

MIIM JEWS *of* BOSTON

*Essays on the Occasion of the Centenary (1895–1995)
of the Combined Jewish Philanthropies
of Greater Boston*



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*“The Jews of Boston
in Historical Perspective”*



COMBINED JEWISH PHILANTHROPIES OF GREATER BOSTON

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The Jews of Boston in Historical Perspective

בזמן הזה הכל לפי השנים הכל לפי המקומות הכל לפי הזמן

“Nowadays, everything depends upon the years, the locations, and the season.”

TALMUD BAVLI TA'ANIT 14b



BOSTON, historian Sam Bass Warner once wrote, “is a unique place with its own particular natural and human history, but it is also a very ordinary American place, typical of the nation’s many metropolises.”¹ Jewish Boston is much the same, at once unique and ordinary, in some ways typical of America’s Jewish communities and in other ways distinctive. The central themes of Boston Jewish history are familiar ones to students of American Jewish life: immigration, adaptation, socioeconomic mobility, religion, education, culture, philanthropy, Zionism, assimilation, antisemitism. The expression of these themes, however, is peculiarly Bostonian, affecting the timing and character of Jewish settlement, the relationship between Jews and their Christian neighbors, and above all the life of the mind—that love of learning that sets Boston apart as the “Athens of America” and has promoted the optimistic hope that “Athens” and “Jerusalem” might ultimately be reconciled.



The roots of the Boston Jewish community extend far back into the colonial period—back as far as “Solomon Franco, the Jew” who accompanied a cargo vessel into town in 1649. For two centuries, however, only a handful of Jews settled down long enough in Boston to establish a permanent home. The rest were Jewish transients, individuals who wandered in and out of the city. Never were there enough Jews around to form a community.

This fact—the absence of any organized Jewish community in early Boston—sets the city apart from the major American port cities where Sephardic Jews settled in numbers: Savannah, Charleston, Philadelphia, New York, and Newport. One potential Ashkenazic immigrant, the learned Israel Baer Kursheedt, who arrived in

Boston in 1796 having studied under Rabbi Nathan Adler in Frankfurt, found but one Jewish family in town and no synagogue. He quickly retreated. Other immigrants bypassed Boston entirely. As a result, the frontier cities of Cincinnati, Cleveland, Louisville, and St. Louis all had synagogues and organized Jewish communities before Boston did; so did smaller cities like Easton, Pennsylvania. It was only in the 1840's that Boston finally housed a sufficient number of Jews to form a community, and in 1843 they formally organized as Kahal Kadosh Ohabei Shalom (The Holy Community Lovers of Peace). This became the third synagogue in New England, following those previously established in Newport and New Haven.

Religious, cultural, and economic factors all help to explain the general reluctance of early American Jews to settle in Boston. They preferred more open and cosmopolitan cities where opportunities and foreign immigrants abounded—hence their affinity for New York and the cities of the frontier. Boston, by contrast, projected an image of formidable homogeneity; for a time it held the dubious distinction of being America's most homogenous city.² Until the coming of the Irish, most immigrants, and certainly most Jews, sought their fortunes elsewhere.

Students of American Jewish communities have discovered that “the degree to which Jews were involved in the early growth of a city and had achieved a notable and respected place in public and private life . . . directly influenced how later generations of Jews were received.” Where Jews won “pioneer” status, as in Indianapolis, Cincinnati, and San Francisco, they generally fared better. Where they were seen as latecomers and interlopers, they generally fared worse.³ Boston Jews fell into this latter category. Notwithstanding the pious Hebraism of the Puritans and the occasional intrusion of intrepid Israelites bent on trade, Jews remained an alien presence in early Boston. They were not among the city's founders, and they were not particularly welcome.

The great migration from Germany in the 19th century, a migration that transformed many American cities and spread Jews where none had lived before, largely passed Boston by. Only three percent of Boston's immigrant population was German in 1850 and six percent in 1870. Perhaps fearing to compete with the Irish, the mass of German immigrants, Jews and gentiles alike, settled south and west of Boston in a belt that stretched from Connecticut, New York, New Jersey, Delaware, and Maryland through Pennsylvania and into the Midwest.⁴ One of the most striking features of Boston Jewish history, as a result, is the absence of an entrenched, well-organized German-Jewish community of the type found in cities like New York, Cincinnati, and San Francisco. This reluctance on the part of German Jews to settle in “the Hub of the universe” explains both the Boston Jewish community's

failure to thrive in the way that Jewish communities in these other cities did during the central decades of German-Jewish immigration and the comparative lack of internal tension between Central and East European Jews later on.

Boston's Jewish population did nevertheless grow from less than forty Jews in 1840 to approximately one thousand Jews on the eve of the Civil War. While spectacular in percentage terms, the actual growth is far less than that experienced by other major cities where Jews settled. Keeping in mind that all Jewish population figures from this period are approximations at best, it is estimated that during this same period New York City's Jewish population grew from 7,000 to 40,000; Philadelphia's from 1,500 to 10,000; Cincinnati's from 1,000 to 10,000; and San Francisco's from no Jews at all to 5,000.⁵

Even the small number of Jews who did immigrate to Boston during these years were more often Polish than German in origin. Fleeing economic privation and religious persecution, they stemmed particularly from the province of Posen, then under Prussian sovereignty. A statistical analysis reveals that no less than forty-four percent of Boston's Jews during this period were born in "East and West Prussia, Poland, Posen, and Pomerania"; the birthplace of another twenty-nine percent within the German-Polish lands remains uncertain. Eight percent more came from other countries, including a small but distinctive group that immigrated from Holland. Only nineteen percent hailed specifically from Southwest Germany and Bavaria. This surprising preponderance of Polish Jews stands in stark contrast to the situation in the Midwest. In Milwaukee, for example, only four percent of Jews stemmed from Polish lands, while seventy-five percent came from Southwest Germany and Bavaria, Bohemia and Austria.⁶

The influence of Boston's Polish Jews may readily be seen within Congregation Ohabei Shalom, which from the beginning understandably followed the Polish-Jewish rite known as *Minhag Polin*. The minority that preferred the German rite, known as *Minhag Ashkenaz*, seceded in 1853, establishing what became Kahal Kadosh Adath Israel, today Temple Israel. Henceforward, Ohabei Shalom became known in Boston as the Polish Congregation, and Adath Israel as the German one. As late as 1878, the Polish congregation was the largest in town, boasting almost two and a half times as many members as its German rival.⁷

The Polish character of Jewish Boston also manifested itself in other ways. Not having experienced the same historical conditions that paved the way for Reform Judaism's rise, Polish Jews in America tended to be more religiously conservative than their German counterparts; Reform spread far more slowly among them. So it was in Boston. "While all over the United States reformed Judaism began to assert

itself, the Jews of Boston, of the Hub of the Universe, of the literary centre of America, took no part whatsoever.”⁸ The author of this statement, Rabbi Solomon Schindler, was himself a Reform rabbi, and it was he who introduced religious reforms into the “German Congregation” beginning in 1874, fifty years after the emergence of religious reforms in Charleston and thirty years after the first Reform congregations developed in Baltimore and New York. As for the “Polish Congregation,” although it, too, introduced religious reforms in the 1870’s, seeking to stem the flow of younger members to Adath Israel, it did not formally affiliate with the Reform Movement for another twenty-five years.

All of these factors—the small size of the early Boston Jewish community, its Polish character, and its religious conservatism—affected the relationship between the “established” Jewish community of Boston and the new wave of East European immigrants who made their presence felt as early as the 1870’s. Victims of economic privation and political oppression, these new immigrants came initially from Lithuania, then under Russian sovereignty. They settled in the poorest sections of the North End and established new Orthodox synagogues: Shomre Shabbes (“Sabbath Observers”) and Beth Abraham. Even as they lived across town from one another, however, the new Russian Jews and the older Polish ones found much in common. The leader of the new immigrant community, Baruch Isaac Reinherz, looked upon the rabbi of Ohabei Shalom, Falk Vidaver, as a *landsmen*, a fellow “Russian-Pole.” Both men wrote frequently for the European Hebrew press, and both wrote glowingly about America as a land where Jews could be free and succeed. Even when the two men fired polemics at one another, their dispute ended with a call for communal unity and joint efforts on behalf of Jewish education. For the most part, the size and composition of the 19th-century community kept intra-Jewish tensions to a minimum.⁹

The massive East European immigration of the 1880’s and 1890’s heightened intra-Jewish tensions in Boston. The city’s Jewish population multiplied approximately eight-fold during these two decades, from about 5,000 to 40,000. Understandably, the small established community felt overwhelmed. Putting aside their differences, Boston’s German and Polish Jews came together to meet this crisis. The East European immigrants, quite mistakenly, viewed them all as “Germans” and treated them with suspicion. What is remarkable in retrospect, however, is not the ugly tensions that developed between old and new immigrants or the unfortunate decision in 1882 to ship a group of 415 impoverished refugees back to New York, but rather the speed with which the manifold problems posed by immigration were overcome. Led by the wealthy German Jews of Adath Israel, particularly the Bavar-

ian-born Jacob Hecht and his American-born wife Lina, the community mobilized to aid the refugees, creating a panoply of benevolent institutions to receive and assist them. In 1891, when the city's Russian Jews founded their own institution, the Benoth Israel Sheltering Home, to offer immigrants temporary shelter and food, the established community offered support. "We have to take care of the thousands coming to our shore," Edward Goulston, Adath Israel's former president, declared at the dedication. "We must help them to become good citizens . . . We must certainly treat the immigrants with kindness and toleration."¹⁰ In 1895 the establishment of America's first federation, the Federation of Jewish Charities, underscored the community's resolve to work together to solve communal problems; its list of charter subscribers included a sprinkling of Russian Jews. In 1908, the Federation expanded to embrace charitable societies recently established by these Russian Jews. As a result, years before such cooperation was effected in cities like New York and Cincinnati, Boston Jews of different immigrant backgrounds—Polish, German, Russian, and more—regularly interacted at the federation's meetings.¹¹

By World War I, East European Jews dominated Boston's Jewish community. Of the estimated eighty to ninety thousand Jews in the city, all but a few thousand were recent immigrants or their children. Even the old "German Congregation," now universally known as Temple Israel, was attracting young Jews of Eastern European descent. The Temple's new rabbi, Harry Levi, was himself the child of Polish-born parents and made East European Jews feel welcome.¹² So, where other Jewish communities, including New York, continued to grapple with the legacy of misunderstanding between German Jews and their East European cousins, Boston, by and large, did not. Only disparate patterns of residence and separate country clubs kept the old social distinctions alive.

Zionism, too, proved less divisive an issue in Boston, partly again because East European Jews so dominated the community. In addition, the fact that the city's best known and most highly respected Jew, Louis Brandeis, as well as many of his intellectual friends, and Boston's *Jewish Advocate*, all strongly advocated Zionism served to undermine the movement's critics. Widespread local support for Irish nationalism strengthened the case for a Jewish homeland still further. Admittedly, earlier rabbis of Temple Israel, Solomon Schindler and Charles Fleischer, had attacked Zionism from the pulpit; for them it raised the spectre of dual loyalty. Harry Levi, however, came to support the Zionist cause, not so much for American Jews as for those living "hopeless lives" elsewhere. His successors at Temple Israel proved to be staunch Zionists, as did most of the other major rabbis in the community. By World War II, according to George Gallup, more than ninety percent of Greater Boston

and New England Jews supported Zionism, a record unmatched anywhere else in the United States.¹³

Boston thus was largely spared the wearisome intra-communal battles over immigration and Zionism that divided so many American Jewish cities, particularly those rich with 19th-century history and steeped in the traditions of German Jewry. The issues that Boston Jews faced instead were those that would eventually come to the fore in most urban areas where Jews lived: tensions between immigrants and their children, between wealthier Jews and poorer ones, between Jews of different religious persuasions, Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform, and—most important of all as far as local residents were concerned—tensions between Jews and their neighbors.



Writing on the subject of Jews and their neighbors in 1889, Rabbi Solomon Schindler was still rhapsodic: “It cannot be said that the New Englanders had ever shown a spirit of intolerance to Jewish settlers Jews could never complain of ill-treatment in New England.” Schindler himself maintained close ties with Boston’s liberal Protestant elite, and for many years, according to his biographer, “felt more at home with non-Jews than with Jews.” His portrayal of inter-group harmony in the city bespoke more hope than reality.¹⁴

In fact, the relationship between Boston Jews and their neighbors was never so simple. For all that they professed to respect the “ancient Hebrews,” most Bostonians prior to the late 19th century had, at best, a fleeting acquaintance with Jews. They heard about them more than they actually saw them, and they puzzled over how to reconcile the historically stereotyped “mythical Jew,” found in their books, with the real Jew, the proverbial “Jew next door,” who seemed altogether different. The poet Oliver Wendell Holmes (father of the Supreme Court justice), for example, admitted that he grew up with the “traditional idea” that Jews “were a race lying under a curse for their obstinacy in refusing the gospel.” “The principal use of the Jews,” he believed, “seemed to be to lend money, and to fulfill the prediction of the old prophets of their race.” Later, as he came into contact with Jews, he changed his mind. As he recounted in his poem, “At the Pantomime,” he moved from “silent oaths” against “the race that slew its Lord” to a recognition that Christianity emerged from Judaism and that Jews remained an extraordinary people. More important, he adopted a pluralistic view of religion—one more commonly found in the 20th century—urging Christians “to find meaning in beliefs which are different from their own.”¹⁵

Ralph Waldo Emerson, perhaps Boston's greatest 19th-century sage (and Louis Brandeis's favorite Boston author), once compared Jewish Law to "Evil" and Judaism to a disease. Commenting on "A Sketch of a Polish Jew" shown at an 1839 Boston exhibition of pictures painted by Washington Allston, he remarked to his diary that "the Polish Jews are an offence to me; they degrade and animalize." In his public address on "Fate" he declared, foreshadowing the late 19th-century myth of a worldwide Jewish conspiracy associated with the "Elders of Zion," that "the sufferance which is the badge of the Jew has made him, in these days, the ruler of rulers of the earth." Yet in a later lecture, delivered in 1869, Emerson put forth a different view: "You cannot bring me too good a word, too dazzling a hope, too penetrating an insight from the Jews," he declared. "I hail every one with delight." Just a few months earlier he had indeed hailed ("All Hail! You have written a noble poem, which I cannot enough praise") a volume by the Jewish poet Emma Lazarus, whose work he had been encouraging and whom he subsequently welcomed to his home in Concord. Emerson thus embodied the contradictions and ambivalences that quite generally characterized Brahmin views of the Jew during this period. As was also the case elsewhere in the United States, conflicting emotions, changing experiences, and divergent influences pulled people now one way concerning the Jews, now the other.¹⁶

Mass immigration, first of the Irish and later of the so-called "new immigrants," including Southern Italians and Jews, transformed the Boston that the city's old families knew and gradually undermined their confidence. The optimistic Yankee humanitarian belief in the power of education and democracy to effect immigrant uplift gave way to devouring fear: some members of old-line families came to believe that their race, their country, and their whole way of life was imperilled. By the late 19th century, Henry Adams and Henry James had turned venomously anti-Jewish. The poet James Russell Lowell became obsessed with Jews: he sought them out and avoided them, defended them and attacked them, admired them and feared them. His uncertainties, Barbara Solomon has pointed out, paralleled his feelings about America in general and reflected the social and intellectual concerns of his age.¹⁷ Seeking to protect the world they had known, old-line Bostonians withdrew into themselves; their social institutions kept the Irish, the Jews, and other immigrants out. The Boston *Social Register* (1891), a listing of some 8,000 "proper Bostonians," provided a reliable guide to the chosen ones whom high society favored. Revealingly, it included fewer than a dozen Catholic families and exactly one Jewish man, Louis Brandeis. Brandeis was also the only Jewish member of the Dedham Polo Club. Yet notwithstanding his Harvard degree, his pedigreed law partner, his

Yankee ways, his intellectual eminence, and his growing wealth, Brandeis was still excluded from at least four other exclusive clubs—as was every other Boston Jew. “Antisemitism,” he complained to his brother some years later, “seems to have reached its American pinnacle here.”¹⁸

For the Jewish masses, of course, this kind of social antisemitism meant very little. They had neither the money nor the inclination to join high society and felt content to live amongst themselves. When, however, the Brahmin-dominated Immigration Restriction League promoted a literacy test to keep additional immigrants from America’s shores, or when over fifty elite Bostonians signed a 1916 petition seeking to prevent Louis Brandeis, their hero, from winning Senate confirmation to the Supreme Court (“He has not the confidence of the people,” they alleged), or when their own children found themselves excluded from prestigious jobs on account of their “race,” they understood that “intolerance” and “ill-treatment” of the kind Schindler disclaimed had in fact come to pass. Even Mary Antin, whose paeon to Boston in *The Promised Land* sought to rekindle faith that “in America everything is possible,” lost some of her youthful optimism after World War I.¹⁹

More directly troubling to the masses of Jews in the immigrant neighborhoods of Boston was the reception that they met at the hands of their neighbors, particularly the Irish, and to a lesser extent the Italians. Both groups were Catholic, and as the Boston settlement house director Robert Woods wrote in 1902, “They can love each other for their common enmity to the Jew.” In the early years of the West End, Jews and gentiles of a young age still played together. “We were a cosmopolitan gang,” Isaac Goldberg recalled of his boyhood friends around the turn of the century. “There were Italians, Scotch, Irish, Bohemians, Jews, and nondescripts . . . We knew nothing of racial prejudice . . . Later our education would be completed by our parents; we would learn to hate one another as befits members of a Christian civilization.” Those who grew up later, however, remembered a more Balkanized Boston, where Jews lived within their own boundaries and faced consequences if they ventured out. Journalist Theodore H. White, for example, recalled living in “an enclave surrounded by Irish” during his youth in the 1920’s. The local library lay in an Irish district, and his “first fights happened en route to the library” to get books. “Pure hellishness divided us,” he recollected, but looking back he concluded that “even where the friction between the groups was greatest . . . it was not intolerable.”²⁰

Jews, of course, were not the only targets of young toughs. Fights between the Irish and the Italians were legion as well. “For years,” according to one student of the subject, “it was not considered safe for a young Italian to set foot in Charlestown, and the young Irishman who ventured into the North End found himself in

similar jeopardy.”²¹ To a considerable degree, these battles among Boston’s young people reflected the political battles then being waged by their elders over turf, power, and social advancement.

Anti-Jewish violence peaked in Boston during the hard years of the Depression and the Second World War. Fear stalked the Jewish community at that time and senseless acts of violence abounded. Nat Hentoff recalls a typical episode in his autobiography, *Boston Boy*.

One evening, three friends and I are walking through large, dark Franklin Park on the way to a dance at the Hebrew school. Coming toward us are four bigger boys. When they are close enough, it is clear they are not Jewish. And since they are not Italian, they are Irish. Their leader swaggers up to me and asks—what else? —“Are you Jewish?” Since there are other members of my tribe with me . . . I nod.

“You got a light?” he asks.

As I go to my pocket, I look down, and a stone, a huge stone, smashes into my face. Or so it feels. The shock and pain are such that it takes a few moments for me to taste the blood and feel the space where, a second ago, there had been a tooth. Their leader, rubbing his fist with satisfaction, waits for a revengeful lunge and is not surprised when it doesn’t come. So few of these kikes fight back. He and his sturdy companions move on, guffawing.²²

Economic tensions and jealousies underlay some of this violence. Cultural and political differences between Catholics and Jews, exacerbated by the New Deal, the Spanish Civil War, Catholic isolationism, and the Church’s fear of communism also played a significant role. The man who fully exploited these tensions and in the process attracted a large local following was Father Charles E. Coughlin, a demagogic radio priest from Royal Oak, Michigan. His call to “drive the Money-changers from the Temple,” his scurrilous attacks upon New Dealers, and his fulminations against “International Bankers” struck sympathetic chords in Catholic Boston—as they did in many other cities where Jews and Catholics lived side by side. In 1935, Coughlin was the guest of the Boston City Council and the Massachusetts legislature; a year later his Union Party ran stronger in Boston than in any other American city. Thereafter, beginning in 1938, his antisemitism became increasingly overt and raucously strident. He linked communism and atheism with “Jewish internationalism,” reprinted the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, and embraced fascism. He also

established the Christian Front, a quasi-military pro-fascist organization whose rallies often ended with the Nazi salute. Cries of "liquidate the Jews in America" were heard at some of these rallies. The brutal attacks on local Jews that took place in Boston over the next five years were frequently carried out by Christian Front members.²³

What particularly disappointed Boston's Jewish community at this time was the tepid response to local antisemitism on the part of politicians and Catholic church leaders. In Boston, more than in other cities, politicians, priests, and policemen shared common family ties and common roots in Irish soil. Having themselves been oppressed, both in their homeland and in Boston, the Catholic Irish and their leaders now banded together to protect their own. Their silence allowed *Social Justice*, the Coughlinite newspaper, to be sold outside of Boston's Catholic churches until the government suppressed it for sedition in 1942. Their acquiescence, also in 1942, paved the way for the notoriously antisemitic pro-Coughlin editor of the *Brooklyn Tablet*, Father Edward Lodge Curran, to appear as principal speaker at South Boston's Evacuation Day Program. Cardinal O'Connell specifically sanctioned Curran's appearance, and two thousand people turned out to greet him. Worst of all, their hands-off attitude meant that physical attacks on Jews throughout Dorchester and Mattapan continued. In October 1943, two young Jewish victims of such violence were themselves taken into custody when they protested the refusal of police officers to arrest their assailants. One was severely beaten by an officer who called him a "yellow Jew," and both were prosecuted and fined ten dollars. The incident, coming as it did against the backdrop of Nazi atrocities throughout Europe, received extensive press coverage and generated a public outcry. The young Irish dissident Frances Sweeney, editor of the *Boston City Reporter* and a courageous spokeswoman for liberal Catholics opposed to fascism and antisemitism, blamed "Governor Saltonstall, Mayor Tobin, the church and the clergy" for giving the Christian Front indirect encouragement. Reputedly, she also labelled Boston "the most anti-Semitic city in the country." As investigations multiplied and Boston's police commissioner lost his job, the local conspiracy of silence gave way to concerted action. Once that happened, incidents of antisemitism in the city dropped dramatically.²⁴

The 1944 appointment of Richard Cushing to serve as Boston's Archbishop—he was, at the time, the youngest such prelate in the world—did much to improve intergroup relations throughout the city. Within months of his ascension, he vigorously condemned antisemitism and ordered his priests to oppose all forms of discrimination. Setting a personal example, he himself befriended local Jews and

cooperated with the Boston Jewish Community Council. He boasted that his own sister had married a Jewish man.

A Cambridge priest, Father Leonard Feeney, dissented from Cushing's liberal policies on theological grounds. He opposed improving relations with non-Catholics and particularly rallied his followers against Jews, whom he characterized as "horrid, degenerate hook-nosed perverts." On one occasion, he publicly compared Temple Israel's Rabbi Joshua Loth Liebman to a "dog"; later, he threatened to disrupt the opening of the Catholic chapel at Brandeis University. His followers, meanwhile, perpetrated attacks against young Jews around Franklin Park. In response to Jewish pleas for help, Cushing, unlike his predecessors, acted decisively. In 1949 Feeney was dismissed from the Jesuit order; in 1954 he was excommunicated.²⁵

Subsequent decades in Boston witnessed the breakup of Catholic ethnic parishes, the weakening of ethnic politics, the religious revolution wrought by Vatican II, the burgeoning impact of suburbanization, and widespread socioeconomic improvements for Jews, Irish and Italians alike. Antisemitism declined nationwide, and in Boston as well. "Today, compared to 40 years ago, there's a love affair between Jews and Catholics," Philip Perlmutter, executive director of the Jewish Community Relations Council, reported in 1985.²⁶ Although issues such as Sunday closing laws, state aid to parochial schools, public celebrations of Christmas, and the right to an abortion continued to divide Jews and Catholics, the commonality of political and economic interests that drew members of the two faiths together proved far more important.

The anti-Jewish violence that broke out in Dorchester and Mattapan in the late 1960's and early 1970's disrupted this improving era of community relations between Jews and their neighbors. Robberies, muggings, and assaults became daily occurrences; once again, Jews felt afraid to leave their homes. "I was held up four times," one elderly Jewish woman complained. "The first two times they only took my money; the last two times they beat me up and threw me on the street." The perpetrators of violence this time were not Irish Catholic members of the Christian Front or supporters of Father Feeney, but rather young blacks, many of them newcomers to the neighborhood. Their victims were most commonly poor and elderly Jews who remained behind in Dorchester and Mattapan after the bulk of the Jewish population had moved away to the suburbs. As had been true three decades earlier, so now Jews felt that public officials ignored their plight. The Jewish community, too, was slow to react; racial tensions in the city were bad enough, some Jewish leaders felt, without further inflaming them. In the end, the Jewish commu-

nity succumbed to the inevitable. “We urged all the Jews to get the hell out of there as quickly as they can,” one local Jewish leader later recalled. With help from the Combined Jewish Philanthropies, Jewish social service agencies helped the remaining few thousand Jews to relocate.²⁷



If Boston never proved to be as harmonious or tolerant a place for Jews as Rabbi Solomon Schindler had expected back in 1889, it did live up to its reputation for nurturing and cultivating the life of the mind. Schindler himself described the city as “the literary centre of America.” Fifteen years earlier, a Hebrew guidebook published in Berlin employed the better-known phrase, “the Athens of America,” and also described the city as “the nation’s foremost seat of wisdom and learning.” According to a popular 19th-century aphorism, the typical query asked about someone in Boston was “How much does he know?” In time, this became the city’s defining characteristic in Jewish eyes as well.²⁸

As early as 1903, the social worker Frederick Bushée noticed that “among some of the Jewish families [in Boston] education seems to be more highly prized than it is by any other nationality.” Himself a devoted immigration restrictionist, he was profoundly ambivalent about this discovery. Jews, by contrast, gloried in the “intellectuality” with which they were stereotyped. Mary Antin, author of Boston’s best-known Jewish immigrant autobiography, for example, laid heavy stress on education as the key to the promise of the “Promised Land.” School became her surrogate house of worship, while for her father, “education, culture, [and] the higher life were shining things to be worshipped from afar.” By contrast—as if to confirm the adage that New Yorkers care less about what you know than about how much you are worth—the hero of Abraham Cahan’s famous Jewish immigrant novel of 1917, *The Rise of David Levinsky* (set in New York), never secured his dream of higher education; he was too busy getting rich.²⁹

Boston Latin School served as the first gateway for many of the young Jewish boys who prized education. Theodore White remembered it as an excellent but “cruel school.” “It accepted students without discrimination, and it flunked them—Irish, Italians, Jewish, Protestant, black—with equal lack of discrimination.” White was among those who struggled on, and he was not alone. A 1985 roster of ten famous Latin School students (“a distinguished gallery of old boys”), published to celebrate the school’s three hundred and fiftieth anniversary, is fifty percent Jewish. All five of the Jews listed—Bernard Berenson, Leonard Bernstein, Nat Hentoff, Robert Coles, and Theodore H. White—were among the school’s recent (since

1885) graduates. Their achievements made them part of a Latin School tradition made famous by the five earlier names on the list: Cotton Mather, Ben Franklin, Sam Adams, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Samuel P. Langley.³⁰

It was Harvard, however, that truly symbolized success to the Jews of Boston. Embodying as it still does “so much of the city’s body and soul,” Harvard, particularly the Harvard shaped by its liberal, philosemitic president, Charles Eliot (1869–1909), became for Jews what it had long been for “Proper Bostonians”—a major part of their “total existence.”³¹ To enter the hallowed halls of Harvard became a sacred rite of initiation for Jews, a sign that they had been accepted into the priesthood of the intellectual elect. Even if they remained social outcasts as students, as many Harvard Jews did, the fact that they had successfully passed through the university’s portals gave them a feeling of both superiority and belonging: Harvard was now their school as well. Indeed Harvard came to serve as something of a barometer of Jewish social acceptance within the city as a whole. Thus when Eliot’s successor, the Judeophobic A. Lawrence Lowell, sought to place a quota on Jewish admissions in 1922, all of Boston Jewry felt the slap. When, in later years, Harvard returned to merit-based admissions, appointed more and more Jews to its faculty, added Jewish Studies courses to its curriculum, and invited Jews to fill upper level administrative positions, Boston Jews knew that for them, too, a whole new day had dawned.³²

This relationship between Harvard University and Boston Jewry—reflecting on the one hand a marked congruence between Brahmin values and Jewish values and on the other hand an age-old tension between Hellenism and Hebraism—strikes at the heart of what is distinctive about Jewish Boston: its enchantment with the life of the mind. Boston Jewry’s most enduring contributions lie in this realm, and many of its most creative intellectual figures devoted their lives to the quest for synthesis, seeking to reconcile, as it were, the two great traditions to which they fell heir.

Three examples must suffice. The Harvard Menorah Society, founded in 1906 for “the study and promotion of Hebraic ideals,” explicitly sought to bridge the world of the university and the world of the Jew. Its leaders, Henry Hurwitz and Horace Kallen, both Boston-bred and Harvard-educated, sought to “make Jewish culture respectable among educated Americans.” The secular Jewish culture that they envisaged formed the basis for the Intercollegiate Menorah Movement that Hurwitz promoted to his dying day.³³ Louis Brandeis, the very embodiment of those values that one associates with Jewish Boston, found in the Zionist movement the magic synthesis that could link Americanism and Judaism. His creative reinterpretation of Zionism in staunchly American terms legitimated the movement and

helped pave the way for its subsequent dramatic acceptance and growth. Finally, Harry Wolfson, the pioneering Jewish scholar whom local Jews revered as “the sage of Harvard,” found his synthesis in the study of philosophy. Having mastered both the Greek and the Jewish philosophic traditions, he not only delineated their harmonization, as achieved by Philo of Alexandria, but also pointed to the centrality of Judaism within the larger community of philosophic thought that included Christianity and Islam.³⁴

Liberalism underlay all of these creative syntheses, and that is no accident. For it was the great 19th-century Brahmin liberals, like Charles Eliot, who seemed most welcoming to Jews, while conservative restrictionists and conservative Catholics persecuted and excluded them. Temple Israel’s rabbis, Solomon Schindler and Charles Fleischer, preached liberalism in the late 19th century; Louis Brandeis and his circle helped to shape American Progressivism in the early 20th century; Louis Kirstein, the Filene brothers, David Niles, and Felix Frankfurter galvanized the forces of Boston liberalism in support of Franklin D. Roosevelt during the Great Depression; and Michael Walzer, Leonard Fein, and Steven Grossman, among others, continued to uphold the torch of liberalism into the 1990’s. Liberalism, indeed, forms part of the ethos of Boston’s Jews—so much so that some Boston Jews consider its values to be intrinsic to Judaism itself. While far from the truth, the assumption is nevertheless revealing, providing as it does yet another example of the local penchant for synthesizing two worlds into one.

Learning is an even more important part of the local Jewish ethos. Through the years, the great heroes of Boston Jewry have been its intellectuals and scholars—the “smart set” as Stephen Whitfield dubs them in his essay in this volume. Louis Brandeis, for example, was long remembered for having achieved the highest scholastic record of any Harvard Law School student (as well as a special dispensation from the Board of Trustees allowing him to graduate at a younger age than the rules allowed). Harry Wolfson, it was said, “dazzle[d] old John Harvard with his magnitude of brains.” Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, according to an opinion cited in the *New York Times*, was one of the half dozen most brilliant rabbinic scholars “since Maimonides in the 13th century.”³⁵ Such luminaries commanded reverential followings in Boston. Not only were their public lectures hugely attended, but they themselves became communal role models and the objects of extraordinary veneration. It was precisely this kind of veneration that a newcomer to Boston, Abram L. Sachar, drew upon when he argued that American Jews needed a new university of their own. What he and a phalanx of Boston and New England Jews envisaged in 1948 was a high quality secular university, a kind of Jewish Harvard, sponsored by

the American Jewish community and named for Louis Brandeis himself—the ultimate synthesis, in short, of American and Jew.

Today, no community has more colleges and universities in its midst than Boston does, and none boasts so high a proportion of Jewish academics and students among its population. The city has become a focal point for Jewish student activities of every sort: social, political, cultural, and religious. It also serves as home to the Association for Jewish Studies, the professional organization of Jewish scholars established in 1969. For all that it is educationally well-endowed, however, we have seen that Boston is in other ways embarrassingly impoverished compared to kindred American Jewish cities of its size. It is neither as old, nor as rich, nor as invested in national Jewish institutions as most of its East Coast cousins, and the relationship between Jews and their neighbors in the city has often been deeply troubled.

What the best local Jewish minds sought nevertheless to accomplish, as Hurwitz and Kallen did through the Harvard Menorah Society and Brandeis through Zionism, was to forge a creative synthesis between Boston and Jew, a *mélange* that, they hoped, would combine the best features of each culture—“Athens” and “Jerusalem”—and make Jews feel welcome in both. Most of the chapters that follow in this volume are, in effect, analyses of this optimistic experiment. They explore how in different historical periods and communal settings the interaction between Boston and Jew played out. Was synthesis possible and was it effected? No final verdicts are rendered here; the question is left hanging. But even to pose the question is to suggest how the history of Jews in Boston might take on some larger significance.

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12. Mann, *Growth and Achievement*, 35, 87.
13. See Mark Raider's essay in this volume.
14. Schindler, *Israelites in Boston*, unpaginated [p.2]; Mann, *Growth and Achievement*, 48.
15. Eugene R. Fingerhut, "Were the Massachusetts Puritans Hebraic?" *New England Quarterly* 40 (December 1967): 521-31; Oliver Wendell Holmes, *Over the Teacups* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1891), 193-99; Louis Harap, *The Image of the Jew in American Literature from Early Republic to Mass Immigration* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1974), 87-90; see Jonathan D. Sarna, "The 'Mythical Jew' and the 'Jew Next Door' in Nineteenth Century America," in *Antisemitism in American History*, ed. David A. Gerber (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 68-69, from which some of this paragraph is drawn.
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