**Going Urban:**

**The Jewish Experience of the Metropolis in Yiddish, Hebrew, and German Literatures of the Early Twentieth Century**

Project Description

This proposed dissertation will offer a comparative reading examining the processes of urbanization, spatial design, and the Jewish urban experience in three novels written during the first four decades of the twentieth century: “Out of the Depths” written in Hebrew by Yosef Haim Brenner (1908); *The End of Everything* written in Yiddish by David Bergelson (1913); and *Job: The Story of a Simple Man*, written in German by Austro-Hungarian author Joseph Roth (1930). The central question to be considered in a reading of these works is whether and how the praxis[[1]](#footnote-1) of urban space — its construction, creation, movement, and contemplation — constitutes a potential platform for universalization through the denial of Jewish particularity. Such a platform converts Jewish, communal, and tribal life into a modern life of equality and progress based on the universal category of the subject-citizen. This question assumes that universalization, based on the generic categories identified with it, constitutes a fundamental inherent problem (not a solution), since it is always entangled with interests and power relations and represents a conceptual and existential possibility that is imaginary and immaterial, or practical.[[2]](#footnote-2) Each of the texts discussed in the current work presents, directly or indirectly, the existence of the Jewish subject in the dialectical totality of various urban centers: London, Kiev, and New York. The critical reading of these urban centers examines how they simultaneously necessitate and negate, each in its own distinct way, the alternative and various possible responses to the question of modern Jewish existence (the “Jewish question”). They present differing, sometimes opposing, narratives that challenge the central spatial and political possibilities offered for Jewish existence in the early twentieth century: nationalism, territorialism, immigration, cosmopolitanism, and Diasporism. Thus, I examine the role of urban space in how the works discussed address the “Jewish question” and how Jewish mobility within this space sought to address the threats posed by modernity to the Jewish subject — a threat originating from the contradiction between civilian universality and Jewish particularity.

General Background

Urbanization and mass migration of Jews from small cities and rural areas to large cities in Western Europe and other countries, especially the United States, were key processes characterizing Jewish existence in continental Europe in the latter third of the nineteenth century and the early decades of the twentieth century.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Whether motivated by assimilation and acculturation, pogroms and deportations, or the collapse of Jewish economic niches in Eastern Europe, Jewish immigration to major cities was so pervasive that, in the cultural discourse of modernity and the modern condition, Jews have become identified with cities and thus labeled as cosmopolitan and urban.[[4]](#footnote-4) However, the internal contradictions in the stereotype of Jews as city dwellers is revealed in the texts examined, as is the attempt to universalize Jewish particulars — to deal with the “Jewish question” — through life in urban spaces, which is explored and problematized through these texts in various ways.[[5]](#footnote-5)

The connection between the modern Jewish subject and various spatial frameworks, including the urban one, is one of the central aspects of the so-called “Jewish question” (*Die Judenfrage*). The Jewish question is an epithet, used in nineteenth- and twentieth-century European discourse, for a variety of social and political questions concerning the status and standing of European Jews within modern European society, and in particular in relation to the achievement of civil and legal equality. The Jewish question sought to examine the possibility of translating the particular, communal, and tribal markers of traditional Jewish life into universal political categories, such as modern citizenship. Among Jewish thinkers, the Jewish question is formulated and understood as a question that requires — directly or indirectly — a spatial response. Nineteenth-century Enlightenment philosophers (progressive Jews), influenced by the European Enlightenment movement, embraced Jewish emancipation and equality in a perpetual search for a neutral public space, where Jews could combine maintenance of Jewish lifestyles with participation in secular-civilian society that did not label them as Jews and was not dependent on their religion. It was therefore an ambition to find a tolerant heterogeneous space where Jews could live in civil and legal equality with non-Jewish citizens, while their Judaism would become invisible and hidden. The poet Yehuda Leib Gordon’s appeal, in his Hebrew poem “Awake My People” (1866), includes the famous line “Be a man in the streets and a Jew at home.” This reflects Enlightenment thinkers’ belief in a clear spatial division between private space and public space, and the possibility of restricting Jewish particularism to places of prayer and the home.[[6]](#footnote-6) The urban space to which many Enlightenment Jews flocked in search of opportunities to integrate into non-Jewish society thus became a paradigmatic space for realizing Gordon’s appeal.

It is no coincidence that European Enlightenment thinkers lived and formed their philosophies within the urban spaces of the major Western European cities, which were perceived as the antithesis of the small Jewish township — the *shtetl*. While the monolithic and homogenous *shtetl* prevented any possibility of creating public spaces not designated as Jewish, the metropolis was seen as a neutral field in which Enlightenment Jews could become citizens of the world. In the modern metropolis of Europe, they could learn new languages, sit in cafés in the main squares, go to the theater, experiment with new rituals and customs, wear European clothing, and do whatever was necessary to mark them as equal citizens: Jews whose Judaism was unnoted and invisible. In the city, the primary Enlightenment thinkers — such as Judah Leib Gordon, Naphtali Hirz Wessely, and Moshe Mendelsohn — were able to demonstrate that Jewish particularism is built on a pillar of shared, universal humanity, and that Judaism does not prevent the Jew from becoming an ethical, rational being and thus integrating into non-Jewish society.

The pessimism of the Enlightenment thinkers about the possibility of equitable integration into non-Jewish European society, following the failure of the emancipation struggle and the persecution of Jews in Eastern Europe in the 1880s, was also marked by a renewed appeal in terms of the space. At that time, the understanding was that the long-awaited civilian option for a heterogeneous and neutral space in which they could exist should give way to a homogeneous Jewish, sovereign, and autonomous spatial option. The turning point in modern Jewish thought regarding space was Yehuda Leib Pinsker’s essay “Auto-emancipation” (1882), in which he ruled out the possibility of Jewish emancipation in non-Jewish European society. For him, this is a legal process that negates any real social bond, and does not guarantee true and complete recognition by non-Jewish European society of the need for equality for the Jews. In analyzing the “abnormal” state of the Jewish people in Europe, which he describes as a liminal ghost nation continuing to exist without its own territory among foreign nations, Pinsker calls for a territorial solution through the establishment of a sovereign Jewish-national framework in a space that would therefore be homogeneous in character.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Pinsker’s proposed solution does not mention a specific space in which the sovereign Jewish territory will be established. However, under the pressure from the Lovers of Zion movement, and later under the influence of Herzlian Zionism, a connection was established between the civil aspiration to be a nation among the other nations and the mythical affiliation to the Land of Israel, for the first time in modern Jewish history. Once the solution to the Jewish question became linked to territory, it led to the emergence of political theology that sought to unite the messianic yearnings of the Jewish people for Zion (the Land of Israel), and the territorial aspirations of a modern nationalist movement. As soon as the Zionist movement established territorial affinity between Judaism and Jews with the physical space of the Land of Israel as its infrastructure, alternative responses to the Jewish question (within the context of nineteenth- and twentieth-century internal Jewish discourse) challenged this exclusive territorial affiliation and the resulting negation of Jewish life outside the Land of Israel. There were various responses, such as aspiration to Jewish participation in a worldwide proletariat movement or support for a cosmopolitan and Diasporic stance opposed to the Zionist negation of the exile. Each of these recognized the ethical, human, political, and social potential of Jewish life precisely in heterogeneous spaces that are not exclusively labeled as Jewish. They attempted to formulate a relationship between the Jewish individual and a space that is not founded on territorial appropriation and nationalist prejudices. The texts discussed in the proposed work all address, through various formulations of political autonomy, the desire to normalize Jewish life precisely in the spaces that deny the Zionist super-narrative of “exile to redemption.”

One of the hallmarks of Herzlian Zionism was the desire to develop the untamed and uninhabited space of Israel through pioneering agricultural settlements.[[8]](#footnote-8) The Zionists perceived the European metropolis, and urban settlement in general, as a degenerate bourgeois option that contradicted the socialist and progressive life characterizing pioneer settlements in rural spaces. Zionist philosophy negated life in the Diaspora, in Europe, and especially in European urban spaces, which was perceived as an existence fraught with national tension; debased, alienated, and displaced, directly in contrast to the productive life of pioneering, agriculture and rural settlement.[[9]](#footnote-9) The Jew living in a noisy, industrialized, and alienating urban space, who has no ownership or affiliation that could be termed territorial, national, mythical, or theological, was a total antithesis to the hard-working agricultural Jew in direct, intimate and physical contact with the land and who manifests ownership of it through this connection. In light of this background, Jewish life in major cities outside the Land of Israel, as portrayed in the selected texts, is understood as a choice that is not only thematic or aesthetic but also essentially political. These writers attempt to present a spatial alternative, which goes beyond the ideological dictates of the Zionist super-narrative, according to which the condition for redemption is to move from exile in Europe to the homeland of Israel.

I argue that the cities portrayed in the discussed texts — London, Kiev, and New York —each offer an alternative to the subject-space relationship inherent in the Zionist project in Israel. Each of these cultural, political, and economic centers offered the Jewish subject an existential perspective which was cosmopolitan, liberal, and universal, and a key to territorial life beyond the Zionist pilgrimage from the Diaspora to Israel. Therefore, these urban spaces will be considered as sites where the subject-space relationship cannot be automatically framed through binary labels that organize, sort, manage, and control the national agenda: in other words, territorial, sovereign, and autonomous on the one hand, or exiled, alienated, and debased on the other.

One of the key tenets accompanying my reading of the three selected texts is that their descriptions of urban spaces can be seen as ideological products, not fixed or stable, whose relationship to the outside reality — literary, material, and historical — is not one of direct and immediate reflection. The phenomenon of urbanization, as I show, led to a broad and rich range of representations of urban spaces. In many cases, these are aimed at mitigating the ambivalence and conflict involved in moving to a metropolis and even minimizing the contradictions arising from Jewish life within it. In this context, Raymond Williams’ Marxist analysis of the representations of the city and the country in 16th century English literature is particularly relevant.[[10]](#footnote-10) Williams shows that representations of city and country are based on a fundamental distance between the object represented and the actual referent. He explains these representational gaps through the development of capitalism in England. Williams writes that the consistent portrayal in literature of the city as an industrialized, noisy, corrupt, and alienating space, which is the complete opposite of the country — a pre-urban paradise of intimate and harmonious community relations — constitutes “a myth functioning as memory.”[[11]](#footnote-11) These binary representations, established in systems of cultural representation (especially literary ones). They create ideological distortions and perpetuate a myth of space that disguises physical reality and the mechanisms of power, under which the capitalist industrial revolution has penetrated, with all its might, not only the city but also the agricultural economy of the village, and made the boundary between these spaces fluid.

The distorted presentation of the unequivocal separation and difference between these spaces is intended to embody the capitalist mode of production and to obscure the extent of its damage. This is made possible, as Williams shows, precisely by disguising how these two spaces operate according to the same economic principle, especially in the post-industrial revolution period. Williams’ writings enable me to examine the representations of the cities in the selected texts as part of the ideological attempt to assimilate the Jewish urban experience, and as a means to disguise and obscure the anxieties, uncertainties, violent power mechanisms, and conflicts that arose among Jews in response to the upheaval of modernity and the emergence of super-narratives such as nationalism, assimilation, cosmopolitanism and Diasporism — which sought to give definite and clear answers to the Jewish question in the twentieth century.

In the Jewish case, as I intend to show, the urban experience did not create a yearning for a rural space associated with traditional peasant life, but rather a sentimental attitude towards a Jewish space that was also presented in contrast to the modern city: the Eastern European Jewish township — the *shtetl*. This township space is on the existential horizon of the urban space in most of the texts I will discuss, whether as a possibility denied through city life, or as a Jewish space that is reconstructed — voluntarily or involuntarily — in various urban enclaves. Therefore, another major argument underlying this work is that Jewish urbanization, which entailed departure from the *shtetl*, had a definitive influence on literary representations of urban spaces as well as of the Jewish environment that was apparently left behind.

Unlike the tendency towards romanticism in English literature, in which urban existence is portrayed as a fall from rural pastoralism, many Jewish writers recognized the advantages of city life, and saw it as an alternative to the claustrophobic and deteriorating space of the township.[[12]](#footnote-12) Nevertheless, as Dan Miron shows, nineteenth-century Yiddish and Hebrew literature perpetuated a representation of the *shtetl* as a mythical and isolated territory imprisoned in theological temporality: an ahistorical and exclusively Jewish social space guided by divine providence.[[13]](#footnote-13) Following Miron’s remarks, representations of the *shtetl* as a Jewish space outside of history are necessary for the corresponding literary representations of the city as a space that corresponds to the Jewish aspiration to return to history and integrate into the spirit of progress and modernity.

In the light of the above, a central issue discussed in several sections of this dissertation is how Jewish existence in the urban sphere influences and produces the economics of the representations of the Jewish township, making it a fetishistic object and a sentimental representation within the framework of Jewish collective memory. In this context, I examine how Jewish life in the city is largely responsible for the literary works about the urban Jewish space, and how representations of the urban sphere and Jewish urbanism give rise to a new confrontation with the normative and accepted literary representations of the *shtetl.* I show that the geographical remoteness of the major urban centers explored in the selected works is precisely what strengthened the *shtetl*’s status as a “Jewish reservation” filled with the exoticism of *Yiddishkeit*, and conferred on it a status of a fetishistic object that exceeds its actual material value.

This does not mean that these writers automatically or consciously participated in the economics of representations that nurtured the exchange value of the *shtetl* and made it a site of nostalgic and sentimental attachment.[[14]](#footnote-14) My readings of the various texts seek out moments of deconstruction, through which writers expose ideological representations of the city and the *shtetl*, uncover the hybridity of these spaces, and undermine their literary preoccupation with binary spaces, with the movement between them following a narrative of secular redemption. In doing so, as I argue, the writers challenge how these representations of space promote institutionalized political programs, which create the hierarchy between city and *shtetl* that is essential to any super-narrative dealing with the integration of the Jewish subject into modern, progressive history. These issues will be explored in the various works in an attempt to understand whether, given the anonymous setting of the book, the Jewish subject succeeds in donning new masks and representations in order to establish himself as unmarked, as one among a “nation like all other nations,” and whether urban life can be the key to normalizing modern Jewish existence.

Finally, in my work I will address the link between representations of urban space and language, as reflected in the choice of writing about urban Jewish existence and urban space in Yiddish, Hebrew, or German. The writers of the selected texts held differing and varied opinions regarding how the modern Jewish subject and the modern Jewish nation should look. The implicit or explicit political view of each writer places Jewish life in a different place on the spectrum between the particular versus the universal; between the sense of Jewish, community, and tribal identification versus the neutralization of these feelings in favor of solidarity with a collective that is not necessarily Jewish. In the nineteenth century, writers who wrote in both Hebrew and Yiddish were an integral part of the landscape of European Jewish literature. By the first decades of the twentieth century, the bilingual Yiddish-Hebrew model had virtually disappeared from Jewish literature. The choice to write in Yiddish or Hebrew was therefore a political decision, and a testament to the writer’s beliefs regarding the future of Jewish culture; either a future of a new Jewish-national culture, based on Hebrew, a biblical tradition, and identified with the territory of Israel, or else a Yiddishist, non-territorial future most strongly identified with a worldwide proletariat or cosmopolitan Diasporic existence.[[15]](#footnote-15) In contrast to Jewish writing in Hebrew or Yiddish, writing in German largely disregarded the particularity of a Jewish language. In the case of Joseph Ruth, for whom the Yiddish language was not foreign, this choice apparently blurred his hyphenated Austro-Hungarian-Jewish identity. Writing in German minimized the tension between the aspiration for Jewish particularity and the commitment to European culture and its universal ideals. Therefore, the discussion will examine not only use of urban spaces as part of the attempt to understand various possible ways of life for Jews in the twentieth century, but also how the choice to write about the urban space in Yiddish, Hebrew, or German (given that the ideological and political gap between them widened during the years when the texts were being written) expresses an a priori political relationship between subject, space, and language.[[16]](#footnote-16)

Proposed Chapters

**The first chapter** of the dissertation will deal with the novella in Hebrew by Joseph Haim Brenner (1881-1929) “From the Straits” (1908), written following his four-year stay in London (1904-1908). The novella describes the dense concentration of the Jewish population emigrating from the Russian Empire; the miserable and alienated lives of Jewish immigrants displaced from their place of residence, whether cities or townships, who had not yet been able to establish themselves in London. These Jews are engaged in trying to find an optimal definition of Jewish identity that transcends its particular and exclusive components, and whose existence and continuity will no longer have a religious and theological basis. The novella traces a group of Russian Jewish immigrants who live in the Whitechapel district of the East End in London and are print workers for the Yiddish newspaper *The Daily Crab*. This group of Jewish workers is in conflict with the newspaper owner, who is installing a new printing machine designed to replace their handiwork. The conflict leads to a general strike, which is ultimately unsuccessful. Through this “economic plot,” which deals with the difficult physical conditions and class-based realities of early twentieth-century Jewish immigrants, London emerges as an urban laboratory for exploring diverse political responses to the Jewish question, including communism, territorialism, anarchism, Christian proselytizing, trade unions, and assimilation. As I will show, this economic plot has intertextual connections with the Zionist praxis which reveal Brenner’s perception of Jewish sovereignty as a colonial assertion of control over a territory, and his subversion of the monolithic intractability and indisputability of the Zionist discourse. As this novella suggests, during his time in London, Brenner was exposed to the extremes of contradictory intellectual and political positions, ranging from various socialist agendas to existentialist thought, while his intellectual and moral stance as a Jewish thinker and writer remained unaffiliated with any particular sector.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Against this background, Brenner’s uncompromisingly critical attitude towards the Zionist project remained intact. As Anita Shapira points out, Brenner shied away from the “culture of Zionist congresses and Zionistic chatter,” which he saw as evidence of the weakness of the Jewish people. Although he believed in a national future for the Jewish people, Brenner demanded honest self-criticism regarding nationalist action and its future implications.[[18]](#footnote-18) The representations of London in Brenner’s work are reminiscent of the fragmented, heterogeneous, and crowded life that George Simmel describes in his book *Metropolis and Mental Life* – a life of “rapid crowding of changing images, the sharp discontinuity in the grasp of a single glance…”[[19]](#footnote-19) Thus, a spatial analogy is made to identities in limbo and the undetermined dialectic poles of modern Jewish politics.

In March 1904, as Brenner was crossing the border into Prussia, fleeing from the authorities of the Russian Empire who wanted to draft him to the army, he wrote to the renowned Hebrew poet Haim Nachman Bialik: “I wanted to go to New York, but I have no money. [...] I have to go to London. There is no other place.”[[20]](#footnote-20) In April 1904, at the age of twenty-three, Brenner arrived in the capital of the British Empire, one of the largest and busiest urban centers in early twentieth-century Europe. Brenner settled in Whitechapel in the East End of London, where he lived for four years, which are considered to be among the most significant periods in the evolution of modern Hebrew literature as a whole. This great city held a multitude of opportunities for the young Brenner: he acquired aesthetic sensibilities for diverse and novel arts such as painting, he visited galleries, attended political gathering, and attended lectures on Hebrew and Yiddish culture and topics related to Russian revolutionary culture. Nevertheless, Brenner was in London by default, and his move there was not the result of prior planning.

Therefore, I examine Brenner’s stay in London and his work there a nonlinear journey through multiple cities — including Gomel, Berlin, Breslau, and Lvov — that led him from revolutionary Russia to Zionist Israel. This multitude of locations indicates the importance of staying within the urban sphere, in connection with Brenner’s deep opposition to the teleological (and theological) narrative of the Zionist movement, which binds exile and homeland in a hierarchical and urgent association. I view Brenner’s stay in London and his literary pursuits there as part of a broader spatial and political movement — tentative, deferred, capricious — through which Brenner challenged the pioneering territorialization of Israel. From London, Brenner planned a trip to Israel, and declared that “for a year, I will travel to Palestine, not as a believing and hopeful Zionist, but as a man who misses the sun.”[[21]](#footnote-21) This quickly gave way to the decision that “I will not go to Israel again.”[[22]](#footnote-22) Brenner finally arrived in Israel in 1909, where he lived for twelve years, until he was assassinated during the violent clashes with the local Arab population in during the 1921 riots.

On the face of it, setting the story in London, which had a parliamentary system of government, along with the tolerant and liberal rhetoric of the British Empire, seemed to offer the most convenient platform for exploring the possibility of Jewish life in a civilized society. As Seth Koven observes, during this period in Britain, the Jewish question became a broad and fundamental social question, through which Britain explored its own identity as a liberal and enlightened nation capable of sheltering victims of religious and political persecution on the continent of Europe.[[23]](#footnote-23) In fact, the Jewish question in the British sphere was not only related to theology and politics, but led to parliamentary discussions on civic qualifications for Jews as well as discussion of Judaism as a racial category, based on the theories of the new science of ethnology.[[24]](#footnote-24) Brenner’s work indirectly internalizes the tension arising from the dual rhetoric London offered the Jews: on the one hand, civil and inclusive rhetoric in the spirit of the Enlightenment, and on the other, the classification of Jews into new modern categories, such as race, which mark the Jew as different and biologically and physically distinct.[[25]](#footnote-25)

At the beginning of the twentieth century, some 144,000 Jews lived in the East End of London, and had a large presence in the districts of Whitechapel, Mile End, and Bethnal Green.[[26]](#footnote-26) Thus, in the East End of London, the Eastern European Jewish township was re-created, with street life and a network of Jewish educational institutions, synagogues, workshops, a Yiddish theater, and even a small but vibrant circle of Hebrew and Yiddish publications.[[27]](#footnote-27) This collective urban settlement was described at the time as “a fragment of Poland torn off from Central Europe and dropped haphazard into the heart of Britain.”[[28]](#footnote-28) It was presented by Brenner as a Jewish enclave challenging the concept of the modern metropolis as a transformative space in which the Jewish subject moves linearly and unidirectionally from the “pre-modernity” of the traditional Jewish town to the modernity of the European city.[[29]](#footnote-29) This portrayal of a semi-urbanized Jewish space in the heart of a large European city undermines the ideological position of these spaces in a system of binary relations. Further, it shows the possibility of an alternative form of Jewish urbanization, not necessarily identified with the categories of modernization and progress and with what Walter Benjamin called “a homogenous, empty time.”[[30]](#footnote-30) Brenner’s portrayal of the Jewish ghetto as a space controlled by patterns brought from the *shtetl* to the heart of the busy London metropolis produces hybrid spatial qualities, and enables a view of how the entry of the Jews into modern history can begin from a position that does not demand a sweeping transformation of the entirety of Jewish life. Simultaneously presenting these two types of space emphasizes their dialectical nature and prevents their fixation in the framework of a predetermined ideological-empirical pattern of representation and meaning. Therefore, the different types of urban spaces in Brenner’s work highlight the tension between the Jewish ghetto and the “free” world, or the spatial struggle between isolation and assimilation. They also illustrate competing and diverse conceptions of the meaning of modernity in general and of Jewish modernity in particular.

Criticism of modern Hebrew literature has emphasized the connection between Brenner’s stay in London and his aesthetic approach to the modernist currents of the period. This is thematically expressed in the portrayal of an alienated and chaotic urban experience, as well as an experimental tendency towards fragmentation, and strengthened by introspection expressed through internal monologue, with a meta-poetic sensibility.[[31]](#footnote-31) There is a temptation to view the use of modern aesthetics and thematics as a throwback to radical existentialism and a solipsistic literary stance that disapproves of any political format.[[32]](#footnote-32) However, I will examine how the representation of the urban experience in London forms an important basis for Brenner’s literary and political enterprise in the creation of Hebrew literature. This is closely related to the national project and the training of a modern, autonomous Jewish subject who has control over his spatial location. This issue will be explored, in part, by examining the epistemic status of the Jewish gaze in the urban sphere, as expressed in the novella under discussion.

The novella “Out of the Depths” is told from the perspective of a first-person narrator, a young Jewish-Russian immigrant wandering the streets of London’s East End and selling Jewish newspapers. From the corner of Whitechapel and Brick Lane, where he regularly sells his newspapers, the narrator observes the events of the city and tries to understand them. That is, through the fragmentary aesthetic of what Brenner calls “dismembered scrolls,” characterized by disruption, unravelling, and shattering.[[33]](#footnote-33) Through the presentation of a gallery of figures, for whom the shock of the metropolis makes them become closed within a space of private reflection, the narrator strives for a comprehensive perception of the space, and for his recognition. In describing the Jewish ghetto in London, the narrator struggles to create a panorama of Jewish life in the city. Since this visual experience relates to issues of spatial control, I argue that Brenner presents a preliminary basis for the establishment of the modern Jewish subject as one who may be identified with a position of power that organizes, controls, and disciplines with respect to the space in which it is located. Hence, the urban space depicted in Brenner’s work is interpreted not only through customary stereotypes of alienation, chaos, disorientation, and displacement, but also as an attempt to prepare the ground for the emergence of Jewish subjects who define their relation to space in a way that expresses control, autonomy, and responsibility.[[34]](#footnote-34) Moreover, by using the concept of “reification” from the academy of the Hungarian Marxist György Lukács (1885-1971),[[35]](#footnote-35) I examine how the Jewish view of the space in Brenner’s work resists the process of fossilization of consciousness, and promotes a critical conception of the Jewish subject’s relationship to the physical environment. Contrary to the tendency among researchers to deal with Brenner’s assimilation of the urban experience as a conscious experience that serves as a symbol of alienation and fragmentation, I examine how his work actually strives to create a configuration of observations of the occupied space (the Jewish ghetto, in this case) in dialectical terms, and which is opposed to its establishment as a fixed ideology. In doing so, Brenner shows that a necessary condition for the entry of the Jewish subject into modern history is the crystallization of a critical consciousness that occupies a space in temporal terms as part of an historical totality.

**The second chapter** of the dissertation will deal with David Bergelson’s (1884-1952) Yiddish novel *The End of Everything* [*Nokh Alemen*], published in 1913. This novel takes place in a nameless city, which can be identified as Kiev. Its theme is the urbanization process of Jewish people from small towns, and its characters frequently move between the *shtetl* and the metropolis. Against the background of the social, economic, and political upheavals in Eastern Europe during the years the novel takes place (such as the 1903 pogroms in Chisinau, the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-5, the failed Russian revolution of 1905, and the intense growth of capitalism between 1905-1914) Bergelson describes the position of the communists, the decline of the status of the merchants in the Ukrainian *shtetl* under the increasing pressure of urbanization, and the fate of the *shtetl*, which has become part of a city-centered system. The representation of urban space in this novel is examined as part of a paradigmatic literary transition to experimental poetics, which moves from the conception of Yiddish as a mimetic language and the collective expressions of “chatty” storytellers (such as Mendel the bookseller and Tevia the dairyman), to a view of it as a modern language that represents complex, cognitive processes of introspection. I illustrate the connection between the hostile representations of urban space in the novel and Bergelson’s own political views. He believed that Yiddish was the basis for the establishment of an extra-territorial Jewish nation with a modern secular culture. Given his declared socialist affiliations and his belief that Russia’s agricultural worker offered the brightest and most promising future for the Jewish subject,[[36]](#footnote-36) I will show how Bergelson represents urban space as decadent and driven by capitalist self-interest, and that the movement from small town to big city as lacking any organizing framework of a narrative of redemption and progress. Thus, Bergelson illustrates the processes of reification the Jewish subject undergoes in the urban sphere, which prevents any possibility of experiencing the movement from the township to the city in dialectical terms of progress, change, or improvement.

At the center of the reading of this novel is the character of Mirel, the only daughter of the Horwitz family, through whom the process of financial and spiritual bankruptcy is described. While moving from town to town, Mirel cannot find her place, neither within the social context of the parochial environment in which she grew up, nor in the intellectual life of the city. The restless movement between the *shtetl* and the metropolis suggests an ongoing search for an alternative to both the traditional life of the *shtetl* and the bourgeoisie of the metropolis, and the simultaneous, hopeless search for lasting, existential meaning. Mirel, who seems to have been inspired by Emma Bovary and Anna Karenina, can be seen as a sort of unsuccessful proto-feminist who fails to formulate an existential option that overcomes the gender roles offered by the traditional *shtetl* or the bourgeois urban society. However, the portrayal in this novel of life in the township alongside life in the city allows for examination of the subversive power inherent in Mirel’s character: a power that undermines the orderly rhythm of life in both these worlds. In other words, the movement between these two spaces is interpreted as a means of presenting them as different and separate from one another.

In Jewish cultural discourse during the transition of Jews from the *shtetl* to the city in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the *shtetl* began to be perceived, according to Naomi Seidman, as a female figure.[[37]](#footnote-37) The binarism rooted in European representations of the city and country is presented in the relations between the city and the *shtetl* not only as a binary opposition between the alienated and modern versus the pre-modern, intimate, and constrained, but also as binary opposition between masculine and feminine. Allison Shachter adds that the pole of the feminine, which is identified with the Jewish township, symbolizes the anxieties about everything Jewish men were doing but should not, as individuals moving in the urban sphere as citizens of the modern world.[[38]](#footnote-38) Bergelson’s novel critically examines the relationship between the fetishization of the *shtetl* and its perception as a feminine space that offers refuge from the capitalist alienation of the city. Exposing the mechanisms that fetishize the representation of the *shtetl* in the context of urbanization processes in this novel becomes possible through a narrative parallel between the *shtetl*’s fetishization and the fetishization of Mirel, who becomes a “commodity” lusted after by Jewish men who pursue her passionately and strive to link their destiny with hers, without sufficiently realistic reasoning. The protagonist of the novel thus emerges not only as someone who is transformed into a subject of conscious reification, but also as someone who becomes, in the context of the economic logic of the capitalist economy prevalent in the spheres of the city and the township, an object of exaggerated value, which the Jewish man exploits for his own purposes, in order to establish himself as an urbanist. Like the *shtetl*, Mirel becomes an object which, after moving to the city, has become unavailable, and thus is given an aura of value that exceeds the “actual” value of the commodity according to the institution’s economic system of exchange.

By applying types of movement associated with the urban sphere to the *shtetl*, I show the subversion of Mirel’s role in a process of spatial experimentation that is not framed in the economy of fetishization and reification. Wandering, as a specific type of urban movement, captivated the imagination of philosophers and cultural critics such as Walter Benjamin (1892-1940) and Michel de Serto (1925-1986). Both Benjamin and de Serto present the wanderer as a radical commentator on urban space and the modern state as a whole, whose movement subverts the rational, planned, and utilitarian syntax of the city.[[39]](#footnote-39) I introduce Mirel’s spatial movement as a type of wandering, whether in the urban area or in the *shtetl*. This wandering, which seems to be ineffectual and purposeless, is described in the academic literature as an expression of Mirel’s inability to fulfill a narrative of feminist redemption.[[40]](#footnote-40) This may reveal the conditions under which the *shtetl* and the woman (Mirel) become fetishistic objects. Mirel’s wandering challenges any unequivocal distinction between the city and the township and presents an alternative spatial syntax that undermines the male, utilitarian, and arrogant logic of the city, and neutralizes the attempt to view the *shtetl* as a focal point for sentimentality. Mirel’s wandering in the city and township are thus presented as an attempt to portray the Jewish urban experience from a female perspective.[[41]](#footnote-41) This is a key to the creation of a hybrid space, based on the rejection of the binary spatial opposition of *shtetl* versus metropolis. It is also presented as a subversive paradigm of inter-urban nomadism, which removes the space and the subject from subjugation to the economics of representation and fetishistic exchange.

**The third chapter** of the dissertation will deal with the novel *Job: The Story of a Simple Man* by the Jewish author and journalist Moshe Joseph Roth (1894-1939), which was published in German in 1930 [*Hiob: Roman eines simplachen Mannes*]. Roth was born to an Orthodox Jewish family in the town of Brody in Austrian Galicia. Two-thirds of the inhabitants of Brody were Jewish, but it differed greatly from the literary representation of Jewish towns in the works of Hebrew and Yiddish literature of the late nineteenth century. Brody reflected the multicultural and multiethnic character of the Habsburg Empire of which it was a part. It was a town of mixed ethnic, religious, cultural, and linguistic identities, which merged, competed, confronted, and influenced each other. The frequently changing borders of the surrounding countries affected the human, cultural, and political landscape of the town and the region. Raised in this reality, Roth shed every indications of his Jewish origins and moved, as did many Jews who aspired to assimilate, to the urban centers of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. He was educated in non-Jewish European institutions, such as the University of Lemberg (Lviv) and the University of Vienna. He dropped his first name, Moshe. He claimed that his father was a Polish Count, an Austrian railroad official, or an officer in the Austro-Hungarian army; most importantly, he denied that he was an Eastern European Jew (*Ostjude*). Western European Jews viewed Eastern European Jewry as the hallmark of a declining and despised form of Judaism, which perpetuates the Jews’ inability to become part of a general civil culture.

The urban space of Vienna (and later that of Berlin and Paris) was a transformative site for Roth, in which he sought — perhaps most prominently and most significantly of the writers I address in this work — to shed his Jewish identity and become a cosmopolitan and loyal citizen of a multicultural and multiethnic empire. His work as a journalist for the liberal newspaper *Frankfurter Zeitung* enabled him to live as a typical city dweller, living in hotels and spending much of his time in cafés. He apparently did not value his Jewishness and described himself as “a hotel citizen; a hotel patriot.”[[42]](#footnote-42) Like many Jews of the Habsburg Empire at the time, who were willing to declare simultaneous allegiance to the Jewish God and the Austro-Hungarian Emperor Franz Josef, Roth believed in the process of assimilation he had undergone within an empire he admired. This assimilation allegedly made Judaism a marginal, or even non-existent, element of his identity as a citizen of the empire.

However, this belief was shattered after World War I, with the collapse of the supranational empire — which turned out to be as imaginary and illusory as was the inclusiveness it granted Jews — and its breakup into different nation-states with rigid political borders and cultural divisions. The disintegration of the Habsburg Empire was accompanied by the rise of nationalist trends that left Roth, like many other assimilated Jews, unable to continue to manifest their ideal of patriotic loyalty to a multicultural and tolerant empire that considers it a citizen with equal rights. Therefore, many of his works were therefore inspired by the yearning for “the world of yesterday” (as in the title of the book by Stefan Zweig, Roth’s close friend); a world in which the desire to bridge and transcend particularistic elements of identity in favor of the common civil denominator of a heterogeneous yet unified and harmonious identity was still seen as possible. The urban space appears frequently in Roth’s novels, sometimes even as the central hero. It is, in many ways, a site of nostalgia for the heterogeneous and multicultural city of the Austro-Hungarian Empire; a mourned object from a world that allowed for free movement — without passports and documents — between its spaces; a world far removed from homogeneous national configurations of sovereignty and territory, which were particularly hostile and threatening for the stateless Jews.[[43]](#footnote-43) The place of Jews in the literary requiem that Roth portrays as the golden age of the Austro-Hungarian urban sphere remains rather marginal. Roth’s turning point regarding Jewish issues came towards the end of the 1920s, when, as part of his work as a journalist, he frequently visited the Russian Empire and Galicia, returning to the Jewish towns he left behind in pursuit of an assimilatory existence. His visits to the Eastern European Jewish townships were documented in *The Wandering Jews* [*Juden auf Wanderschaft*], a series of documentary essays he published in 1927, about the lives and experiences of Jewish refugees from Eastern Europe. His visits to these towns, and his exposure to Martin Buber’s thinking,[[44]](#footnote-44) influenced Roth to embarked upon a journey to rediscover his Judaism. He openly expressed his attraction to what he saw as “authentic” Judaism — the Orthodox Judaism of Eastern European Jews, and especially that of the Hasidic sects. He describes with sympathy the community life, sense of cohesion, and spiritual fulfillment that these Jews experienced in their synagogues and religious institutions, and discovered a strong attraction to the *kabbalah* (Jewish mysticism) that filled their lives. At the same time, he severely criticizes the Jews of Western Europe, absorbed in their aspirations for assimilation and acculturation, who offered their uncompromising loyalty to nation-states that did not repay them with sufficient protection against the rising nationalism and fascism in Europe. He saw the German Jews, who wanted to be “native Berliners” and “go on celebrating their holiest festivals in a kind of shamefaced secrecy, but Christmas publicly, and for all to see,”[[45]](#footnote-45) as immersed in an act of self-deception and denial of their distinctive Jewishness. Emphasis on this distinction indicates Roth’s opposition to Jewish participation in a project of political solidarity that assured the abolition of Jewish particularity in favor of acceptance of a universal identity. This is implied, for example, by his claim that: “Of all the world’s poor, the poor Jew […] refuses to be a proletarian.” In a similar vein, Roth explains that while the Russian peasant is first and foremost a peasant and then a Russian.… “The Jew is a Jew first, and then a peasant.”[[46]](#footnote-46)

As mentioned, Roth expressed a particularly open and explicit sympathy for the Hasidic Jews, who led their lives in parallel, but not in symbiosis, with the historical movement of modern nationalism. These were Jews who showed in their spiritual lives a degree of indifference to questions of sovereignty and territorial spatial control. They preferred to live their lives as a minority with religious, institutional, spiritual, and cultural autonomy.[[47]](#footnote-47) These Jews did not show interest in any movements that grant national liberty and their collective existence cannot be codified in Western national concepts.[[48]](#footnote-48) It is precisely in the religious devotion of the Hasidic Jews, who did not seek to fight the wars of the other nations, or for issues of national sovereignty and patriotism, and who strove to eliminate messianic fervor from historical Jewish life,[[49]](#footnote-49) that Roth saw as a positive indication of pacifism and avoidance of power and territorial control. The novel *Job: The Story of a Simple Man* is the fictional correlative to Roth’s documentary essays, in which he expresses through a spatial narrative of urbanization — a transition from a *shtetl* in the Russian Empire to New York City, the capital of the New World — his conclusions and attitudes regarding the Jewish question as a matter of space and sovereignty. This novel, which clearly links spatial and cultural movement to questions of Jewish identity, is the first of Roth’s fictional works that puts a Jewish story at its core. Roth’s approach to Orthodox Judaism, and especially Hasidic Judaism, is manifest by transforming the process of urbanization, through which Jews sought to become part of history and modern subjects, into a mythical story that does not necessitate active entrance into history in order to fulfill a vision of a more “complete” and “active” existence through modernization and national sovereignty.

The novel tells the story of Mendel Singer, a modest Jew from a *shtetl* in the Russian Empire, who works as a teacher in a religious elementary school and barely manages to financially support his family. Mendel’s deep faith is “repaid” with abject poverty. In a Job-like act of defiance, Mendel decides to move to New York, following the proposal of his son Shmarya, who previously emigrated to America and changed his name to Sam. At first, New York seems to him to be a massive place overflowing with real and symbolic goods and endless new possibilities for the Jewish subject. But the new homeland, like the old one, is found to hold false promises and death in its path. World War I drags Mendel Singer’s sons into the fighting overseas, one for the Russian Czar’s army and the other for the United States army, and they die or disappear. To these tragedies are added the insanity and premature death of his wife, and the illness of his youngest son, Menuchim, who suffers from epilepsy so severe he is unable to speak. Roth portrays a bleak version of Jewish urbanism. He describes a transgressive urban space in which the Jewish subject finds himself struck by a sensual mixture of stimuli and impressions that cannot be decoded or understood through the theological and traditional concepts at his disposal. This breakdown of familiar boundaries prevents the characters in the novel from making sense of their new environment, categorizing their impressions, or understanding urban space through existing semiotic codes. Although this urban experience invites Jews to make the “long-awaited” negation of particularity, this is revealed as a total obliteration and self-erasure in the face of the heavy burden of urban stimuli. It seems that Roth’s New York offers the Jewish subject extreme experiences of urban life, which lead him to undermine his sense of an autonomous self, and at the same time strengthen his connection to the past, and his relationship to tradition.

Through these descriptions of urban space, Roth confronts New York and advanced American capitalism with a third spatial option, absent from the text but implied in its margins: the Austro-Hungarian city and its the promise of individual freedom and social tolerance. By offering an artificial formula – which did not materialize and can no longer be realized – it offers the possibility of maintaining heterogeneous elements of a particularistic identity alongside trends of universalism. In addition, by presenting New York as a fall from a cosmopolitan urban paradise, in other words as a space dominated by bourgeois materialism and capitalist logic, Roth criticizes the homogenization of urban life, which he saw as part of a broader homogenization of life as a result of twentieth-century nationalism. Precisely for this reason, the urban space in *Job: The Story of a Simple Man* (as opposed to some of Roth’s other works) is not portrayed in an affirmative position, but rather as part of a dialectical movement between progress and destruction, between modernity and tradition. He refuses to integrate the process of urbanization into a nostalgic narrative of the city, or into teleological narratives of modernization that hold out a promise of historical redemption.

Furthermore, I examine how the dense network of allusion and the intertextual references to the biblical story of Job reveal another critical dimension of his description of the movement from the *shtetl* to the modern metropolis in this novel. Roth’s Job — Mendel Singer — is not a tragic hero in a divinely ordained plot, but a victim of the impersonal forces of history itself. At the same time, the choice of Job’s character offers a partial obscuring of the national and Hebrew tradition of the biblical text.[[50]](#footnote-50) It is an attempt to oppose any historicization of the idea of messianism and Jewish redemption, and to embed it in the context of movements with a revolutionary agenda, like Marxism or Zionism, which, each in its own way, offered Jews a refuge from their territorial and particularistic existence. Thus, urbanization and urban space receive a mythical status in this novel. They become part of a story that opposes the historical movement and the modern experience of Jews entering history as part of a sweeping existential rehabilitation.[[51]](#footnote-51) In this way, Roth presents the narrative of Jewish urbanization not as a story of the loss of a particularistic Jewish identity, but as part of a Jewish narrative that exists alongside and apart from history, and does not fully share in its demands and upheavals. In Roth’s work, the city becomes a non-historical space of revelation, which marks the Jew as a member of the chosen people. Yet it rejects any deistic and rational conception of urban space, and strives to establish the city as a neutral secular site in which the Jewish subject will be re-created as a universal citizen.

The vicissitudes of Mendel Singer’s life echo of the historical current of Jewish immigration. At the same time, his spatial movement into and within the city is rooted in a mythical tradition that is not appropriated for immediate historical purposes. Invoking the Jewish mythology and biblical story undermine the progressive logic of the modern city and the processes of modernization and Jewish territorialization.[[52]](#footnote-52) In light of Roth’s renewed attachment to Hasidism, the very Jewish stream that shunned a nationalist conception of a sovereign Jewish country, the Jewish question in the novel is translated into a question that is not only spatial but also anti-temporal, because Roth perceived temporality as the dangerous affirmation of a messianic vision that is realized in actual historical time and space. Thus, the spatial question becomes, in Roth’s work, a means of examining subject-space relations that deviate from the Enlightenment redemption story of the Jewish transition to liberation into the metropolis, or from the Zionist redemption story of the Jewish transition to a sovereign national territory.

In conclusion, the comparative reading of these three novels will examine how a common historical theme — Jewish urbanization in the first half of the twentieth century — was employed by Jewish authors who wrote in various national, political, linguistic, and ideological frameworks and contexts, and how each individual’s particular urban experience created and shaped the urban space that appeared in their works. The proposed comparison of these three works will shed an important light on how the Jewish question — and its translation into narratives of urbanization — was not only associated with literary issues of representation and aesthetics, but also contributed to the transformation of modern Jewish literature into an ethical, political and philosophical space in which the modern Jewish subject was invented and designed.

1. The intention here is a physical action whose theoretical model is not external but forms an integral part of the human action involved. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. My remarks are based on the critique of the Enlightenment by Michel Foucault’s school. Enlightenment, as Foucault shows, attempted to create a rational, objective, positivist, and normalizing connection between particular elements and categories of universal thought. Foucault sought to expose the oppressive dimension of Enlightenment discourse by showing how the experience of the connection between the particular and the universal led to the creation of an essentialist and uncritical model of an individual who is detached from material history and the system of particular cultural differences it creates. This connection between the particular and the universal, which forms the basis of Western nationalism and Marxist praxis, was reinterpreted by Foucault in order to understand the difference — and not the oppressive identity — created within it. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Wirth-Nesher, 1996, p. 140. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Yuri Slezkine argues that urbanization, one of the primary characteristics of modernization, became identified with Jews in part because, in the early twentieth century, Jews from Eastern Europe and Russia were more strongly represented than other ethnic minorities living in large cities. He explains this through the Jews’ “mercurial” way of life in the pre-modern era, in which they were service nomads, and which prepared them to become exemplary modern subjects (Slezkine, 2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. In this context, I would like to make a methodological comment about theories of urbanization discussed in my work. There is no single model of the city or the urban experience, and most conceptions of the modern metropolis tend to have a degree of universality, which reveals their limitations and their development according to Western models. However, in an attempt to understand the distinct status of cities that appears in the discussed texts, I examine various models and theories dealing with the urban experience, such as those in the studies of urban space by Michel de Serto, Henri Lefebvre, Walter Benjamin and Georg Simmel. Additionally, I utilize spatial categories such as Mikhail Bakhtin’s “chronotope” and Michel Foucault’s “heterotropia” as a starting point for critical examination of the urban experience in a Jewish context and the connection between the urban space and the design options of the Jewish subjects operating within it. At the same time, I examine the possibility of applying these theories - which assume, each in its own way, a universal individual who does not carry a particular identity and is not labelled as different - to the Jewish subject. This universal, generic individual is viewed as an integral part of urban society, and this privileged position allows the individual to be found in the margins and esoteric areas of the urban space, as a result of desire, choice, and personal aesthetic and ethical preferences. The urban experience, whether it is ongoing and intensive or coincidental and temporary, may suggest, as I intend to demonstrate, the organization of the experiencing subjects and their relationship to the space; the city may be a platform for anonymity without the specifics of Jewish identity and in the absence of the Jewish label. At the same time, it may offer a renewed encounter of the Jewish subject with Judaism. Thus, the validity of these theories will be critically examined in the context of the Jewish question in urban space, which necessarily involves politicizing the typical and universal urban experience addressed in most of the theories of modern urban space. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. In this context, it should be noted that the Jewish question is based on a cultural discourse that is exclusively European, and therefore must be understood within the context of European Jewry only. The Jewish question, and the related issues with which Jewish Enlightenment philosophers grappled (such as the search for a neutral public space of citizenship, modernization, and Jewish entry into history), was not part of the experiences of Jewish communities in Arab countries, because it was an integral part of the European Enlightenment, and was essentially based on Protestant logic. Therefore, the Jewish question is in fact based on the binary distinction between religion and secularism, and on the concept of a subject whose holistic definition is not dependent on his or her religious affiliation, which is therefore not an aspect of the neutral public space. The existence of a Judaism not based on religion was foreign to the existential concept of Jews in Arab societies, who completely identified Judaism with the Jewish religion and did not see the possibility of Jewish subjectivity without clear and demonstrative signs of the religion (For further explanation see: Shenhav, 2004). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. It is important to note that Pinsker and other Jewish Enlightenment thinkers were in deep denial regarding the problems of the category of citizenship, as defined by the Enlightenment, in a Jewish framework. The disappointment of their hope that the Enlightenment would enable a Jewish subject to function in an equitable civil system was due, in part, to their denial of the fact that Jewish continuity was made possible through religious and theological perceptions, and that the Jewish religion is essentially based on collective-public visibility and physical segregation. These traits prevent any real possibility of participation in a civilian system that makes particular affiliations secondary. Pinsker’s ambition for a homogenous Jewish sovereign space negates the very idea of citizenship, since it ultimately requires the formation of a political theology that goes against every conception of modern citizenship. Sovereignty based on categories of “Jewishness,” whether religious, ethnic, national, or racial, profoundly contradicts the notion that seeks to transcend these categories and not to make them a condition for equal civil status. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The Zionist narrative’s representation of Israel as uninhabited must be understood as an ideological construction that sought to establish the myth that the land to which the pioneers of the Zionist movement came was empty and desolate. This myth served as a convenient platform for the moral justification of Jewish settlement in the Land of Israel after two thousand years of exile, and a means of dismissing the resultant conflicts with the Arab inhabitants of the country. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Shapira, 2012. p. 173 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Williams, 1975 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid, p. 43 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Wirth-Nesher, 1996, p. 37 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. In his study, “The Literary Image of the Shtetl,” Dan Miron describes the representations of the Jewish township in the classic Yiddish and Hebrew literature of the nineteenth century, most notably in the works of Shalom Jacob Abramovich (commonly known as Mendel the Bookseller). In these works, the *shtetl* is portrayed as lacking any regulated architectural infrastructure, a chaotic place in which homes were carelessly built with no prior planning, and with a stinking river running through its center, whose murky waters represent the filth of the Jews living around it. However, Miron argues that despite the satirical and critical tone of representations of the *shtetl*, it is portrayed as an allegorical and sublime space, a monolithic and unchanging Jewish territorial entity under divine protection. That is, although presented as a space embedded in the foundations of Jewish existence that the Enlightenment thinkers considered flawed, the *shtetl* was also presented as a space filled with intimacy, closeness, and Yiddishkeit. This undermines the distinct, strict separation between a satirical and mocking tone and a nostalgic, sympathetic tone (Miron, 2000).

    Despite the realistic norms of representation that governed late nineteenth-century Hebrew and Yiddish literature, there was no material anchor for the representations of the *shtetl*. From the outset, they were intended to serve the psychological and ideological needs of the reading public who also adopted the religious metaphors of exile and salvation. As Israel Bartel adds, historical sources show that, in contrast to their literary representation, Jewish townships in Eastern Europe were built according to a defined plan, and that Jewish residential areas were never designed to be spatial units governed by severe ethno-geographical segregation between Jews and non-Jews, as is often portrayed in literary representations (Bartel, 2009, pp. 179-192). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. The discussion of the spatial representation of the Jewish township using concepts such as “fetish” or “exchange value” is based on Marxist value theory. The assumption is that the gap between the representation of the Jewish township, as seen through the prism of urbanism, and the reality may be compared to the gap between the "use value" (that is, the realistic utilitarian value of an object) and its "exchange value" (the symbolic and economic value of the object, which does not necessarily reflect its utilitarian and material value). Using the system of concepts in Marxist value theory allows me to illustrate how the *shtetl* is transformed into a fetishistic object, that is, an object with a mystical aura and idyllic meaning that cannot be explained by its "natural" and historical status. I assert that the gap between these two versions gives the object its fetishistic status and a distorted ideological representation of Jewish life. It creates a literary geography of the *shtetl* that results, in part, from the accelerated urbanization processes among Eastern European Jewry at the end of the nineteenth century and the first two decades of the twentieth century. I explore the possibility of verifying as well as challenging and negating this gap, as part of my focus on texts dealing with the image of the *shtetl* in twentieth-century urban life (Marcus, 1977, pp. 472-480). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. As Miron shows, the two major branches of modern Jewish literature written from the nineteenth century, Yiddish and Hebrew, became severely separated entities over time. This is not only because of the differences in language, but also because of ideological and artistic differences. In the short span from the last decade of the nineteenth century through the first decade of the twentieth century, Miron explains, the choice between Yiddish and Hebrew was not binding, and the model of bilingual writers seemed possible (as evidenced by the literary activity of authors such as Abramovich and Peretz). Yiddish was viewed negatively by the Enlightenment thinkers of the mid-nineteenth century as a language lacking aesthetic appeal or a barbaric jargon preferably translated into European languages or Hebrew. Nevertheless, Yiddish and Hebrew literature were seen as part of a bilingual entity of Jewish literature. As part of the Zionist attempt to normalize Jewish existence in modernity, Hebrew became the language of territoriality and sovereignty, while Yiddish was dismissed because it was identified with exile and therefore degenerate (Miron, 2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. To ensure that my discussion of the issue of language will not be anachronistic, I would like to make it clear that in the historical moment being addressed - before World War II, the Holocaust, the establishment of the State of Israel - Hebrew was not yet the official language of the State of Israel, German had not yet been ostracized due to its identification with murderers and oppressors, and Yiddish was not yet excised from the canon of sovereign Jewish culture. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. As Hannan Hever (2010) shows, although Brenner considered himself a nationalist Jew, his intellectual life in London highlighted the contradictions between his political behavior and his stated commitment to various political organizations. This is evidenced by his wide-ranging and diverse journalistic and political activities, which seem to indicate a series of dual loyalties, lacking a consistent agenda. During his stay in London, Brenner was a leader of the Workers of Zion, along with Kalman Marmor. At the same time that he worked for the social democratic and anti-Zionist Yiddish weekly, *The New Time*, he established the Hebrew-Zionist periodical with the revolutionary name *The Awakener*(1906). He wrote Hebrew literature and was always an enthusiast of the Hebrew language. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Shapira, 2008 [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Simmel, 1997, pp. 175 [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Quoted by Shapiro, 2008, p. 60 [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Quoted in Hever 2010, p. 144 [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Koven, 2010, p. 47 [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Valman, 1999, p. 243 [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. It should be added that the segregated Jewish life in London’s East End raised issues of economics and class, as is often shown in Brenner’s work, and also exposed the Jews to divisions typical of the British Empire between Orient and Occident, between the European nation-state and the “colonial periphery.” London’s internal spatial division thus marked East End Jews as the “Eastern Other,” in other words, as a separate, tribal culture (Melman, 2009, p. 147) and transformed East London into a kind of dark continent in the heart of the English metropolis. The division of cities into east and west was not unique to London. After all, nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century English Orientalism had a close affinity with the logic of imperialism, which was linked with the urban experience and transformed urban discourse, which was replete with hierarchical oppositions and separations. Brenner argued that the insistence of nationalist Jews to position themselves as agents of colonialism in Palestine expressed their desire to view themselves as European and Western (Ginsberg, 2017, p. 331). Therefore, London’s urban sphere, which positioned the Jews as part of the backward and non-European “East” constituted an instrument that opposed the experience of European Jews, whose spatial movement was a colonial migration that took its legitimacy from ideals of progress and enlightenment. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Melman, 2009, p. 197 [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Pinsker, 2010, p. 76 [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. S. Gelberg quoted in Sims, 1902, p. 29 [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. For an example of how the conventional view of the city as a transformative space serves as a bridge for Jews between tradition and modernity, between communal identity and individual identity, see Baumgarten, 1982, p. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Benjamin, 1996, p. 395 [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Berdichevsky, 2018, p. 59 [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Ibid., 76; Brinker, 1990, pp. 152-153 [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. This fragmentation is reflected in the structure of the text structure, which Brenner calls “dismembered scrolls,” and through interrupting the prose sequence with various delivery techniques, such as stream of consciousness, internal monologues, changing perspectives, and even a genre transition into theatrical discourse. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. This contemplative position also emerges in Brenner’s journalistic writing during his lengthy residence in London, such as his 1905 essay “The Drop,” in which he describes Jewish life on a routine day in East London through the provision of multi-faceted images of the street. I argue that it is no coincidence that the portrayal of the metropolis in this essay is linked to the premature death of Theodor Ze’ev Herzl, the leader of nationalist-political Zionism. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. György Lukács developed Karl Marx’s theory and pointed out the effects of capitalist ideology on the objective and subjective perception of man. He describes this effect through the concept of reification: the fragmentation and de-historicization of reality, which loses its cohesion and meaning as a process of historical succession. Through reification, man loses his historical sense of criticism and becomes a passive entity, who no longer believes in change (Lukács, 1972). [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Bergelson, Dovid, 1926 ARE THESE TWO NAMES OR IS DOVID THE FIRST NAME? [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Seidman, 2016 [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Shachter, 2012, pp. 126-127 [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Movement in the city, de Serto argues, is akin to the experience of speech, in which the *parole* (use of language) often contradicts the standard rules of language, the *langue*. Similarly, it is as if the spontaneous and singular wanderer in the city is rewriting it, and overcoming the rigidity of its existing spatial patterns. Since the city, as de Serto argues, is a place that erases the distinctiveness of the subject, wanderings within it oppose this erasure and produce a new urban syntax that cannot be read through the usual vocabulary of the city (De Certeau, 1985, pp. 122-145). [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Banki, 2010, pp. 91-114 [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. The choice to discuss the character of Mirel in the light of the practice of wandering practice or the figure of the wanderer is itself an act of politicization and gender. From a critical point of view, the **Baudelairian** shock of the urban experience, and the practice of urban wandering described by Benjamin and de Serto, are implicitly based on male defaults, which mask gender through use of universal and general humanistic terms. This experience should therefore be read differently in Jewish and non-Jewish contexts, due to the palpable difference between urban wandering that is undertaken against a background of a sedentary life and national affiliation, as opposed to the that which is undertaken, as in the Jewish case, against the background of a general existential detachment and nomadism. In analyzing the relationship between women and modernity, Rita Felski (2009) criticizes Georg Simmel because in his theory of urban life and the modern city women do not share the existentialist sense of homelessness in modernity, and do not experience the alienation of the urban space. In light of the above, I show that the connection between theories of the urban experience and that of a female literary figure is incomprehensible. I add to the general critique of the tendency to formulate and describe the urban experience (as well as other experiences) as a primarily male experience. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Roth, 2015 [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Many of Roth’s novels provide a glimpse into the “underworld” of the big city: bars, brothels, public baths, immigrant neighborhoods, and soup kitchens for the needy often appear in his works. They invoke the recurring theme of the loss of the golden age of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, which created urban spaces where displaced, nomadic, and cosmopolitan subjects perceived the city as a home that may have been temporary, and yet was the only one possible for them (Rosenfeld, 2001). [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. For more on the relationship between Ruth and Buber, see Lazaroms, 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Roth, 2004, p. 88 THE ORIGINAL PUBLICATION DATE IS MISSING IN SOME FOOTNOTES [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Roth, 2001 (1927) [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Literary research often notes what appears to be a contradiction between Roth’s intense attraction to Eastern European Hasidic Judaism and another attraction, formed towards the end of his life, to Catholic Christianity. However, it seems that these can be reconciled with what appears to be a broad opposition to Protestant attitudes, whether Christian or Jewish (such as Zionism), which uphold a strict separation between the supposedly secular public space and the religious private space. This can be seen, for example, in a conclusion he draws in one of his essays: the Hasidic Jew, who does not strive for national liberty in the Western sense, “…does not fight for any Palestine. He detests the Zionist, who uses ridiculous European methods. […] An Orthodox Hasid from the East would prefer a Christian to a Zionist” (Roth, 2001 [1927], p. 30). [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. It is therefore not surprising that Roth’s renewed attraction to Hasidic Judaism was accompanied by a change in his perception of the question of Jewish sovereignty and nationalism. Roth, who became suspicious of the national movements that arose after World War I and their irreconcilable connection to nationalism and fascism, saw Zionist aspirations for a Jewish nationalist not only as an inauthentic imitation of European nationalism, but also as a return to a previous, primitive stage. He saw a conflict of interest between Judaism and territoriality, between the desire for a national homeland with definite boundaries and what he saw as a liberating Jewish tendency to be nomadic and transient. Roth’s admiration of the wandering, non-militant, vacillating, and oppressed Jew, who nevertheless had strong and authentic passion and creative and vital and spirituality, finds its most profound expression in his novel *Job: The Story of a Simple Man* (1930). [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. According to Gershom Scholem, the preoccupation of Hasidic and Orthodox rabbinic Judaism with spiritual and inner redemption (which does not take place publicly on the stage of history, and does not involve the Jewish collective as a whole) and their insistence messianic temporality as holding out for something perpetually unfulfilled was a means of eliminating radical messianism from Judaism, as part of a broad reaction to the messianic fervor and unrest that arose in the Jewish world following the (actual and historical) emergence of the false messiah Shabtai Tzvi (Scholem, 2011 [1959]). [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. As Galit Hasan-Rokem claims, the choice of Job, a man who lived in the land of Uz, far from the Holy Land and from the national territory of Palestine, reinforces the rabbinic tendency to detach the Book of Job from the written tradition of the national dynasty (Hasan-Rokem, 2014, p. 149). [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. Like Walter Benjamin in *The Arcades Project*, Roth examines and locates the mythic and historical elements within the modern city that divert it from its unique and transient historical reality to a theological and temporal past. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. This is in contrast to Zionist discourse, in which the biblical text is widely used as a means of justifying the territorial-historical, and not just mythical, connection between the people of Israel and the territory of the Land of Israel. Instead, Roth seeks to mythicize a particular moment in Jewish history in order to extract the Jewish subject from the necessity of historical circumstances that do not offer the possibility of actual redemption. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)