of that neighborhood came to symbolize all that was wrong in inter-racial relations in Gotham. Finally, this book explores and interprets the present-day beginnings
of Jewish return to Harlem within a dynamic city undergoing demographic and economic transformations, and it interrogates the question of what gentrification means for varying classes of neighborhood people. So here is Harlem's Jewish story told anew—from its very beginning—knowing that its history is not over, but rather a work in progress.
Harlem, “a Village on the Outskirts of the City,” circa 1870 (map courtesy of Lionel Pincus and Princess Firyal Map Division, New York Public Library).