AJS Review 41:1 (April 2017), 1–7
© Association for Jewish Studies 2017
doi:10.1017/S0364009417000010

Introduction to the Theme: Jews and Cities, between Utopia and Dystopia

Eli Lederhendler

The collective discussion embodied in the following group of essays is the outgrowth of a three-year-long symposium on Jewish and urban studies conducted at the Hebrew University's Scholion Interdisciplinary Research Center in the Humanities and Jewish Studies from 2009 to 2012. The synergy that animated our weekly discussions owed something to the fact that, rather than chiming in on similar notes, we partook of a wide sampling of reading and analysis. We came from different disciplines, with different agendas: scholars of literary criticism, adepts of social theory, historians, cultural analysts, an expert in religious philosophy, and a landscape architect with a critical interest in the culture and politics of spatial construction. The broad sweep of our discussions was greater than will be evident from this selection of papers, since our circle of discussants continually swelled and altered during those three years, reshuffling the range of participants and topics. However, most of those whose work is represented in this sampling were present throughout the entire three-year project.

Some of the eclectic quality of our discussion is carried over into the pieces included here, and it is not my intention to weave a master narrative out of the variety that they display. Rather, in my reflections on the themes that arise from the discussion, I wish to present the keynote problems that they address.

Foremost among these are antithetical modes of relating to the city as a site for modern living: at one end of the analytical discussion we have allusions to utopian virtues, while at the other we seem to be in thrall to dystopian images. The utopian city is apt to be described in terms of the individual's experience of infinite variety. It becomes an ethnography of the random singularities of urban living. At the conceptual far boundary of the utopian discourse of urbanism, we seem to valorize slogans of cosmopolitan versatility—as if the city itself was not, nearly always, a place where competing social groups constantly wage turf wars, *politically* organizing space and power for self-interested purposes.

The dystopian city, in contrast, is a place where persistent or permanent conflicts (past or present) reinforce the biases and the mapping of racial- or national- or class-based ideology. At the far edge of the dystopian image, we have to deal with destroyed histories of urban communities—images and memories of which are marshalled anew for cultural creativity.

I believe that the paths we have negotiated between these polarities are inseparable aspects of a wider, often unacknowledged, dialectic about modernity, of which the city has become a convenient symbol. Thus, the twin or divergent

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0364009417000010 Published online by Cambridge University Press

orientations toward either organized or individuated experience, both of which have always stood at the heart of the modern dilemma, are refracted in our debates regarding the viability of community amid transient, pluralistic, and randomized social realities.

*

Rashi, the classical medieval rabbinic commentator, responded thus to the laconic statement in the Babylonian Talmud that "city life is difficult" (Ketubbot 110b): "Everyone [in cities] dwells crowded together, one house close to another, and there is a lack of air; in [country] towns there are gardens and groves next to the houses and the air is pleasant." The history of Jews in relation to cities raises innumerable issues, but rarely are the aesthetics of the Jews' habitations made so explicit, so mundane, and so expressly suburban.

As moderns, we might be taken aback by this hankering for gardens and fresh air. The city has a venerable history from antiquity onward—indeed, it was long associated with the fortress-capitals of powerful Mediterranean states and the caravan and seagoing dominions that lay to the East. Moreover, to sensibilities nurtured on Western traditions, cities appear for the most part as the harbingers of the new, rather than as the grimly claustrophobic environment that Rashi described.

Indeed, modernizers of Jewish culture during the long centuries ever since Rashi's time evinced little enthusiasm for rusticity, despite the regular drumbeat of economic reformers' pleas (so often ignored) for Jewish agrarianization. In modern Jewish cultural aesthetics, by and large, the provinces (and their inhabitants) were portrayed as crude, gullible, dreary, and decrepit, in contrast to the extravagant images evoked by cities: great ports, bazaars of all the worlds' goods, train depots, and the sheer piling-up of all that great manifold wealth of humanity.

From the end of the Thirty Years War (1648) Jews increasingly became city folk. To be precise: certain streets, neighborhoods, and quarters increasingly became quintessentially Jewish places. Jews, like so many of their neighbors, seemed to be on a historical path from smaller to larger urban settings, despite the overcrowding that Rashi had deplored. One thinks of the merchant milieu of Hamburg and Metz, both of which were homes to the irrepressible, peripatetic Glikl bas Judah Leib (popularly but erroneously known as "Glückel of Hameln"); the imperial environs of Vienna and Prague; and, somewhat later, Berlin and the passage through its elite salon life of sharp young Jewish savants from the hinterland, such as Solomon Maimon and Moses Mendelssohn. What was true of Jews in Europe also held true for Jews in the cities of the Mediterranean and the Middle East, who were no less attuned to the general westward-leaning, "cosmopolitan" orientation of modern bourgeois life.

The process of Jewish urbanization reached mass proportions during the nineteenth century. Famous new hubs of Jewish life emerged: Casablanca, Odessa, and Łódż, for example, were scarcely on the map before 1800, but by 1900, their names were virtually synonymous with the pulse of modernity—and with the crowds of Jews who lived there. It was in that era, and for good reason, that the citified Jewish intelligentsia set the pace and the agenda of

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0364009417000010 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Jewish discourse: realism and romance were both born in the city. So were Jewish libraries, publishing firms, schools and academies, theaters, cafés, and newspapers. The isolated roadside tavern, the hamlets far from the madding crowd, became the realm of the Jewish Gothic: at best, antiquated, and at worst, the domain of ghosts and nightmares of the past.

Eventually, those perspectives began to change, as some observers became convinced that the city had become a leviathan, blocking and repressing the (romanticized) humanistic dimension. A symbolically reconstructed Jewish geography began to take shape: now the Jewish "outback" seemed to be the site of social and moral renewal, the primal scene of nonmediated (authentic, nonbourgeois, uncensored, undomesticated) Jewishness. Modern urban writers refurbished the vestiges of the preurban Jewish spaces of yesteryear, setting them up as a positive alterimage to urban deterioration, anomie, and dyspeptic disorder. Some of them also imagined rural utopias and garden cities in the *Altneuland* (see the essays by Roni Hirsh-Ratzkovsky and Dvir Tzur).

Perhaps it was not coincidental that the segue from urban modernism to the beatification of the rough-hewn, worldly (un)wise, backwoods people of the provinces and their saintly, homespun rabbis came to a climax in the European Jewish republic of letters just about the time when antisemitic provocations targeted big-city Jews in particular: the Jews of the bourse and the banks, the Jews voting in parliaments, the Fagins of the mean urban alleyways, the Jewish denizens of the music hall, the Red agitators in the public squares with their Jewish patronymics.

Jewish ethnographic pilgrimages in the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth set out to record, photograph, and collect what remained of ancestral lore, proverbs, folkways, painted synagogues, *niggunim* (chants and songs), and other non-"self-conscious" forms of creative energy. All were destined for exhibitions, collections, archives, and museums; mined for motifs and iconography; represented in works of literature, visual art, and the performing arts. Yet, for all that, the city remained the point of it all. The prospective custodians and consumers of all this retrospective culture of Jewish specificity were all city dwellers. The subtext of Jewish modernism assumed the ultimate (even the imminent) demise of the preurban setting just as it presumed the assured continuity of city life. The persistence of a Jewish way of life under modern conditions appeared to require an obeisance to the cohesive norms of face-to-face communities, reenacted within the fabric of bustling industrial and commercial centers.

Then, however, the apocalyptic second third of the twentieth century destroyed that paradigm and turned it inside out. The great urban centers of Jewish life, nearly everywhere but in the Western hemisphere, were swept out of their self-assumed role of the Jewish present and future and into the uncannily opposite role as ruined relics and repositories of Jewish memory. Not a single European city was left, east of London and west of Moscow, which was not also a (mute) Jewish tombstone.

As Scott Ury points out in his historiographical essay, "Lost and Found," the memorialization drive that animated the first postwar generation was devoted to lending a voice to those city Jews and providing their ghosts with a visualized

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0364009417000010 Published online by Cambridge University Press

afterimage. From documenting or embellishing the "authentic," preurban typology of provincial Jewries, once so commonly practiced in scholarship, art, and literature, we find, after 1945, a fascination with urban Jewries of the recent past. Many works of historical reconstruction, written by Jewish scholars in the post-1945 era, dealt with the Jewries of larger towns and cities—giving birth to an updated, modern historical geography.

A parallel transformative event was the extrusion of most of the Jews, about a million strong, from Muslim lands, beginning in the 1940s. The exodus swelled to massive dimensions in the 1950s, and was nearly completed in most Muslim countries by the 1970s. Again, the cities they left behind have become the subjects of a rich vein of retrospective cultural production, in literature, history, the performing arts, and (of late) an itinerary of ethnotourism in selected safe zones (such as Morocco and Tunisia) or purpose-built cultural museums in Israel.

Israel, indeed, has been a prime venue for postwar, postmigration Jewish cultural production. A great deal has been invested at the academic, artistic, and wider cultural level in the project of urban Jewish memory salvage, historiography, and hagiography. Tel Aviv's Museum of the Jewish People (Beit Ha-tefuẓot) is just one such example. Yet, because British Mandatory Palestine had remained open to Jewish migration during the 1920s and 1930s (when most other countries severely curtailed Jewish migration), the retrospective Jewish cultural posture took root there early on, even prior to the Second World War. For urbanized Jews in the Yishuv, the countryside offered a new context for confronting both the nonurban (and non-Jewish) present and the European metropolises they had only just left behind (see, again, the essays by Tzur and Hirsh-Ratzkovsky). The east European market town (shtetl), the Mediterranean entrepôt, and even the Parisian sidewalk-café culture could be seen as miniaturized and reincarnated in parts of Jaffa/Tel Aviv, even as the "sons" of the Yishuv could emplot a new native-born sensibility based on the contrasts of town, village, and open fields. Still later, the generation of Yiddish writers who made their homes in Israel after the Holocaust deployed their language and their retrospective sensitivity as they (in their turn) sought to come to terms with a new geographic order (see the essay by Gali Drucker Bar-Am).

*

Thus far, we have sketched a narrative that moves, by stages, from a pronounced enthusiasm for city life, through a disenchantment phase, then a stage of destruction and loss, and finally a period of reconstruction and imagination-bound symbolization.

Yet, a few underlying motifs deserve a second, closer look. One of these is the question of urban order and disorder, which Scott Ury raises in his essay. Here we begin to limn the divergent metaphors I mentioned at the outset—between modern orderliness (organization, institutions, and collectives) and modern individualization (the antinormative breakout from collective constraints). The contours of the city that seek to engineer order—streets numbered and named, transit lines converging on central squares, public institutions binding the

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0364009417000010 Published online by Cambridge University Press

cityscape into a visually identified entity—have their parallel, in our particular cases, in communal organizations, journals, committees, schools, districts, and courtyards (Drucker Bar-Am, Hirsh-Ratzkovsky). These are to be pitted against *disorder*, inconsistency, and the politics of conflict. These latter make the urban environment a volatile (even dangerous) place, demanding constant attention to boundaries and safe zones, as dubious as these might be (Tzur).

The other, equally elusive, and not unrelated issue is that of urban space and human redemption, or as I would rephrase it here: the quest for aesthetic and existential wholesomeness. Roni Hirsh-Ratzkovsky, in her essay, invokes the influence of German expressionism on the thinking of central European cultural Zionists, who were engaged in the early twentieth century in a quest for just this sort of complementarity (urban/rural, German/Jewish, European/Palestinian).

Scott Ury, for his part, invokes Walter Benjamin as a modern prophet. He cites Benjamin's evocation of the numinous aspects of the historical: the "secret agreement between past generations and the present one [implying that] our coming was expected on the earth."[1] Ury argues that it was just this sort of (overdetermined) quest for a redemptive plan that Jewish historians incorporated into their portraits of Jewish urban communities. Order in the form of communal cohesiveness was, for them, a prescriptive national eschatology, he argues. Ury prefers, instead, that we adopt Benjamin's disorderly, immanent, and specifically *de*scriptive strategy for observing the discrete specifics of the urban habitat.

*

I should note, at this point, my basic sympathy with the "disorderly" school; indeed, I have, in some of my past work, undertaken to describe the disorderliness of urban life as a kind of unravelling, deeply affecting the perceptions of Jewish city dwellers and their social forms of life.[2] In that context, I, too, am a skeptic when it comes to overdetermined images of urban Jewish cohesiveness.

However, the conflation of most postwar and contemporary Jewish communal histories under the rubric of the "orderly" impulse (and its cognate, commemorative and "redemptive" orientation) requires careful parsing.

To be specific: the ideological discussion of community-as-polity, as Scott Ury traces it, leading from Simon Dubnow to his successors, did undertake to substantiate a claim for Jewish national cohesiveness and, by extension, self-determination. Dubnow, however, did not just frame a national-communal vision of the Jewish past (and future). He also endorsed a liberal project of Jewish economic and social integration in the wider (national, urban, and transnational) community. As he saw it, this ought to be accomplished without necessarily subscribing to cultural flattening of differences—the counterfeit absorption of the Jews in an assimilatory model.

1. Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (London: Jonathan Cape, 1985), 254.

2. Eli Lederhendler, *New York Jews and the Decline of Urban Ethnicity, 1950–1970* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2001).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0364009417000010 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Dubnow conceived of Jewry as a post-territorial, floating collective, already positioned socially and structurally where the other nations of the world would (so he supposed) eventually arrive in due course. Under this philosophy, no mere local-patriotic nationalism could compete, in humanistic terms, with a world citizenship (his use of the term *Weltgeschichte* is telling),[3] which he touted as a better alternative to rampant antagonistic nationalisms. This was a particularly subversive gambit, given the liberal Russian intellectual context in which he first operated in the nineteenth century and the nationalist environment of interwar Europe. His redemptive orderliness, if so, was not a neat template of an ahistorical, reified triumph of the national cult but, rather, a complex argument whose essence was dialectical.

For Dubnow (to some extent) and for his various successors (to a remarkable degree), writing communal histories was also a project in "disordering" and upsetting an already extant, hegemonic, exogenous historiography of major cities: generally speaking, these histories did not include Jews. Their archives—as representing a subaltern group—were not deemed relevant.

I would therefore suggest that urban Jewish histories (not all of which were intended solely for Jewish consumption, after all) have had a secondary function in promoting a counterhegemonic discourse, when seen in the context of general urban and national histories. The historical work done by Majer Bałaban in interwar Poland may be fruitfully compared, in this light, to what a contemporary scholar, such as Gershon Hundert, has done with his history of the Jews of Opatów.[4] What in some authors' hands became compensatory at the simplest level ("filling in" the Jews' narrative where the dominant culture had written it out), in the hands of others (especially some leading exponents of the current academic generation), has become far more nuanced.

It is in the context of this larger debate that the essay by Gali Drucker Bar-Am directly tackles the question of counterhegemonic urban narratives, using different empirical case studies.

*

Two keys to understanding the work presented here, therefore, are: (1) the order/community vs. disorder/city debate, and (2) the critique of the national commemoration/redemption impulse—a question that entails looking at the wider discursive universe and the significance of a collateral-compensatory-subversive historiography.

To these two fundamental organizing dimensions, I should add a third: Israeli and non-Israeli urban narratives. Perhaps most poignantly and pointedly, Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi's evocation of the question of Jerusalem, viewed through

3. Simon Dubnow, *Weltgeschichte des jüdischen Volkes: von seinen Uranfängen bis zur Gegenwart* (Berlin: Jüdischer Verlag, 1925–29); translated into Hebrew as *Divre yeme 'am 'olam* (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1956).

4. See for instance Majer Bałaban, *Historja Żydów w Krakowie i na Kazimierzu, 1304–1868* (Kraków: Nadzieja, 1931–36); Gershon Hundert, *The Jews in a Polish Private Town: The Case of Opatów in the Eighteenth Century* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0364009417000010 Published online by Cambridge University Press

a "shtetl prism" and its ultimate opposite in an urbanized, more universal ideal, seeks to address this complex web of issues.

Several of the Tel Aviv/Jaffa essays (Tzur, Drucker Bar-Am) also address the manner in which various city-based writers (of prose, fiction, and first-person narratives) have portrayed the geographical-political-cultural overlapping and separation between diasporic and homeland experiences. Hirsh-Ratzkovsky's essay deals with two brothers from Berlin, but also touches on other points on the map of Europe (Paris, Galicia), before ending up in the Ben Shemen Youth Village. Thus, the essay exemplifies the fluid transitions that we encounter between pre- and post-1948 Jewish geographies. Affording a different perspective on home, homelessness, and (re)construction—indeed in a kind of counterpoint to some of the Jewish historical material—Naama Meishar's essay addresses Jaffa Slope Park in relation to the Palestinian neighborhood that preceded it.

Finally, Scott Ury enables us to view, in tandem, Jacob Shatzky's Warsaw history (a New York–based project) and Israel Klausner's Vilna project (one of a number of Jerusalem-based commemorative volumes discussed in the essay). The poignant mirroring between Shatzky's archive at New York's YIVO Institute and Klausner's archive at Jerusalem's Central Archive for the History of the Jewish People lies at the heart of Ury's historiographical analysis.

*

As I intimated almost from the outset, these essays are replete with either very "positive" or very "negative" associations with the urban experience. The dialectic that I have described is, at least in part, framed not only by the dualistic modern opposition between individual and society, but also by the combustible tenor of our times. I insert this self-reflective note partly as a precaution against what may seem to be overaesthetization of the real—our urge (as scholars) to subscribe to metacategories of representation (e.g., memory, cosmopolitanism, nostalgia), or to make sweeping apodictic pronouncements (e.g., the city embodies plurality in its social essence). This, I fear, is an urge that threatens to remove us as human beings from the sober observation of our times.

"Jews and Cities" is a perennial topic for research and discussion, and our own modest contribution is but one part of an ongoing exploration. It is, as we hope to have shown, a platform for thoughtful engagement with broader issues.

Eli Lederhendler
Hebrew University

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0364009417000010 Published online by Cambridge University Press