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Deborah Dash Moore, Howard B. Rock, Annie Polland, Daniel Soyer, Jeffrey S. Gurock. *City of Promises: A History of the Jews of New York.* New York: New York University Press, 2012. 3 volumes. 1,000 pp. $125.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8147-1731-8.

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City of Promises

This three-volume history of Jews in New York City is a landmark study and a remarkable work of synthesis. Under the guidance of editor Deborah Dash Moore, four well-known specialists of New York Jewish history examine the topic in three different phases: the colonial period and the decades from the Revolution to the Civil War (Howard B. Rock); the period of mass immigration from 1840 to 1920 (Daniel Soyer and Annie Polland); and the decades from 1920 to 2010 (Jeffrey S. Gurock). Each volume contains the general introduction by Moore and a short "visual essay," a discussion of selected images from the respective period, by art historian Diana L. Linden. The volumes are accessible to general readers but also speak to a more scholarly audience.

Home to the largest concentration of Jews for most of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, "New York" defies easy categorization in modern Jewish history. In 1942, on the eve of the Holocaust, the great Jewish historian Salo W. Baron observed, "Today probably over three million Jews, or nearly one-fifth of all world Jewry, live within one hundred miles of Times Square. There is an enormous difference between a Jewish community counting a few hundred or a few thousand members and the new gigantic agglomerations of Jews found in New York City or even in Chicago, Philadelphia, London, Moscow, Budapest and other great cities."[1] The enormous diversity of a huge and growing Jewish population, concentrated in a few neighborhoods, constituted a new phenomenon. In his 1930 study *Soziologie der Juden* (Sociology of the Jews), Arthur Ruppin (1873–1943) judged New York as the epitome of a process that he characterized as Jewish "metropolization." Like the rest of the population in Europe and North America, Ruppin observed, Jews began moving in growing numbers to cities after 1800, but Jewish urbanization rates were disproportionately high, and Jews preferred especially very large (often capital) cities: Vienna, Budapest, Warsaw, London, Berlin, Moscow, Petrograd/Leningrad, Philadelphia, Chicago, and above all New York, which he described as a "Jewish world in itself." In some parts of the city, a few blocks were home to more Jews than some of the larger European countries. Ruppin, a Zionist who left Berlin for Palestine in 1908, judged the Jewish mass movement to the cities critically. In very large cities, however, Jewish "agglomerations" might bring about new Jewish milieus.[2]

The question whether assimilation will lead to the eventual disappearance of Jews as a group, or whether cities (outside of Israel) with large Jewish populations, in particular New York, are nurturing new Jewish identities and new forms of Jewish *Gemeinschaft*, is as contested today as it was during the twentieth century. Gurock, the author of the final volume, takes an optimistic view. He describes Jewish New York, even after suburbanization and the significant loss of population after World War II, as a place where "over a million Jews still sustained sufficient diversity to fuel activist dreams, to create communities of solidarity, and to transform promises into realities" (p. 209). Closely related is the question how Jewish New York, as the quintessential center of the Jewish Diaspora or–as Polland and Soyer put it–as "capital of the Jewish world" (p. 137), redefined itself after the founding of the State of Israel in 1948. As the "City of Promises," New York represents a contrasting model to the new old

Promised Land, the State of Israel.

Since the nineteenth century, scholars, writers, and artists have explored and pondered about many details of the fascinating encounters between Jews and New York. The Jewish history of New York is better researched than that of other large American cities. Summarizing the vibrant, rich scholarship on a very large, diverse, and fluctuating group living in and shaping a transforming global city constitutes a remarkable challenge for historians. Moore and the individual authors not only have assessed the existing scholarship, but also have struck the right balance between the main themes defining Jewish history in New York.

The overall title of the study *City of Promises* is inspired by Moses Rischin's 1962 classic *The Promised City: New York's Jews, 1870-1914.* Rischin examined the impact of the rapid transformation of Jewish New York during the period of mass immigration between 1870 and 1914. As Moore points out in her foreword, Rischin "saw a universal paradigm of modernization unfolding in the very particularistic experience of New York Jews" (p. xiv). This statement serves as a guiding principle for the study. New York is not just a city with a remarkable Jewish history that can be traced almost to the earliest days of New Amsterdam. In New York, Jews found a safe haven, were well respected by their Gentile neighbors, and had many opportunities, at a time when most Jews in Europe were marginalized second-class citizens, subject to discrimination and with limited economic prospects, or worse. Jews in New York were not idle bystanders. They joined other New Yorkers in building and "making" their city. Most, even if facing economic hardship themselves, felt obliged to support Jews in other centers of the Diaspora who were less fortunate. During and after the First World War and in the aftermath of the Holocaust, two associations based in New York, the Hebrew Immigrant and Sheltering Society (HIAS) and the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, provided crucial support.

Like Rischin and other historians, the authors of this study do not romanticize Jewish life in the city, pointing to economic pressures, tensions with other groups, and anti-Semitic discrimination. In contrast to smaller American cities, the size of the community and its visible presence represented an unusual degree of protection and even power. Jews in New York exercised influence at the ballot box and as workers who went on strike, even though they were often divided. The authors do highlight the achievements of individual Jews, as artists, writers, and journalists, and in the scholarly world, business, and politics. Yet instead of highlighting contributions by (later) famous Jews, such as writer Philip Roth or actress and singer Barbra Streisand (both are not mentioned), they focus on average children, women, and men, and their individual experiences as Jews in New York.

The broader context frequently recedes in the background. For example, during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when Jews represented a relatively small group, they enjoyed more privileges than Catholics. The members of Shearith Israel dedicated the city's first synagogue in 1730, decades before the first Catholic house of worship opened its doors. Gurock, discussing the involvement of Jews in the city's politics and especially devoting much attention to the relationships between Jews and African Americans, does a better job in situating the position of different groups of Jews and their relations to their neighbors in the complex and fluctuating urban society than the other authors. Nevertheless, each volume strikes the right balance between politics, economic and business history, residential mobility, and religious and cultural history. Yet more could have been written about the relationship of Jews in New York to other Jews, across the United States, in Europe, and in Israel. (Jewish) New York was (and remains) a crucial point of reference for American Jews and many Jews outside of the United States. Many passed through the city on their way to their eventual destination. Some remained for a few months or years. Others visited regularly for business or for meetings of Jewish philanthropic organizations, religious institutions, and scholarly groups. And for more than a few, "New York" remained out of reach, an unfulfilled dream, especially between 1925 and 1965 when the United States pursued a restrictive immigration policy.

The division into three partly overlapping time periods for the different volumes is sensible. This decision provided the authors with more freedom to approach their period from their respective vantage point. The five-volume series *The Jewish People in America* (1992), for instance, is much more rigidly subdivided. The authors of *City Promises,* however, faced strikingly different tasks. Rock tackles a relatively well-researched and manageable topic. The literature on Jewish life in colonial America is easy to overview and quite a few key sources have been published, not least in the earlier volumes of the *Proceedings of the American Jewish Historical Society.* Suffice it to say, Rock makes good use of the existing scholarship. Soyer and Polland took on a much more challenging job, trying to examine the impact of mass immigration and the rise of Jewish New York within a

few decades. Not only did they have to survey a huge body of studies, but they also had to provide a balanced assessment of the most dramatic period in American Jewish history. For the foreseeable future, their volume will be the best starting point for students and scholars researching Jewish history in New York between the 1860s and the 1920s. Gurock ventures, at least in part, into relatively new territory, relying on the works of social scientists, journalists, and writers, and, judging from the endnotes, on extensive archival research. His volume is certainly the most interesting one for readers familiar with New York Jewish history.

The State of Israel does not figure prominently in this study. Moore does not even mention Israel in her general foreword that precedes each volume, and Gurock treats it only in a few very short passages. For example, he refers repeatedly to the divisive head of the Jewish Defense League, Meir Kahane, but does not discuss his relationship to and political career in Israel. New York occupies a special place in Israeli history and memory, because some New Yorkers made Aliyah and many New York Jews have family in Israel. The status of Israel (and Palestine) was partly determined and repeatedly discussed at the United Nations, regularly drawing most of the key protagonists (as well as supporters and protesters) to the Upper East Side in the last fifty years. One could also point out that some of the Haredim communities in New York, notably Chabad, maintain close links to followers in Israel.

The treatment of Israel hints at a conscious choice made by the editor and the authors: to write their history of Jewish New York from within rather than from without. That has many advantages, especially in regard to the proven expertise of the authors and their knowledge of details unknown even to New Yorkers. But taking the inside perspective also has shortcomings. The national and transnational dimension of New York as a "capital of the Jewish world" is not analyzed sufficiently. This criticism, however, does in no way diminish the extraordinary effort and scholarship reflected in these volumes. One can only hope that this three-volume history of Jews in New York will serve as a model for future studies about Jews in other American cities.

Notes

[1]. Salo W. Baron, *The Jewish Community: Its History and Structure to the American Revolution* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1942), 1:26.

[2]. Arthur Ruppin, *Soziologie der Juden* (Berlin: Jüdischer Verlag, 1930), 1:111, 115–116, 118.

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