Doing Business in America

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The history of business as a decisive factor in American Jewish life can be charted as a global matter and as a national one. Jews conducted their businesses from America around the world and across the nation. Business, the buying and selling of goods, the extension of credit and the financing of money-making enterprises grounded Jews in America to constant national and transnational projects, extending over time from the seventeenth century.

But business also took place at the most intimate local level and American Jewish communities, large and small, took their basic shape from business, from commerce and consumption. While Jewish communities served historically as places where Jews worshipped together, provided charity, protected each other, and fulfilled basic religiously-shaped needs including marriage, burial, circumcision, education, and the like, they also derived much from the fact that they existed as places where Jews bought from other Jews and where Jews sold to their co-religionists. These communities functioned as places where Jews extended credit to each other, employed each other, and relied on their co-religionists as customers and purveyors of goods.

Indeed the life of Jewish enclaves hummed around the constant flurry of buying and selling that took place on “the Jewish street” with no clear line separating the religious, social, and political definitions of “Jewish community” and...
the flow of goods among Jews. Rather, the commercial transactions, the “buzz” of the Jewish marketplace made the other, presumably loftier functions possible, at the same time that stores and other kinds of commercial places often did double-duty as either formal or informal community centers.

Wherever and whenever Jews coalesced to form communities, they transacted business with each other and made the exchange of goods for money a key element of in-group interaction. What differed from place to place and across time reflected changing Jewish residential patterns, differentials in the size of Jewish communities, technological developments which affected how goods got bought and sold, and the degree to which the state regulated economic activities. But regardless of the historic moment and the geography, commerce and consumption helped make community and provided physical locations for the kinds of interactions among Jews that fostered connectedness, a key element of community.

Buying and selling among and between Jews lay at the heart of Jewish life in as much as Jewish enclaves thrived upon the commercial relationships which brought Jews into constant contact with each other, whereby the marketplace took its basic characteristic from the flow of the Jewish calendar, and according to which Jewish neighborhoods thrummed according to a tempo set by Jewish merchants who provided goods to Jewish customers. They in turn demanded that Jewish entrepreneurs satisfy their yearnings for particular goods, at specified times, and in particular ways. Consumer and entrepreneur depended upon each other, spinning a web of reciprocal relationships which bound them together. While conflict also, and indeed always, characterized intra-Jewish commercial transactions, the degree to which Jews depended upon each other for basic and special goods, invested the entrepreneurial sector with cultural meaning and made it a vehicle for creating and sustaining community.

Whether the commercial transactions functioned smoothly and harmoniously, or conflict arose as the two groups sparred with each other on matters such as cost versus quality, their continuous interactions with each other created a common business zone, forging intimate connections which provided the bedrock of community life. Whole histories of Jewish communities could in fact be told from the vantage point of the mundane reality that wherever Jews lived they sold to and bought from each other, and the shopping street, no less than the synagogue, the study house, the ritual bath, cemetery, or community center, forged the bonds of mutuality.

The sellers and the buyers each played crucial roles in the chain of relationships which made community possible. Those who hoped to make a
profit, obviously the merchants, and those who yearned to purchase desired items of the highest quality for the lowest price, the consumers, probably had in mind merely their own instrumental and petty goals when facing each other. Doubtless neither party to the transaction thought “community” when they saw the other across the counters of thousands upon thousands of Jewish-owned shops, nor did they consciously ponder the fact that by purchasing or selling a loaf of bread, a pad of paper, or a pair of socks, that they helped sustain the collective Jewish life and that their behaviors constituted historically significant actions. They probably had no reason to see beyond the shelves and the cash registers in the stores and the larders and cabinets of their homes.

The complicated processes involved in the purveying and purchasing of goods within Jewish communities can and ought to be historicized, divided into categories of analysis, yet always linked to ideas about community. The ordinariness of selling and shopping did not make the matter historically irrelevant. Rather the quotidian commercial concerns of Jewish communities gave them deep social, cultural, and political meanings.¹

That businesses, large and small, wholesale and retail, served larger communal purposes obviously transcends the history of Jews in America or anywhere. As one historian of shopping as a factor in English social history noted, “Wherever we live, whoever we are, our shopping is very much a reflection of ourselves” (Harrison 5). Most of the literature, however, has tended to emphasize the nature of goods up for sale, patterns of consumption, and changing tastes (see McCracken). Few, either focusing on the United States or elsewhere, and whether historically based or concerned with the contemporary, have twinned the idea of community with that of commerce. Yet shopping streets, wherever and whenever they developed, functioned as common space, places where individuals met, interacted, saw what they shared with each other, and in the process of buying and selling carved out a zone for public life.

Therefore, how and where Jews bought goods, how they used commercial spaces for communal purposes, and what kinds of relationships existed between merchants and customers ought to be part of our scholarly projects. Opening up the category of community to the ubiquitous issue of buying and selling broadens the analytic framework in general and also makes relatively ordinary Jewish people, women as shoppers and sellers, in particular, key players in the creation of community.

Jews did not alone function in communities based on local, everyday business. In the context of American history we have examples from a number of subfields as to the importance of retail space in the forging of community.
ties. Studies of small town life, both the empirical and the nostalgic, have made much about the country store as a gathering place that bound people together. Lewis Atherton in his 1954 homage to the dying small towns of the midwest, the “middle border,” offered an entire chapter to the shopping areas of the towns which served primarily farm families. In particular he pointed to the classic general store, a place where men and women congregated in different areas and where “close to the stove and the conversation” the shopkeeper tallied his ledger and supervised the flow of the shopping. *Main Street on the Middle Border* also made emotionally and historically significant the barbershops, hotels, saloons, and livery stables that lined the village thoroughfares and where men and women met, bought, sold, talked, and made community (44). The Reifel store in Four Corners, Iowa, a town analyzed by historian Carol Coburn, provided the men of this rural, heavily German community with “a gathering place at night . . . where they gathered to exchange the latest news.” The store, as analyzed by Coburn, served as the least problematic, and most positive, common denominator for the men who otherwise divided over matters of politics, religious doctrine, and the lure of American culture. Only the store functioned as an uncontested community space (22).

The histories of all minority communities, like the German enclave of Four Corners, could be told from the vantage point of the ethnic marketplace and the multiple functions served by the buying and selling of goods within the community. No immigrant or ethnic community existed without the commercial infrastructure in which group members shopped in stores owned by co-ethnics and in particular imagined those shops to be key places to fulfill group needs. John Bodnar has elevated the ethnic merchants in *The Transplanted* to their rightful place as community leaders, noting in this broad synthetic book, that “In every settlement a group emerged to pursue entrepreneurial ventures which depended upon the support of the immigrant community.” He offers then bits and pieces of evidence drawn from numerous histories of various groups which demonstrate how ethnic neighborhood businesses served “neighborhood clienteles,” although he does not go much further than that in analyzing the role played by those stores in enabling communities to form (131–38).

The historical scholarship on nearly every ethnic group has been replete with listings and descriptions of food establishments, bookstores, music stores, taverns, and clothing stores which through commerce made it possible to “be” a participant in the ethnic project. The more sophisticated of these studies, like George Sanchez’s *Becoming Mexican American* put such ethnic businesses as record shops and clothing stores squarely into the analytic framework,
showing how merchants and consumers mediated between “old world” formats and American realities and how the stores functioned as meeting places for Mexicans in Los Angeles, thereby creating sites for the growing community. In Sanchez’s Boyle Heights record shops, merchants not only arbitrated between the many musical formats derived from various regions in Mexico and between music defined as Mexican versus American, but the music emanating from the shops drew customers in, put them in conversation with the merchants, with each other, and solidified notions of Mexicanness and community membership. Lizabeth Cohen’s *Making of a New Deal* charted the close relationships which existed in Chicago’s immigrant neighborhoods between shopkeepers and customers, co-ethnics. The former not only provided needed goods to the latter, but by offering credit to struggling families, the grocers became brokers in the political and economic life of the communities.

Notably, though, few historians, studying any ethnic community in the United States, have done more than mention in passing the vast amount of commerce that linked merchants and customers of the various enclaves. Histories of one group or another contain what might be seen as an obligatory paragraph or two on the range of stores that community members favored and sustained, drawing attention to which goods shoppers preferred. The historians have, by and large, not paused longer to actually study the phenomenon directly, systematically, or thoroughly.

Rather, political scientists and sociologists studying the post-1965 immigration have drawn our attention to the analytic gravitas of entrepreneurship (and consumership) in the construction of ethnic communities. Ivan Light and Edna Bonacich, for example, in their study of Korean *Immigrant Entrepreneurs* in Los Angeles have provided a theoretical model which distinguishes between an entity they called “the ethnic economy” which, unlike the “ethnic enclave economy” does not require “loational clustering of ethnic firms, nor does it require that ethnic firms service members of their ethnic group as customers or buy from coethnic suppliers” (xi). Like sociologist Alejandro Portes in his numerous studies of the Cuban enclave economy of Miami, Light and Bonacich, invest significant analytic significance in the social, economic, and political implications of the clustering of Korean-owned businesses located in the heart of Los Angeles’ “Korean Town,” and the almost inexorable draw of those stores for the residents of the neighborhood.

Historians of ethnic communities in the United States might indeed learn much from the work of the social scientists who focus now on the contemporary processes of immigration and ethnicization. The latter observe these
developments as they unfold and see, how crucial a role the ethnic markets play the streets of America’s new immigrant neighborhoods.

Enclave commerce ran through American Jewish history and that history points to the intricate links between business and the ways in which American Jews lived in their Jewish communities. Not only did the buying and selling of Jewish “stuff” have long historic roots but those ordinary, constantly repeated commercial acts lay close to the heart of what it meant for American Jews to live in their Jewish communities. American Jews invested meaning in their marketplaces, and defined them as key sites in the construction of both identity and lived life.

In terms of types of Jewish commercial transactions as they lay at the center of the history of Jewish community life a number of categories suggest themselves. First, some of the goods that flowed along the Jewish commercial chain fell clearly in the domain of what has commonly been assumed to be essential to the practice of Judaism. As such the commercial sector never stood apart from the religious. Merchants who sold kosher foods, those who marketed particular delicacies associated with Sabbath and holidays, those who enticed customers with new clothing for festivals, as well as the merchants who displayed new pots and pans, crockery and cutlery in the weeks before Passover provided the material underpinnings that enabled holy time to be marked and lived. Likewise the sellers of books, almanacs, greeting cards, magazines, candles, and various objects which carried religious or ethnic valence, acted through the medium of their commercial transaction as religious functionaries. Their displaying and selling of particular “things” on a weekly or seasonal basis fostered a Jewish tone and helped infuse the streets with a sense of Jewish time.

For those who purchased these goods, their many and repeated acts of shopping and the range of merchants they depended upon to secure these goods, all made possible such sacred acts as marking the Sabbath, making the holiday, and the fulfillment of a continuous set of other religious mandates. Indeed given the degree to which Judaism functioned first and foremost as a home and family based religious system, the masses of Jews depended more upon merchants and their stores in order to perform Jewish rituals than they did upon synagogues and rabbis. As such, not only can the commercial life of the Jewish street not be distinguished from the performance of religious obligations, but rather that life stood at the forefront of getting ready for ritual activities.

The literature as it exists now, despite the fact that few have scholars have devoted much specific attention to the web of relationships which linked
Jewish shops to Jewish community life, already offers many examples of how places of Jewish commerce served simultaneously as places which dispensed Jewish news, fostered Jewish interactions, and the made possible the provision of Jewish services. Ewa Morawska in her study of the small Jewish enclave in Johnstown, Pennsylvania, for example, described how the kosher butcher shop which opened up in 1903 stood next to the railroad station. In her study, that kosher market, “served as a referral service for passengers just off the train. If they were transients, travel assistance was provided by women of the Hakhnoses Orkhim, a society constituted to provide aid to wayfarers” (51). The implications of this small detail bear thinking about as we imagine community.

If we understand the making of “community” to be an abstract concept which indicates the process by a set of individuals who consider themselves responsible for others with whom they share some characteristic, transforming them from being merely “a set of individuals” to a collectivity with mutual obligations and expectations, then the butcher shop in Johnstown played a key role for numerous Jews who passed through this western Pennsylvania steel-making and coal mining town. The Jews of Johnstown supported a butcher shop by spending their money there on food which they believed Judaism obliged them to consume and the women of Johnstown banded together to create a formal society that ministered to the needs of Jews in transit from one place to another. Placing the butcher shop near the railroad station may not have been done specifically to fulfill a communal obligation—hachnassat orchim—but rather it may have been just good business sense. But its physical location, prominently placed nearby the depot, made possible the intricate fusion of economic, philanthropic, and religious needs, all of which sustained the community of Jews in Johnstown and which by implication made the Jewish community of Johnstown a player in the creation of a larger American Jewish community.

While some kinds of business establishments, like kosher markets, clearly depended upon Judaism and Jewish law, as well as on a network of Jewish religious functionaries, other stores like those that sold household wares, clothing, stationary, and the like also served Jewish functions. Stores that lined the Jewish street did not have to sell specifically Jewish goods to at times play a role in the creation of Jewish community life. Again a small detail in the scholarship winks at us, pointing out that the entrepreneurial sector intersected with the communal, indeed fostered it.

In 1909 a group of Jewish women in Boston’s South End, mostly poor mothers, met at Hyman Danzig’s Three and Nine Cent Store. No doubt they
exchanged information about a whole range of subjects in this otherwise obscure neighborhood store which served as a convenient gathering place. Among the issues, they noted among themselves that no medical facility existed in the neighborhood. They spontaneously formed themselves into a committee which later that year came up with “a novel fund-raising scheme,” constructing and selling “miniature bricks at fifty cents a piece to pay for the building of an entire hospital. . . . They made the most of nickels, dimes and quarters. By September, 1911, the little group of women had grown into a fund-raising society known as the Beth Israel Hospital Association” (Ebert 225). While the women might have gone about the business of creating a hospital anyway, the ordinary daily act of gathering at Hyman Danzig’s store provided them with a spring board for community organizing and institution building.

That the women used this commercial space as a social space should draw the attention of historians. It should highlight to us how community in the broadest sense of the word depends as much on the street as on the formal institutions designated as such. This same point has emerged as an analytic detail in writing about the other end of the century. Historian Gerald Gamm, in a study subtitled, Why the Jews Left Boston and the Catholics Stayed, documented the entrepreneurial Jewish infrastructure of the community that its merchants and customers abandoned. After ticking off the number of kosher butcher shops supported by the Jews who shopped along Blue Hill Avenue, as well as the bakeries, groceries, and fruit markets, Gamm put the G&G delicatessen onto historic center stage, as the place which “gave the district its special character.” Quoting from a local newspaper, Gamm offered an insight into the close connection between the making of Jewish community and the existence of particular commercial establishments. The article deserves here to be quoted at some length. Referring to the delicatessens of the neighborhood the reporter noted:

Of all the fortresses only one reached the proportion could claim palatial amenities that testify to high culture, that immense landmark which any traveller who has passed down Blue Hill avenue will smile in recognition of, the G&G. One the tables of the cafeteria talmudic jurisprudence sorted out racing results, politics, the stock market, and the student could look up from his “desk” to leer at the young girls sipping cream soda under the immense wings of their mothers; watch the whole world of Blue Hill avenue revolve through the G&G’s glass gate.
The dissolution of the Jewish neighborhood of Dorchester, a dense Jewish residential community by all accounts, according to Gamm, can be marked less by the moving of the synagogues than by the final closing of the “glass gate,” the end of the food businesses (198–99).

Gamm’s reference to this quite mundane eatery did not constitute the first scholarly valorization of it as a dense, powerful, and magnetic Jewish communal institution. Hillel Levine and Lawrence Harmon in their 1992 study of Boston Jewry, aptly entitled *The Death of an American Jewish Community*, also focused on decline, following “the glory years” of Blue Hill Avenue. They placed the deli at the center of the Jewish community’s political and social history and went so far as to declare that it “enjoyed the greatest drawing power of any institution in the Jewish community.” Politicians, Jewish and non-Jewish eager to win the Jewish vote made an obligatory pilgrimage to the G&G, for example. Indeed, so central a role did it play in bringing Jews together and providing them with a place to be and be with other Jews, that, “if asked to free-associate about Jewish Boston, former residents invariably utter ‘the G&G’ . . . a place to dine, cut deals, and evaluate prospective sons-in-law.” Levine and Harmon asserted, suggestively, that the intellectual and religious leadership of the community expressed disdain, and possibly jealousy, for the G&G and resented the fact that it competed with schools, synagogues, and more refined places of Jewish communal life. The authors asserted that, “those charged with shaping the community,” actually “struggled for ways to get people off the Avenue and into the classroom or clubhouse.” To no avail, since, at least in the realm of meaning and memory, while many Boston Jews did attend classes as the Hebrew Teacher’s College, “few former residents think first of Hebrew College when reminiscing of the old neighborhood.” That place of honor belonged to the G&G (13).

While Gamm, and before him Levine and Harmon, identified a few dozen Jewish food establishments alone as key places in the community’s self-conception of itself as distinctive and as providing for its own needs, other and larger Jewish enclaves supported even more retail establishments where Jews sold to each other, congregated, and did business in a dense Jewish environment. New York obviously stood in a category by itself, as a mammoth and complicated place for Jewish marketing and Jewish community. An 1899 survey of New York’s Eighth Assembly District, which encompassed parts of the immigrant neighborhood, listed no fewer than 631 food establishments that:
catered to the needs of the inhabitants of this area. Most numerous were the 140 groceries which often sold fruits, vegetables, bread and rolls, as well as the usual provisions. Second in number were the 131 butcher shops which proclaimed their wares in Hebrew letters. The other food vendors included 36 bakeries, 9 bread stands, 14 butter and egg stores, 3 cigarette shops, 7 combination two-cent coffee shops, 10 delicatessens, 9 fish stores, 7 fruit stores, 21 fruit stands, 3 grocery stands, 7 herring stands, 2 meat markets, 16 milk stores, 2 matzo . . . stores, 10 sausage stores, 20 soda water stands, 5 tea shops . . . 11 vegetable stores, 13 wine shops, 15 grape wine shops, and 10 confectioners. (Quoted in Rischin 56)

If to every one of these places a steady stream of Jewish women and men came in and out, stopping to talk to the shopkeeper and to the other customers, exchanging news, finding out about each others’ fortunes and misfortunes, then we can see how the profusion of retail establishments on the Jewish street created a thick space for making community. The photographic record of that Eighth Assembly District, that is, the Lower East Side, testified to the intensity of the street life and the degree which commercial activities drew Jews out of their apartments and into the public spaces, talking as well as buying, interacting as well as inspecting merchandise, and in the process creating community.

Likewise for decades Jews who had once lived on the Lower East Side but then moved out to newer areas in the Bronx and Brooklyn, trekked back to the “old neighborhood” to shop. Memoirs told and retold the details of Jews from other parts of New York coming to the Lower East Side before Passover to buy nuts, dried fruit and wine, returning on Sunday mornings for bargains on clothing as well as for pickles and “appetizing,” and finally, in a nearly religious act tantamount to a pilgrimage, fathers brought their pre-bar mitzvah sons to the “sacred space” to purchase a tallith in anticipation of their thirteenth birthdays. Each one of these acts of Jewish shopping not only helped make the Lower East Side the crucible of American Jewish memory culture, but helped in the process create the key narrative of community in its most authentic form (Diner, Lower East Side Memories).

Jewish commercial life not only sustained ritual practice and provided the spaces where Jewish socializing and community building activities could happen, but the ways in which different groups used those places reveal to historians some of the fissures that divided communities. No issue demonstrates this more sharply than that of gender. That is, Jewish women and Jewish men had different, albeit linked, histories of commerce and community.
The business sector of the Jewish street, in big cities and in smaller ones, provided a crucial zone for the performance of gender roles, a crucial element in the fabric of community life. For one, street level businesses brought men and women together as both, husbands and wives “manned” the stores, suggesting a host of questions.

To what degree did the small-business sector, the shops along the Jewish main street, employ the labor of all family members versus function as the sole domain of male or female entrepreneurs? What role did married women play in these stores and how did their entrepreneurial activities enhance their authority within the family? How did Jewish women’s involvement in these shops and stores limit their options? Here we certainly have a vast range of first-hand accounts which bear witness to the ways in which Jewish women as shopkeepers blurred any kind of line between the public and the private and between the work of business and the business of home.

Countless numbers of Jewish shops doubled as places of residence in as much as families lived above and behind “the store.” Mary Antin, for example, offered a description in her lyrical autobiography of how her mother tended the store and “in the intervals of slack trade, she did her cooking. . . . Arlington Street customers were used to waiting while the storekeeper [her mother] salted the soup or rescued a loaf from the oven” (155–56). Hers may be the most famous depiction of a phenomenon which predominated among Jewish entrepreneurial families and existed literally everywhere immigrant Jewish families flocked into self-employment through opening and operating small businesses. To what degree did this pattern affect women differently than men and how did the fusion of family and shop leave its mark on community life?

Small business meant family business. Some women actually operated independent businesses of their own, continuing in America the European tradition of multiple enterprises within a single nuclear family: one belonging to the husband, the other to the wife. However, most Jewish small businesses in America meant husband and wife working together.

While both men and women, recalling memories of the past, may have defined their small business as a place in which women “helped” out in the men’s stores, a different kind of pattern emerges in the on-the-ground descriptions of how these stores actually functioned, with Mary Antin’s, as an exemplar. Husbands and wives functioned in a symbiotic relationship as they both struggled to make the business a reasonably profitable concern.

Men often decided that they could transition from being someone else’s employee to being self-employed precisely when they married.
Entrepreneurship, particularly small scale, street level business, rarely involved single men, and being married meant that they, whether former sweatshop workers, garment factory laborers, or peddlers, now had their life-long partners behind counters and cash registers. The Jewish men who arrived in America and went out on the road to peddle finally married or brought over their wives only when they had the means to open a shop. In numerous cases, the erstwhile peddlers continued, at times, to sell from the road while their wives operated the in-town stores (Diner, *Roads Taken*).

For Jewish women, marriage meant leaving behind the garment factories where they labored as hired hands and becoming “helpers” or better still, unofficial co-owners of grocery stores, bakeries, delicatessens, dress shops, and dry-goods emporia.

One story, like the hundreds of thousands which left few archived records, involves Harry Cohen who came to Baltimore in 1906 from Chernigov, Russia with his brother. His family had been food purveyors back home, and Cohen hoped to replicate this in America, albeit at a higher level. Realizing this dream, however, had to wait. He first took a job with Schloss Brothers, a garment shop, as a buttonhole maker and presser, living simply and saving his money.

In 1913 he took the first step towards fulfilling his aspirations by marrying Sarah Kaplansky, also an immigrant from Russia. He continued working at Schloss Brothers while she took in boarders and laundry, continuing to earn an income after marriage. For six years Sarah and Harry scrimped and saved, and eventually had enough to invest in a business.

By 1919 they had saved enough to buy a building at 1427 East Baltimore Street. Living on the upper floor, they operated a delicatessen on the ground level. Although Sarah continued to take in boarders and do laundry for others over the course of an unrecorded number of years, she also waited on the customers in the restaurant, prepared kugel, latkes and knishes and baked the challah, while Harry did the work which publicly defined the enterprise as his. He cured and sliced the meat, the “stuff” intrinsically associated with the world of the delicatessen, but she engaged with the customers, presumably using her personal qualities to make them feel welcome and ensure return visits to the business (Kessler 2–7).

Indeed, reminiscence literature is filled with this kind of tale. Sidney Weinberg’ *World of Our Mothers*, drawn heavily from oral interviews with Jewish women who had emigrated from eastern Europe to America, resonates with stories about men, women and small businesses. One woman remembered wanting to get a job after marriage, but her husband objected. Instead,
the two decided to open a small children’s clothing store, where they both sewed the clothes and sold to customers. Another of Weinberg’s interviewees recalled that her husband “owned” a business selling women’s corsets door-to-door in a predominantly Italian neighborhood. Having bought too many of the smaller sizes, which would never do for his potential customers, his wife, “helper” that she was, pointed out to her husband that they could stitch together several of the smaller corsets and not lose too much money on his bad investment. Another woman, who assisted her husband in knitting factory, related how “My mind always went a mile a minute and it was necessary because my husband was very conservative and I was the gambler of the family. I ran the factory and my husband was the accountant” (238–39).

One of the interviewees in The World of Our Mothers told the following story, demonstrating the shared gender space of the Jewish small business.

I opened up a hand laundry and I worked like a horse by myself and business was pretty good. And a store opened up around the corner, which was the main street—181st Street—and I took the store and moved in there. And everybody helped. We had an apartment—not far—and my husband was able to go home. He used to get up very early in the morning, open up the store. I went in later and I stayed at night . . . I did all the hard work . . . I worked day in and day out. For eleven years I had the store. (228)

Variations of these themes fill American Jewish oral history and reminiscence literature. Although these stories have not been systematically studied heretofore, they point to a rich focus for the study of gender. Women and men came together in the realm of small businesses and family stores existed because women and men labored there together. In most cases, at some point or another in the history of these stores, the family lived above or behind the shop, further merging the traditionally male sphere of the market place and the culturally sanctioned women’s work at home. Their concentration in small neighborhood businesses and the subsequent male-female bond defined the world in America for Jewish immigrants very differently than for other ethnic groups.

Business at the heart of Jewish community life in America created a reality that the marketplace forced men and women to depend upon each other. However, men and women had different, gendered stakes in their definition of the business, their responsibility in it and its implication for role allocation. By and large, the women’s versions emphasize that though husbands considered the business to be theirs by virtue of male norms, as did municipal officials who
dispensed the needed licenses, women provided the lion’s share of the ideas, serving as the “brains” of the operation. Such rhetoric resonates in women’s writings and recollections. Their accuracy matters much less than the reality that business functioned as a space which both women and men occupied and contested.

So too the consumers of the Jewish shopping districts divided and converged along gendered lines, bringing out both Jewish women and men in search of goods. Some sources indicate that they divided their responsibilities as to who bought what. Louis Wirth in the 1927 study, *The Ghetto*, declared that in the Chicago Maxwell Street market, “Thursday is ‘chicken day’, when Jewish customers lay in their supplies for the Friday evening meal. Most of the purchasing is done by the men, who take a much more active part in the conduct of the household and the kitchen than is the case among non-Jewish immigrant groups. The man sees that the chicken is properly killed for if something should go wrong, he, as the responsible head of the household, would have to bear the sin.” Buying the fish, however, he observed, fell more squarely in women’s domain on this same Jewish street. As such, Wirth suggested that a gendered shopping world existed and this in turns offers us another way of seeing how the world of consumption in Jewish neighborhoods throbs with analytic possibilities (237).

Statements like these provide tantalizing hints that indicate that gender and gender relations underlie the commercial life of the Jewish street. They lead us to seeing that full-scale histories of Jewish communities as places where Jews bought from and sold to each other have to be refracted through the lens of gender. That Jewish women and men have experienced migration, adaptation, and the process of community building differently, now resides at the center of our historic understanding. That they experienced America as a place of conflict also figures prominently as an accepted element in our understanding of the past (Prell).

The commercial zone can provide yet one other place where this gender struggle played itself out. Paula Hyman has certainly shown this in her classic article on the kosher meat boycotts which raged in New York at the turn of the twentieth century. Those food fights pitted Jewish women, the consumers who considered themselves and their families to be entitled to the right to consume meat at a fair price within their means, against Jewish male merchants, the butchers, who had behind them the communal leadership, the slaughterers and the rabbis. As the women saw it, the merchants, as Jews, had a responsibility to provide kosher meat to them, as custodians of their families;
consumption. They demanded that the business of kosher meat be conducted with their sensibilities and pocketbooks in mind. The women’s demands underscored the degree to which marketing and community functioned as fused categories. The drama which got played out in front of the butcher shops, and in the pages of Hyman’s article, demonstrate the degree to which commerce, community, gender, and conflict all need to be considered as pivotal forces in Jewish history (Hyman; Frank).

The size of a community as well as the gendered nature of community life reflected itself in the realm of Jewish shopping. From the early twentieth century onward, Jewish visitors who came to New York from the “hinterlands” commented in awe about the great metropolis as a place to buy Jewish goods. The sheer size of New York’s Jewish community made possible a diversity of markets whereby Jewish “things” could be consumed. The Jewish Catalog (Siegel et al.), perhaps the key text in the Jewish counter-culture spawned in the 1970’s, offered its readers explicit advice on how to shop for Jewish goods in New York. The array of items that Jewish merchants in New York could sell to Jewish consumers eager to acquire Jewish “things” demonstrated the city’s significance, particularly the Lower East Side. Thus, the Catalog, after suggesting, for example, to those eager to buy Jewish books to try book stores in their local communities, directed them to “the Lower East Side . . . a visit to which calls for the time-tested Jewish skills of haggling and striking a bargain with the booksellers” (205–06). For shoppers in search of a ram’s horn for Rosh Hashana, it noted, “it helps a lot to be in close proximity to either Jerusalem or (not to mention the two in the same breath) New York. If you are so situated, head for Meah Shearim or its diasporic equivalent, the Lower East Side” (105–06). The ability to buy Jewish goods—books, ritual objects, and pickles—on the Lower East Side added to its sanctity and made it in the process a metaphor for the image of an organic and dense Jewish community.

Likewise, in any number of memoirs or autobiographical fragments American Jews who had grown up and lived outside of New York described, as did art historian Alan Schoener, how a visit to the Lower East Side evoked a sense of Jewish connectedness through what could be bought on its streets. “I found myself,” he wrote, “roaming around Delancey Street and Second Avenue, eating food that my mother never cooked” (Introduction). He connected emotionally to a metaphoric sense of Jewish community through those rambles and through those acts of consumption. In order to eat that food, which transported him to a time when the neighborhood had been a dense Jewish enclave, he had to pay money to a merchant, be it the vendor of a cart, the owner of a
restaurant, or the proprietor of a store. Schoener, like so many other Jewish voyagers to the old immigrant enclave, reconnected to a mythic community by means of a commercial transaction. (Schoener went on to curate the Jewish Museum’s exhibit, “Portal to America,” itself a powerful text in the furthering of the idea that the Lower East Side constituted a formative site in the construction of American Jewish communal identity [quoted in Diner, *Lower East Side* 80, 98–99].)

These commercial transactions between Jews, in whichever century they took place, had tremendous impact on the nature of community life and community self-understanding. Although Jews sold to non-Jews historically more often than they sold to other Jews, the close connections which developed between Jewish merchants and local Jewish buying publics helped sustain Jewish space and Jewish community. By patronizing neighborhood merchants and transforming shopping places into community spaces, Jewish consumers in concert with the merchants whom they may at times have conflicted with over quality and price, nevertheless helped make the personal public, and the private communal. Memoirs, autobiographies, as well as a vast number of journalistic sources, described often in exquisite detail the ways in which Jews in cities and towns in many lands and several continents congregated in Jewish stores and shops. Here they mixed together their buying of fish, meat, wine, bread, hats and socks, with the spreading of community news, the selling of notions with debates over notions of community priorities. The stores and shops provided places to gossip, sites for planning public activities, as well as venues for getting the goods defined as both necessary and desirable.  

The literature on American Jewish history, despite its relative silence about small neighborhood business as something that mattered, does point to a number of crucial eras. The first era, the one which extended into the early decades of the nineteenth century, relied on the imposition of a pre-modern European Jewish (and also colonial-style) model of high levels of community control in which Jewish merchants who served the Jewish public had to submit to community control. Those goods which Jews saw as crucial to the practice of Judaism, kosher wine, kosher meat and matzah in particular, rather than flowing to customers through independently owned and operated stores which needed to woo the public to come and buy in competition with others selling the same goods, instead, fell into the domain of the congregation—only one per city—which enjoyed a monopoly on the provision of such goods. Those congregations could withhold goods from Jews who deviated from community standards of behavior and enterprising entrepreneurs had no chance of
setting up their own businesses. That the goods came from the congregations also made for a kind of subterranean Jewish market. We have no evidence that shops with Hebrew letters, marked with words like “kosher” or “Jewish” graced the streets of early America (Faber 69–70). While the Jewish women and men who inhabited these early communities made a living primarily in commerce, in the selling of various kinds of goods to the general public, Jewish goods came to Jews through the regulated world of the congregations.

Hyman Grinstein in his path breaking history of the Jews of New York, the first of the notable community biographies which dominated the scholarship in the mid-twentieth century, introduced the community-commerce nexus as early as the third page of the book. Grinstein asserted in this introduction that the key moment in the history of the community, a moment which presaged later diversification, seen by some as disunity and the decline of authority, came about in 1812 when a brief, unsuccessful, breakaway from Shearith Israel, the only congregation in the city, went out and hired its own shohet. While the “rift was soon healed” and “Shearith Israel continued to supervise the sealing and sale of kosher food,” a powerful trajectory had been set on its course. The universal practice that had prevailed in America since the end of the seventeenth century that the one congregation which existed in each city with an organized Jewish presence maintained total control over the selling of kosher food began to unravel.

Instead, under the “broad concept of liberty which existed in America,” commercial individualism flourished and competition between congregations and merchants and among those who wanted to be merchants became the norm. The communities unraveled in the face of the “climate of freedom” and a culture of enterprise infused the Jewish commercial world no less than it came to suffuse nearly all aspects of American life (3).

With that unravelling there ensued a long period of time, from the 1820s through possibly the 1960s in which Jewish community life derived much of its impetus and structure from the vibrant and flamboyant tone of the commercial transactions of the Jewish street. In that extended history, in one city after another, Jewish neighborhoods became distinctive in large measure because of what got sold and bought on their streets, and how. Jews went out onto streets in the ordinary course of life, making the purchases of necessities and luxuries in company with other Jews, shopping at stores owned by their co-ethnics. Street, store, and living spaces flowed into one another as being Jewish in large measure meant shopping and consuming Jewish. That marketplace culture flowered in every city where Jews lived and existed in its particular way until
the age of suburbanization, when the rise of the low density, automobile culture, put in place a set of new realities.6

In the years that the streets of Jewish neighborhoods functioned as Jewish marketplaces, merchants had to court the Jewish buying public. The signs, advertisements, hawking, and pulling-in, all tactics designed to attract customers, gave the Jewish streets their particular appearance, announcing to all that these streets constituted Jewish space. Alfred Kazin, describing his Brownsville of the 1920s, remarked looking backward from the late 1940s, how the “electric sign . . . lighting up the words Jewish National Delicatessen” made him and the others who used this Brooklyn street, Pitkin Avenue, as their turf, feel “as if we had entered into our rightful heritage” (33–34).

The needs of ordinary Jewish women and men to buy particular goods and the desire of the Jewish shopkeepers, also quite ordinary Jewish women and men, to win over the consumers meshed. In that meeting place between Jewish consumers and Jewish entrepreneurs, although conflicts between the two groups flared with frequency, community flourished.

We can narrate that history of community through commerce from the narratives of every community which has heretofore been written about. We can see the communal power of buying and selling Jewish in the primary documents which have survived from each Jewish enclave regardless of geography. Let me offer a few examples, just to demonstrate the breadth of the material already available.

Thinking back about all that he had seen in his life, Isaac Mayer Wise remembered in his 1901 Reminiscences the Jewish community that had taken shape on the east side of Baltimore in the early 1850s, as a place where “there seemed to be many Jews . . . although everything is very primitive. Women in the small shops carrying children in their arms, or else knitting busily. Young men invited passers-by to enter this or that store to buy . . . M’zuzoth, Tzitzith, Taleithim, Kosher cheese and Eretz Yisrael earth were on sale” (quoted in Fein 78). Here in Wise’s recollections family life and entrepreneurship, the mixed male-female presence, community and consumption overlapped in a visible if, according to him, unappealing way.

In his sociological analysis of Chicago’s Jewish community of the late 1920s Louis Wirth may have avoided the word “primitive” and eschewed the kind of judgmental tone that Wise indulged in, but he offered a similar kind of observation which put the world of retail squarely into the making of Jewish community. “The description of the ghetto,” opined Wirth, “would be incomplete without mention of the great number of other characteristic
institutions that give it its own peculiar atmosphere and mark it as a distinct culture area.” Here Wirth included, “the Kosher butcher shops, where fresh meats and a variety of sausages are a specialty. . . . the basement fish store to gratify the tastes of the connoisseur with a variety of herrings, pike, and carp, which Jewish housewives purchase on Thursday in order to serve the famous national dish of gefülte fish at the sumptuous Friday evening meal . . . Kosher bake-shops with rye bread, poppy-seed bread, and pumpernickel daily. . . . the bathhouse, which contains facilities for Turkish and Russian, plain and fancy, baths . . . basement and second-story bookstores, cafes, and restaurants. . . . the cigar stores, and the curtained gambling houses . . . the offices of the shyster lawyers, the realestateniks, and sacramental wine dealers. . . .” Wirth's monograph, published by the University of Chicago Press, came adorned by a series of woodcuts by the artist Todros Geller, identified as “ghetto” types—the “Horseradish grinder” who sat "on the sidewalks in front of butcher shops and fish stores . . . bowed and bearded;” selling to the women and men who walked by, as well as an artistic rendition of the Maxwell Street Market, streaming with people scurrying around buying goods of various kinds (224–28).

That same tone pervaded much of the imaginative literature that grew out of the immigrant communities. Anzia Yezierska’s 1923 Salome of the Tenements positioned her protagonist Sonya Vrunsky, a fictional stand-in for Rose Pastor Stokes, on New York’s Essex Street. Yezierska depicted, with decidedly negative tones, the “jostling throngs, haggling women, peddlers and pushcarts. The smell of fishstalls, of herring stands,” all of which gave the neighborhood its distinctive quality. Yezierska peopled her fictional world with Jews who used the streets to provide and consume goods they understood to be crucial to Jewish life. “Holiday hats! Shine yourself out for Passover! Everything marked down cheap!” blared a “puller-in” to Sonya, who, lured by the lights of Fifth Avenue found the life of Essex Street a dismal combination of “the sordidness of haggling and bargaining—all she had ever known till now,” with the essence of the immigrant Jewish community (Red Ribbons 25–26).

In their history of the Jews of Buffalo, a product of the 1954 Tercentenary commemorations which marked 300 years of Jewish life in North America, Selig Adler and Thomas Connally provided yet another example of how thinking about Jewish community cannot be divorced from considering the role of retail. In charting how “Buffalo’s first distinctly Jewish neighborhood” came into being, the two historians noted that, it coincided with the rise of the community’s first “shops and business institutions.” In particular they noted the centrality of “Rosenblatt’s Bakery,” where at 268 William Street “Jews met as
they picked bagel, honey-cake and *hallah* out of the bins in the store windows.” The opening up of Rosenblatt’s stimulated competition so Joseph Cohen, “went into the same business.” With his purported “secret recipe” brought from Warsaw, Cohen opened up shop on Strauss Street and “here his son, Albert, made ‘Cohen’s rye bread’ a household word in Buffalo.” The upstate New York city’s Jewish entrepreneurial nerve center extended beyond just bread, and “by the turn of the century, kosher butcher shops throughout the area had multiplied rapidly. There were Jewish barber shops in the neighborhood, a bicycle shop operated by Levi Russlander at 136 William Street, and a number of Jewish shoe repair shops” (186–87).

Studies of individual communities, whether large or small, provide a clear picture of this Jewish predominance in small business and the intimate linkages between it and the patterns of Jewish life. In the small Jewish enclave in Johnstown, Pennsylvania, nearly all Jews derived an income from their stores. Their actual purpose in moving to Johnstown, an industrial town in western Pennsylvania which housed massive steel mills and nearby coal fields, was to go into business. Shopkeeping brought the Jews to this place (Morawaksa). In Providence, Rhode Island, a mid-sized city with some industrial options for Jews, nearly 65% of Russian Jewish men listed themselves as self-employed in the 1915 state census (Pearlman 43). In New York, approximately 45% of all Jews earned a living in small businesses of one kind or another in 1909 (Rischin 79).

Throughout this long period of time small business meant family business. Some women actually operated independent businesses of their own, continuing in America the European tradition of multiple enterprises within a single nuclear family, with one belonging to the husband, the other to the wife. However, most Jewish small businesses in America meant husband and wife working together.

The rabbis, the sociologists, historians, and novelists as well as journalists, reformers, and memoirists have all made a crucial point, each in their separate ways, reflective of the genres in which they worked and the projects they pursued, that offer scholars of business, community and of American Jewish history a direction for research. They each saw, like so many other observers, the profound reality that Jewish communities in the United States functioned not just as places where Jews prayed, acted politically, and furthered some worthy social goal such as providing for the poor, sustaining education, or supporting Jewish culture. Jewish communities also served as sites for buying and selling and the entrepreneurial infrastructure of Jewish spaces operated in tandem with the construction of Jewish identity and meaning.
The Jewish streets of Baltimore, Chicago and New York, and all the other places where Jews settled and lived, the commercial hubs of the neighborhoods where Jews planted themselves, provided more than sites for providing ordinary Jews with ordinary necessities. Rather these streets offered Jews informal and organic ways to interact with other Jews. Although the world of Jewish commerce never existed independent of politics and ideology, the reality that some Jews, the shopkeepers among them, needed these stores to make a living, while others, the consumers, needed them to feed, clothe, and supply themselves with a range of goods, made for reciprocity and connectedness, essential elements of the idea of community. The relatively mundane commercial activities, recorded by Wise, Wirth and Yezierska, and the others, the realities they saw of Jews selling and Jews buying, represented a foundational element of life of Jewish communities.

Existing in an intermediate zone between the formal structure of communities—the synagogues, associations, societies with their charters, by-laws, and elections of officers—and the informal, the groups of friends, relatives, neighbors, and even strangers, whose very presence shaped everyday life, stores and shops, the merchants and their customers, made possible Jewish public space.

The business world at the lived level of the street offers a historically rich and analytically complicated vantage point from which to see changing patterns of Jewish community life. While the reality of Jews buying from and selling to each other, both the goods which they believed Judaism demanded of them as well as the ordinary stuff, basic necessities and luxuries, has run continuously through Jewish history, each place and each era reflected differences in context. Those contexts, and in this case the American one, offer historians a new and relatively untapped mine of material from which to imagine community, communities, and their histories. The stories demonstrate the deep bond between the business of Jews and the business of Jewish life.
Notes


1. A quite robust literature on the history of consumption and the significance of shopping has already been developed. A few of the key works of recent years include Benson; Cross; and Cohen.

2. This was the case for Ewa Morawska’s interviewees in Johnstown.

3. What is particularly notable in Frank’s article is that Jewish women were among the most assertive housewives in New York in demanding that the merchants of their neighborhoods respond to their consumer needs.

4. The one work in American Jewish history which has given the marketplace its due as an analytic construct is Heinze, *Adapting to Abundance*.

5. The scholarship on the pre-modern period in Jewish history has stressed the degree to which business and commerce within the ghetto operated under the control and with the strict regulation by the formally sanctioned community. Rabbis and wealthy elites controlled the commercial sector no less than they controlled the religious sector or the relationship between the community and the larger non-Jewish world. See for example, Katz, *Tradition and Crisis*, where the power of the elite in the economic activities of the community was a major subject of discussion. Katz, for example, noted that the leadership took upon itself the question of “how to regulate competition among Jews,” to limit the rights of “strangers,” although they were Jews, from settling and doing business in the community (49).

6. A full-scale history of Jewish consumption and Jewish community would have to deal with the late twentieth century and the massive suburbanization of American Jewry as an analytically different era. What impact the low density, automobile-driven nature of suburban life had on Jewish shopping needs to be probed. In essence the realities of suburban design changed the basic nature of “the street” as a place where people walked in and out of stores, congregated on corners, met casually in the mundane course of activities. The development of internet shopping and the privatization of consumption further changed basic patterns and would need to be analyzed in its own terms.
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