

לְשָׁנָה הַבָּאָה בְּיְרוּשָׁלַיִם

L'Shana Haba'ah B'Yerushalayim

“Next year in Jerusalem”

(MA programs in Modern Languages and Literatures and Translation Studies 2024/2025)

“לשנה הבאה בירושלים” (L’Shana Haba’ah B’Yerushalayim): The Promised Lands of American Jews.

**Part 1. America as the promised land for Jewish migrants from Europe**

The module will focus on early Twentieth century Jewish-American literature. We will read some texts in which the United States is idealized by the second generation of Jewish migrants, coming from Eastern Europe. Most of the course will be devoted to the reading of Henry Roth’s novel *Call It Sleep*.

**Bibliography**

1. Emma Lazarus, “1492” (1883)
  2. Abraham Cahan, “Rabbi Eliezer’s Christmas” (1899)
  3. Delmore Schwartz, “America!, America!” (1940)
  4. Henry Roth, *Call It Sleep* (1934).
- Students are required to read the **whole** novel and at least one of the following essays of their choice, based on their interests; non-attending students will read three essays:
- a. Leslie Field, “Henry Roth’s Use of Torah and Haftorah in *Call It Sleep*”, *Studies in American Jewish Literature* (1975-1979) , 5, 1, 1979, pp. 22-27 (the role of religion);
  - b. Stephen J. Adams, “‘The Noisiest Novel Ever Written’: The Soundscape of Henry Roth’s *Call It Sleep*”, *Twentieth Century Literature*, 35, 1989, pp. 43-64 (the city and its noises);
  - c. Lynn Altenbernd, “An American Messiah: Myth in Henry Roth’s *Call It Sleep*”, *Modern Fiction Studies*, 35, 4, 1989, pp. 673-687 (myths in *Call It Sleep*);
  - d. Hana Wirth-Nesher, “Between Mother Tongue and Native Language: Multilingualism in Henry Roth’s *Call It Sleep*”, *Prooftexts*, 10, 2, 1990, pp. 297-312 (multilingualism in *Call It Sleep*);

- e. Thomas J. Ferraro, “Oedipus in Brownsville: Parricide, a House Divided, in *Call It Sleep*”, in *Ethnic Passages. Literary Immigrants in Twentieth-Century America*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1993, pp. 87-122 (*Call It Sleep* and sexuality);
  - f. Massimiliano Morini, “Joint Evaluation in (Modernist) Narrative: Henry Roth’s *Call It Sleep*”, *Textus*, XXIII, 2010, pp. 83-102 (*Call It Sleep* and modernism).
5. Elèna Mortara, *Letteratura ebraico-americana dalle origini alla shoà. Profilo storico letterario e saggi*, Roma: LITOS, 2006. Parte 1: Storia dell’America ebraica e della sua letteratura dalle origini alla shoà; parte 3: Canoni e testi della letteratura ebraico-americana (1 “Emma Lazarus, una pioniera della letteratura ebraica americana”; 2 “Nel *Golden Land* degli immigrati: suoni e lingue di Babele in Henry Roth”); **OR** Hana Wirth-Nesher, ed., *The Cambridge History of Jewish American Literature*, New York: Cambridge UP, 2016. 1 Julian Levinson, “Encountering the Idea of America”; 4. Werner Sollors, “Immigration and Modernity 1900-1945”.

Middle East, 1200 B.C.

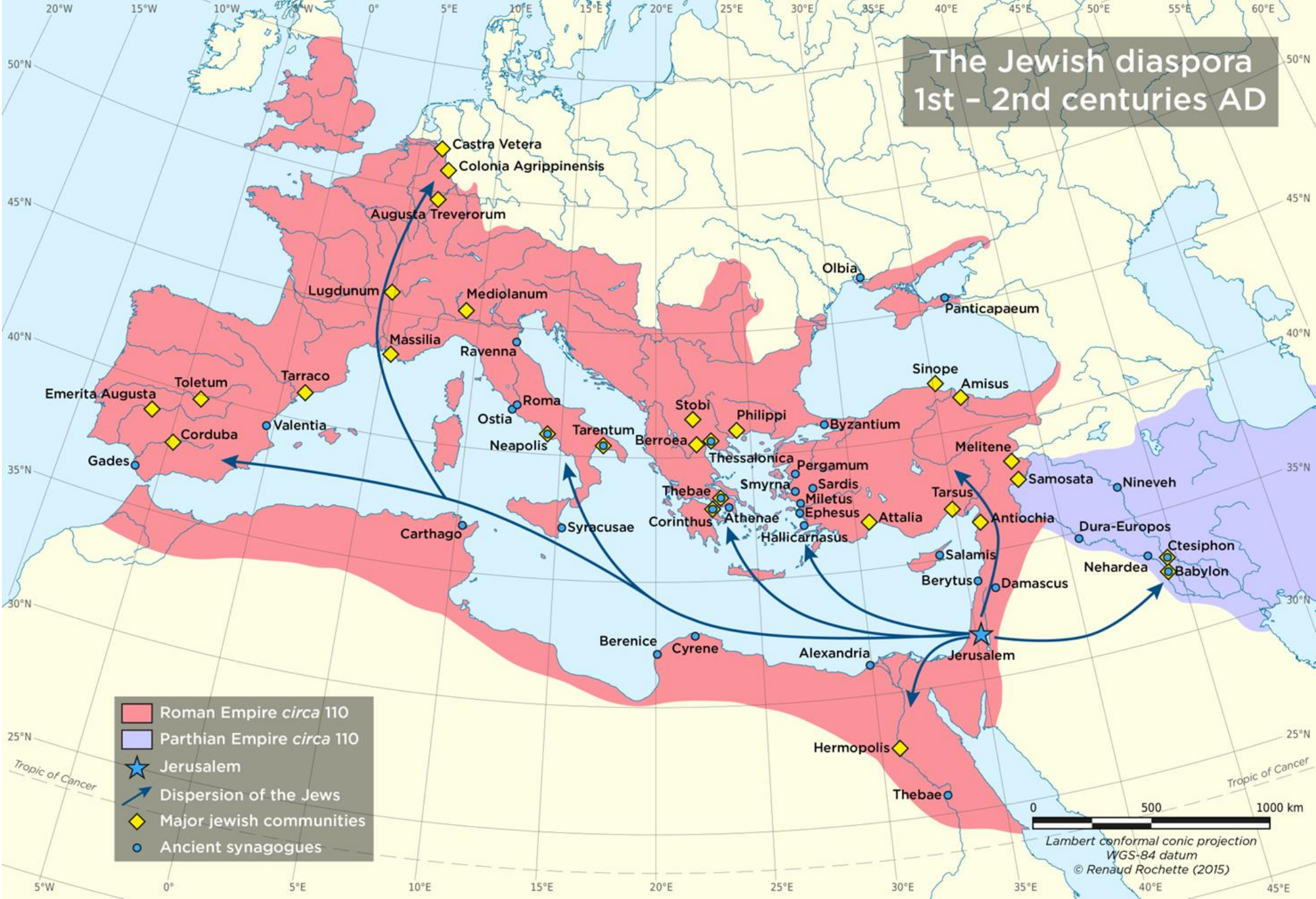
Jews: 8-10% of the population of the Roman Empire

586 B.C.: destruction of the First Temple in Jerusalem → Babylonian captivity

70 C.E.: destruction of the Second Temple (by the Romans) → Jewish diaspora

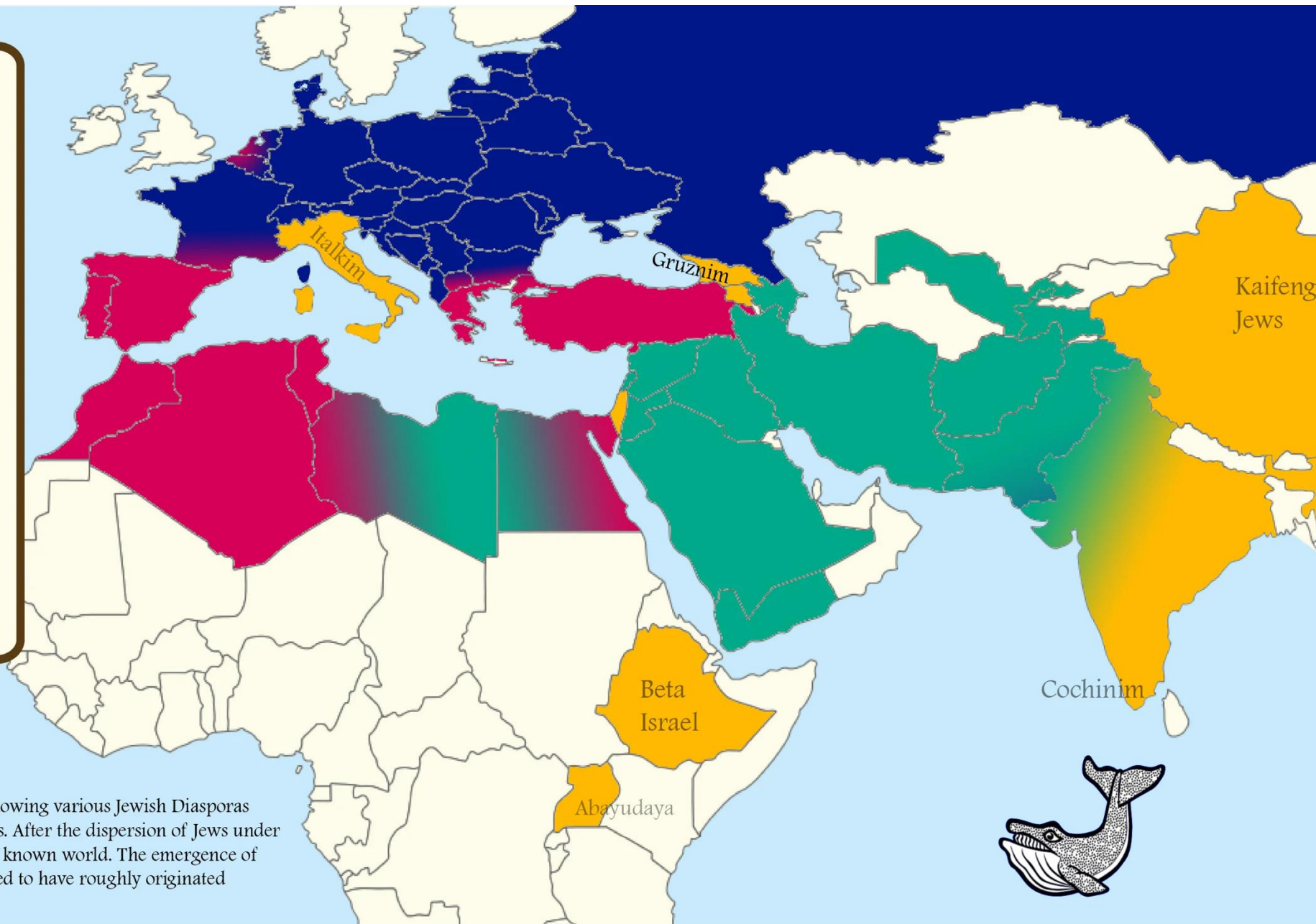


# The Jewish diaspora 1st - 2nd centuries AD



# LEGEND

-  Ashkenazi  
(means Germanic Jews)
-  Sephardic  
(means Iberian Jews)
-  Mizrahi  
(means Eastern Jews)
-  Independent Grouping



## Map of Jewish Ethnic Origin Countries

These cultural and ethnic groups slowly arose following various Jewish Diasporas from Ancient Israel and other Jewish communities. After the dispersion of Jews under Roman rule, many settled in different parts of the known world. The emergence of Ashkenazi and Sephardic Jewish identity is believed to have roughly originated around 800 c.e.

**Sephardic:** Ladino or Judeo-Spanish

1492: Sephardic Jews expelled from Spain and Portugal

**Ashkenazi:** Yiddish

Lived in Central and Eastern Europe for more than 600 years, in villages (*shtetl*) in Lithuania, Galicia, Russia, Romania, Austria-Hungary

**Orthodox Judaism:** traditional branch, adhering to Jewish law:

- **Modern Orthodox:** Balances traditional Jewish law with engagement in the modern world
- **Haredi (Ultra-Orthodox):** Strictly observant, includes **Hasidic** Judaism, a subset that emphasizes mysticism and strong leadership under a *Rebbe*

**Reform Judaism:** Reform Judaism / Jewish Enlightenment

(השכלה *Haskalah* → Moses Mendelssohn). Adapts Jewish traditions to modern values, emphasizing ethics over the traditional law

**Conservative Judaism:** A middle ground between Orthodox and Reform



## Zionism

Jewish nationalism movement → establishing a Jewish state in Palestine.

The “Lovers of Zion” supported the settlement of Jews in Palestine, in the face of persistent anti-Semitism and pogroms in Eastern Europe.

**Theodor Herzl** (1860-1904): authored *Der Judenstaat* (*The Jewish State*, 1896) and called the first Zionist Congress in Basel (1897), after the Dreyfus Affair (1894).

Jews in Palestine: from 90,000 in 1914 to 238,000 in 1933. Zionism achieved its goal with the creation of the state of Israel in 1948.



## **Antisemitism:**

### **Kishinev Pogrom**

Anti-Jewish riot, Kishinev (now Chişinău, Moldova), **April 6–7, 1903**

Cause: false accusations that Jews were responsible for the death of a Christian boy, Mikhail Rybachenko, murdered in a family fight

Local antisemitic newspapers spread news that Jews were responsible for the murder and mobs attacked Jewish homes and businesses. At least **49 Jews were killed, hundreds were wounded**, and thousands were left homeless

Another outbreak of violence followed in 1905. These events contributed to Jewish emigration from Russia to the United States and Palestine

The event played a major role in strengthening Zionist movements. The **U.S. government protested against Russia**, and **Theodore Roosevelt** and **Leo Tolstoy** spoke against the atrocity

THE PROTOCOLS AND  
WORLD REVOLUTION

INCLUDING A  
TRANSLATION AND ANALYSIS  
OF THE

“PROTOCOLS OF THE MEETINGS  
OF THE ZIONIST MEN  
OF WISDOM”



BOSTON

КНИГА КАГАЛА

МАТЕРІАЛЫ ДЛѢ ИЗУЧЕНІЯ ЕвРЕЙСКАГО БЫТА.

СОБРАЛЪ, И ПЕРЕВЕЛЪ

Яковъ Брафманъ.

«Die Juden bilden einen Staat im Staate.»  
SCHILLER.

## Antisemitism: *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*

A fabricated antisemitic document that claimed to reveal a Jewish plan for global domination

First published in Russia in **1903**, the text was likely created by the Tsarist secret police

**Conspiracy theory:** Jewish leaders were plotting to control the world through banking, media, and political influence

First introduced in the U.S. around **1919**, became popular after the Russian Revolution (1917), also thanks to some Russian migrants Henry Ford’s newspaper *The Dearborn Independent* published antisemitic articles (1920–1922) under the title *The International Jew: The World’s Foremost Problem*. Sold up to 700,000 copies. Ford apologized in 1927

**1921:** *The Times of London* and *The New York Times* exposed the document as a forgery

Used to justify antisemitism, including **Nazi** propaganda in the 1930s  
**1920s** and **1930s:** *The Protocols* was used by the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) and Christian nationalist groups

## **Jews in America**

**12 September 1654:** 23 Jews arrived from Brazil aboard the St. Catherine

**1776:** 2,500 Jews were living in the American colonies

**1790:** First Synagogue established

**After 1820** Ashkenazic Jews immigrated; outnumbered Sephardic Jews

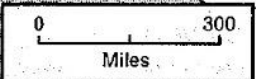
## The Era of Mass Migration

1880	250,000	0.50%
1890	450,000	0.71%
1900	1,050,000	1.38%
1920	2,043,000	3.41%
<i>2020</i>	<i>7,500,000</i> <i>(15,000,000 with Jewish ancestry)</i>	<i>2.4%</i> <i>(4.5%)</i>

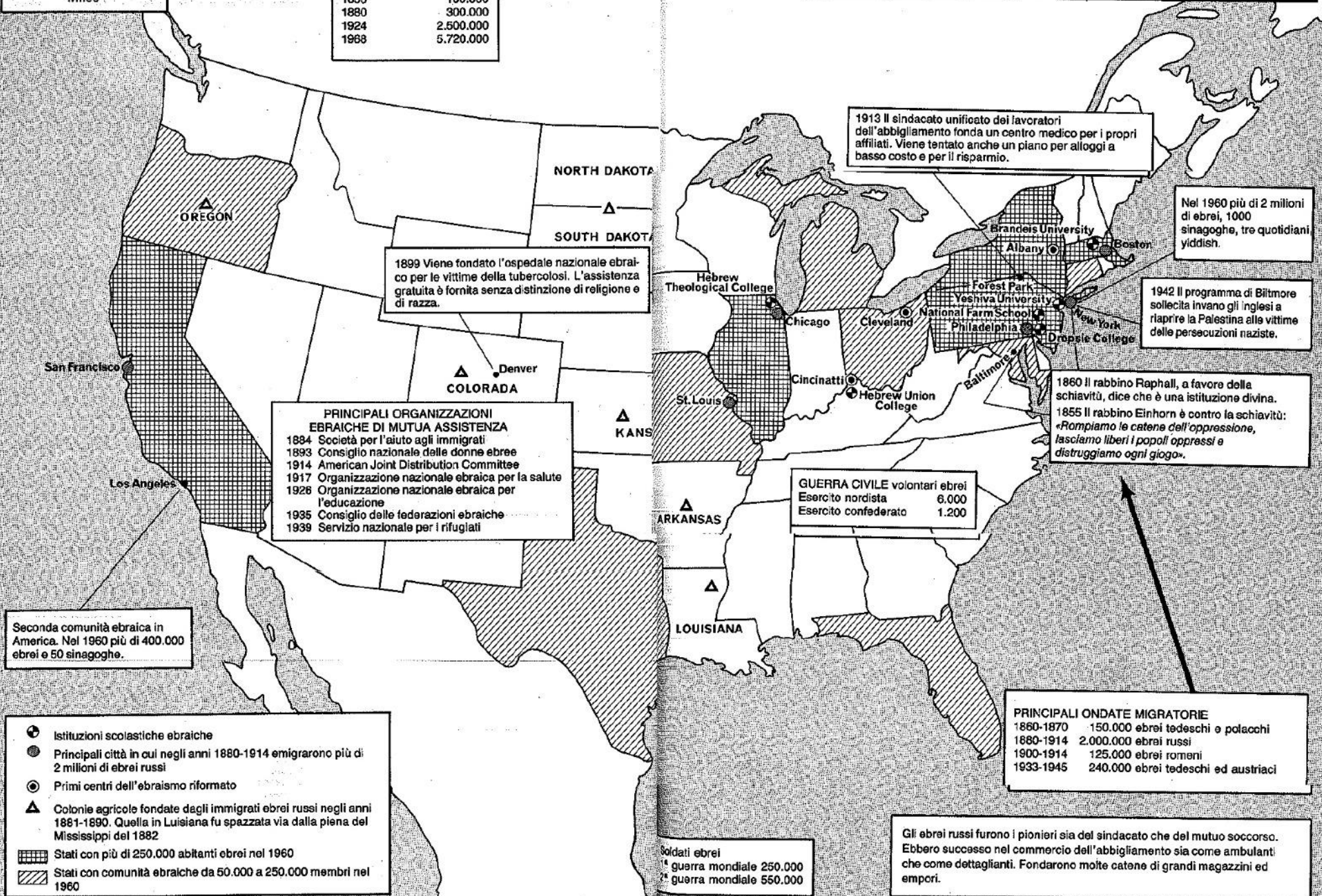
# Jewish migration to America

1. **17<sup>th</sup> century:** Spanish-Portuguese (Sephardic)
2. **Mid 19<sup>th</sup> century:** upper-middle class, educated Jews, especially from Germany
3. **Late 19<sup>th</sup>-early 20<sup>th</sup> century:** working class Jews from Eastern Europe
4. **Post-Shoah** migration

# GLI EBREI NEGLI STATI UNITI 1860-1960



EBRAISMO STATUNITENSE	
1855	100.000
1880	300.000
1924	2.500.000
1968	5.720.000



1899 Viene fondato l'ospedale nazionale ebraico per le vittime della tubercolosi. L'assistenza gratuita è fornita senza distinzione di religione e di razza.

1913 Il sindacato unificato dei lavoratori dell'abbigliamento fonda un centro medico per i propri affiliati. Viene tentato anche un piano per alloggi a basso costo e per il risparmio.

Nel 1960 più di 2 milioni di ebrei, 1000 sinagoghe, tre quotidiani yiddish.

1942 Il programma di Biltmore sollecita invano gli inglesi a riaprire la Palestina alle vittime delle persecuzioni naziste.

1860 Il rabbino Raphall, a favore della schiavitù, dice che è una istituzione divina.  
1855 Il rabbino Einhorn è contro la schiavitù: «Rompiamo le catene dell'oppressione, lasciamo liberi i popoli oppressi e distruggiamo ogni giogo».

GUERRA CIVILE volontari ebrei  
Esercito nordista 6.000  
Esercito confederato 1.200

Soldati ebrei  
1ª guerra mondiale 250.000  
2ª guerra mondiale 550.000

Gli ebrei russi furono i pionieri sia del sindacato che del mutuo soccorso. Ebbero successo nel commercio dell'abbigliamento sia come ambulanti che come dettaglianti. Fondarono molte catene di grandi magazzini ed empori.

- PRINCIPALI ORGANIZZAZIONI EBRAICHE DI MUTUA ASSISTENZA**
- 1884 Società per l'aiuto agli immigrati
  - 1893 Consiglio nazionale delle donne ebrae
  - 1914 American Joint Distribution Committee
  - 1917 Organizzazione nazionale ebraica per la salute
  - 1926 Organizzazione nazionale ebraica per l'educazione
  - 1935 Consiglio delle federazioni ebraiche
  - 1939 Servizio nazionale per i rifugiati

Seconda comunità ebraica in America. Nel 1960 più di 400.000 ebrei e 50 sinagoghe.

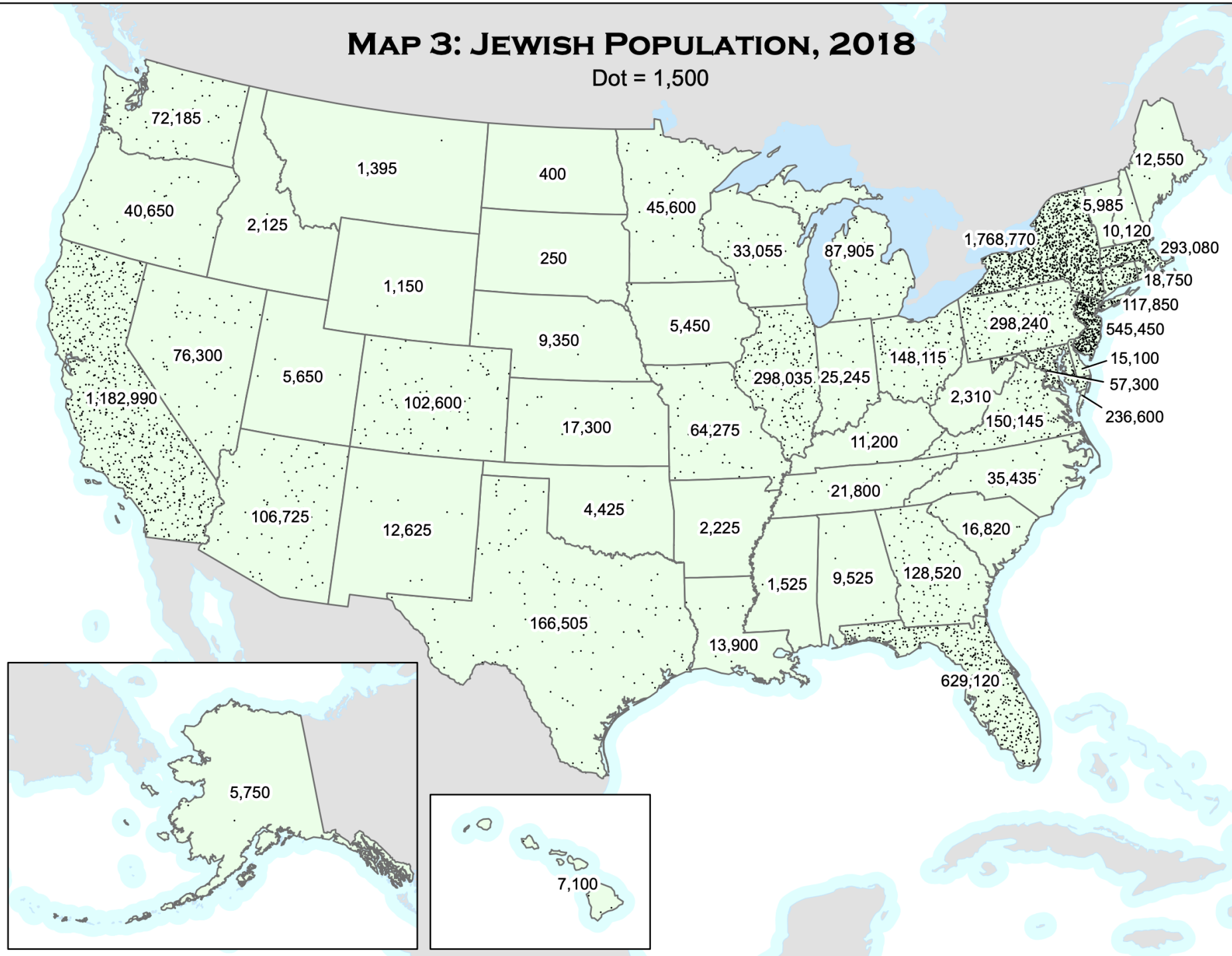
- Istituzioni scolastiche ebraiche
- Principali città in cui negli anni 1880-1914 emigrarono più di 2 milioni di ebrei russi
- Primi centri dell'ebraismo riformato
- ▲ Colonie agricole fondate dagli immigrati ebrei russi negli anni 1881-1890. Quella in Louisiana fu spazzata via dalla piena del Mississippi del 1882
- ▒ Stati con più di 250.000 abitanti ebrei nel 1960
- ▤ Stati con comunità ebraiche da 50.000 a 250.000 membri nel 1960

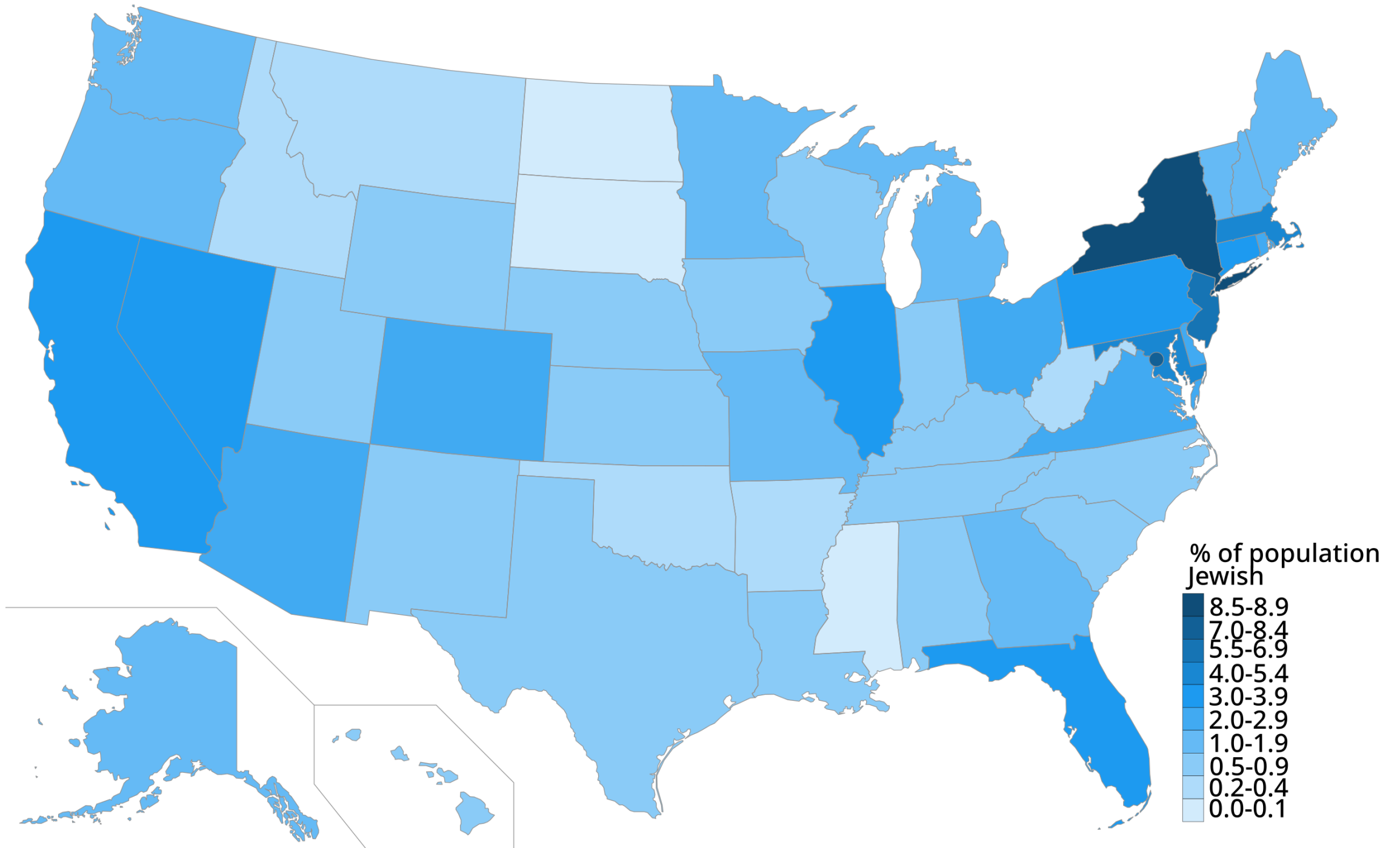
**PRINCIPALI ONDATE MIGRATORIE**

1860-1870	150.000 ebrei tedeschi e polacchi
1880-1914	2.000.000 ebrei russi
1900-1914	125.000 ebrei romeni
1933-1945	240.000 ebrei tedeschi ed austriaci

# MAP 3: JEWISH POPULATION, 2018

Dot = 1,500







EXTRA NEW  
A GREAT BANKRUPT  
OF  
**MEN'S FURNISHING GOODS**  
MUST BE SOLD WITHIN 15 DAYS  
COME TOGET BIG BARGAINS WHILE SALE IS GOING ON  
GOODS SOLD AT PRICES. COME AND CONVINCE YOUR SELF

עקסטרא נייעס אין דיא איסט סייד!  
איין גרויסער באנקראט טייל פון מענ'ס פארנישונג  
מוס אויספערקויפט ווערען 15 טעג  
קאמט די קויפט גרויסע בארגינס  
ווארע וויד פערקויפט וואסענדיק קאמט די אפערטיינד

5

WEINBERG & POLLAK  
**SKIRTS**  
READY MADE & TO ORDER

146 S. POLAN 146

SWEET'S

WIRE & GRINDING  
SHING

# **Jewish multilingualism**

Mother tongue (Russian, Ukrainian, Lithuanian, Polish...)

Hebrew

Yiddish

English

## What did American Jews read?

Tanakh (תנ"ך): Hebrew Bible

Talmud: essays in Hebrew and Aramaic (interpretation of the Bible and moral and juridical principles)

Yiddish texts about Jewish life in Eastern Europe

## What did American Jews write?

Influence of European realism (Ibsen, Hugo)

Literature in Yiddish, especially theater

Jacob Gordin (1853-1909), *The Jewish King Lear*

Literature in Hebrew: *The Yankee Talmud* (1892-93), about present America

## Emma Lazarus

(New York 1849- 1887)

Sephardic (father) and Ashkenazi (mother) legacy;  
ancestors involved in the Civil War (raised funds for the  
Northern army)

Studied music, literature, languages (French, German,  
Italian)

1866: *Poems and Translations: Written between the  
Ages of Fourteen and Sixteen* (published by her father)

1771: *Admetus and Other Poems*

1882: *Songs of a Semite*, includes the historical play *The  
Dance to Death*, about an episode of antisemitism  
occurred in the past, and affirms the need for a Jewish  
homeland 15 years before the First Zionist Congress



PS  
2233  
56

SONGS OF A SEMITE

EMMA LAZARUS

Songs of a Semite:

# THE DANCE TO DEATH,

AND OTHER POEMS,

— BY —

EMMA LAZARUS,

AUTHOR OF "ADMETUS, AND OTHER POEMS," "ALIDE," "TRANSLATIONS FROM HEINE," ETC.

NEW YORK.  
OFFICE OF "THE AMERICAN HEBREW,"  
498-500 THIRD AVENUE.  
1882.

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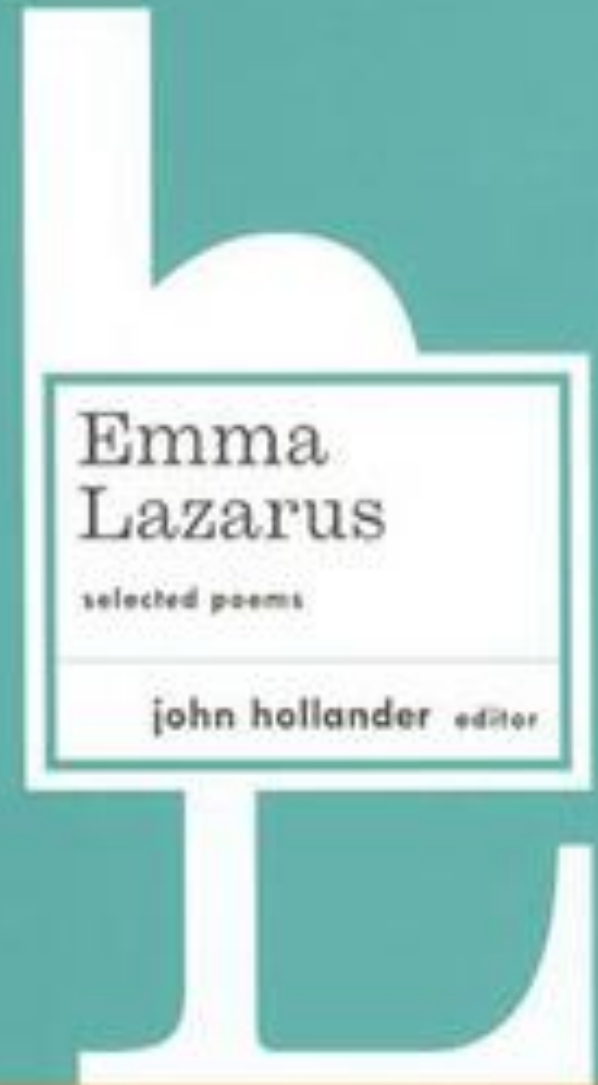
1883: visited England and France, met, among others,  
William Morris (socialist writer)

Learned Hebrew and worked with the Hebrew Emigrant Aid Society to support Jewish immigrants. She had a role in founding the Hebrew Technical Institute and developing agricultural communities for immigrants in the United States  
Correspondence with Ralph W. Emerson, Henry and William James, Ivan Turgenev

Lived in New York and was involved in the intellectual life of the city in the period when New York replaced Boston as the cultural heart of the nation

William James: “a poetess, a magazinist, & a Jewess, Miss Emma Lazarus, whose name you doubtless know, as did I, without knowing any of her works” (Letter to Alice James, July 25, 1882)

Emma Lazarus, *Selected Poems*,  
edited by John Hollander, New York,  
The Library of America, 2005



AMERICAN POETS PROJECT

1  
Sonnets.

The New Colossus.

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,  
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;  
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand  
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame  
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name  
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand  
Glow'd world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command  
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.

"Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she  
With silent lips. "Give me your tired, your poor,  
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,  
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.  
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,  
I'll lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

1853.

(Written in aid of Bartholdi's Statue of Liberty.)

THE NEW COLOSSUS.

NOT LIKE THE BRAZEN GIANT OF GREEK FAME,  
WITH CONQUERING LIMBS ASTRIDE FROM LAND TO LAND;  
HERE AT OUR SEA-WASHED, SUNSET GATES SHALL STAND  
A MIGHTY WOMAN WITH A TORCH, WHOSE FLAME  
IS THE IMPRISONED LIGHTNING, AND HER NAME  
MOTHER OF EXILES. FROM HER BEACON-HAND  
GLOWS WORLD-WIDE WELCOME; HER MILD EYES COMMAND  
THE AIR-BRIDGED HARBOR THAT TWIN CITIES FRAME.  
"KEEP ANCIENT LANDS, YOUR STORIED POMP!"

CRIES SHE  
WITH SILENT LIPS. "GIVE ME YOUR TIRED, YOUR  
POOR,

YOUR Huddled masses yearning to breathe free,  
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore,  
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,  
I'll lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

THIS TABLET, WITH HER SONNET TO THE BARTHOLOMI STATUE  
OF LIBERTY ENGRAVED UPON IT, IS PLACED UPON THESE WALLS  
IN LOVING MEMORY OF

EMMA LAZARUS

BORN IN NEW YORK CITY, JULY 22<sup>d</sup> 1849  
DIED NOVEMBER 19<sup>th</sup> 1887.

## The New Colossus (1883)

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,  
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;  
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand  
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame

Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name  
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand  
Glow world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command  
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“Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!” cries she  
With silent lips. “Give me your tired, your poor,  
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,

The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.  
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,  
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!”

## 1492 (1883)

Thou two-faced year, Mother of Change and Fate,  
Didst weep when Spain cast forth with flaming sword,  
The children of the prophets of the Lord,  
Prince, priest, and people, spurned by zealot hate.

Hounded from sea to sea, from state to state,  
The West refused them, and the East abhorred.  
No anchorage the known world could afford,  
Close-locked was every port, barred every gate.

Then smiling, thou unveil'dst, O two-faced year,  
A virgin world where doors of sunset part,  
Saying, "Ho, all who weary, enter here!"

There falls each ancient barrier that the art  
Of race or creed or rank devised, to rear  
Grim bulwarked hatred between heart and heart!"

## Abraham Cahan

(Vilnius, 1860-New York 1951)

Studied to become a teacher, but was involved in socialist riots

1882: Moved to New York, after the assassination of tsar Alexander II

### **The journalist:**

Wrote for the *Arbeiter Zeitung* (Workers' Papers), Yiddish newspaper

1897: Founded and directed until 1951 *The Jewish Daily Forward* (in 2015: *The Forward*, in Yiddish and English, פֿאַרווערטס, *Forverts*), newspaper of the Socialist Labor Party

1897 → Kishinev pogrom, fully covered by the *Jewish Daily Forward*, highlighted the newspaper's militant approach



## **The writer:**

Authors of short stories, novellas and three novels:

*Yekl. A Tale of the New York Ghetto* (1896, in yiddish)

*The Imported Bridegroom* (1898)

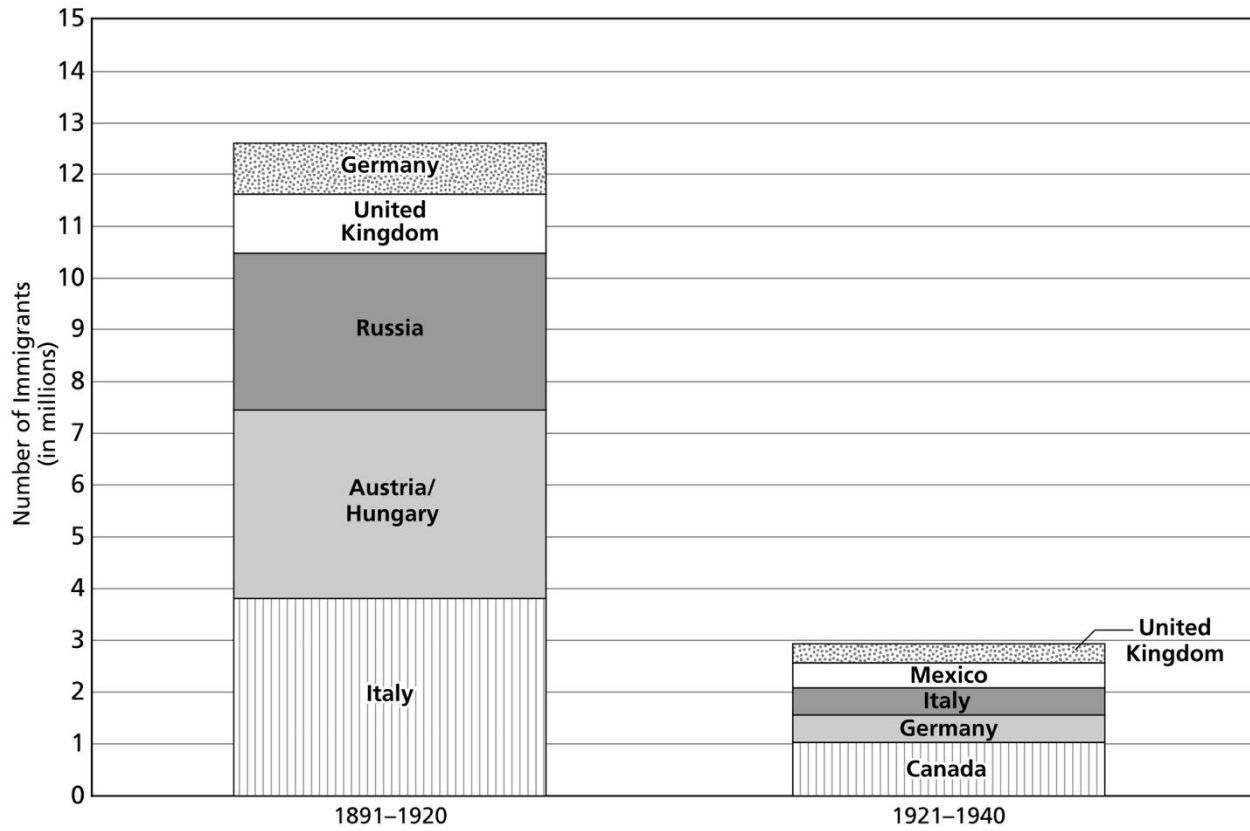
*The Rise of David Levinsky* (1917) → inspired to William D. Howells' *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885)

The impact of realism: Cahan and Howells (1837-1920) → "The Man of Letters as a Man of Business" (1893): the professional writer as a job

Migration and multilingualism

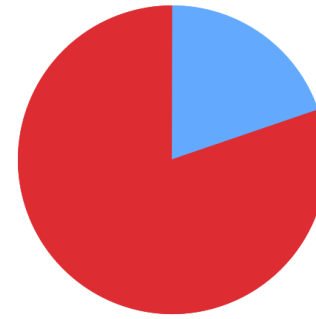
*The Rise of David Levinsky*: the end of the myths of the self-made man and of America as the promised land (for Jews)

**SOURCES OF U.S. IMMIGRATION, 1891-1940**

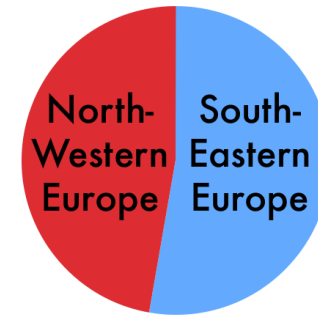


Note: This graph shows only the top five countries.  
 Source: U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service.

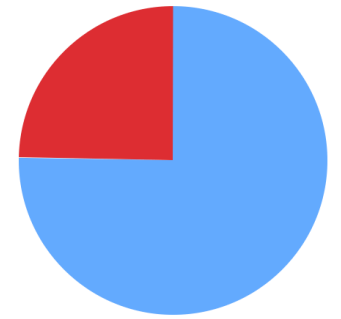
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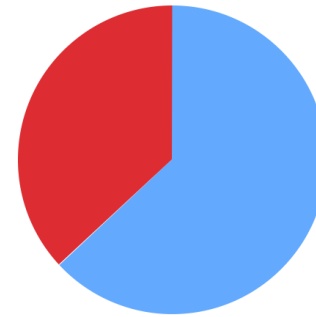
1881-1890



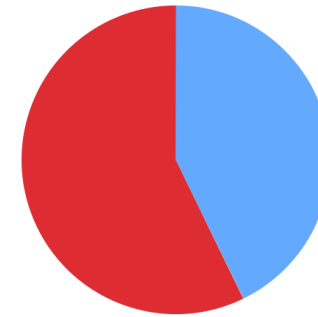
1891-1900



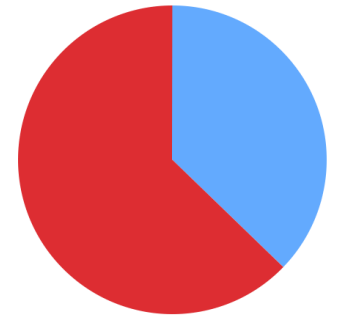
1901-1910



1911-1920



1921-1930



1931-1940

**1924 Immigration act (Asian Exclusion Act and National Origins Act)**

# Antisemitism in the 1920s United States

In **1913** Leo Frank, a Jewish factory manager in Atlanta, Georgia, was wrongfully convicted of murdering Mary Phagan (13yo) and sentenced to death. The case stirred antisemitic sentiments. Georgia Governor commuted Frank's sentence to life imprisonment → on August 17, **1915** an angry mob kidnapped Frank from prison and lynched him. The case fueled antisemitism into the 1920s, inspiring the resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan



Elite universities (Harvard) introduced quotas limiting Jewish student admissions

**1924**: Burton J. Hendrick, *The Jews in America*; **1926**: Henry Pratt Fairchild, *The Melting-Pot Mistake*; episodes of antisemitism in Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (**1925**), Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* (**1926**), and in works by T.S. Eliot and Djuna Barnes

**1930s**: realism and socialism; the **Second world war**: consolidated the process of Americanization of Jews as over 550,000 Jews served in the armed forces



## **Delmore Schwartz**

(New York 1913-1966)

Migrant background (Romania)

**1935:** graduated in Philosophy from NYU,  
moved to Harvard University

Wrote for the *Partisan Review* (co-editor  
**from 1943 to 1945)**

Worked as a journalist and as a teacher, then  
suffered from mental illness and alcohol  
abuse and **in 1966** went to live in isolation in  
New York City midtown hotels

Influenced by modernists like Yeats, Auden,  
Eliot, Stevens

Model Saul Bellow for the protagonist of  
*Humboldt's Gift*

**Delmore Schwartz**  
**“The Ballad of the Children**  
**of the Czar”**

1  
The children of the Czar  
Played with a bouncing ball  
  
In the May morning, in the Czar’s  
garden,  
Tossing it back and forth.  
  
It fell among the flowerbeds  
Or fled to the north gate.  
  
A daylight moon hung up  
In the Western sky, bald white.  
  
Like Papa’s face, said Sister,  
Hurling the white ball forth.

2  
While I ate a baked potato  
Six thousand miles apart,  
  
In Brooklyn, in 1916,  
Aged two, irrational.  
  
When Franklin D. Roosevelt  
Was an Arrow Collar ad.  
  
O Nicholas! Alas! Alas!  
My grandfather coughed in your army,  
  
Hid in a wine-stinking barrel,  
For three days in Bucharest  
  
Then left for America  
To become a king himself.

3  
I am my father’s father,  
You are your children’s guilt.  
  
In history’s pity and terror  
The child is Aeneas again;  
  
Troy is in the nursery,  
The rocking horse is on fire.  
  
Child labor! The child must carry  
His fathers on his back.  
  
But seeing that so much is past  
And that history has no ruth  
  
For the individual,  
Who drinks tea, who catches cold,  
  
Let anger be general:  
I hate an abstract thing.

4

Brother and sister bounced  
The bounding, unbroken ball,

The shattering sun fell down  
Like swords upon their play,

Moving eastward among the stars  
Toward February and October.

But the Maywind brushed their cheeks  
Like a mother watching sleep,

And if for a moment they fight  
Over the bouncing ball

And sister pinches brother  
And brother kicks her shins,

Well! The heart of man is known:  
It is a cactus bloom.

5

The ground on which the ball bounces  
Is another bouncing ball.

The wheeling, whirling world  
Makes no will glad.

Spinning in its spotlight darkness,  
It is too big for their hands.

A pitiless, purposeless Thing,  
Arbitrary and unspent,

Made for no play, for no children,  
But chasing only itself.

The innocent are overtaken,  
They are not innocent.

They are their father's fathers,  
The past is inevitable.

6

Now, in another October  
Of this tragic star,

I see my second year,  
I eat my baked potato.

It is my buttered world,  
But, poked by my unlearned hand,

It falls from the highchair down  
And I begin to howl.

And I see the ball roll under  
The iron gate which is locked.

Sister is screaming, brother is howling,  
The ball has evaded their will.

Even a bouncing ball  
Is uncontrollable,

And is under the garden wall.  
I am overtaken by terror

Thinking of my father's fathers,  
And of my own will.

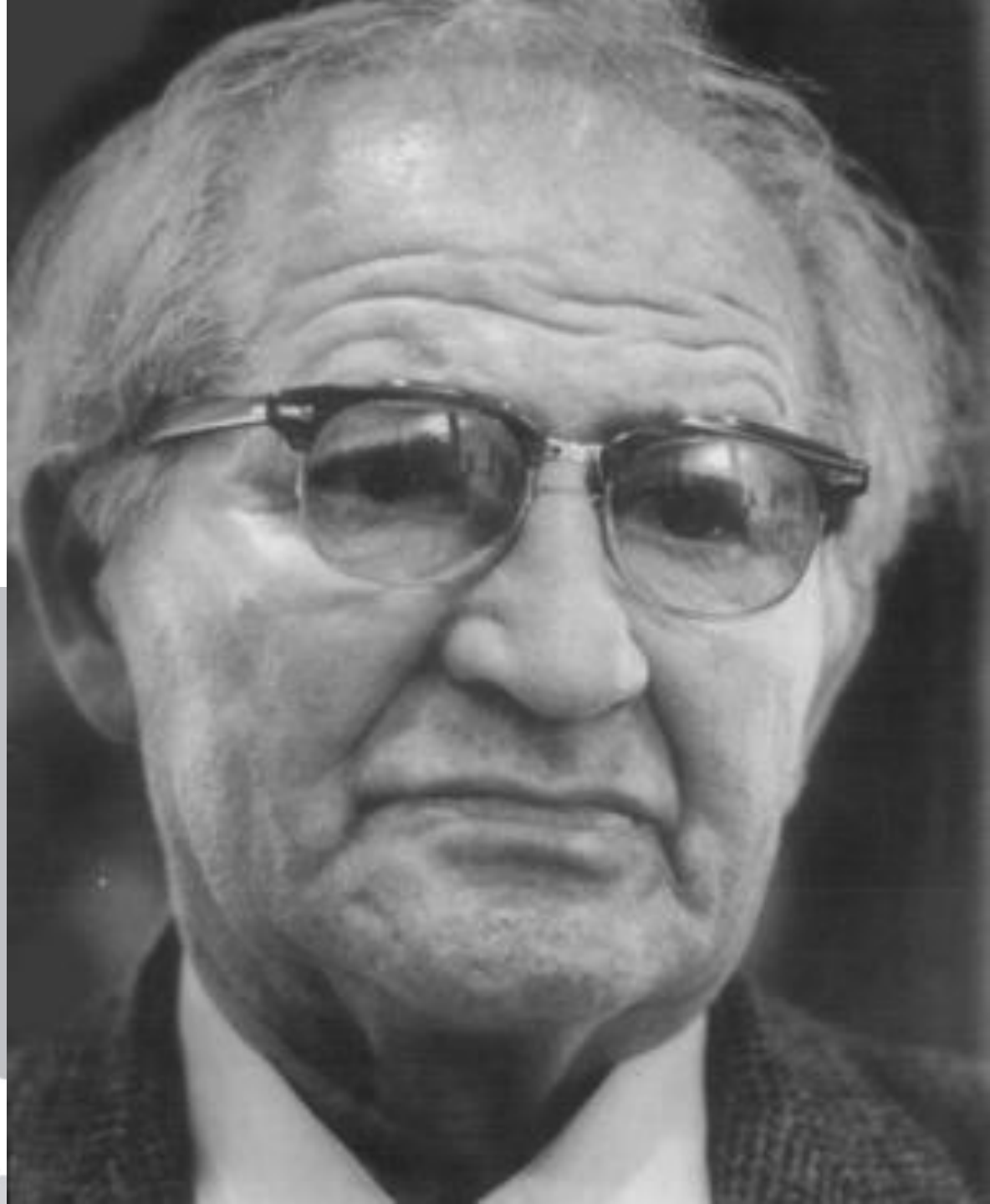
## Henry Roth

Tysmenitz  
(Galicia, present  
Ukraine), 1906 -  
Albuquerque, 1995

Immigrated to New  
York City in **1908**;  
raised in the Lower  
East Side  
Brooklyn - Lower  
East Side - Harlem

### 1934: *Call It Sleep*

Writer's block for decades  
1990s: *Mercy of a Rude  
Stream* series (4 volumes,  
explores Roth's troubled  
past, sexual taboos, and  
Jewish identity.  
Controversial for its  
confessional style)





CALL  
IT  
SLEEP  
BY  
HENRY ROTH



BALLOU



CALL  
IT  
SLEEP  
BY  
HENRY ROTH



**CALL IT SLEEP**  
*by Henry Roth*  
Underlying the splendid surface of this first novel—the rich and moving poetry, pathos and humor the author has caught and recreated out of the speech of immigrants, the pungent and varied dialects of the streets of New York, its swift action and moving emotional situations, ranging from passionate love to passionate love—is the incisive portrait of a growing child drawn often with bitterness but always with accuracy and delicacy. The author, of Austrian birth, came to America with his mother when he was two years old and lived intimately through the environments and the struggles of his novel. He began this novel when he was twenty-four and completed it a year ago, when he was twenty-seven. It is safe to say that it places him startlingly within the ranks of the few significant and arresting novelists of America today. 399 pages. \$2.50

*Balloy Black-Top Books are Good Books*



# Modernism

## Fragment and stream of consciousness

Literature: Marcel **Proust**, *À la recherche du temps perdu* (1913-1927)

T.S. **Eliot**, *The Waste Land* (1922)

James **Joyce**, *Ulysses* (1922)

Music: Arnold **Schönberg** (twelve-tone technique/**dodecaphony**): a method of composition where all 12 notes of the musical scale are used equally, without repeating any note until all have been played. This creates music without a clear key or traditional harmony ([audio](#))

## Themes

Immigrant experience

Parental conflict and abuse

Religion and mysticism

The city as a protagonist (compare to John Dos Passos' *Manhattan Transfer*, 1925)

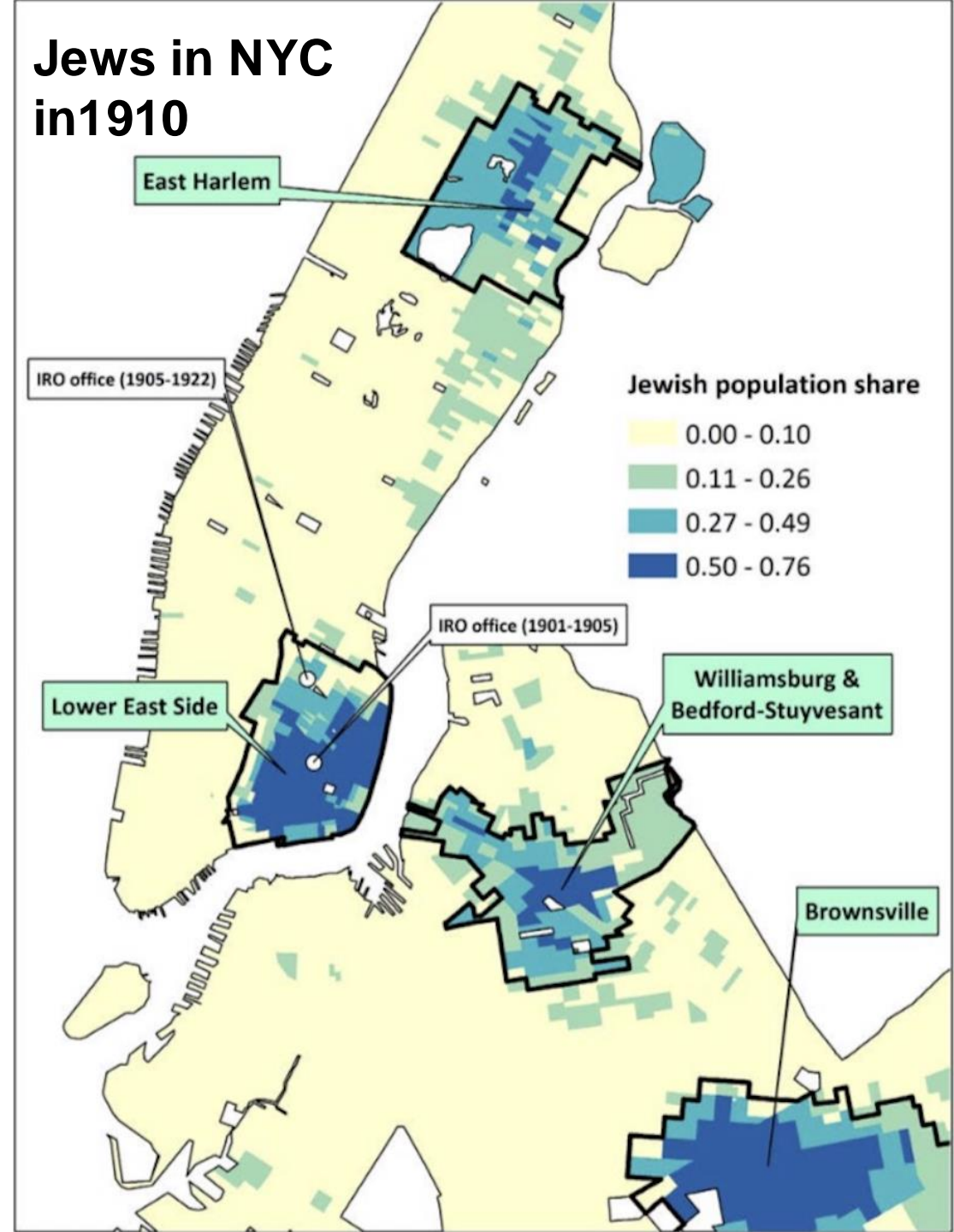
# The city

Population in New York City		
1870	942,292	
1880	1,206,299	+28.0%
1890	1,515,301	+25.6%
1900	3,437,202	<b>+126.8%</b>
1910	4,766,883	+38.7%
1920	5,620,048	+17.9%
1930	6,930,446	+23.3%

**Tenement:** a densely populated, low-cost apartment building, often old and poorly maintained, that houses multiple families or individuals. Tenements were common in cities like **New York during the 19th and early 20th centuries**, providing basic housing for immigrants and working-class families

**1901. New York Tenement House Act**, which required new buildings to have outward-facing windows, indoor bathrooms, proper ventilation, and fire safeguards.

# Jews in NYC in 1910



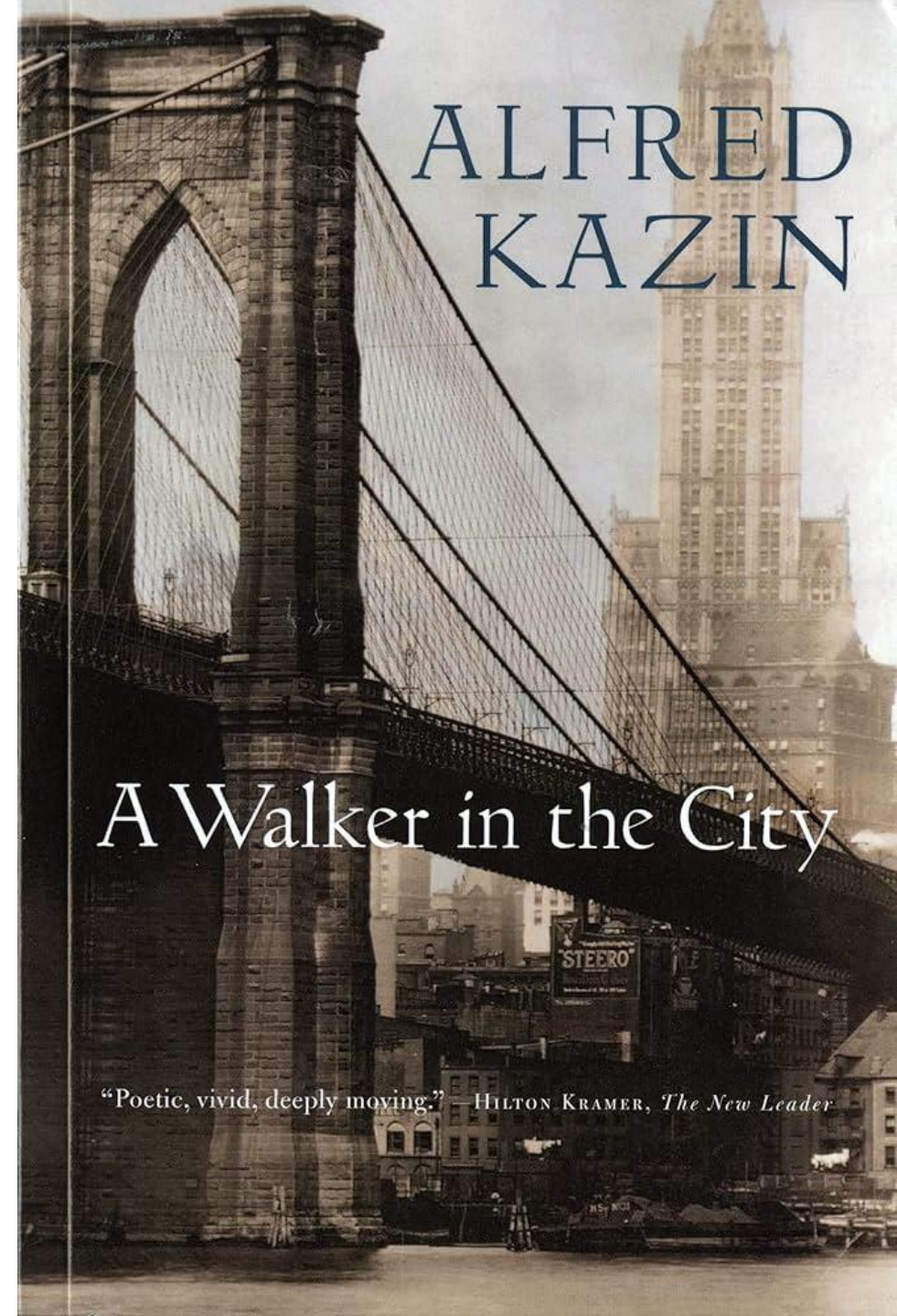
George Bellows, "Cliff Dwellers" (1913)



## Alfred Kazin (1915-1998), *A Walker in the City* (1951)

The last time I saw our kitchen this clearly was one afternoon in London at the end of the war, when I waited out the rain in the entrance to a music store. A radio was playing into the street, and standing there I heard a broadcast of the first Sabbath service from Belsen Concentration Camp. When the liberated Jewish prisoners recited the *Hear O Israel, the Lord Our God, the Lord is One*, I felt myself carried back to the Friday evenings at home, when with the Sabbath at sundown a healing quietness would come over Brownsville. [...]

My great moment came at six, when my father returned from work, his overalls smelling faintly of turpentine and shellac, white drops of silver paint still gleaming on his chin. Hanging his overcoat in the long dark hall that led into our kitchen, he would leave in one pocket a loosely folded copy of the *New York World*; and then everything that beckoned to me from that other hemisphere of my brain beyond the East River would start up from the smell of fresh newsprint and the sight of the globe on the front page. [...]



By sundown the streets were empty, the curtains had been drawn, the world put to rights. Even the kitchen walls had been scrubbed and now gleamed in the Sabbath candles. On the long white tablecloth were the “company” dishes, filled for some with *gefilte* fish on lettuce leaves, ringed by red horseradish, sour and half-sour pickles, tomato salad with a light vinegar dressing; for others, with chopped liver in a bed of lettuce leaves and white radishes; the long white *khalleh*, the Sabbath loaf; chicken soup with noodles and dumplings; chicken, meat loaf, prunes, and sweet potatoes that had been baked all day into an open pie; compote of prunes and quince; apricots and orange rind; applesauce; a great brown nutcake filled with almonds, the traditional *lekakh*; all surrounded by glasses of port wine, seltzer bottles with their nozzles staring down at us waiting to be pressed; a samovar of Russian tea, *svetouchnee* from the little red box, always served in tall glasses, with lemon slices floating on top. My father and mother sipped in a Russian fashion, through lumps of sugar held between the teeth.

## Call It Sleep's characters

Albert Schearl ∞ Genya Schearl



David Schearl

**David:** the second king of Israel, unified the tribes, established Jerusalem as the capital, and received God's promise of an eternal dynasty. Christians believe Jesus is his descendant (the prophecy of the Messiah). Muslims: Dawud is a prophet.

- Bertha (Genya's sister) ∞ Nathan (a Jewish Russian widower)
- Yussie and Annie Mink (David's neighbors and friends)
- Leo (Catholic Polish boy)
- Reb Yidel (rabbi who runs a חדר, *cheder*, a school for Jewish kids)



1 Samuel 17: **David**, a young shepherd, defeats the giant warrior **Goliath** with a single stone. The Philistines and Israelites are at war. Goliath, a giant Philistine warrior, challenges Israel to single combat, mocking them and their God. **King Saul** and the Israelites are terrified and refuse to fight him. David is sent by his father to bring food to his older brothers at the battlefield. He hears Goliath mocking Israel and asks why no one is fighting him. David tells King Saul that God will help him defeat Goliath. Saul allows David to fight. Saul offers David his armor and sword, but David refuses, choosing his sling and five smooth stones: "You come against me with sword and spear, but I come against you in the name of the Lord Almighty!" (1 Samuel 17:45). David slings a stone that hits Goliath in the forehead, and Goliath falls down.

## What *Call It Sleep* is not (Alfred Kazin, “Introduction”)

- A naturalist novel like Theodore Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie* (1900)
- A realistic novel
- A novel that “falls into lyrical expansiveness for its own sake”
- A psychoanalytic / Freudian novel
- A religious novel or a novel about religion



MODERN CLASSICS



Henry Roth  
*Call It Sleep*

## The city in *Call It Sleep*

Differences between the places where the Schearls live

Role of the city in the construction of American imagery

Role of the protagonist within the city

**Book I:** Brownsville, Brooklyn

**Book II:** Lower East Side, Manhattan (German Jews arrived in the 1840s, Eastern European Jews in the 1890s) → density: six times as high as in Paris

## Running through the city

**Chs 12 and 13:** after coming out of the cellar, David's race through the city begins

pp. 92-94: coincidence of style and content

Other episodes of David running through the city:

- I, 12: he runs away from his house (p. 90)
- III, 8: he runs away from older boys in 10th street (p. 245)
- IV, 14: after Leo rapes Esther (David's cousin), David runs away to his cheder (p. 345)
- IV, 19: after Albert discovers he wears a cross, he runs to the street (p. 400)

**Esther:** (*Book of Esther* in the Bible) becomes Queen of Persia and saves her people from extermination. She had always hidden her Jewish identity and risked her life by revealing it to her husband, King Xerxes, and exposing Haman's (the king's advisor) plot to kill the Jews. The king could not revoke his previous decree ordering the Jews' destruction, but he issued a new one that allowed the Jews to defend themselves. This led to their survival and the establishment of פורים (Purim).

## The city and American collective imagery

The capital city of the 19th century. **Paris**, Baudelaire and Benjamin, (“On some motifs in Baudelaire”): the *flaneur*

The capital city of the 20th century: **NYC** (different from the city that we know today: the most famous skyscrapers were built in the 1930s). The American city is like a jungle: see Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle* (1906); see the use of the word “**wilderness**” in *Call It Sleep* (II, 3, p. 148)

Only exception: David and aunt Bertha visiting NYC (II, 3): exploration of the city; role of David as a second-generation migrant

The “unreal city” (IV, 4, p. 280)

## David's family

David's growing up: death (I, 9, pp. 63-69 → "threads within threads," p. 66)

sexuality (I, 7, pp. 52-53)

Genya and the past (II, 7, p. 169) → nostalgia

Genya's secret (II, 9, pp. 192-204) } the father

Albert's secret (IV, 19, p. 387)

David and his father (I, 10, p. 77 and II, 9, p. 202 - IV, 19, p. 388 and 399, the cross)

- Historical and anthropological meaning: David belongs to a new generation of Jewish Americans
- Symbolic meaning: David as the son of man

**Esau** was the eldest son of Isaac and Rebekah and the twin brother of Jacob. He was a hunter, unlike Jacob, who was more domestic. As the firstborn, he had the right to inheritance; yet he sold his birthright to Jacob for a bowl of lentils (Genesis 25:29-34). He **lost his father's blessing**: when Isaac was old and blind, Rebekah and Jacob tricked him into giving Jacob the blessing meant for Esau (Genesis 27). Esau married Canaanite women, Judith and Basemath, which displeased his parents (Genesis 26:34-35), which is why he later married Basemath, the daughter of Ishmael, trying to please them (Genesis 28:8-9).

Genya's father was **Benjamin** → The role of Benjamin's tribe in Israel's history: when King Solomon died, his son Rehoboam took the throne. Due to his harsh policies, ten of the twelve tribes of Israel rebelled against him and followed Jeroboam (one of Salomon's servants) forming the northern kingdom of Israel (1 Kings 12:16-20). The tribes of Judah and Benjamin remained loyal to David's dynasty in the southern kingdom of Judah (1 Kings 12:21). **Benjamin and Judah preserved Jerusalem as the religious center of Judaism** and ensured the continuation of the Davidic line. The Benjamites were part of the exiles who returned after the Babylonian captivity (Nehemiah 11:31-35), helping to rebuild Jewish society.

## ***Call It Sleep* and sexuality**

Sexuality signifies the loss of innocence, causing Albert and, especially, Genya to appear to David as ordinary human beings rather than idealized figures

David discovers sexuality as a stigma or as a sin

Stigma: sexuality and Jewishness (III, 8, p. 246): Jewishness is perceived as no longer related to legacy, but written on the body

Sin: eavesdropping on his mother's story (II, 9, pp. 192-204); looking Leo and Esther at a distance (IV, 14, pp. 349-355) and feeling "petrified" (p. 354)

Miscegenation: Esau's filth (II, 9, p. 199)

Miscegenation: the symbolic "killing" of the mother (IV, 15, pp. 364-368)

In *Totem and Taboo* (1913), ch. 4, Freud theorizes that early human society was structured as a primitive horde, where a dominant male (the father) monopolized all women and held absolute authority over his sons. The sons, jealous and resentful, conspired to kill and consume him, which symbolized destruction and incorporation of his power. After killing the father, the sons felt guilt and renounced their individual desires, leading to the establishment of totemic religion and the incest taboo. This act laid the groundwork for social norms, laws, and collective morality, replacing brute force with cultural regulations.

## ***Call It Sleep* and religion**

Book III, “The Coal”: reference to **Isaiah** (III, 4, p. 224)

פסח (**Pesach**) Passover: Israelites’ liberation from Pharaoh’s rule and their journey to the Promised Land (III, 7, p. 239)

בר מצווה (**Bar Mitzvah**): coming-of-age ceremony for 13-year-old boys, marking religious maturity and responsibility for following Jewish commandments (III, 4, p. 222)

Religion as language (III, 2, p. 210) and rhythm (III, 9, pp. 251-252): acoustic epiphany

The new generation of Jewish Americans and faith: Rabbi Yidel’s monolog (IV, 16, p. 371)

Isaiah 6:1-7: **Isaiah** sees the Lord seated on a high throne, with angels) surrounding Him. Isaiah realizes his own sinfulness and cries out: “Woe to me! I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty.” One of the angels **takes a live coal from the altar with tongs and touches Isaiah’s lips**, saying: “See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for.” After this, Isaiah hears God’s voice asking: “Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?” Isaiah replies: “Here am I. Send me!” This is the moment when Isaiah accepts to be a prophet.

## ***Call It Sleep: conclusion (IV, chs 21-22)***

David is back to darkness after Albert has made sure he is not his son, because of the rosary: IV, 20: “Dark, still dark”; “Dark mine only”; “If it lights, so what?”; “Dark yet – is dark. Dark always” (pp. 402-404)

Anti-epiphany: he wants to drop a metal wire on the trolley rail to cause a flash of electricity as he did in the past → III, 8: “Power!” (p. 249 and pp. 251-252)

- general symbolism: darkness vs. light
- biblical symbolism: reference to **Isaiah** (the burning coal)
- historical-materialistic symbolism: reference to Greek mythology and to **Prometheus**

**Prometheus** was a giant who defied Zeus by stealing fire from the gods and giving it to humans and, as punishment, was chained to a rock and an eagle came daily to eat his liver → Karl **Marx**: “Prometheus is the most eminent saint and martyr in the philosophical calendar” (*The Difference Between the Democritean and Epicurean Philosophy of Nature*, 1841)

## ***Call It Sleep: conclusion (IV, chs 21-22)***

**Ch. 21:** David does the same but the spoon lands in the wrong spot, he tries to take it back but is seared with electric current (p. 417). Everything stops until the ambulance arrives

Background: the city, its voices and noises (*but* David gets almost killed by a symbol of modernity and progress). References to

- the US: the Statue of Liberty (p. 413)
- key dates in the history of mass uprisings (p. 414)

1789: French revolution


1848: the “springtime of nations”

1871: the Paris commune

1905: the assault on the winter palace



David's body is found (p. 418 and 430)



**Springtime of Nations:** the Revolutions of 1848, a wave of political upheavals that swept across Europe against absolute monarchs (in Italy too: the “Five Days of Milan”, Kingdom of Sardinia-Piedmont declared war on Austria, the Roman Republic was declared, with Mazzini and Garibaldi involved, Pope Pius IX fled Rome)

The **Paris Commune** (1871): a radical socialist government that ruled Paris for about two months, established after France’s defeat in the Franco-Prussian War and the fall of Napoleon III. It aimed to create a society based on workers' rights and social justice but was crushed by the French government .

The **assault on the winter palace:** in 1905 protesters, led by workers and revolutionaries, assaulted the Winter Palace (the official residence of the Russian tsars from 1732 until 1917) in St. Petersburg. The protest was suppressed, but it led to limited reforms, including the establishment of the Duma (parliament).

## ***Call It Sleep: conclusion (IV, chs 21-22)***

**Ch. 22:** explanation of what happened in ch. 21

p. 432: “The shock went to the lower part. That’s what saved him” and p. 435, the neighbor explains what happened to the doctor

Typical scenes from a working-class neighborhood: other children recognize David (p. 432), people speaking Yiddish (p. 434), the neighbor (p. 435), the policeman (p. 436)

Albert: “stood in the doorway, features dissolved in the dark” (p. 438)

Pity (p. 439)

David is back with his mother, and back to darkness: “strangest triumph, strangest acquiescence. One might as well call it sleep” (p. 440)