

Jews and the City

Frankel Institute for Advanced Judaic Studies

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Jews have lived in cities for millennia and scholars have consistently studied Jewish urban life. Much scholarship on Jewish religion still assumes that Jews are not particularly oriented to spatial forms and representations, preferring temporality or textuality to spatiality. One form of Jewish social organization associated with cities, namely, “the ghetto,” entered urban studies as an analytical concept to diagnose the attributes and socio-pathology associated with enforced residential segregation. The phenomenon is most familiar with regard to the mandatory residence within specifically Jewish precincts in medieval and early modern times, whether as ghetto in Christendom, or mellah in Muslim lands. A focus on Jews and the city asks how the physical geography of built environments — bridges, walls, and invisible boundary markers — structures and reflects inter-group relations.

Concepts of sacred space, examined effectively within such cities as Jerusalem, can be applied to diasporic cities. The sacred city of Jerusalem served as a touchstone of Jewish religious imagination regarding the organization and meaning of sacred space. Jews living in diaspora often involved the name of Jerusalem as a trope for their attachment to the virtues of their current homes, even as proper sites of Jewish piety and learning and poetry. The Institute theme asks how these metaphors and representations reflect or distort or influence actual practices. It further invites exploration of the literature and arts that have emerged within or about cities.

Scholars of religion have argued that there are distinctive forms of urban religion that inscribe elements of the sacred on cities. Religious figures have shaped cities into sacred spaces while commerce and entertainment, politics and street performances have influenced religious change. Cultural studies critics have examined key urban types, such as the flaneur, as well as invisible cities, sites of memory, representations of the city in varied media, ruins and slums. Urban studies has paid attention to the impact of the built environment on a wide range of cultural behaviors from intimate family formations and individual self-fashioning to institutional structures and public performances of ethnic identities. Urban and cultural geographers have mapped the transformations of space into place.

The theme of Jews and the city invites scholars from many disciplines to collaborate. It raises questions about the relation of text to space, of representation to practice, of prayer to built environment, of difference to holiness. It invites examination of fruitful intersections of gender and sexuality, commerce and entertainment, politics and public culture, labor and domesticity, class and religion, as mediated through urban spaces, as well as inter-ethnic relations, cultural-brokering, identity-formation and ethnicity. Across these kinds of structuring connections, Jews share urban landscapes with other groups.