

Warsaw. The Jewish Metropolis

*Essays in Honor of the 75th Birthday
of Professor Antony Polonsky*

Edited by

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In Kotik's Corner: Urban Culture, Bourgeois Politics and the Struggle for Jewish Civility in Turn of the Century Eastern Europe

Scott Ury

Looking out on the great turn-of-century metropolis of Warsaw, A. A. Friedman, editor of the Hebrew daily *Ha-tzofe* (The Observer), could not help but notice that the city and its residents were changing. Among the many changes unfolding before the paper's keen journalistic eye was the appearance of numerous "Jewish" cafés: coffee houses that were patronized almost exclusively by Jews. Typical of a turn-of-century daily's love-hate relationship with the modern city, the newspaper was both drawn to and repulsed by Warsaw's many sites of urban attraction and horror, including cafés.¹ Indeed, not only had "the Jews" changed the face of "the city," the city had changed the face of "the Jews":

The number of cafés in our city has grown at an alarming rate of late and some of these institutions are even open on Shabbat. The reason for this phenomenon is the growing number of solitary people [*aneshim bodedim*] living in our city without their families. These people have much difficulty finding a place where they can go on Shabbat . . .²

This seemingly innocuous item about the changing nature of Warsaw's cityscape speaks volumes about a series of fundamental social transformations—the massive in-migration of single Jewish men to the city, noticeable changes in levels of religious observance, and the appearance of a new public

* Research for this article was made possible by a generous grant from the Israel Science Foundation, ISF, Grant No. 361/12.

1 On dailies as guides to the perplexities of urban living, see Peter Fritzsche, *Reading Berlin, 1900* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 16–20. Also see Judith R. Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992). I also discuss some of these questions in Scott Ury, *Barricades and Banners: The Revolution of 1905 and the Transformation of Warsaw Jewry* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), 45–90.

2 *Ha-tzofe*, no. 498 (25 VIII / 7 IX 1904), 849.

culture. Together, these changes altered Jewish society and culture in urban centers across turn-of-century Eastern Europe.³ These and related developments will serve as the backdrop to this article's discussion of the emergence of Jewish coffee houses in Warsaw, vital public spaces that will serve as a rubric here for examining the Jewish encounter with and response to modernity in Eastern Europe.⁴ What can the triangular relationship between coffee, Jews and the urban ideal tell us about Jewish perceptions of and responses to the very epitome of modern society, the metropolis?

For over a generation, coffee houses have stood at the center of critical theories interrogating the development of modern, liberal societies and their ostensible guarantor, the bourgeois public sphere (or, alternatively, civil society). In his now classic *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Jürgen Habermas persuasively argues that coffee houses were part of a series of new spaces and institutions that emerged in eighteenth-century Western Europe to form a "public sphere," the bedrock of modern, western society, politics and culture that guaranteed Western Europe's path from enlightenment and democracy to cosmopolitanism and co-existence. At its core, the bourgeois public sphere was a collection of institutions—coffee houses, newspapers and theaters—that enabled the assembly of individuals and the crystallization of "the public." Its key characteristics were its open nature, rational foundations, and new spaces in which individuals could assemble to debate rationally the issues of the day and form a collective public without abandoning their individual autonomy. According to Habermas, "the bourgeois public sphere may be conceived above all as the sphere of private people come together as a public; they soon claimed the public sphere regulated from above against the public authorities themselves, to engage in a debate over the general rules governing relations in the basically privatized but publicly relevant sphere of commodity exchange and social labor. The medium of this political confrontation was peculiar and without historical precedent: the people's use of their reason."⁵

3 For more on Jewish public culture at the time, see: Jeffrey Veidlinger, *Jewish Public Culture in the Late Russian Empire* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009).

4 For recent studies on the connection between Jews and coffee, see Sarah Wobick-Segev, "Buying, Selling, Being, Drinking; Or, How the Coffeehouse Became a Site for the Consumption of new Jewish Modalities of Belonging," in Gideon Reuveni and Sarah Wobick-Segev (eds.), *The Economy in Jewish History: New Perspectives on the Interrelationship between Ethnicity and Economic Life* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2011), 115–134; and Robert Liberles, *Jews Welcome Coffee: Tradition and Innovation in Early Modern Germany* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2012).

5 Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), 27. My thanks to Derek Penslar for his insightful comments on this issue.

In addition to reconfiguring the nature of urban space and shaping the very mode of public interaction between individuals, the public sphere was also an inherently political and contestatory body, one that served as both the foundation of “the public” as well as the source of the public’s confrontation with authorities. Thus, the bourgeois public sphere came to be seen not only as a key marker of modern society but also the guarantor of such leitmotifs of modernity as civil society and democracy. Ultimately, coffee houses and other central public sphere institutions came to symbolize what was widely viewed as the Western European model of modernity—one that was inherently rational, democratic, and progressive.⁶

Despite Habermas’ influence, some critics contend that, notwithstanding the allure of progress that the great project of modernity offered, cracks eventually began to appear. Like the cliché regarding a Bolshevik omelet, far too many “eggs” were broken along modernity’s path of progress and redemption. Some have even argued that the source of the breakdown of the great project of modernity is, in fact, embedded deep within its very essence.⁷ Inspired by these and other readings of the development of modern society, I have argued elsewhere that many of these contradictions are as salient for Jews as they are for other residents of the European continent, both its western and eastern halves.⁸ The following analysis further develops this discussion by highlighting the contradictions embedded deep within the Jewish encounter with the metropolis—the very hallmark of modernity—and the accompanying attempts to construct the autonomous (Jewish) self—one of modernity’s chief aspirations.⁹

Located in the heart of Warsaw’s Jewish district, at 31 Nalewki Street, Yehezkel Kotik’s coffee house vividly illustrates many of these contradictions. Throughout this chapter, I will highlight two aspects of Kotik’s coffee house that explore the dialectics of Jewish and general modernity in turn-of-century eastern Europe. On the one hand, Kotik’s café was a quintessential public sphere institution. For many of Warsaw’s Jewish residents, both veteran residents and

6 On the connection between civil society and democracy, see, for example, Michael Walzer, “The Concept of Civil Society,” in Michael Walzer, ed., *Toward a Global Civil Society* (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1995), 16, 24. See also Ernest Gellner, *Conditions of Liberty: Civil Society and Its Rivals* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1994), 5, 53–54, and 103.

7 See, for example, Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Continuum, 1999). For an alternative view, see Zeev Sternhell, *The Anti-Enlightenment Tradition*, trans. David Maisel (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010).

8 See Ury, *Barricades and Banners*, 261–272.

9 On modernity and the fate of the modern self, see Igal Halfin, *Terror in My Soul: Communist Autobiographies on Trial* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).

recent arrivals, his centrally-located café was a dynamic, open urban space in which Jewish individuals from a wide cross-section of Warsaw's diverse urban society and the surrounding region would congregate to debate the affairs of the day. In this and other ways, Kotik's café was typical of the many new public forums in Warsaw that encouraged debate between individuals and an attendant imagination and re-construction of an urban Jewish community. True to Habermas's model, this community of discourse would often serve as the foundation for a burgeoning collective body politic, if not a nation in the making.

At the same time, Kotik himself was a tireless communal activist who regularly used the café to advance his own particular vision of bourgeois politics, urban reform, and Jewish national regeneration. Thus, an analysis of the projects for urban renewal that Kotik promoted within his coffeehouse sheds light not only on the language and ideal of Jewish urban reform but also on his inherently ambivalent relationship to modernity and the precarious place of the individual within his visions of Jewish civility, citizenship, and self. Taken together, Kotik's quintessentially modern, urban café and his plans for urban reform expose a set of contradictions and tensions inherent in modernity itself, thereby problematizing our understanding of the Jewish encounter with and understanding of urban society, the Jewish community and the Jewish self in the modern world.¹⁰

In Kotik's Corner: Coffee and the Construction of the Jewish Public Sphere

As many observers have noted, the last third of the nineteenth century was a period of rapid industrial and urban growth across great parts of the Russian Empire. Although diverse factors contributed to these developments, a series of virtually new cities arose in late nineteenth-century Eastern Europe, including Łódź, Warsaw, and Odessa.¹¹ Like many other developments, the emergence of these new centers affected the lives of many of the Russian Empire's

10 For traditional views of the path of Jewish modernity, see Jacob Katz, *Tradition and Crisis: Jewish Society at the End of the Middle Ages*, trans. Bernard Dov Cooperman (New York: Schocken, 1993); Jacob Katz (ed.), *Toward Modernity: The European Jewish Model* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1987); and Shmuel Feiner, *The Jewish Enlightenment*, trans. Chaya Naor (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

11 On the growth of cities in late imperial Russia, see Daniel R. Brower, *The Russian City between Tradition and Modernity, 1850–1900* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990) and Michael F. Hamm, *The City in Late Imperial Russia* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986).

five million Jewish subjects. Attracted by new economic opportunities as well as intellectual and cultural possibilities, many Jews began to migrate from provincial towns and small centers (*shtetls*) to the new metropolises.¹²

While population figures are always problematic, official statistics regarding Jewish population growth in these new centers are telling. In the decades preceding World War I and the collapse of the old regime, Odessa's Jewish population grew almost fourfold, from approximately 55,000 in 1880 to roughly 200,000 in 1914; the Jewish population of Łódź sky-rocketed from around 10,000 in 1873 to some 170,000 by the outbreak of World War I, and the number of Jews in Warsaw grew almost three-fold from 125,000 in 1881 to some 340,000 in 1914. (In each of these cases, it should be noted, the non-Jewish population grew at similar rates, and the portion of registered Jewish residents in cities like Odessa, Łódź and Warsaw hovered around one-third of the total population throughout the period.) As a result of these changes, roughly one-half of Warsaw's Jewish residents in 1897 were newcomers who had been born outside of the city. Furthermore, roughly 50% of the city's Jewish residents at the time were under the age of twenty.

The influx of a great number of young Jewish migrants to the city created a radically new social dynamic that set off intensive public debates about the nature and fate of urban society.¹³ Jewish and Polish observers alike charged that many Jewish arrivals to Warsaw were foreign not only to the city, but also to Polish society and culture. Labeled and often derided as "*Litvaks*" (Jews from Lithuanian lands), Jewish migrants were said to lack both an affinity for Polish language and culture and a sense of loyalty to the burgeoning concept of "the Polish nation." As a result of these and other prejudices, Jewish newcomers were often portrayed as disruptive, foreign elements that upset the city's precarious social balance at the turn of the century city. The term *Litvaks* quickly became code for many of the problems that seemed to divide Poles and Jews in Warsaw.

Thus, the typical growing pains of urbanization were exacerbated by tensions between veteran Jewish residents and newcomers, as well as between Poles and Jews. These and related changes led many residents to begin searching for new frameworks that might lend a sense of order, structure and meaning to an increasingly chaotic urban environment. Jewish newcomers, in particular, who were frequently marginalized by both Polish and Jewish elites, as well

12 For more on Jewish migration to such centers see Shaul Stampfer, "Patterns of Internal Jewish Migration in the Russian Empire," in Ya'akov Ro'i (ed.), *Jews and Jewish Life in Russia and the Soviet Union* (Ilford: Frank Cass, 1995), 28–47.

13 I discuss some of these debates in Ury, *Barricades and Banners*, 45–90.

as by established Jewish communal organizations, needed new frameworks that would help them respond to many of the problems they encountered in the new, oftentimes dizzying urban arena. Soon, a series of new, ostensibly apolitical public institutions like coffee houses, lunch buffets, and other public establishments began to appear and serve as impromptu centers for urban assembly, community, and organization. Thus, Jewish coffee houses were not only an integral part of the changing cityscape but also served critical social, cultural and political functions. They provided physical arenas in which Jewish migrants and other urban residents could meet, converse, and debate as part of a coherent public.

At their core, coffee houses and similar urban institutions were markedly different from the traditional Jewish communal institutions they began to supplement, and those differences were the secret of their success. First, unlike synagogues, study houses, and other traditional Jewish communal spaces, coffee houses were commercial enterprises that lay beyond the jurisdiction of the official Jewish community and thus beyond Jewish communal supervision. In addition, their ostensibly apolitical nature enabled them to operate right under the suspicious eyes of tsarist officials, who were anxious to wield control over the empire's cities, with their increasingly unruly residents and multiple sources of unrest. While this was particularly relevant in the years surrounding the Revolution of 1905, tsarist officials remained concerned about maintaining a semblance of urban order well after the revolutionary tide subsided.¹⁴ Lastly, the open nature of coffee houses and their storefront appeal made them particularly inviting to newer Jewish residents, who often felt shunned by established communal institutions or lost in the urban shuffle. As cities expanded and new arrivals roamed the streets in search of alternative modes of belonging, coffee houses provided an enticing forum. Migrants, activists and other random urbanites could meet there, discuss the issues of the day, and simply be, without risking arrest, imprisonment, expulsion, and worse.

Yehezkel Kotik's coffee house at 31 Nalewki Street, one of the period's best-known Jewish coffee houses, seems to fit Habermas's model of the bourgeois public sphere to a "T". Established by Kotik soon after his arrival in Warsaw from Kiev, the café quickly became a regular meeting point for a variety of Jewish intellectuals, activists and observers. Much like Habermas's theoretical public sphere, Kotik's coffee house was considered an open public space in which individuals from a variety of political and intellectual camps could

14 On the regime's attempts to assert order in Warsaw and neighboring regions, see Robert E. Blobaum, *Rewolucja: Russian Poland, 1904–1907* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), 260–291; Ury, *Barricades and Banners*, 91–140.

gather to debate and sometimes effectively create the affairs of the day. True to Habermas's model, impromptu meetings and open-ended discussions often helped lay the foundations for the critical transition from public assembly to urban community and from intellectual debate to political action.

Hebrew and Yiddish memoirs of journalists and cultural figures like A. Litvin, Avrom Reisen and Shlomo Shreberk recall the open, vibrant nature of the discussions and meetings that took place at 31 Nalewki Street. Again matching Habermas's theory, these discussions often revolved around published works, both newspapers and literature, and popular politics. According to the publicist Shreberk:

One could always meet the Yiddish writers at a certain café on Nalewki street. It was a rather inexpensive establishment, and for twenty kopeks one could eat lunch for a week. Most of the patrons were, for the most part, lower class businessmen: traders, office clerks and, once in a while, a teacher. One could even find the paper *Ha-tzefira* on the table and to the best of my knowledge this was the only restaurant in which one could find the paper. People would sit there for hours and hours, they would read the paper, get to know one another, and converse. Sometimes they would do all three at the same time; even people who met for the first time in their lives in the café... They would speak about new literary works by writers, recent newspaper articles and the lives of the writers themselves such as Frishman, Sokolow, Peretz, [and] "Zionism," local matters and general affairs among the Jewish people. All of these were daily topics...¹⁵

Elsewhere, Shreberk notes the seemingly natural intersection of bourgeois society, secular culture and Jewish politics in Kotik's café. Here, as well, Shreberk recalls the wide variety of people who took part in the public debates that characterized the inchoate public culture developing in the café and similar public institutions.

... Kotik's café became the home of Warsaw's Jewish writers. All of the worker activists would also come there. One could meet the Bund leaders

15 Shlomo Shreberk, *Zikhronot ha-motzi le-or shlomo shreberk* (Tel Aviv: S. Shreberk, 1955), 144. Also see Avrom Reisen, *Epizoden fun mayn lebn*, vol. 1 (Vilna: B. Kletzkin, 1929), 214–216. For this and many other indispensable sources on Kotik, see: Yehezkel Kotik, *Mah she-raiti: zikhronotav shel yehezkel kotik*, ed. and trans. David Assaf (Tel Aviv: Diaspora Research Institute-Tel Aviv University, 1999), 26.

Beinush Mikhalevitch and Alter Erlich. H. D. Nomberg and Avrom Reisen were also regular guests even though Kotik had Zionist tendencies. In Kotik's café people would read new stories and poems before they were published . . .¹⁶

Initially established as part of his prosaic search for stable income in a new environment, Kotik's coffee house quickly became integral to Warsaw's new Jewish cityscape.

In many ways, the coffee house was as eclectic as its owner and as dynamic as the city itself. It served alternatively as an informal community center, a cultural venue, and political meeting site. Indeed, Kotik's café was almost never about just coffee. In fact, Kotik's café and its tireless owner seemed perfectly suited for the fluid, changing nature of Jewish society in the monstrosity of a metropolis that Warsaw had become. True to Habermas's model of the bourgeois public sphere, Kotik's café provided an open, public space where patrons could meet to discuss rationally cultural affairs, communal projects, and political activities beyond the watchful eye of Tsarist officials and traditionalist communal leaders, together forging a sense of an urban Jewish community.

Nor was discourse about the café limited to coffee culture and political memoirs. In a series of feuilletons published by Sholem Aleichem on the pages of Warsaw's phenomenally popular Yiddish daily *Haynt* in 1913, the author's literary alter ego Menakhem-Mendel is emplotted deep within the metropolis of Warsaw. Like many other Jewish residents of Paris, New York, Berlin, and other great turn of the century cities, Menakhem-Mendel roams the streets of Warsaw in apprehension and excitement, fervently searching. However, unlike Benjamin's flâneur, who thrives on the margins of urban society in a state of perpetual liminality, Sholem Aleichem's Menakhem-Mendel searches incessantly for a new home, a new center, and a new Jewish order.¹⁷ And, like so many other Jewish urban residents, he finds this new Jewish order in the new spaces and institutions that began to appear and coalesce into a Jewish public sphere. Menakhem-Mendel's description of his new urban life to his long distance wife Shayne-Shendel bespeaks this search for belonging in an ostensibly fictionalized city:

16 Shreberk, *Zikhrnot*, 158–159.

17 On the image of the flâneur, see Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, trans. Harry Zohn (London: Verso, 1985), 35–66.

Stuffed like a barrel with news from the papers and the smoke of cigarettes, I take my walking stick and go to my milk bar to drink coffee and to converse with people. My milk bar is on Nalewki, Khaskl Kotik's place. . . . We sit and sit, just the two of us, Khaskl [Yehezkel] Kotik and me, over a cup of coffee and discuss our Jewish brethren . . .¹⁸

Thus, in a relatively short period of time, Kotik's café had become not only a central location for Jewish cultural and political activists in Warsaw, but also a literary symbol of how many readers, observers and other urbanites would imagine and experience modern Jewish society and culture across a host of turn-of-century cities. For Sholem Aleichem, Shlomo Shreberk, Avrom Reisen and many others, coffee houses like Yehezkel Kotik's café on Nalewki Street typified the inherently open, neutral locations in which seemingly random urban residents would meet and connect "over a cup of coffee and discuss our Jewish brethren . . ."

At the same time, Menahem Mendel's urban wanderings highlight a deeper tension that unsettles the seemingly natural connection between the modern city, the modern community, and the modern self. Like a *dreidel* (a Jewish top associated with the holiday of *Hanukkah*) spinning through the maddening maze of modernity, Sholem Aleichem's Menakhem-Mendel is, in a sense, suspended. Like many other Jewish urbanites, he feels a sudden rush and urge to break away and explore the rich, endless urban terrain that the modern city seemed to promise. But every time he arms himself with his walking stick—his symbol of bourgeois civility, urban defense, and male empowerment—and sets out to lose himself in the city's inherent infinity, he is drawn back into his "milk bar," "Khaskl Kotik's place." The East European city, with its ornate buildings, enticing boulevards, and seas of anonymous inhabitants promised Jewish urbanites exactly what the *Haskalah* was never able to deliver, freedom. At the same time, that same city, with its sheer size, constant motion, and new sights, sounds and smells, intimidated Jewish flâneurs and drove them towards distinctly Jewish urban spaces. From their earliest encounters, the inherent universality of the modern city and the ideal of an urban Jewish community were at odds; and the modern Jewish individual vacillated constantly between these two poles in the Polish metropole.

18 Sholem Aleichem, *Menahem mendel be-varshah*, trans. Aryeh Aharoni (Tel Aviv: Alef, 1977), 19–20.

Between Public Sphere and Public Reform: Urban Stains and the Struggle for Jewish Civility

In addition to being a familiar public space where Jewish urbanites could congregate and discuss the affairs of the day, Kotik's café gave the owner himself a base from which to popularize his own particular visions of urban reform, bourgeois society, and Jewish civility. Hence, Shreberk, Litvin and others all note that Kotik regularly used the coffee house to promote the different self-help organizations that he initiated in Warsaw, including Brotherly Aid (*Ahi-ezer*), The Children of Zion (*B'nei tziion*), and others. According to Shreberk:

I remember the first time I was in the café, the owner [Kotik] handed me a small brochure in Yiddish entitled, "Ten Commandments for the Daughters of Zion." After he saw that I knew Hebrew he gave me the same brochure in Hebrew. To more radical patrons, he would give "The Proletarian Calendar, 1907–1908," which he edited, as well as the brochure, "The Jewish Deputy."¹⁹

Kotik's coffee house thus played another critical role in turn-of-century Warsaw: the promotion of projects for urban reform and the rehabilitation of Warsaw's Jewish residents and its Jewish community.

As many scholars have noted, Jewish communities in Eastern Europe had a long history of communal organization and philanthropy.²⁰ These projects included both community-wide endeavors run by the official Jewish community and those organized by local societies and informal groups.²¹ Thus, the established Jewish community in Warsaw (*gmina*), recognized and

19 Shreberk, *Zikhronot*, 158–159. Shreberk is probably referring to the bilingual pamphlet published by Kotik in 1899 entitled *Aseret ha-dibrot le-benei tsiion*. See below, note 35. Also note Litvin's description of how Kotik would peddle his organizational literature. A. Litvin (Shmuel Leib Hurwitz), "Yehezkel Kotik," *Yudishe neshomes*, vol. 4 (New York: Folksbildung, 1917), 2–3, 7 and 9.

20 On Jewish charity and philanthropy in Warsaw and other regions, see Jacob Shatzky, *Geshikhte fun yidn in varshe*, II: 139–160 and 175–192; III: 110–129 and 172–191; Isaac Levitats, *The Jewish Community in Russia, 1844–1917* (Jerusalem: Posner, 1981), 69–84 and 163–179; and Brian Horowitz, *Jewish Philanthropy and Enlightenment in Late Tsarist Russia* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008).

21 For more on Jewish charities and philanthropy at the time, see Rainer Liedtke, *Jewish Welfare in Hamburg and Manchester, c. 1850–1914* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998); and Derek J. Penslar, "Philanthropy, the 'Social Question' and Jewish Identity in Imperial Germany," *Leo Baeck Institute Year Book*, 38 (1993), 51–73.

regulated by Tsarist authorities, administered a series of charitable, religious and educational projects that included a Jewish hospital, Jewish orphanages and other institutions.²² Nevertheless, the size and scope of the urban environment severely strained communal resources and left many Jews in Warsaw, in particular newcomers who felt shunned or disenfranchised by established communal institutions, overexposed and vulnerable.²³ These developments encouraged increasing numbers of individuals to create and take part in societies and organizations based outside of the official Jewish community.

A new arrival from Kiev and the owner of a popular coffee house in the heart of Warsaw's Jewish district, Kotik was particularly well-suited to respond to the pressing needs of Warsaw's Jewish residents and visitors. Thus, Kotik initiated several self-help organizations that were dedicated to reforming urban Jewish society and rehabilitating individual Jewish urbanites. For example, Kotik founded an organization designed to create a communal synagogue and provide assistance to local Jews (*Ahi-ezer*), a body dedicated to the reform of Jewish youth (*B'nei tzion*), and other projects. Various sources regarding these organizations not only offer fascinating insights into Kotik's own interpretation of the Jewish urban condition, but also many of the inherent tensions in reigning visions of modern Jewish society and selfhood.

Kotik's role as both café owner and a crusader for urban reform demonstrates how a public sphere institution like the coffee house could serve as the foundation for larger projects aimed at the reconstruction of Jewish society and the rehabilitation of the Jewish individual.²⁴ As I have noted elsewhere in regard to the development of modern Jewish politics, the dual transition from public debate to a discourse of action, and from urban society to Jewish community, represents a critical turning point in the Jewish encounter with and response to modernity.²⁵ Thus, unlike other interpretations that often emphasize a symbiotic if not inherently positive relationship between Jews and modernity, Kotik's various projects for urban reform and the rehabilitation of the individual reveal a deeply ambivalent, problematic, if not dialectical,

22 On these and related institutions, see Shatzky, *Geshikhte fun yidn in varshe*, III: 110–129 and 172–191.

23 François Guesnet, *Polnische Juden im 19. Jahrhundert* (Cologne: Böhlau, 1998), 161–176 and 438–446.

24 On the precarious fate of the individual within the context of various reform projects, see Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1995); Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Vintage, 1973); and, Halfin, *Terror in My Soul*.

25 Ury, *Barricades and Banners*, 172–213.

relationship between modernity and many of its key symbols like the city and the modern (Jewish) self.²⁶

Like many other observers of turn-of-century cities, Yehezkel Kotik felt that the urban environment was in dreadful disarray and desperate need of repair. His conviction that the city was a dangerous and corrupting environment and that the Jewish community and individual were its potential victims unsettles some of the more traditional renditions of that encounter. The brochure that he published in 1896 promoting the construction of a synagogue that would both facilitate urban reform and provide assistance to its members reflects his abiding fear that an imminent crisis threatened the urban Jewish community and the lives of hundreds of thousands of Jewish urbanites. Anticipating sociologist Georg Simmel's canonical critique of modern life, Kotik's writings depict Warsaw's Jewish residents as drowning in a sea of anonymity.²⁷ The introduction to his brochure for the self-help organization *Ahi-ezer* (Brotherly Aid) contended that a pervasive sense of alienation threatened any and all sense of community in Warsaw and, in turn, in other turn of the century cities.²⁸ For Kotik, a nineteenth century that was once full of optimism and hope had come to a screeching halt, necessitating a re-evaluation of modernity and its impact on urban Jewish society. The café owner-cum-reformer observes:

There are here, right now, some two-hundred thousand of our fellow children of Israel who are strangers unto one another [*muzarim heme ish le-ahiv*], they are like a large forest, with many trees, all of which plant roots in the earth, and none of which are connected to the other; everyone worries only about himself, and no one looks out for his neighbor . . .

26 See, for example Katz, *Tradition and Crisis*; and Feiner, *The Jewish Enlightenment*. On the search for the modern Jewish self, see Marcus Moseley, *Being for Myself Alone: Origins of Jewish Autobiography* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006), 387–480; and Kenneth B. Moss, *Jewish Renaissance in Revolutionary Russia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 173–216.

27 For prevailing interpretations of urban society at the time, see Georg Simmel, “The Metropolis and Mental Life,” and “The Stranger,” in *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, ed. and trans. Kurt H. Wolff (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1964), 409–424 and 402–408, respectively.

28 On alienation as a leitmotif of modernity, see Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich, 1973), 305–326 and 474–479; George L. Mosse, *Masses and Man: Nationalist and Fascist Perceptions of Reality* (New York: Howard Fertig, 1980), 33, 75 and 230; and Pheng Cheah, *Spectral Nationality: Passages of Freedom from Kant to Postcolonial Literatures of Liberation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 166 and 243.

there is no love or solidarity between us, each person takes care of only himself . . . and the only thing that remains between us is hatred and jealousy and a division between the hearts.²⁹

At first glance, his solution to the impending collapse of urban Jewish society seems to be a rather traditional one. According to Kotik, the seasoned communal activist (*klal tuer*), the answer to these and other troubles that beset hundreds of thousands of Jews in Warsaw could be found in one of the oldest of Jewish institutions, the synagogue. His brochure detailing the by-laws and goals of *Ahi-'ezer* points to the synagogue as the remedy for what seemed to be the most pressing of all modern, urban ailments: the impending atomization, and potential dissolution, of the urban Jewish community.³⁰

However, while there were many synagogues and prayer houses in Warsaw at the time, none were really equipped to resolve the twin crises of urbanization and communal disintegration. In fact, the large number of small, Hasidic prayer houses that dominated Warsaw's cityscape actually divided Jewish urban society further. Indeed, as many of those who operated these prayer houses were, according to Kotik, motivated by narrow self-interests, these prayer houses ultimately endangered an already precarious community. In this, as in other cases, Kotik voiced charges similar to those aired by both maskilic critics and antisemitic observers regarding the state of Jewish religious practice and urban society, which suffered from a chronic lack of decorum, an ingrained aversion to beauty, and an irrepressible desire for financial gain. According to Kotik, the very institution that was supposed to serve as the foundation of Jewish society was rotten to the core:

Unfortunately, in Warsaw, the great city of God, our eyes shutter at the sights as the holy mission of the synagogue, and there are many, and the small prayer houses, whose numbers rise into the hundreds, that have become private businesses in the hands of simple people from among the masses who do not differentiate between the holy and the profane and between that which is tainted and that which is pure . . . These people undertake all sorts of unspeakable and strange acts that ultimately

29 Yehezkel Kotik, *Hatsa'at hukei ahi 'ezer* (Warsaw, 1896), 4.

30 Kotik, *Hatsa'at hukei ahi 'ezer*, 4–5. "Our wise men, of blessed memory, who knew our state of dispersion and the division between the hearts that prevailed among us suggested a way to fix this problem; and this tool became a fortress to organize our society under one roof. . . this is none other than the synagogue, the house for public prayer; this, in fact, is the best medicine for the disease of division and disquiet that continues to this day . . ."

humiliate us in the eyes of our neighbors, including in many cases where they rent spaces that are to be used to create houses of God which lie near the trash gate or the local outhouse, places that cannot be used for residence ...³¹

Instead, influenced by reigning conceptions of bourgeois urban civility exemplified by Jewish communities in cities like St. Petersburg, Berlin and Budapest, Kotik called for the creation of a “great, expansive synagogue.”³² Such an institution would not only resolve the growing sense of alienation and division among Jews but would also return a sense of decorum and dignity to the people meant to serve as a “light unto nations.” Ultimately, a large, communal synagogue would ameliorate pervasive fears of urban chaos and accompanying anxieties regarding the decline of Jewish society and resolve many of the problems that plagued Jews in the metropolis. Kotik’s comments reflect his own transitional role between maskilic ideals, bourgeois values and national politics.

And thus wake and awake all those according to his own desire and ability to work and strive toward creating a communal synagogue in which all of our estranged brothers can congregate, especially those that have arrived from the four corners of Russia for their business needs and livelihood ... New residents will join with veterans who came earlier or with members of the older generation who live here; the synagogue will include all of the advantages that we yearn for, so that we can achieve the coveted and elevated goal of supporting one another, spiritually and financially ... and thus we will become productive and honest people and we will also be well received in the eyes of the government.³³

Ahi-ezer and its synagogue proposal were, like other self-help projects, thus conceived not only to reform the nature and image of urban Jewish society, but to transform individual Jewish urbanites from potential embarrassments to model citizens.

31 Kotik, *Hatsa'at hukei ahi 'ezer*, 5–6.

32 On debates regarding the construction of the Choral Synagogue in St. Petersburg, see Benjamin Nathans, *Beyond the Pale: The Jewish Encounter with Late Imperial Russia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 153–164. On the Great Synagogue in Budapest, see Rudolf Klein, *The Great Synagogue of Budapest* (Budapest: Terc, 2008).

33 Kotik, *Hatsa'at hukei ahi 'ezer*, 8.

This mixture of anxiety and ambivalence regarding the city and the nature of urban Jewish society was not limited to *Ahi-ezer* and designs for institutional, communal and, ultimately, individual reform. Another reform project proposed by Kotik, "*Aseret ha-dibrot li-vene tzion*" (Ten Commandments for the Children of Zion), advocated a similar mix of maskilic ideals, bourgeois norms, and national values as the key to rehabilitating the Jewish urbanite and the urban Jewish community.³⁴ Like *Ahi-ezer*, this educational project repeatedly combined the goals of individual rehabilitation and communal reform within a larger framework of urban reform and social engineering. Here, in particular, the goal was the reform of the Jewish individual. Thus, the brochure's introduction emphasizes the need to "educate them [*b'nei tzion*] from the smallest to the oldest, whether they are among the poor or among the rich, with a good and honest education so that they will be industrious [*harutzim*] and happy [*mausharim*] and bring pride to their parents and their people."³⁵ Throughout, Kotik expressed the hope that proper education, social reform, and communal cohesion would lead to both individual and collective happiness, if not redemption.

True to the Haskalah spirit that informed so many of Kotik's designs for urban reform, the rehabilitation of Warsaw's Jews was to be founded on a detailed program of popular re-education.³⁶ Like many other latter-day maskilim who turned to modern reform projects and modern Jewish politics, Kotik was a firm believer in the ability of educational institutions to improve and regenerate both urban society and the modern individual. However, here too, these designs often exposed deep tensions between the reformer's goals and the obstinate object of reform, Warsaw's Jewish residents. Like much of the Haskalah agenda he inherited and the bourgeois platform he advocated,

34 On other reform projects see Lee Shai Weissbach, "The Jewish Elite and the Children of the Poor: Jewish Apprenticeship Programs in Nineteenth-Century France," *AJS Review* (1987), 123–147.

35 Kotik, *Aseret ha-dibrot li-vene tzion* (Warsaw, 1899), cover page, 1. On social engineering in twentieth-century Eastern Europe, see Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as Civilization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

36 Kotik, *Aseret ha-dibrot li-vene tzion*, 13–14. "And all this we cannot achieve if we do not fix and improve the state of education, which is the one and only foundation and institution that can guarantee the people's happiness and well-being; only education can change our status for the better; without proper and improved education all the efforts to improve and enhance our situation will be completely and totally wasted endeavors." For more on Jewish education at the time, see, for example, Shaul Stampfer, *Families, Rabbis and Education: Traditional Jewish Society in Nineteenth-Century Eastern Europe* (Oxford: Littman, 2010), 145–210.

a key imperative was that Warsaw Jews become respectable and productive members of urban society.³⁷ Accordingly, Jews had to learn to behave as “respectable guests.” As in many other cases, Kotik’s drive for reforming individual behavior was rooted in the belief that many Jews in Warsaw behaved inappropriately and that their actions embarrassed and even threatened the city’s other Jewish residents. Time and again, Kotik’s calls for reform were rooted in a palpable fear regarding what Polish Varsovians thought of their Jewish neighbors.

Ultimately, a proper education would teach Jewish urbanites civility and thus ensure peaceful relations between Jews and their neighbors. Kotik’s comments seamlessly passed from institutional and religious reform to individual behavior and, ultimately, consciousness:

We should implant in the hearts of the children of Israel the knowledge that they are ‘guests’ and not ‘landlords’ . . . They will always be considered as guests in the eyes of their neighbors; and thus, they should teach their children the ways and the rules of the guest and instruct them to how to behave among those citizens who are the ‘landlords.’ And these are the ways of the guest: when you enter a strange person’s house you should behave with more manners and civility than the homeowner himself, when you sit at the table you should sit straight up and eat with your hands and feet aligned and balanced; all of your movements should be measured and polite . . .³⁸

But chronic lack of decorum was not the only factor that threatened urban Jewish society. With his keen eye focused on the urban environment, Kotik also noted the abysmal living conditions that characterized many Jewish neighbor-

37 Note Kotik’s demand that Jews undertake so-called productive professions. Kotik, *Aseret ha-dibrot li-vene tsion*, 28. “We must continue and undertake all of those things which the rabbis commanded us and which are pertinent to the people’s existence and happiness. And they said: ‘A person should always teach his son crafts, and anyone who does not teach his son crafts it is as if he taught him how to stray.’”

38 Kotik, *Aseret ha-dibrot li-vene tsion*, 37–38 and 41–42. For similar comments regarding the need for Jews to behave appropriately in eighteenth century Prague see Ezekiel Landau, “Sermon for the Sabbath Preceding Passover, (1782, Prague),” in Marc Saperstein (ed.), *Jewish Preaching, 1200–1800: An Anthology* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 362 and 363. “We should act respectfully toward inhabitants of this kingdom” because “it is their own land, while we are only guests. A sense of submissiveness is good when it comes from within.” My thanks to Michael K. Silber for bringing this and many other sources to my attention.

hoods. Here, as well, he was torn between his admiration of Warsaw's Jews and his disgust with their behavior, a disgust that he was no longer able contain.

Commenting on the pressing need for "cleanliness and purity" in the city's Jewish areas, Kotik writes: "It is known that our brethren, the Children of Israel, are far from being clean and pure. It is more than enough to look at the storefronts and shops that sell food and goods that belong to Jews and those that belong to non-Jews to see that the difference between the state of the former and those of the latter are as clear as day and night."³⁹ However, while he was alarmed at the lack of "cleanliness and purity" that characterized urban Jewish society, the source of these conditions could ultimately be corrected. Thus, he rails against "the pressures and the paucity [that] have forced us to sit in dark corners and tiny alleys, in places with trash and mud, filth and the like, until, over the years, we lost our sense of cleanliness and purity."⁴⁰ Here too, addressing the "trash and mud" and the "filth" that colored Jewish neighborhoods and shops was intended not only to improve the Jews' living conditions, but also to deflect potential criticism and animosity.⁴¹ True to his faith in liberal, reform politics, both of these social ills—the Jews' lack of cleanliness and the non-Jews' potential animosity—could be ameliorated by addressing the connection between "cleanliness and purity."

Kotik's concerns regarding the Jews' chronic inability to act appropriately is echoed in his comments on "impudence." Here, as well, impudence not only represented a gross violation of bourgeois codes of civility, but endangered Jewish society itself. In fact, Kotik considered impudence to be "the biggest evil of them all, one that has been with us from time immemorial and because of which has fallen upon us many troubles and woes and is still a stumbling block and a hurdle in each and every path of our lives . . ."⁴² As in other cases, key markers of bourgeois civility and society such as rational discourse and good manners would ensure social reform and the health, happiness and future of the city's Jews. Again tying together urban reform, individual behavior, and collective redemption, Kotik notes:

If we desire the happiness of our people, we will instruct our children to respect their elders, the wise men and the learned. If a younger

39 Kotik, *Aseret ha-dibrot li-vene tsion*, 60.

40 Ibid., 61.

41 Note Kotik's concern that: "those who hate use and persecute us are not interested in knowing the reasons for the lack of cleanliness that is prevalent among us," *ibid.*

42 Ibid., 73–74. For similar comments regarding Jewish arrogance in Prague, see Ezekiel Landau, "Sermon for the Sabbath Preceding Passover," 363 and 364.

person hears something from a learned one with which he disagrees, he will not dismiss the person and will not humiliate him in a rude manner, but will ask his elder or teacher if such matters are, indeed, correct . . . And, if a person can prove to his friend that his opinion is correct, if we have, indeed, taught them how to speak wisely and explain their view to their peers—what could be better and more pleasant.⁴³

Like many other urbanites in turn-of-the-century Eastern Europe, Yehezkel Kotik was caught in-between. Though a widely-recognized figure in Warsaw's Jewish cityscape, he remained a newcomer who felt removed from the Jewish community's established, Polonized elite. Nor was he part of the growing number of seemingly superfluous urban Jews who roamed the city's streets. Thus, he was repeatedly shocked by much of what he saw around him. His simultaneous familiarity and fear inspired various designs for Jewish urban reform that liberally integrated maskilic ideals, bourgeois values, and national norms.

Kotik's repeated warnings regarding the potential dangers of poor citizenship reflected a much wider anxiety over the nature of urban Jewish society at the turn of the century. While these and other points echo Haskalah debates over the improvement of "the Jews" and the need for proper relations with their non-Jewish neighbors, Kotik was determined to reform urban Jewish society. Thus, in addition to divisions and discord among Jews, he worried that "the Jews" were indeed an unclean, immoral, and greedy people whose repeated displays of rude and insolent behavior disrupted the delicate urban ecology. Such flaws had to be identified and rectified before they brought disaster to Jews in Warsaw and, perhaps, throughout Eastern Europe. Once implemented, Kotik's programs for re-education and social reform would ensure that Warsaw's Jews become civil, productive members of urban society who would conform to the reigning urban social norms. In this and other ways, Kotik's call to reform Warsaw's Jewish residents was grounded in a discourse that was deeply ambivalent about the state and fate of urban Jewish society and the modern Jewish individual.

Conclusion: Kotik, Coffee and the Contradictions of Jewish Modernity

Yehezkel Kotik, his coffee house, and his various reform projects tell us much about the Jewish encounter with the modern world that cities like Warsaw

43 Kotik, *Aseret ha-dibrot li-vene tsion*, 95–97.

engendered. On the one hand, Kotik and his coffee shop at 31 Nalewki served as a stabilizing influence in a time of massive upheaval and displacement. As seemingly random Jews met, conversed and befriended other Jewish residents of the city, the city's universalism was repeatedly challenged—if not subverted—by the allure and sense of Jewish familiarity. Thanks to their open, neutral status, coffee houses like Kotik's quickly became integral parts of a growing, distinctly Jewish public sphere in Warsaw. Ultimately, this new public forum not only lent a much-needed sense of order and stability to the inherently chaotic urban arena, but promoted public debate between seemingly random urban residents and helped forge a sense of community among the many strangers who were very often lost in the metropolis. As Sholem Aleichem's alter-ego Menakhem Mendel noted: "My milk bar is on Nalewki Street, Khaskl (Yehezkel) Kotik's place . . . We sit and sit, just the two of us, Khaskl Kotik and me, over a cup of coffee and discuss our Jewish brethren."⁴⁴ Thus, Kotik's coffee house became a Jewish oasis in an urban jungle.

From his café on Nalewki Street, Kotik also fulfilled another classic urban role, that of *flâneur*. His multiple roles as migrant, observer, and communal organizer (*klal tuer*) familiarized Kotik with the darker side of Warsaw's urban Jewish society, including its poverty-stricken immigrants, instances of filth, displays of rude behavior, and growing tension between the city's guests (Jews) and hosts (Poles). In response to his exposure to such a wide cross-section, Kotik created and implemented a series of projects that were designed to domesticate, rehabilitate and transform Jewish urbanites from potential embarrassments into paragons of urban civility. Through institutions, frameworks, and projects that could overcome the many problems associated with urban life, educate Jewish residents, and come to the aid of a new Jewish underclass, Kotik could, perhaps, save the Jews of Warsaw from themselves. However, in order to effect this transition, Kotik would first have to rescue Warsaw's Jews from the most deadly and carcinogenic of all modern diseases, the city itself.

Taken together, Kotik's repeated efforts to use modern means of organization, education and reform to restructure urban Jewish society reflect his own ambivalence towards the city, urban society, and the modern world. In this and countless other cases, it was the role of the Jewish reformer—the self-anointed prophet of Jewish decay and regeneration—to lead the Jewish urban masses out of their state of darkness and into the light of modernity. Ultimately, proper reform projects would save the Jews of Warsaw from their sorry state and their many weaknesses. They would also help avert an imminent clash with the Jews' neighbors, who were quickly losing patience with their guests,

44 Sholem Aleichem, *Menahem mendel be-varshah*, 19–20.

for among the veritable sea of modern maladies produced by the city (and *de facto* modernity) was intolerance and hate. Thus, many of these reform projects were concerned not only with the city's Jews but with relations between Jews and Poles in the contested capital city of Warsaw.

Lastly, Kotik's coffee house and his reform initiatives expose many of the fundamental contradictions embedded deep within the very project of modernity. As Shreberk, Litvin and others noted, it was in his coffee house at 31 Nalewki where Kotik would push his brochures and promote his reform projects among unsuspecting patrons. Moreover, it was at that very moment that the coffee house—one of the foundations of the bourgeois public sphere—was used to advance plans for large-scale urban reform and individual rehabilitation that the course of modernity would pass from one of rational debate between individuals to impassioned pleas for subduing base desires and re-shaping individuals in the name of infinitely higher ideals, like collective rehabilitation, communal cohesion, and, ultimately, (Jewish) national redemption. Thus, Yehezkel Kotik, his coffee house and his visions of bourgeois civility not only provide a window onto the lives of everyday Jews in turn-of-century Warsaw, but also onto the crooked path of modernity among Jews, Poles and other residents of Warsaw and the rest of Eastern Europe for the remainder of the twentieth century.