

To the Golden Cities

PURSUING THE
AMERICAN JEWISH DREAM
IN MIAMI AND L.A.



DEBORAH DASH MOORE

To the Golden Cities

*Pursuing the American Jewish Dream
in Miami and L.A.*

Deborah Dash Moore

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FOR MY MEN
MacDonald,
Mordecai, and Mikhael

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Preface and Acknowledgments

I don't remember the first time I saw Miami. My memories are imperfect vignettes, much like the faded photograph that sits on a bookcase in my parents' home. A hotel photographer captured my sister and me in the flouncy chiffon dresses of the era. I recall, of course, beautiful beaches with foaming waves, but I also remember the licentious pleasures of the children's dining room, where I ordered hot fudge sundaes with chocolate ice cream. Paradise on earth! And then there was the hotel porch with its white columns and comfortable chairs, where my sister and I—we billed ourselves as “The Dash Sisters”—performed “If You Knew Susie” to the delight and approval of my parents and grandparents. This was, I realize with an historian's hindsight, exactly the type of uninhibited behavior that worried the more zealous professionals working with some of the Jewish defense agencies.¹ “If You Knew Susie” belonged in the privacy of our room, not on the public porch where it might “generate” antisemitism among those who caught our act. Repeated visits to Miami added layers of impressions, a muddle of sensations.

♥ I first saw Los Angeles on an early August morning in 1970. We were driving across the country on a trip to visit sites of historical interest and natural beauty, and approached the city from the east. Stopping at a roadside rest area on one of the mountains surrounding the city, we looked down on the sprawling streets that appeared to

stretch limitlessly until they merged with a hazy horizon. Over us hung a heavy dull orange sky, the famous smog of L.A. Assuming L.A. offered neither historical interest nor natural beauty, we quickly drove through the city and headed north up the coast. Eight years later we returned to California. From our home in Santa Barbara we visited Los Angeles regularly, drawn not only by the pleasures of a big city but by friends, and friends of friends, who had moved there from the east. Then we saw another L.A.—one of promise, opportunity, the good life.

The idea of actually researching and writing about Jews in Miami and Los Angeles did not occur to me until 1984. That spring, George Pozzetta invited me down to Florida to participate in a conference on ethnicity in the Sunbelt. The conference members responded warmly to my paper on Jewish migration to the Sunbelt and encouraged me to research and write a book.² The idea planted in Florida blossomed in Jerusalem. On a Fulbright to the Hebrew University I had the good fortune to teach a course on American Jews since 1945 with Aryeh Goren. As we struggled to shape a syllabus, we realized that we had to create an historical overview of the era, developing a chronology and periodization, selecting key events and turning points. The postwar history of American Jews had not yet been told.

When I returned to the States, I recognized that migration to the Sunbelt provided an ideal prism through which to view American Jews' postwar history. Through migration, American Jews seized hold of their future and launched themselves on an odyssey into the postwar era. But they lived under the shadow of the destruction of European Jewry and in the euphoria, uncertainty, and demands that accompanied the birth of the State of Israel. Today we live in a world they shaped. Their choices redefined many components of American Jewish identity. Nowhere did the changes appear more vividly than in Miami and Los Angeles. The statistics confirmed my impressions: migration to the Sunbelt in the postwar decades translated into migration to Los Angeles and Miami. These were the pacemaker cities, the ones deserving an historian's attention.

I began my research in New York, a city blessed with a wealth of resources. At the Jewish Division of the New York Public Library, the librarians graciously expedited my many requests. At the American

Jewish Committee, Cima Horowitz in the library and Milton Krentz in the William E. Wiener Oral History Library provided valuable assistance. I also had the immense good fortune to meet Gladys Rosen, who shared with me her insights into Miami's Jewish history, the fruit of several years of research. Later she invited me to tour her basement and then generously gave me cartons of material she had accumulated. My research on Miami benefited enormously from her diligence and intelligence. I refer to these files as the Rosen files, after their archivist. At the YIVO Institute of Jewish Research, Zachary Baker and Dina Abramovicz in the library offered useful aid and Marek Web and Frume Mohrer in the Archives patiently helped as I scoured American Jewish Committee records. Marek's blend of professionalism and charm—who can resist being called *meydele*?—lifted my occasionally flagging spirits.

A Rapoport Fellowship in American Jewish Studies allowed me to visit the American Jewish Archives in Cincinnati. Abraham Peck and Fannie Zelcer facilitated my research there. Nathan M. Kaganoff [z"l] at the American Jewish Historical Society filled my mail and phone requests, making my brief visit exceptionally productive. Sharon Pucker Rivo at the National Center of Jewish Film accommodated my crowded schedule and guided me into the field of film research. A National Endowment for the Humanities fellowship supported research trips to Los Angeles and Miami, as well as a brief visit to the Library of Congress. In L.A. I had the good fortune to receive a warm welcome from Hannah Kuhn, the librarian at the Brandeis-Bardin Institute, and from Steven Lowenstein and Max Vorspan at the University of Judaism. The librarians and archivists at the Jewish Community Library of the Federation-Council, and the library of UCLA, including its Special Collections, assisted me. Several synagogue librarians and administrators also opened doors for me at the Stephen S. Wise Temple, as did Kala Ginsberg at Temple Adat Ari-El. A trip to Miami proved to be similarly productive. Henry Green at the University of Miami introduced me to the Mosaic project, while Beatrice Muskat at Temple Israel, Ruth Abelow and Helen Goldman at Temple Emanu-El, and Dori Goldman at Beth David offered generous assistance. In Israel I benefited from the expertise of archivists at the Central Zionist Archives and Steven Spielberg Jewish Film Archives.

Menaham Kaufman wisely encouraged me to consult the United Jewish Appeal oral histories at the Institute of Contemporary Jewry of the Hebrew University.

Researching a past within living memories challenges an historian. I am indebted to the many individuals who shared their memories of Miami and Los Angeles with me, in formal interviews and casual conversations. They are acknowledged in the notes, as are the oral histories I consulted. I would be remiss, however, not to single out an early interview with Wolfe Kelman [ז"ל], who shared with me his exceptional understanding of religious developments during the postwar era and an extraordinary series of interviews on a Friday in July 1989. Bud Hudson, reluctant to talk in much detail about his own migration from New York to Los Angeles, arranged for me to interview the Mavens, a wonderful group of guys who made new homes and lives for themselves and their families in the San Fernando Valley. Although I was able to use only a fraction of their stories, the book has benefited enormously from their generous spirit.

A similar generosity of spirit animated the many colleagues and friends who took time from busy schedules to read and critique chapters and work-in-progress. Miriam Cohen, Richard Cohen, Judith Goldstein, Eileen Leonard, Charles Liebman, Deborah Lipstadt, Peter Medding, Ezra Mendelsohn, Mary Shanley, Gerald Sorin, and Patricia Wallace gave me valuable criticisms. I also learned from opportunities to present material in public forums. I especially appreciate the comments of Selma Berrol, Michael Ebner, Marc Galanter, Robert Goldberg, Jeffrey Gurock, David Hollinger, Walter Nugent, Bruce Phillips, Riv-Ellen Prell, David Rothman, Martin Ridge, Moses Rischin, Joel Schwartz, Jan Shipps, and Alan Trachtenberg. Marc Stern urged me to examine the files of the Commission on Law and Social Action of the American Jewish Congress, and I am grateful for his prodding and insight.

Another type of vital help came from institutions and individuals who recognized the value of the project. Pamela Brumberg and William Frost at the Lucius N. Littauer Foundation encouraged me in spirit and substance. The foundation's support allowed me to write and helped in final preparation of the manuscript. Samuel Norich, executive director of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, very early expressed his enthusiasm and enabled me, during the year I

served as research director, to devote myself to the book. My friends in the Department of Religion at Vassar College—especially Betsy Amaru, Robert Fortna, John Glasse, and Lawrence Mamiya—let me take what seemed to them like an endless number of leaves of absence required to research and write the book. Vassar College also generously supported me through several grants-in-aid, including a final grant from the Salmon Fund. I appreciate as well the University Seminars at Columbia University for assistance in the preparation of the manuscript for publication. Ideas presented here benefited from discussions in the University Seminar on The City.

Several research assistants speeded a long process. A former student and Vassar graduate, Cindy Sweet, first helped me determine the dimensions of the research. Elliott Gertel scoured newspapers for me. Jennifer Breen shared her research on *Exodus* as did Elizabeth Weaver on tourism to Israel. I was fortunate in having the aid of some competent Vassar students, especially Brian Sokol. Mikhael Moore transcribed tapes (a boring task). Roberta Newman did the photo research; her knowledge and skill translated my rather inchoate ideas into real pictures. Marcia Kerstein Zerivitz at Mosaic helped locate many photos of Miami.

When I thought that all was finished, I received unexpected and invaluable help from my editor, Joyce Seltzer. Her attention to argument, language, and coherence inspired me to tackle the text again, to clarify and condense. I learned from her and from her assistant, Cherie Weitzner, who peppered the manuscript with queries that sent me back to the computer to rethink and rewrite. Because of their care and skill, I have written a better book.

There is finally another kind of aid that I have constantly relied upon, but not without gratitude. My family truly made possible the research and writing. Trips to Los Angeles were affordable on fellowships because I could always count on sleeping on my cousin's couch. Glynnis Golden and her son, Gabriel, turned work into pleasure (and Glynnie's mastery of L.A. freeways and streets ensured that I never got lost). My grandmother, Bella Golden, never hesitated to give me the keys to her North Miami Beach apartment. My parents, Irene and Martin Dash, offered unfailing enthusiasm. Irene read and critiqued several chapters. Mordecai Moore did some research at crucial moments. Mikhael Moore surprisingly took up the challenge

of reading one chapter; his comments—both critical and praiseworthy—helped me see what still needed to be done. Both sons managed, as teenagers graciously to put up with a mother who appeared endlessly fascinated with what happened in two cities at a time before their birth.

There are three people who did more. They read and critiqued draft upon draft; they listened and argued over lunches and dinners to ideas and interpretations; they managed somehow never to grow bored, never to lose interest; they cheered me when I was discouraged; and they pointed out the work yet to be done when I thought I was finished. Without them, the book might never have been written. Paula Hyman and Aryeh Goren shaped this book in ways they cannot imagine. MacDonald probably can imagine his impact, but he deserves to know how much it mattered to me. I am beholden in gratitude and love. Needless to say, I am also solely responsible for what lies between these covers.

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1

On the Threshold

Modern consciousness entails a movement from fate to choice.

—PETER BERGER
The Heretical Imperative

Nineteen forty-five marks a turning point for American Jews. That year they crossed a threshold to embrace the fulfillment promised by America. Behind them lay the immigrant working-class world—their parents' world of passionate politics and a vibrant Yiddish culture, their childhood world indelibly associated with New York City and the other large cities of the Northeast and Midwest. Before them stretched the American century—their century. The future glittered most vividly in the opportunity America offered them to begin again, its tantalizing promise of a fresh start in new territory. As native-born Americans, Jews faced the future with anticipation and trepidation. Between the provincial past and boundless present loomed the horror of World War II. The war transformed American Jews, disrupting their ties to a familiar world and propelling many of them out of their homes into a mass migration across the continent.

The destruction of European Jewry ruptured American Jews' living link to their European past. The Holocaust shattered an era of European Jewish cultural innovation and religious renewal. The rich European Jewish community that had sustained American Jewish life through immigration and provided world Jewry with intellectual, moral, and religious leadership lay in ashes. The disaster left the New World as the remaining hope for a Jewish future in the diaspora. American Jews, long considered exotic provincials by their European brethren, now confronted an awesome burden of ensuring Jewish security and survival. This task they neither anticipated nor welcomed.¹ The end of World War II forced them to face their responsibility for world Jewry in a radically altered Jewish world. Having survived the war unscathed, American Jews forever lost their provincial isolation.

After the war American Jews began a journey that would rival the mass migration of their immigrant parents. The decision to abandon the big cities for a new frontier charted a course for the rest of the century. While many Jews chose to settle in suburbia, a significant minority opted for the open society of the emerging sunbelt. In the postwar era Jews discovered Houston and Dallas, Atlanta and Phoenix, and especially Miami and Los Angeles, cities on the verge of enormous growth. "Let me tell you, to me when I came here the first time, I had a feeling that I had come to Paradise," Isaac Bashevis Singer admitted. "First of all the palm trees. Where would I ever see a palm tree in my life?" Then there was the fresh orange juice. "That first sip was nothing less than ambrosia, especially after such a long journey."² Singer's initial impressions of Miami were far from unique. Jews thought Miami and Los Angeles possessed the earmarks of an earthly paradise: unending sunshine, the bluest of blue skies and the cleanest of clean air; an enormous expanse of ocean, miles of unspoiled sandy beaches, streets lined with tall palm trees, and a relaxed, easygoing style of life, a foretaste of eternal life itself.

Miami and Los Angeles present a peculiar perspective on postwar American Jewry. Preeminently cities of newcomers, they showcase American Jews unconnected to old routines. Jewish communities without long-established hierarchies and institutions flourished in the "land of young people looking for a future and retired folk reviewing the past."³ Miami and Los Angeles lacked accepted patterns of deference to an entrenched leadership. Communal life was bland but also

malleable and welcoming. These cities let Jews be whatever types of Jews they wanted to be. When they chose to be Jewish or liberal, to support the establishment of the State of Israel or the separation of church and state, Miami and Los Angeles Jews were not just fashioning an identity for themselves. Their decisions placed them in the vanguard of American Jewish life because they were freely taken. By migrating to Miami or Los Angeles, American Jews initiated a process of change. In typical American style they proposed to start anew.

Yet in their choices Miami and Los Angeles Jews drew upon childhood memories derived from an upbringing on the streets of a big American city like Chicago or New York. Memories of such rugged urban realities enhanced the beauty of Miami and Los Angeles. Recalling crowded, vertical, dark, and dirty cities, American Jews marveled at the clean, spacious, open, horizontal quality of Miami and L.A. In the daytime the cities were bathed in light, from the omnipresence of sunlight to the popularity of white and pastel-colored buildings. At night, streets were quiet and empty; in the morning, sounds of birds filled the air. Signs of prosperity abounded: almost everyone seemed to own an automobile—a luxury in the Northeast and Midwest—and most people lived in private, single-family houses with flowers and fruit-bearing trees in the gardens.⁴ Even the sweet smells signaled a reality sharply at variance with the acrid fumes of coal-burning heaters and incinerators. The pace was more leisurely, less harried. The long train journey to reach these two cities helped set them apart from mundane America.

Los Angeles appeared more like clusters of small towns strung together along broad, straight streets than like the nation's third largest city. Visiting L.A. during the war, the French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre compared it to "a big earthworm that might be chopped into twenty pieces without being killed. If you go through this enormous urban cluster," he wrote, "... you come upon twenty juxtaposed cities, strictly identical, each with its poor section, its business streets, night-clubs and smart suburb." Ironically, at the center of the city's structure stood the single-family detached suburban house, normally on the urban periphery. Miami barely made it into the ranks of big cities, so meager and dispersed was its population. "Miami, renowned as a gay, metropolitan playground, is also a quiet community of individual homes and gardens, and is rapidly recovering from

its spectacular, adolescent growth,” observed the WPA guide. “Wide stretches of vacant lots, overgrown with scrub palmettos, give these outlying sections a ragged, straggling appearance.” Both Miami and Los Angeles devoted extensive acreage to farms within their county limits.⁵ Seeing the external physical reality, American Jews imagined a corresponding internal one. The conspicuous absence of multistory slum tenements, for example, signaled a lack of poverty to American Jews. What made Miami and Los Angeles so attractive was their contrast with cities that most American Jews called home.⁶

Prior to World War II over 40 percent of American Jews lived in New York City, and another 10 percent lived in Chicago. With a handful of other big cities—Philadelphia, Boston, Cleveland—these accounted for the preponderance of American Jews. These cities shared much in common with such smaller industrial cities as Milwaukee, Detroit, St. Louis, Pittsburgh, Baltimore, and Newark. Ethnicity animated their neighborhoods, influenced occupational distribution, and dominated politics. Jews were one ethnic group among many. Jewish religion, culture, politics, and occupations stemmed from immigrant origins. “Down the street were Orthodox Jews, up the street were Zionists, in the middle of the street were shtetl Jews, get-rich-quick Jews, European humanist Jews,” recalled the writer Vivian Gornick of her East Bronx neighborhood. Divisions among Jews—of class, birth, background, ideology, and religious observance—ultimately paled before differences separating Jews from other immigrants, mostly Catholics, many from peasant cultures. Their interaction with each other, and with the local, often Protestant, elites, shaped each city’s character.⁷

Like their fellow city dwellers, Jews reckoned their ethnicity as part of the common coin of urban discourse. Those who grew up in the city, especially the children of immigrants, quickly acquired a streetwise savvy as they navigated patterns of daily life, walking from home to school, running errands at local stores, visiting relatives, playing games, meeting fathers returning from work at the subway or elevated stations. Occasional trips outside of the neighborhood reinforced through contrast a sense of the familiar.⁸ Immigrants in the multiethnic metropolis each marked their separate turfs, defining both differences and shared aspects of urban culture. Where each group chose to settle influenced its perceptions of its collective identity.

In every city except New York, Jews were simply one minority struggling among others. Jews in New York City enjoyed the luxury of numbers and diversity. Almost two million strong and roughly 30 percent of the population, they were, in fact, the city's largest single ethnic group. Because of their critical mass, their internal differences did count. New York Jews could separate themselves from their fellow Jews on the grounds of ideology or religion, class or politics, and still find enough other similar Jews to fill an apartment house, an organization, or even a neighborhood. Gerson Cohen, the future chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary, grew up speaking Hebrew in an immigrant household, an unusual pattern of Jewish family culture. When he was a teenager, he met a Polish boy who had studied "within the Hebrew secular system of Poland. He and I played ball together, talking away in Hebrew, from which I drew the following inference: New York City was a place where people, however isolated they were from the mainstream, did not need to be alone."⁹

The diversity and numbers of New York Jews allowed them to settle large sections of the city and to endow those areas with a Jewish ambiance. Growing up in East Flatbush, Victor Gotbaum remembered that section of Brooklyn as "really insulated, wrapped in a false sense of security, what with Jews to the left of you and to the right of you and across the street from you." Although they shared the streets with other ethnics, New York Jews often were remarkably provincial. "Much later," the labor leader continued, "I was impressed when my Chicago friends told me that right across the street there might be a Polish family and a Polish gang ready to get you. I never had that problem. Neither did most Jews raised in Brooklyn. When you went to school the minority would be two or three non-Jews per class." The writer Grace Paley "grew up being very sorry for Christians. My idea was that there were very few of them in the world." Kate Simon knew that Italian immigrants lived on the east side of Lafontaine Street in the Bronx, but she considered them "just Jews who didn't talk Yiddish. They didn't go to synagogues, either, but a lot of Jews didn't. Most of them went to church only on their high holy days, like Jews." Comfortable in their own world, New York Jews rarely ventured outside of it. "The Jewish immigrant world branded upon its sons and daughters marks of separateness even while encouraging them to dreams of universalism."¹⁰

Living in New York, Jews understood the ineluctable quality of Jewishness. It dictated not only how one spoke, where one lived, the schools one attended, one's choice of job but even one's politics and friends. "The Jewish community enclosed one, not through choice as much as through experience and instinct, and often not very gently or with the most refined manners." The author Irving Howe's reminiscences ring true. "What you believed, or said you believed, did not matter nearly as much as what you were, and what you were was not nearly so much a matter of choice as you might care to suppose." Indeed, the flip side of ineluctability was naturalness. Being Jewish came naturally in New York; it required virtually no special effort. It was part of being a New Yorker, or to be more precise, of being from Brooklyn or the Bronx. "Growing up in the Bronx I didn't feel Jewish, nor did I *not* feel Jewish. 'Feeling Jewish' is something that occurs to people only when they already see some alternatives to being Jewish," Howe continues. "Growing up in a Jewish family that spoke Yiddish, as I did, made it all a natural environment. I had no distinctive consciousness that there was any choice or alternative."¹¹

In Chicago and Philadelphia, Cleveland and Boston, Jews possessed a more acute awareness of their minority status. "It is no wonder, at least to me, that I was in my late teens before I dared go inside Brooks Brothers in Boston," the journalist Nat Hentoff admitted. "The name, the look of the place, the look of the salespeople I saw through the window, all signaled that they would smell the ghetto on me and not make me welcome." Hentoff grew up "in a three-story apartment house on Howland Street" in Roxbury, Boston, not far from Blue Hill Avenue, the main Jewish shopping thoroughfare. A substantial distance separated Jews from their Christian neighbors, both Catholic and Protestant. Irish Catholic Boston during the Depression revered Father Coughlin, the antisemitic radio priest. On Sunday excursions in the car, Hentoff listened to Coughlin's sermons with his family "and felt hunted too. None of us had the slightest doubt, on those Sunday afternoons, that pogroms could happen here too."¹²

In Philadelphia, most of the neighborhoods "were strictly segregated." Even Jewish builders were reluctant "to sell to Jews." One builder recalled that "as a kid in the models, I was told to warn any buyers coming in who happened to be Jewish that the rest of the neighborhood was all Gentile." Looking back, Marvin Orleans

observed that the Jewish builders, including his father, “were not too crazy about selling to Jews for fear of what it would do to their market.” In Chicago, as Jews left the West Side, the slum area that housed many different immigrant groups, they moved to sections of the city that rapidly acquired substantial Jewish populations.¹³

Although some Jews invested in single-family homes, many remained renters.¹⁴ Renting facilitated mobility, and Jews moved often from one apartment to another depending upon their changing fortunes. To move to a new neighborhood—to change the view from the kitchen window—meant to exchange an old ethnic identity for a new one, to abandon tradition for modernity. Jews living on the Lower East Side of Manhattan looked out onto narrow, densely crowded streets, often filled with pushcarts. Wash hung from clotheslines strung across the rear yards. Yiddish and English signs adorned the tenement facades advertising the coexistence of workplace and residence. By contrast, Jews who moved to the Bronx saw from their windows wide, clean streets filled with criss-crossing patterns of fathers traveling to and from work, children heading to school or at play, and women making the rounds of shopping in local stores. Striped awnings covered windows in the summer, laundry often hung on the roof to dry, and pushcart markets cluttered only a handful of streets.¹⁵

In contrast to the new cities where Jews would soon move, the organized Jewish community in the northeastern and midwestern cities presented a picture of institutional completeness. Schools of all types—religious, congregational, communal, Zionist, Yiddishist, socialist, communist—and of all levels—elementary, secondary, vocational, college, teacher training, graduate—flourished or expected to flourish. Jews established hospitals, orphanages, old-age homes, homes for delinquents and for unwed mothers, community centers, settlement houses, and young men’s and women’s Hebrew associations. Gender provided a fulcrum for organization, and women’s organizations represented a wide political and religious spectrum. Even occupational groups reflected ethnic background. There were organizations of Jewish public school teachers and policemen, unions of Jewish garment workers and bakers, of Yiddish writers and social workers. Most numerous were the small societies of Jews from the same hometowns in the old country, *landsmanshaftn*. These groups directly linked Jews with their European cousins. Religious activities