

INTRODUCTION

One of the great lacunae in historical scholarship is a definitive or comprehensive history of the American Jewish experience. In part, this is due to the fact that we are still lacking sufficient data on American Jewry on the local level from which we should be able to develop an overall study. The genesis of the accompanying presentation was based on the thought that this problem could be alleviated in some way by preparing a model for historical scholarship and at the same time increase our knowledge about Jewish life in Massachusetts. It was anticipated that the approach used and the sources consulted could serve as an example for similar research that could be undertaken for the other states, and eventually extended into the 20th century.

Very briefly, the project envisioned a listing of all organized Jewish group activities that appeared in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts through the year 1900, indicating, whenever possible, when the organization or group came into existence, where it met, its purpose, how long it continued, and its more prominent members and officials.

Contrary to all expectations, we discovered that despite the relatively small Jewish population, in 58 years there came into being somewhat less than 400 Jewish groups in Boston, and a bit over 125 in the remainder of the state. The figures are not exact, since in some instances the sources were not consistent and the same organization or group would seem to have been listed in two or more different ways.

The mass of data assembled in the following pages is truly staggering. An evaluation of this information revises to a degree some of the views current about Jewish life and history in 19th century Massachusetts. There is no doubt that utilization of similar methodology and sources could result in an equally comprehensive knowledge of Jewish group activity in other states, and eventually a broader understanding of the American Jewish experience.

One of the first problems in dealing with the history of the Jews in Massachusetts is our inadequate knowledge of the actual number of Jews residing in this state. From various contemporary sources we would suggest the following statistics which should be considered as a framework for the several interpretations that follow. Until 1843 there were only individual Jews who came to or settled in Boston and Massachusetts. In that year the first

synagogue, Congregation Ohabei Shalom, was established. By 1845 there were approximately 200 Jews in Boston; by 1849, about 1000. In 1875 the Jewish population in the city numbered about 3000; in 1880, 7000; and by the end of the century, approximately 40,000. The only two figures available for the Jewish community in the State outside of Boston are 1500 Jews in the year 1880, and 14,000 for the year 1900.

The Jewish community in Boston and the Commonwealth of Massachusetts was very late in starting, and also contained many less Jews than the other major industrial areas in the East. Despite this, the pattern of Jewish development in Boston resembles that of all other major Jewish communities in the United States. The first actual group appearance of Jewish presence was a synagogue, as noted above. But despite efforts to maintain the all embracing services that the Jewish synagogue provided in Europe, almost all benevolent and social activities were soon provided by other institutions. In addition, the appearance of new houses of worship in no way kept pace with the growth of the community. Five years after the first, a second synagogue was established in Boston in 1849, and a third in 1854. Two synagogues were established in 1858, but none during the decade of the 1860's. Four synagogues appeared in the 1870's, and 16 in the 1880's.

Since the greatest growth of the Jewish community was in the last decade of the century, it would be natural to assume that a large number of synagogues would be established then. We have records of 45 different synagogues that appeared in Boston in the 1890's. Even if we add to this the 8 synagogues that still survived from the earlier period, this would give us a grand total of 53 synagogues for 40,000 people. Since the average synagogue in Boston at this time was very small, we can conclude that the vast majority of Jews in the city did not actively participate in religious services, and rarely, if ever, attended.

In its European setting, the synagogue supplied various needs to its members; social, religious, and even financial in time of illness and death. But very soon after the establishment of the first synagogue in Boston, two societies appeared--the Chevra Ahawath Achoth, or the Sisterly Love Society, as an adjunct of the synagogue in 1848, and a men's group, the Chevra Ahabath Achim (Brotherly Love Society), in 1849. This pattern of non-synagogue communal activity continued as the century progressed. Since this was also a period in history prior to Social Security and other welfare legislation, Americans in general had to look elsewhere for assistance during times of unemployment, illness and death. Very popular at this time throughout the United States were the various Jewish fraternal

associations with their local lodges which provided in addition to sociability, numerous insurance plans for times of need. In the city of Boston through the year 1900, no less than 53 Jewish lodges of this type came into existence; and these were supplemented by various charitable and benevolent associations, some of which provided the same benefits to members, and others which sought to provide similar services to the needy in the community at large. One can see the relative importance in the community of the synagogue and these other organizations by the number that were created. From 1843 to 1900, 69 synagogues were established in Boston. During the same period there appeared 130 charitable and benevolent associations, not including the 53 lodges noted before.

The programs of these institutions were diverse and varied and the detail can be discovered in the following pages. Suffice it to say that there was no existent need of the immigrant Jewish community that was not met. As examples, we can cite the East Boston Ladies Gmilas Chesed Association, which lent money without interest; the Free Employment Bureau which attempted to find jobs for immigrant Jews in the mills and industrial plants in New England; the Hebrew Emigrant Aid Society which provided "aid and advice" to Jewish immigrants; and the Baron Hirsch Dispensary and Hospital and the Jewish Dispensary for Women and Children which provided free medical care for the poor. Homes were also established for orphans and aged. It would be, indeed, difficult to find any social service provided in our own times, usually by government assistance, that was not attempted during the 19th century by the Jewish community in its efforts to better the conditions of fellow Jews.

Further evaluation of the data would seem to show that the immigrant Jew was somewhat ambivalent in his attitude toward America. Overwhelmed by conditions in the New World, on the one hand the immigrant tried to participate in the new social milieu and take advantage of the unprecedented economic and educational opportunities that were available; yet at the same time there was a constant desire to retain an identification with life in the Old World. Occasionally some groups were successful in melding the two. Symptomatic of the effort to retain identity with life in Europe were the various groups called landsmanshaften that came into being and whose membership was based exclusively on the place in the Old World from where the group arrived. The resulting institution varied in nature; in some instances these were synagogues, in others benevolent associations, social clubs, or Zionist societies. During the period under discussion no less than 54 groups of this type were established in Boston,

representing 34 geographic areas in Europe--a country, region or city. This data has additional interest because we can now for the first time document from where the immigrant Jews in Boston came.

Unlike other Jewish communities in the United States, Boston had no organized period of Sephardic immigration. We have already noted that the German period was late in starting, and contemporary reports assert that the Boston community was relatively small until the Russian Jews started to arrive in the 1880's. An analysis of the data would essentially substantiate many of these observations, but we can now add some previously unknown information. We must, of course, assume that it would take some time after arrival before an immigrant group would attempt to organize itself as a landsmanshaft, and that a substantial number of people from that region would have to be present. The first group which actually included the name of a foreign country in its title appeared in Boston in 1882 and utilized the name Russia. Before the turn of the century, five groups with the name Russia came into existence. The only other instance in which the name of a country was used was Austria, and although the first Austrian landsmanshaft was not established until 1885, 7 such organizations came into being by 1900. Austria, in fact, represented the largest number of landsmanshaften established by people from one location. We must therefore assume that starting in the 1880's a very large number of Jews arrived in Boston from Austria, a fact which has never been previously noted.

Among the 54 landsmanshaften, three regions from Eastern Europe are also represented--Kurland (three societies), Wolin (two), and Lithuania (one). The remaining 29 areas for which landsmanshaften appeared were all cities in various sections of the Russian Empire. We can assume that at first a landsmanshaft could only be established by individuals who came from a large region. As the century progressed a sufficient number of immigrants arrived to permit the luxury of a formation of a group from the same small Russian town or village. Social scientists and immigration historians have often questioned what motivated the movement of Jews from one community in Europe to a specific area in the United States-- friends, neighbors, members of the family? Perhaps the data we have gathered does not answer the question definitively, but we can note that within a period of ten years there did appear in Boston two landsmanshaften each from the cities of Birsen and Prenner, three from Vilna, and no less than four different organizations from the town of Vilkomir.

What attraction the city of Boston had for the people of Vilkomir is hard to explain. We do have the names of the incorporators of three of the groups. Five not-too-common family names repeat themselves among these founders, and at least two individuals were responsible for the appearance of two different groups.

On the other side of the coin, the immigrant community attempted in many ways to model itself after American society. No less than 45 different social clubs were established, catering to various elements in the community and to various levels of the social strata. It is understandable that many schools would be set up and we have records of at least 18 such attempts, the majority devoted to Hebrew studies but at least one providing vocational training and housekeeping. Also apparent in this communal effort is the role of women, who were responsible for establishing no less than 42 different societies to serve every conceivable social and charitable need. It has often been noted that Boston was a major center for Zionism in America. This view is readily substantiated by the fact that no less than 17 different Zionist groups came into being, many of them a number of years before the appearance of Herzl or the first Zionist Congress in 1897. Could the unusual interest in Zionism perhaps be explained by the fact that Boston had not been particularly hospitable to Jewish immigrants for over 200 years, and consequently a substantial number of the new arrivals viewed their stay here as something temporary before a permanent Jewish homeland could be attained?

As in all historic events, there are certain unusual or unique phenomena, which are of interest to mention. There are recorded only two instances of benevolent associations established by employees of a single firm. These two were the firms of Abraham Shuman and Company, a large department store, and H. M. Hillson, manufacturer of tin ware. Is there something in the Jewish ethic, or is it merely a series of coincidences that both Shuman and Hillson were prominent figures in the Boston Jewish community, that they both employed a large number of immigrant Jews, that they both permitted their employees to establish benevolent associations and that the most active members in these organizations happened to be Jewish?

As further examples of the efforts of the Jew to adopt American customs, we should note the appearance of no less than three different Jewish baseball clubs in 1883, a sporting club in 1892 and a whist club in 1893; and we should also mention the Sixth Company Infantry Mass. Provincial Militia, established immediately after the outbreak of the Spanish-American War, which was comprised exclusively of 46 Jews.

Attempts were also made within the Jewish community to organize as groups of businessmen, professionals and workers. The first to appear was the Boston Clothing Manufacturers Association, established in 1886, and was followed by the Boston Traders' Benefit Association; Boston Young Business Men's Association, and the Boston Hebrew Business Men's Association. On the professional level there appeared the Hebrew Master Baker's Association, the Boston Hebrew Painter's Association, and (by stretching our definition) the Hebrew Peddlers Association and the Mercantile Peddlers' Association. Representing the worker were the Boston Jewish Carpenter Union, the Boston Pressman's Union, the Boston Sheet Metal Workers Union, the Boston Vest Pressman's Association, the Cloth, Hat and Cap Makers Union, the Fraternal Garment Workers Association, the Hebrew Building Trades Protective Association, the Independent Ladies Tailors and Dressmakers Union, the Pants Makers Union, the Skirt and Cloakmakers Union, and the Vestmakers Union. In each instance these organizations were either exclusively or almost exclusively comprised of Jews.

Finally, a series of organizations were established to encourage Jewish participation in the democratic process and become politically active in their new environment. Three of these groups--the East Boston Club, the Hebrew Sound Money League, and the West End Hebrew Educational Club--were established specifically to encourage Jews to vote, while the Leopold Morse Democratic Association and the Democratic Jews of the North End served as political clubs for the immigrant community.

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An analysis of the data which has been collected dealing with the Massachusetts Jewish communities outside of Boston is also revealing. Did the Jew in the small rural community adjust in a different way than his counterpart in the large city or not? We have been most fortunate in locating information on Jewish groups that appeared in 23 Massachusetts cities and towns. At first glance it would seem that the types of organizations that appeared were not much different than those that came into being in the large immigrant center of Boston. But there are some striking differences. Of the 133 groups that have been recorded, not one was a landsmanshaft. Apparently none of the smaller cities of Massachusetts was able to attract a large enough group from a single European locale to produce such an institution.

On the basis of demographic data available for the year 1900, we find that different communities responded differently in the creation of Jewish organizations. At one end of the spectrum

is Fall River, with a population of 5000 Jews, which produced no more than 18 Jewish groups. On the other end is the community of Worcester with 1000 Jews, which established no less than 27. How did conditions in these two communities differ to produce such disparate results? The following figures reflect conditions in other communities in Massachusetts:

Chelsea (population 2000)	15	organizations
Haverhill	(300)	6
Holyoke	(200)	5
Lawrence	(600)	8
Lowell	(750)	8
Lynn	(unknown)	6
New Bedford	(850)	7
Pittsfield	(350)	7
Springfield	(300)	10

It does seem strange that in Springfield a Jewish organization appeared for approximately every 30 Jews, and in Holyoke, one for every 40. Could it be that these communities were so isolated and distant from any center of Jewish population that their inhabitants demonstrated their Jewishness by affiliating with various groups? One other point can be noted for the smaller communities. The number of synagogues in each instance in proportion to the total Jewish population, was much higher than in the city of Boston. Could a factor in this phenomenon have been the fact that church attendance in the smaller communities was relatively much greater than in Boston, and did consequently synagogue attendance provide the Jewish immigrant with ethnic identity?

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There are several overall conclusions and observations that can be made from all the data that has been collected, as well as recommendations for further study. In many of the documents, especially those presented to the Commonwealth at the time of incorporation, there are listed the addresses of many of the members. Utilizing this information and the local directories, we can discover where the Jewish community was located and what population movements took place, if any. In many of the reports of the fraternal lodges, there is an indication of the language used at meetings, which can give us further insight into the linguistic adaptability of the Jewish immigrant. Finally, some effort should be made to analyze why so many groups came into existence. A check of government records and the published accounts of other immigrant groups indicates that similar organizations were established by almost every other ethnic

community, but not in the quantity that was created by Jews. We can see in the following pages that in many instances the same individuals were involved in the formation of numerous organizations, and at times, apparently members of the same family. Was there something in the makeup of certain individuals that was a factor? Or can we explain this phenomenon by the fact that Jews, after hundreds of years of suppression, were finally exposed to a society with unlimited freedom? Did perhaps many Jews feel that one simple inexpensive and positive way of participating in this new liberty was to establish a society free from government control or other outside limitations? Perhaps this will explain the fact that two organizations appeared in Boston nine years apart, comprised of members from the small community of Birsen, Russia; many of the incorporators have similar names and are no doubt related, but what is most striking are the two titles of the organizations which, while not the "King's English", very adequately portrays their makeup-- the Brotherhood of Birsen Association, and the Sistership of Birson Association. Does the establishment of these two organizations reflect in some subtle way how these Jewish immigrants identified with, and participated in, the great American Dream?

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Material in the accompanying pages is not only fascinating in its own right, but also offers great potential for further exploitation. An examination in depth should be undertaken of the manner in which the 19th century immigrant Jewish community participated in the general Boston community, and how it in turn was shaped by life in Boston. This effort should also be extended to the 20th century, until the period in the 1920's when mass immigration into America finally ceased; and ultimately research should also be undertaken for other ethnic groups in Massachusetts to provide us with comparative data and additional insight into the nature of the mosaic of American life and culture.