

Passover and the Parlor:

Tenement Housing and its Effect on Jewish-American Identity

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For the last few centuries, large scale immigration to America by the Jewish population occurred due to the severe religious persecution across the world. The Jewish population, concentrated mainly in Eastern Europe, has continuously filtered into American civilization to live in freedom and equality. Specifically in the late 1800s and early 1900s, Jewish people were immigrating through Ellis Island and settling in the Lower East Side of New York. These immigrants were forced to live in tenement housing that consisted of cramped, apartment style buildings with masses of people trying to make a life for themselves in America. These particular immigrants came to the Lower East Side and attempted to integrate their Jewish values with their new found American identity. The Jewish religious traditions and family values were combined with the mass consumption culture of American life. Jewish immigrants started to adapt their lives to the ways of the American capitalist culture. In this process of acculturation, these immigrants began to form their specific Jewish-American identity that mixed specific traditions to form a new culture. Crowded tenement housing in the Lower East Side was the main feature that shaped the formation of the Jewish-American identity at the beginning of the twentieth century. Their specific housing situation allowed the cultural maintenance of Jewish traditions and the beginnings of integration into America consumerist culture.

The Jewish immigrant population in the Lower East Side of New York, during the early twentieth century, has been the subject of a wide variety of studies. There have been many histories, ethnographies, memoirs and quantitative studies done on the Jewish community in the Lower East Side over the years. However, this work does not tend to

demonstrate how important their housing situation was in the formation of a specific Jewish-American identity. Previous research on this general topic has been purely based on testimonies and eyewitnesses of people that lived during this period. This research had been done in many different forms, but stands as a main feature of historical evidence about the issues of these Jewish immigrants. This category tends to focus on the individual experiences rather than the community as a whole. Books such as Irving Howe's, *A Documentary History of Immigrant Jews in America: How We Lived 1880-1930*, presents his research as a compilation of countless testimonials of life in the Lower East Side. Howe demonstrates the importance of the individual experience in the research of a specific time in history. Although, this is relevant to the topic, it does not provide any argument on the process of the creation of a Jewish-American identity.

Another trend in research on this topic is the abundance of specific studies concerning one aspect of the Jewish community. These quantitative research studies focus on aspects, such as the crime rate or deaths of Jews in New York. There is a developing pattern of high death rate, due to the epidemics that hit New York in the early twentieth century. The research shifts towards the statistical analysis of which types of diseases were prevalent and how many people died from them. This is seen in many studies, specifically in Rosner's *Hives of Sickness: Public Health and Epidemics in New York City*, illustrating the effects of mass disease. These studies have found that the conditions on the Lower East Side allowed for a massive health epidemic (Cope, 1901, Bender, 1999). There is a tendency in the studies concerning crime rates in this time and the city's potential for gangs and violence. The statistical evidence is shown to calculate the number of crimes committed and the individuals responsible for those crimes. In the

article, *Juvenile Delinquency among the Jews in New York* by Julius Maller, the prevalent idea is that the Jewish immigrant community suffered from criminal activity within New York (Maller, 1932). These types of studies do provide specific information on topics surrounding the statistical facts recovered from the Jewish population, but lack an overall sense of acculturation.

Research that focuses on the tenement housing has a propensity to be either subjective observations from real life or imaginative reproductions from testimonials. These observations are done to look at the problems of these crowded and unsanitary buildings, while the reproductions serve as a historical account of New York Jews. The tenement housing research is also mainly based on personal accounts, which often give a one-sided view of the total experience of the city. Jacob Riis was one of the first to conduct these types of studies on tenement housing, when he personally investigated the housing situation in New York. He wrote the book, *How the Other Half Lives* (1890), outlining his experiences, encounters, factual evidence, photographs and future outlook on this type of housing in the early twentieth century. Although Riis went through the Lower East Side to gain a picture of what life was like, there still are many ideas left to clarify regarding tenement housing.

All of these types of research stand in this field as reputable sources for information concerning the Lower East Side. Yet, there is a gap in the existing research because of a lack of cohesive picture of how tenement housing shaped the Jewish-American identity. This is where this particular research will fit into because it will investigate how the housing really integrated these two different cultures. In order to do this, personal accounts, newspaper articles, photographs and statistics will be tied

together to present a clear understanding of the nature of this community. My primary sources will mainly consist of photographs taken by Jacob Riis when he was living in the Lower East Side, which I found while researching this topic. These are important because they give the visual image of something that may seem far out of reach from today's society. My secondary sources are mainly books that are concerned with personal accounts, histories, and authors that detailed their findings in their own research of this time. These serve to assist us understand what the pictures mean and give evidence to support this topic. The existing trends in the research concerning Jewish immigrant life in New York will be made into a clear relationship by the way tenement housing stood as the main factor that influenced the specific Jewish-American identity.

Before coming to America, Eastern European Jews lived a much different home life. Their housing was often times more spaced out in the countryside, yet in some places they lived with entire families in small rooms (Cohen, 1995). Andrew Heinze (1990) summarizes that in "the old world, Jewish identity depended on a venerable distinction between the holy and the mundane spheres of extinction" (p. 47). This was the idea that daily life within the home was more focused on deprivation, while the luxuries were saved for that of traditional religious holidays like Passover. Their culture was based on their experience of the lack of material possessions, with the exception of the holy days. Heinze notes that Jewish immigrants remembered times with "no dolls, no books, no games" within the house (1990, p. 37). Marcus Ramage tells of his experience in the old world of Europe as the houses "were low and made of mud, with whole families occupying one room" (Howe & Libo, 1979). He also comments on that their houses were basically furnished with only essential needs, without any need to show off

wealth through home décor. Ravage also tells that the “pride of families in its godliness,” not in their furnishings (Howe & Libo, 1990, p. 5). Their homes were only for the center of religious practices and otherwise simply used for specific survival purposes. This would drastically change once they came to the United States and the Jewish people would combine their past traditions with American ones in order to create their Jewish-America identity based from the home.

The Lower East Side of New York consists of the area in Manhattan, west of the East River. This bustling community consisted of rows and rows of several story high tenement buildings. These apartment style buildings housed the majority of the Jewish population that had



recently immigrated to America. However, the conditions of these buildings were less than satisfactory. Main standards of living were not met, as the masses of immigrants swarmed the streets and buildings day and night. Riis (1890) noted the conditions of the tenements as horrible and disgusting as the poverty was overwhelming. Riis collected data from the New York Health department showing that in 1869 there were 14, 872 tenements in New York with a population of 48,492 persons. However, by 1890 that number had increased from 37,316 tenements and a population of 1,250,000 (pp. 104). This was over the course of just twenty years and there were more immigrants pouring into Ellis Island as persecution abroad began to take its toll of the Jewish community. Cope (1901) found in his investigation of the tenement situation that “out of 255,033 people that lived in these buildings, only 306 had access to bathrooms in the houses in

which they lived” (p.12). He also noted that it was not uncommon to find “seven or more people occupying a space that was 14 by 8 feet” (p. 13). Some of the most notable characteristics of these tenements are that fact that they were without running water, electricity, ventilation, windows and air (Schoener, 1967). The tenements also showed the aspirations of the materialistic culture in America. They were often accented with furniture that they paid for in installments and often times created parlors with everything including a piano in the tiny space that they had (Heinze, 1990). The Jewish population that inhabited these tenements was clearly influenced by their living situations, as they were a main feature of their existence in New York.

The Jewish immigrants that came to America attempted to blend their traditional religious and moral values into the consumerist, entrepreneurial American way. The Lower East Side was the initial staging ground for the Jewish community introduction into this dominant, overwhelming society. Because of the overpopulation due to large scale immigration from Europe, tenements were forced to take on hundreds of people at a time (Schoener, 1967). The tenement housing was a main feature of the placement of the religious ceremonies that kept the Jewish past alive. Jewish immigrants celebrated Passover, Purim and Shabbat within the confines of their crowded apartments (Heinze, 1990). The Jewish culture stayed vibrant because of the housing situation is that because they were so close together, it was much easier to keep religious traditions alive. This high concentration of Jewish immigrants allows for the exchange of cultural ideas and no need to alter any important religious traditions. They would prepare for the Sabbath and holy days within the tenements and cook meals to share with family during their holidays. Tenements were often places for make shift synagogues, which were placed in

and around the apartments (Riis, 1890). Food was shared throughout the tenements during these holidays, as well as traditionally religious items. This community kept its beliefs and values alive by the vast amount of Jewish immigrant influence on one another. Heinze (1990) notes that during religious holidays you could see “the burning candles that illuminated the windows of tenement house after tenement house” (p. 70). This demonstrates the notion that Jewish traditions were kept up within the immigration process. Many of these immigrants had come to America to seek an escape from religious persecution and now that they had it, there was no way that they would change their beliefs. Therefore, these specific traditions would be practiced to their full extent and celebrated among the Jewish community to preserve their unique culture in the America.

Tenement housing also kept the Jewish family together, which was always an important aspect in the traditional of this culture. Eastern Europe had been a place of tremendous hardship for many Jewish people that placed strict boundaries, rules and problems into their lives (Soyer, 1997). These people had to rely heavily on their family and community in order to live. The Jewish faith also presents a strong emphasis on the importance and value of family in order to live a fulfilling life (Cohen, 1995). The tenement housing allowed for the continuance of this specific Jewish value with its distinct characteristics. Their families stayed an important part of their life, as they had been in Europe, as they all lived together and worked to provide for their family. Families were often kept in small quarters and therefore were greatly involved in each others lives (Soyer, 1997). Each member worked within the household to help the general good of the family. The family members would each contribute to the financial stresses by finding jobs and bringing extra work home to avoid the labor laws in order to gain extra money.



Children would be taught to sew within the confines of the home and brought work to do while they were not at school (Schoener, 1967). Mothers and fathers would work in the home, eating as they worked, to ensure that their family would be able to pay rent and put food on the table. This was tied together by the fact that they lived together in one or two rooms and would not survive if total independence was taken on by each family member. The communities that were forced together in these tenements also supported one another as they kept their traditions alive and remained active in assisting those in need. Jewish traditional culture depends on the bringing together of family and community to commemorate holidays and keep morals alive. Within the Lower East Side, these traditions were easily brought and sustained in America because of the way that they lived with many others that shared their background in the tenement housing.

Another way the tenement housing allowed the Jewish immigrants to retain their traditions was the manner in which their households were run. Jewish memorabilia could be seen as mezuzahs could be found on the doorposts to their tenements. Menorah's were placed as decorations for one of their most holy days and displayed in the meantime throughout the house (Heinze, 1990). Kosher foods could be found in and around the tenement houses and women prepared them with care as they exchanged recipes through their windows. Photographs that they brought with them were carefully placed in the home to remind them of their life before. Their homeland was integrated into their new world by keeping memorable items within their homes (Cohen, 1995). These were shared between the social connections that exist within the tenement houses and allowed their traditions to continue on with minimal influence. Clothing from their past was kept locked away in their closets and heirlooms were displayed among the furniture (Heinze,

1990). In keeping the home decorated with some of the traditional items brought over from Europe, the Jewish community was holding onto part of their unique culture. They allowed their houses to remain part of them compound identity, combining new with old. This gave them a sense of where they had come from and what they were raised on. In keeping their traditional furnishings, religious items and family heirlooms within the household, Jewish immigrants could retain part of their old world identity.

Americanization of the Jewish immigrant was facilitated by the housing situation of this particular community. The household itself was that of disease, filth and extreme poverty. However, these immigrants came from Eastern Europe for a better life filled with opportunity. When they arrived, they were forced to live in such miserable conditions that affected every aspect of their community. Jewish immigrants came to America to realize a dream of freedom and comfort, but because they were in these awful conditions, they became eager to delve into the entrepreneurial market to become successful. That allowed them to focus on their work to reach a level of success with which they could improve the state of their homes and fit into American culture. The Jewish community idealized the perfect America home, complete with gas stove and



piano, and did anything in their power to achieve this.

Riis (1890) noted that these Jewish immigrants came “to escape persecution from which freedom could only be brought by gold and it has now enslaved them in bondage worse than that from which they fled” (p.133). This demonstrates how quickly the Jewish community has

succumb to the financial pressures that American culture presents in order to live a

money-driven, luxury infused lifestyle. Riis (1890) also commented that on his observations in the middle of the Lower East Side he felt that “no other spot does life near to intensely materialistic” (p. 135). As masses of Jewish immigrants crowded into the Lower East Side, Americanization was immediately driven into the minds of this community to realize their dreams of a perfect household.

The Jewish community of New York desperately wanted to fit into America culture and did this emulating that consumerist style within their home furnishings. The parlor was one of the most fascinating rooms to the Jewish immigrant. Parlors were “well-rooted in American society by the late seventeenth century” and had become a symbol of status in New York (Heinze, 1990, p. 35). The Jewish immigrants were “mesmerized by the idea of a room devoted simply to ‘living’” (p. 34). This was indefinitely a result of their past lives in East European countries where values were not placed with in characteristics of the home, but the religious values. Because this type of room was of the highest respectability levels, Jewish immigrants struggled to create their rooms in their tiny tenement houses. Marcus Ravage remembers his own house with eight members within two rooms. The front room was used in the day as a parlor containing carpet, pictures, a rocking chair, a sofa and china. At night it was converted in the bedroom for himself and his wife, along with two children (Howe & Libo, 1979). One of the main features of the parlor that signified that had a successful home was the piano. Heinze (1990) related that “a piano in your home, meant you made it” (p. 137). All of these items made up the consumerist culture that signifies the America way of life. Each carpet, sofa, picture and rocking chair had to be produced in order for the masses of immigrants to own them. The piano is the ultimate symbol of a leisure activity in the

home and by owning one the Jewish community was attempting to fit into American society. Their identity was molding into that of a combination of their past culture and their current (Soyer, 1997). The luxuries in the home that were once reserved for religious ceremonies had now become everyday use items.



This demonstrates how the tenement housing was central to the Jewish integration into the American consumerist culture.

The American capitalist system, with opportunity around every corner, filtered into the houses of the Jewish community. Because of the poor housing situation, the Jewish people were in desperate need of the money to improve their tenements and start working for themselves. Work began to consume these immigrants' lives and the "bulk of this work [was] done in tenements where the laws that regulate factory labor [did] not reach" (Riis, 1890, p. 140). The household became the center of daily activity because their desire for money forced these immigrants to work at home after their daily job (Howe & Libo, 1979). Although sweatshops were unsanitary and poorly regulated, they still had enough restrictions to force those who desired extra money to continue their work at home. Riis (1890) noted that through almost every window of these tenements he could see the hunched over shoulders of the Jewish worker and hear the whirl of the sewing machines. This was done all in the pursuit of the money and financial necessity to improve their living situation. There were other factors that may have influenced this as well, but to live in a tenement where ventilation does not exist, bathrooms are few and

eight people are crammed in one room was indefinitely a motivating factor to make money. Within the household, Jewish workers were forced to spend hours and hours creating these products that would allow them the freedom that comes out of being financially stable. The improvement of the tenement was one of the main motivating factors in the necessity to work to exhaustion in the home after work.

Although religious traditions were preserved within the tenements, they were also greatly altered within the home because of the tenements. The parlor room was also known throughout the tenements as the Sabbath room (Heinze, 1990). This demonstrates the traditional Jewish emphasis on luxuries associated with religion and the American everyday sense of luxury. For these holidays, when celebrated in America, they became



an importance on the cleanliness and furnishings in the home. When friends and families were coming over to commemorate these holy days, the Jewish immigrants felt the need to display their home as a status symbol to prove their place in America. Every year during Passover, the

tenement streets were lined with the old furniture and dishes that had once been inside their houses. Heinze (1990) notes that this “annual transformation of the household had become a well-established custom by the 1890’s” (p. 84). This “renovation” was to improve their personal furnishings in order to maintain respectability (Heinze, 1990).

During these holidays, stores and peddlers were seen selling products to give the Jewish house the particular decorations that would seem the most elegant against the contrast of their poor tenement structure. The changes in their traditions illustrate the formation of the “American” part of their Jewish-American identity. Although these traditions

remained the same general idea, the consumerist culture of America had infiltrated even the holiest of Jewish traditions. This was most likely done because of the simple fact that they were attempting to permanently integrate into the American culture and their houses were one of the most significant ways to adopt their new culture. Religious traditions were indefinitely kept in their transition to American culture, but the consumerist appeal that dominated the United States penetrated this to form the Jewish-American combination.

Jewish women had the greatest transformation within the home in American culture. Their identity was carefully molded into a preserver of traditions, with a new consumer style that kept this transition smooth. This was the result of the freedom that America presented in terms of marriage and career (Howe & Libo, 1979). When these women acquired a tenement apartment, no matter the conditions, her everyday goal was to manage the household and transform it into something to be proud of. Specifically, the tenement houses often had gas stoves. This was something that took these Jewish immigrant women by surprise. This consumer good was key to the Jewish-American identity as women now did not require hours to prepare wood, light fires and clean ashes in order to cook “(Heinze, 1990). Marcus Ravage remembers his own mother seeing their gas stove and believing it was “her pride and joy” (p. 134). Adapting to American culture meant adapting to what these people had in terms of opportunity, leisure products, and material items. Women “emphasized the importance of these new products within the home” (Heinze, 1990, p. 105). Other consumer goods were bought by these homemakers in order to fulfill their duty as a new participant in American culture. Heinze (1990) speaks of the advertisement to Jewish homemakers that said “A Woman Needs to Be Up

to Date” and “A Telephone Keep that Household Up to Date” (p. 113). This illustrates the idea that the Jewish woman had become the manager of the domestic consumption that American society elicited within New York. As the Jewish homemaker in the Lower East Side, it became important to keep their traditions as well as demonstrate acceptance and utility of American traditions to create their newfound identity.

The Jewish-American identity that formed during the late 1800's and the early 1900's consisted of the continuance of specific Jewish traditions, while incorporating the American consumerist culture. Jewish immigrants coming from Eastern Europe had focused their lives on the dedication to their religious values and holiness. The material world was not something they considered part of their identity. Luxury goods were saved for their most prestigious holidays in order to praise God. However, they dreamed of coming to America to escape persecution and live in the land of opportunity. When they arrived, they were determined to fit into American culture. Consumer culture in the United States began to push the importance of products, leisure activity and material goods. The tenement housing became the central feature of retaining their Jewish traditions and adapting to the American way. The tenement housing consisted of small, crowded apartments that were filled with immigrants trying to adjust to their unfamiliar surroundings. Their living situation gave them a place to keep up religious ceremonies, make social connections, keep heirlooms from their past and keep their immigrant past alive. The houses also served as the gateway to a consumerist nature as furnishings were made to be of the utmost importance. Work to create these consumer products was done in the home, while these same products were bought in order to enhance the social class of their lives. Women became the managers of domestic consumption as gas stoves,

telephones and pianos were bought on installments in desperate need for the perfect household. Even religious traditions were adapted to the American system of using consumer goods to show importance. Tenement housing is the central feature that shaped the Jewish-American identity by the way in which their lives were based around these buildings. The house allowed for their Jewish ideals to circulate around the crowded tenement while concentrating their unique culture among those that lived in the old world. It also gave way to the founding of their new culture and put the American ideals into the home. The community of Jewish immigrants in the Lower East Side of New York formed their specific Jewish-American identity on the basis of their housing situation.

Research on this specific immigrant community is important because it demonstrates the founding of certain identities that were created through cultural influences. America is a country of immigrants and therefore it is necessary to recognize the influence our other cultures to understand people today. Not only is this research relevant then, but every culture that is represented in America furthers the distinctive quality that is the United States. Further research could track the Jewish-American descendants today to determine if they retained their Jewish traditions throughout the last century. It would be interesting to see if the generations after those in the Lower East Side blended into the American lifestyle and lost all of their traditions. The specific Jewish-American identity that was formed during this time in the Lower East Side was unique because it stemmed from the particular tenement housing. These immigrants sustained their religious, moral, and familial traditions, while they integrated the



consumerist culture of America. This research serves to demonstrate the important and unique qualities that immigrants bring to enrich America culture.

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