**Going Urban:**

**The Jewish Experience of the Metropoles in Yiddish, Hebrew, and German Literatures of the Early 20th Century**

Project Description

This project offers a comparative reading that examines the processes of urbanization, spatial design, and the Jewish urban experience in three novels written during the first four decades of the 20th century: "Out of the Depths" written in Hebrew by Yosef Haim Brenner (1908); “When All is Said and Done” 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 20th century: nationalism, territorialism, immigration, cosmopolitanism, and Diasporism. Thus, I examine the role of urban space in how the discussed works 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 civic 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 19th century and the early decades of the 20th 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 examined texts, 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 19th and 20th-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 civic 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-civic society, which 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 civic and legal equality with non-Jewish citizens, while their Judaism would become invisible and hidden. The poet Yehuda Leib Gordon’s appeal to his people, in his Hebrew poem "Awake My People" (1866), includes the famous line “Be a man in the streets and a Jew at home” reflects the belief Enlightenment thinkers regarding 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 complete opposite of the small Jewish town — the *shtetl*. While the monolithic and homogenous *shtetl* prevented any possibility of creating public spaces not designated as Jewish, the large city was seen as a neutral field in which Enlightenment Jews could become citizens of the world. In the large, modern cities 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.

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 from Michel Foucault's academy. 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 a person 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 re-interpreted 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 20th 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 that will be 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 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 him or her 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 subject and his or her relation 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)