

American Jewish History in a Global Context

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The lives of Jews in American colonies before the United States declared independence in 1776 took place within a global context. Therefore, major developments in Jewish America, both past and present, need to be understood in relation to Jews across the globe as well as to world events.

First, and perhaps most important, it was not until 1930 that a majority of American Jews were born in the United States. Before then, most had immigrated from other places. In those places—the Netherlands and the Caribbean before the establishment of the United States, followed by the German-speaking lands of Central Europe, and later regions within the Austro-Hungarian, Czarist Russian, and Ottoman Empires—Jews endured significant political and social upheavals. Wars, economic disruptions, and, at times, brutal persecution forced millions to seek new homes. From the 1830s through the 1920s, over three million Jews migrated to the United States.¹

Jews arrived in what would become the United States in 1654. From that time forward, they maintained deep and important ties with Jewish communities across the globe. In the early period, particularly through the 1820s, these connections were primarily economic. Jews in British North America (and later, the United States) engaged in trade with Jewish merchants in the Caribbean, England, the Netherlands, and beyond. In many cases, they formed business partnerships with other Jews across these regions. Known as **Sepharadim**, due to their roots in the Iberian Peninsula, they often married within their community, arranging matches for their children throughout the Sephardic **diaspora**. They also supported one another in times of need. For example, when New York's fledgling congregation, Shearith Israel, required **Torah** scrolls for religious worship in the 1680s, Jews in the British colony of Jamaica supplied them with the sacred texts.²

Like other **immigrants** to the United States, Jews left behind family and friends. About one-third of Jews from these regions emigrated to the United States, while the remaining two-thirds stayed behind. Despite the distance, they remained in contact. Advances in communication and transportation gradually made it easier for those in America to send messages and financial support to relatives facing economic hardship. Their letters often included news about life in America and, after the 1870s, steamship tickets to help family members reunite in their new homes.

¹ Hasia R. Diner, *The Jews of the United States, 1654 to 2000* (University of California Press, 2004), 71-111.

² Eli Faber, *Volume I: A Time for Planting: The First Migration, 1654-1820* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992).



A photograph of young boys in New York City waiting for the Jewish paper, *Forwards*, to come off the press at 1:00 a.m. Library of Congress (2018677528).

Jewish newspapers published in Europe and the Ottoman Empire contained information about America in general and about its Jews in particular. Jews living across the globe could read about the fate of the Jews who had **emigrated** to the United States. For the most part, those articles depicted America as a place with little **antisemitism** and where Jews were free to make a living and build communities as they wanted. This news, as it filtered to places around the globe, stimulated interest in and admiration of America, creating what was often referred to as “America fever,” the burning desire of Jews in places with limited freedom and access to resources to immigrate.³



A postcard with the text “A Happy New Year” written in English and Hebrew, published by the Hebrew Publishing Company between 1900 and 1920. Library of Congress (2004672480).

WHAT'S IN A WORD?

The following terms all describe people who move, but each highlights a different perspective or type of movement.

- › **Emigrant:** someone who moves away from a country.
- › **Immigrant:** someone arrives as a migrant to a different country. One must emigrate to immigrate, but the definitions distinguish who is in discussion in a particular nation and context.

³ Tobias Brinkmann, *Between Borders: The Great Jewish Migration from Eastern Europe* (Oxford University Press, 2024).

The aid and communication that linked Jews in the United States with Jews abroad extended beyond family ties. Jewish immigrants from hundreds of towns in Eastern Europe—particularly in areas that became part of independent Poland after 1918—formed **landsmanshaftn**, or hometown societies. Based in cities like New York and Chicago, these organizations provided support to immigrants from their communities while also regularly sending money to assist those who remained in their hometowns.⁴

The need to provide assistance became particularly acute with the outbreak of World War I, as Jews were trapped between warring armies. Many Jewish towns across the European continent were destroyed, and countless numbers of Jews found themselves homeless, fleeing one army or the other. In 1914, the *landsmanshaftn* in America, along with other American Jewish organizations, founded the American Jewish Joint Distribution Society (JDC). It collected millions of dollars to send back to assist fellow Jews in distant locations. This aid went not just to friends and family but to Jewish communities as a whole. Individual members of some *landsmanshaftn* traveled on fact-finding missions to assess the destruction and continuing needs of these communities. As an organization, it participated in the reconstruction of Jewish communities after the war.⁵

The JDC responded to crises throughout the interwar period. In the early 1920s, the newly established Soviet Union (USSR), under Communist rule, banned private business in an effort to promote collective enterprises. This was particularly disruptive for the millions of Jews who relied on trade for their livelihood. In response, Chicago-based philanthropist Julius Rosenwald, one of the JDC's founders, created a spinoff organization called the American



A photograph showing shopkeepers receiving aid from the Joint Distribution Committee, c.1920. Photograph from the Archives of the Joint Distribution Committee, held by the Library of Congress (2021670912).

⁴ Daniel Soyer, *Jewish Immigrant Associations and American Identity in New York: 1880-1939* (Harvard University Press, 1997).

⁵ To learn more about the scope of Jewish charity and philanthropy, see the article by Beth Wenger in this volume.

Jewish Joint Agricultural Corporation, or Agro-Joint. It sent millions of dollars to the Soviet Union to establish agricultural colonies for Jews in Ukraine and Crimea, both then part of the USSR.⁶ In the decades from the 1930s through the end of World War II, the JDC sent money and material goods to suffering Jews in Europe, including those that had been confined in the ghettos of Nazi Germany and Nazi-occupied territory.

The JDC helped Jews leave Europe and escape the grip of Nazism, and worked in partnership with the United Jewish Appeal (UJA), that was founded in the United States to address the global Jewish crisis. Together, the JDC and the UJA expedited Jewish settlement to the United States, Canada, Great Britain, parts of Latin America, as well as to Shanghai, China, the Caribbean (particularly the Dominican Republic), British colonies in Africa, and wherever they could find sympathetic governments which might allow in Jewish refugees. After the war, the JDC helped run the Displaced Persons (DP) camps set up by the U.S. Army in occupied Germany to accommodate the million or so stateless and homeless Jews. The on-the-ground work of these global Jewish organizations was made possible by the charitable contributions of American Jews.⁷

Jewish newspapers and magazines in the United States were full of articles about the needs of Jews in distress all over the world. Jewish organizations in the United States, including the National Council of Jewish Women, Hadassah, the Women's American Organization for Rehabilitation through Training, and so many more, prodded their members to give to these Jews in need, and after 1948, to the Jews in the newly declared State of Israel.

Jewish organizations like the B'nai Brith (founded in 1843), the Board of Delegates of American Hebrews (1859), and the American Jewish Committee (1905) attempted to convince the United States government to use its diplomatic and economic clout to improve the conditions of Jews around the world. The leaders and members of these organizations were alerted to the many challenges Jews faced in one place after another, and beseeched presidents, secretaries of state, and members of Congress to help their co-religionists in other lands who confronted difficult circumstances. The political actions of American Jews, while always concerned with domestic matters, paid close attention to events affecting Jews around the world. By the end of World War II, as the United States was the leader of the free world, American Jewish notables and organizations pushed the United States government to use its global prowess to help global Jewish causes.

By the end of the Second World War, the American Jewish community was the largest, freest, and wealthiest Jewish community in the world. The Jews of the United States, through their organizations and publications, declared that the fate of world Jewry, whether in Israel, the Soviet Union, or elsewhere, was their particular responsibility.⁸

From their first arrival in the seventeenth century until the present, Jews in the United States have been bound to Jews around the world through religion and culture. New ideas about Judaism as a religion and Jewish political life circulated globally. Jews in America read books, saw plays, and heard sermons by Jews throughout Europe.

⁶ Avinoam Patt, Atina Grossman, Linda Levi, and Maud Mandel, eds. *The JDC at 100: A Century of Humanitarianism* (Wayne State University Press, 2019).

⁷ Kaplan, *Hitler's Jewish Refugees: Hope and Anxiety in Portugal* (Yale University Press, 2020); Marion Kaplan, *Dominican Haven: The Jewish Refugee Settlement in Sosua, 1940-1945* (Museum of the Jewish Heritage, 2008).

⁸ Gary Dean Best, *To Free a People: American Jewish Leaders and the Jewish Problem in Eastern Europe, 1890-1914* (Greenwood Press, 1982).

European **rabbis** came to lead American congregations, and they brought with them ideas about religious practice. Reciprocally, ideas that blossomed in the United States, particularly about women's equality within Judaism, rights of gay people, new forms of worship and rituals, migrated to Europe and Israel via American rabbis. Once Israel attained statehood, Jews (including rabbis) began migrating there, many from the United States, and imported new and distinctly American practices to a society in which only the strictest religious **orthodoxy** had previously prevailed.⁹

Likewise, an exchange of ideas between American Jewry and Jewish communities elsewhere created a shared global Jewish culture. Some American Jewish organizations established branches globally. For example, the B'nai B'rith appealed to various Jewish communities, leading to the founding of lodges in various German cities, across the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and the Middle East, in places like Cairo and Jerusalem, following the American model. In 1897, Sigmund Freud, the founder of the field of psychology, gave his first public address on the subject to the B'nai B'rith in Vienna.¹⁰



Poster supporting Jews in the Soviet Union, created by the U.S. National Conference on Soviet Jewry, c.1967–1978. Library of Congress (2016648484).

Along with the global networks of institutions and changes to Jewish practice and life, major political movements also shook the foundations of the Jewish world into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Examples of these movements include Political **Zionism**, which advocated for a Jewish homeland in Palestine, and the Jewish labor movement. Political Zionism, first developed in Europe in the 1890s, had a mixed reception among American Jews. Many were hesitant to potentially forfeit their hard-won acceptance in American society by declaring allegiance to another foreign nation-state. At the same time, others saw the creation of a Jewish state as fully compatible with American life, as modelled by their non-Jewish American immigrant ethnic neighbors, who maintained ties to their own nations of origin (Irish-American, German-American, Polish-American, etc.).

The end of the nineteenth century also saw the beginnings of the Jewish labor movement, infused with Marxist ideas about class and the class struggle and again, while born in Europe, it moved to America via individual immigrants, books, pamphlets, magazines, and speakers who moved around the global Jewish world.¹¹

This worldwide connection of Jewish people, ideas, texts, and traditions was multi-directional. These exchanges connect the Jewish world broadly, truly constituting a global Jewish community with the United States at the center.

⁹ Oz Frankel, *Coca-Cola, Black Panthers, and Phantom Jets: Israel in the American Orbit, 1967-1973* (Stanford University Press, 2024), 194-294.

¹⁰ Cornelia Wilhelm, *The Independent Order of B'nai B'rith and True Sisters: Pioneers of a New Jewish Identity, 1843-1914* (Wayne State University Press, 2011).

¹¹ Mark A. Raider, *The Emergence of American Zionism* (New York University Press, 1998).