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Jewish Boston: A People's Journey

Boston, Massachusetts is a unique city teeming with different cultures. One such group is the Jewish people, the pages of whose story contains over one hundred years of immigration, evolution, rhetoric, and changing identities. An exploration of these connected concepts reveals insights into the Jewish culture that present a unique view of the world through the Jewish-American lens.

A major wave of Jewish immigration to Boston occurred between 1880 and 1924. Beginning in 1881, thousands of Jews migrated from the Pale of Settlement and other Eastern European areas as a result of economic hardship, religious persecution, and, in 1881, the pogroms stemming from Tsar Alexander II's murder (Bard, "Modern"; Finkelstein 88). To the Jews, the United States was the "Golden Land" where they could find work and the freedom to pursue their dreams and religion without persecution (Grunberger 17).

However, upon their arrival the new immigrants encountered countless struggles. Many settled in large cities such as Boston where they worked in small businesses or factories for very low wages and lived in cramped and dilapidated tenement housing ("Immigration in the Late"). The Jewish people were separated from the rest of American society by language, culture and religion which contributed to prejudice and nativist actions. The Immigration Restriction League, founded in 1894, believed that "undesirable" immigrants were the cause of many American socio-economic problems such as the reduction of the living wage ("Immigration Restriction

League”). Jewish immigrants addressed these difficulties by building a support system of synagogues and immigrant aid societies (Grunberger 88).

Many immigrants found it difficult to maintain traditions while “recognizing the need to adapt to the cultural and societal mores” (Finkelstein 64). For example, Boston’s Vilna Shul synagogue members applied simpler, more “American” paint over the synagogue’s ornate layers in order to blend in (Antoline). Many Boston immigrants learned English as well as obtained new clothes and hairstyles to transform into a new American Jew (Grunberger 96). Second generation children frequently discarded religious traditions to express themselves in American society (Finkelstein 103). Jews, in turn, found triumph in their own contributions to society by advancing education, labor rights, and healthcare such as the foundation of the esteemed Beth Israel Hospital in 1916 (Grunberger 90; Antoline).

Careful examination of a culture’s rhetoric reveals common values and experiences. A diary kept by a Jewish immigrant peddler reveals his struggle to maintain his traditional practices while balancing a demanding life on the road. He cries to “God of [his] grief when... I must... on Saturday morning carry my pack on my back, profaning the holy day... I can't live as a Jew” (Goodman 108). He further notes this difficulty by observing that “thousands of peddlers wander about... forget [ting] their Creator. They no longer put on the phylacteries; they pray neither on working day nor on the Sabbath... they have given up their religion” (Goodman 99). Abraham Kohn’s suffering is clear through his prayer-like grieving; it reflects other Jews’ struggles to keep their traditions in an unaccommodating American culture. The observance of religious traditions and cultural customs is of central importance to the Jewish people. In their homelands of Eastern Europe they had established centuries of history, while in Boston they encountered new challenges to preserve their traditions and cultural identity.

Another theme the culture's rhetoric reveals is the importance of community in the midst of discrimination and hardships. Founded in 1902, the Jewish Advocate was a popular Boston newspaper that reflected experiences and values of the New England Jewish culture of the time, becoming "a household companion in virtually every Jewish home" ("About Us"). An editorial rallied community support for a petition against the Burnett Bill's attempt to limit immigration by requiring literacy tests. The "business at hand [was]... to fight them at every point and with every reasonable weapon" ("The Immigrants Protest" 8). The "thousands of signatures" showed powerful Jewish community support against the "generation of narrow-minded" people discriminating against them ("The Immigrants Protest" 8). Additional challenges were addressed in "Race Suicide," a 1909 Jewish Advocate editorial expressing concern that the Jewish community would decline because fewer people were marrying early to have large families, partially due to economic hardships (8). This trend would pose a serious threat to the Jewish community because a population decline would mean fewer Jews to carry on the Jewish identity. Editorials such as these brought the community even closer together.

Since the first wave of immigrants, the Jewish identity has changed. Early immigrants were poor, urban-living factory workers who tended towards Orthodox Judaism. They clung to their traditions and culture and were often pushed away from American society. Their adaptation has played a role in the formation of the less traditional Reform and Conservative movements of Judaism (Finkelstein 56). Modern Jewish Bostonians have migrated to suburban areas, seen a substantial loss in old traditions, experienced less discrimination, and are more likely to identify themselves as American before Jewish. In many ways, the Jewish people have become heavily assimilated into American culture, yet they remain an essential component of America's complex religious and cultural landscape.

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