



"A DIFFERENT VOYAGE"

TO THE SHTETLS OF EASTERN EUROPE AT THE END OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY



"A DIFFERENT VOYAGE"

TO THE SHTETLS OF EASTERN EUROPE AT
THE END OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

Compiler: Edna Loebinger, Ruth Vittalle

Editorial consultants: Ofer Nur, Gali Shapira, Gila Avraham
Simona Korenfeld

Translation: IBRT, Jerusalem

With thanks to: Dr. D. Assaf & Dr. Noverstern

Design and production: Zohar Ben-Rey



The Jewish Agency for Israel



"Massua" Memorial to Members of Zionist Youth Movements in Disaster and Revolt

Kibbutz Tel-Yitzhak, 45805, Israel

Tel: 972-9-899-9563, 972-9-899-9997

Fax: 972-9-899-7410

TABLE OF CONTENTS:

■ Introduction	1
■ Historical introduction	8
■ Topics:	
a) Women as Agents of Change.....	15
b) Identity and Belonging	29
c) Space	49
d) Time in the Shtetl.....	63
■ Glossary	80
■ Bibliography	87

INTRODUCTION

In recent years we have been witness to an increasing interest in Yiddish culture. Yiddish has penetrated the list of foreign languages taught in universities, there are concerts of Yiddish songs, there are theatrical performances and literary events, and more. What has awakened this interest? What trend does it reflect, and what does it say about the way we define our Jewish identity today? Moreover, how can one explain the fact that a society that spent years negating the Diaspora and anything it considered to be associated with the Diaspora is adopting and embracing the very same world that it tried so hard to reject? This curriculum deals with these questions mainly through a "voyage" to the shtetls of Eastern Europe in the second half of the nineteenth century.

In 1912, the writer and thinker S. An-ski set out with a delegation of Jewish intellectuals on an anthropological expedition to their native shtetls in Eastern Europe. At the beginning of the twentieth century, An-ski visited the shtetls because he sensed that theirs was a vanishing world; his objective was to document that world. He collected stories, poems, melodies, objects of Judaica, recipes, and more, with the intention of establishing a Jewish Museum. This curriculum is a similar sort of voyage to the shtetls, except that our imaginary journey to the shtetls and Jewish life there is taking place after the Holocaust. This is a voyage to an entire world and to a way of life that was extinguished and blotted out by the Holocaust. In this respect, it is "a different voyage." The curriculum attempts to reconstruct a certain aspect of life in the shtetl: the way of life of the people who lived there, the folklore, tradition, and personal dilemmas of the shtetl residents.

The main theme running through this program is the question of identity and belonging, which is also relevant to the way we define our Jewish identity today. In his *Recits d'Ellis Island*, Georges Perec expresses the complexity of defining Jewish identity.

"I don't know exactly what it means

To be a Jew ...,

It is not a mark of belonging

It has nothing to do with faith or *religion*,
Or customs, folklore, or language;
It is closer to quiet, to absence ...
A certainty, full of concern ...
Abstract, heavy, unbearable:
That of the person marked as a Jew,
And as a victim because he is a Jew,
And who owes his life to chance and to exile.
I could have been born, like my cousin ... in Haifa, or in Baltimore
I could have been Argentinian, Australian, English, or Swedish
But out of this almost unlimited range of
Possibilities,
I was deprived of just one thing:
To be born in the land of my forefathers,
In Lubartów or Warsaw,
And to grow up there in a continuity of tradition,
Of language, of community.
In some way, I am a stranger to something
Inside of me, myself
In some way, I am “different,” but not different
From others, different from “those like me”: I
Do not speak the language that my parents spoke,
I do have a part in the memories that they
Could have had ...
I feel not like one who has forgotten,
But like one who has never had the chance to learn;
And in that sense, I have a different attitude from Robert Bober:
For whom to be a Jew is to continue to adhere
To the tradition, the language, the culture,
The community, that neither centuries of exile nor
The methodical genocide of the Final Solution
Could crush entirely:
To be a Jew, for him, is to receive, in order to pass on
In turn, an entire web of customs, of
Ways of eating, dancing, singing, words, tastes, ways of life ...”

(Recits d'Ellis Island by Georges Perec, 1980, translated from the Hebrew as it appeared in Me'orer, 1, pp. 67–69)

For Georges Perec, being Jewish does not signify a feeling of belonging based on language, tradition, and folklore. For him, being Jewish is expressed by a feeling of “absence.” That is to say, one of the elements of his identity is “the vanished world,” what “is not,” its “absence.” As opposed to this, Robert Bober, whom he mentions in the above extract, defines his identity by “what is.” In other words, his identity is based on folklore, tradition, and the language of the Jewish culture that belonged to the vanished Jewish world. In practice, our curriculum adheres to Bober’s and An-ski’s interpretation of their identity, but it does not invalidate a combination of the two interpretations. Thus, in this curriculum we attempt to touch on a few of the complex issues of Jewish identity as it was then and how it is relevant to our lives today.

In the shtetls of Eastern Europe Jews struggled not only with their daily existence but also with questions of identity, both on a personal level and vis-à-vis Jewish society and non-Jewish society. The documents we present here—memoirs and photographs—reveal various personal dilemmas and paint a picture of a vibrant and colorful life. The personal solutions to these dilemmas involve not only leaving the continuing traditional circle of Jewish life; some remain within it. The possibilities open to Jews at the end of the nineteenth century were to remain within the traditional Jewish society or to follow the spirit of the Haskalah (Jewish enlightenment)—in other words, to become assimilated, to join a non-Jewish socialist movement, to join the Bund, which endeavored to preserve cultural Jewish unity, or to become a Zionist. To remain within the traditional Jewish circle meant that the tense relationship between Jewish identity and non-Jewish society would continue. The curriculum will examine the tension between continuity and tradition, on the one hand, and change and crisis, on the other.

For most of the memoirists, the shtetl represented their parents’ home and the traditional Jewish life that they had left behind. Consequently it became an object of nostalgia and guilt feelings for the writers. These memoirs spread before us a full and vibrant life, not a cold, conservative, and closed world. The texts we have chosen reveal uncertainty and a search for answers. We have divided them into several subcategories

Women and the part they played in the process of change in Jewish society in the shtetl;

Personal conflicts and dilemmas in all areas of life;

- Space (the shtetl as a socio-economically significant geographical area and emigration from the shtetl to Western Europe and overseas); and
 - Time as a concept that determined the pattern of daily Jewish life.
- The classification by theme is not cut and dried and some of the texts may be relevant to more than one category. Due to the nature of the activities, we anticipate that information will be passed from one group to another, with the result that all the students will end up with the relevant information.

The students will work in theme groups, which will in turn be divided into subgroups. Each group will prepare an article or a report for the magazine *A Different Voyage*, to be produced by the class. We suggest appointing an editorial board and a production team from the members of the class. Open the workshop with the story of An-ski's life as described below, because his biography can be used to tie the students' work together conceptually and to anchor their work in a historical context. At the end of the process we will raise questions concerning the Jewish identity of the students today.

THE LIFE OF AN-SKI (PEN NAME)

“The lot of any writer is hard—the lot of a Jewish writer in particular. His soul is torn apart. He lives in two streets with three languages. To live on such a ‘border’ is a matter of bad luck” (An-ski in a speech he gave in St. Petersburg to mark 25 years of creative work).

This sentence typifies An-ski's life. Born Solomon Zainwil Rapoport in 1863 in Chashnik, in Vitebsk province, An-ski studied in a heder before discovering Hebrew Haskalah literature at the age of 15.

In this way he learned Hebrew. At the age of 17 he studied Russian and through Russian literature he discovered socialism. He was caught trying to distribute Haskalah literature to the students of the Vitebsk yeshiva. An-ski turned to the Russian people. He lived in Russian villages and tried to attract the peasants to the socialist struggle. At the same time

he published stories in the Russian press about peasant life. However, he always felt that the gap between himself and the peasants was due not so much to the fact that he was an intellectual, but mainly to the fact that he was Jewish. At that time, he believed that the solution to antisemitism was total assimilation and he even considered converting to Christianity. He displayed that same romantic longing for full integration and immersion in the Russian folk culture regarding Jewish folk culture.

The Dreyfus case was to some extent a turning point in his life. He encountered Jewish socialists, members of the Bund, in Berne, Switzerland, and adopted their philosophy of combining socialism with the preservation of Jewish national identity. His belief in the importance of folklore led him to conduct the first ethnographic expedition to the Pale of Settlement. Its goal was to assemble and catalogue items of folklore. There was a feeling of urgency among the members of the expedition: **“The older generation is disappearing and when they go all our treasures of folk art will disappear forever. We must hurry up and save whatever still remains to be saved.”**

An-ski's expedition carried out three seasons of work between 1912 and 1914, during which they conducted their research in some seventy communities in Volhynia, Podolia, and Kiev province. The expedition collected objects of artistic and religious value. They collected thousands of popular legends and songs, which they recorded, customs, rituals, beliefs, old documents, collections of letters, and more. In 1917, after a great deal of difficulty, the Jewish Museum in St. Petersburg was opened to the public. The museum closed in 1918 after the Bolshevik Revolution. It re-opened in 1923, after An-ski's death, only to close its doors for the last time in the early 1930s.

It is important to note that at the end of the 1880s there was an awakening of interest in folklore among Jewish intellectuals in Eastern Europe. An-ski believed that the Jewish people had its own folk culture and was therefore entitled to political rights like other peoples. He believed that an interest in folklore—and not necessarily religious study—could inspire feelings of nationhood among the people and that this would strengthen the educated and assimilated young people's sense of belonging.

“Time,” said An-ski, “which erodes everything, destroys not only material historical testimony. It also slowly wipes out the living historical material

embedded in tradition, customs, memories, old songs, and so forth. Their natural rate of disappearance has been accelerated by the profound changes that have taken place in Jewish life in Russia. All that remains of many facets of what was until very recently daily Jewish life in Russia are vague images in our people's memories."

(from an article by Lukin...).

TARGET POPULATION

Sixteen-year-olds, teachers, and others interested in the subject.

■ OBJECTIVES

To learn about Jewish life in the shtetl.

To know the problems that Jews of the shtetl had to deal with at the end of the nineteenth century.

To assess the options open to the young shtetl Jew.

To understand the problems of Jewish identity then and now.

■ DURATION OF THE ACTIVITY

3–6 hours

■ STUDY MATERIALS

Excerpts from source documents and photographs

Fact sheets

Historical introduction

Glossary

DESCRIPTION OF THE ACTIVITY

The class will be divided into theme groups. Each group will hand out the texts to its members. After they have read them they will discuss a general question. Next, the group will decide what form its work on the subject will take; for example, an article, an interview, etc. for A Different Voyage. At the end of the activity, the whole class will produce a publication with features on different aspects of Jewish life in Eastern Europe at the end of

the nineteenth century. An “editorial board” can be chosen for this purpose.

After the publication has been produced, the facilitator will organize a discussion for the whole class and bring up questions relating to Jewish identity at the end of the nineteenth century. S/he will also try to address questions and dilemmas relating to identity then and now.

We suggest beginning the discussion with a personal question and from there to move on to more general questions, and then back again. This is because the relationship between the individual and society is at the core of the discussion about our Jewish identity and its meaning.

- *What is each person's Jewish identity? What makes you feel Jewish?*
- *Is religious practice the only requirement, or can it involve a sense of belonging—where it exists—based on a common culture and tradition?*
- *What is the Holocaust's place—of “absence”—in our Jewish and American identity?*
- *Is there any similarity between the Jews' search for direction and identity at the end of the nineteenth century and our search for direction today?*
- *Is the vanished Jewish world important in any way to our identity?*

HISTORICAL INTRODUCTION

Polish Jewry was for a very long time—almost a thousand years—an important segment of the Jewish people. Not only did its numerical weight keep increasing; the processes and trends that occurred in the community affected the social and spiritual image of the Jewish people everywhere.

The Jewish masses in Eastern Europe, living in conditions of distress and discrimination and facing a constant existential threat, created a culture and lifestyle of which traces remain to this day. The Jewish communities of Eastern Europe are bound together geographically and historically. Five hundred years went by from the time when German Jews began to migrate into the territories of the Polish kingdom, in the fifteenth century, until the Holocaust, which exterminated the Jewish communities there. Political borders changed and regions passed from one country to another, but the Jewish community preserved its cohesion, character, and social structure. It was the largest center of Jewry in the history of the Diaspora until the new Diaspora in the United States. The Jews lived in Eastern Europe in densely populated blocs. In 1900, the Jews of Carpatho-Russia constituted sixteen percent of the entire population of that region; in Lithuania they were fourteen percent and in Bukovina thirteen percent, as well as in Belorussia. In Poland, including eastern Galicia, the proportion of Jews exceeded twelve percent. The proportion of Jews was higher in the towns.

The shtetl came into existence as part of a process of settlement and the integration of Jews into Eastern European life. Most of the residents of the shtetls—sometimes all of them—were Jews who provided services to peasants in the vicinity and dealt in trade; some of them managed the estates of Polish nobles.

At the end of the eighteenth century, after three partitions of Poland, some one-and-a-half million Jews found themselves living in the Russian Empire. Hundreds of thousands of Jews from Polish Galicia were annexed to Austria. Others came under Prussian rule. The Russians annexed vast areas of the divided Polish kingdom to the Russian Empire and did not

permit Jews to disperse throughout Russia. In 1791, the Jewish “Pale of Settlement” was established; it lasted until the 1917 Revolution. The legislation controlling the Jews, their place of residence, and their occupations actually helped preserve them.

After Poland was partitioned, the Jews of Galicia found themselves in the Austrian Empire, which included Bukovina, Transylvania, and some eastern parts of Hungary. During the second half of the nineteenth century, all subjects of the Austro-Hungarian empire were granted equal rights. Emancipation in Galicia did not change the traditional way of life. Most of the Jews in the eastern part of the empire continued to live in their shtetls, speak their own language, and preserve the traditions of their ancestors.

During the nineteenth century and the first quarter of the twentieth the number of Jews in Russia and Poland grew, due to natural increase, despite migration to Western Europe and emigration overseas. However, the internal distribution of the Jewish population changed. In the middle of the eighteenth century, about a third of Polish Jewry of that time—a quarter of a million people—lived in the country. Thereafter, almost all of them were concentrated in the shtetls and the large towns within the Pale of Settlement. This change in the demographic distribution of the Jews of Russia and Poland came in the wake of the pogroms in southern Russia in 1881 (known as the “Storms in the South”). This date marks a turning point from many points of view. It marks the beginning of the Hibbat Zion movement and aliya to Palestine, as well as the migration of enormous numbers of Jews to the United States and other countries across the sea. But the structure of Jewish society also changed. The regulations that barred Jews from settling in the countryside increased the population density in the shtetls even more. Tens of thousands of Jews were forced to leave their place of residence in the rural villages and shtetls and move to the large towns. Poor neighborhoods were created there, where tens of thousands of Jews lived without livelihood. Artisans who had eked out a living in the villages and the shtetls became day laborers in urban factories. A Jewish working class emerged, followed by rising unemployment and an increasing number of families with no visible means of support.

In Galicia, at this time, Jews were still living in the countryside and working the land; some of them were well-to-do estate owners. However, most of the Jews earned their living from petty commerce. In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, their economic status started to collapse. Jews began to migrate to Vienna, the capital of the empire.

Thus the Jewish population of the large towns increased; in Galicia it came to be concentrated in Lvov and Cracow. **Our image of Eastern European Jewry is of the shtetl—a form unique to the Russian-Polish regime, which obligated the Jews to live in small concentrations that were neither village nor town. In the shtetl, Jewish life was preserved in an undiluted form. But the Jewish shtetl was dying out and most of the Jews became city dwellers.**

In hundreds of shtetls all over Russia, Austria, and Romania, the Jews lived separately from their neighbors in crowded concentrations where they were the majority of the population. They spoke their own language and were answerable to their rabbis and community leaders, even after the shtetl began its decline. Initially the shtetl had a defined role that was adapted to the economic structure of contemporary society. In Poland and neighboring countries, there was no middle class between the nobles and the peasants. The Jews whose shtetls were in agricultural areas bought the peasants' produce and supplied their needs. The tragedy of the shtetl is that it retained its original structure even after the socio-economic regime that had brought it into being had changed. The railway brought the town and country closer together. The noble landowners lost their wealth. Large-scale commerce developed. Yet the structure of the shtetl remained as it was; under pressure from the authorities it retained an economic structure that had outlived its time. This threatened Jewish livelihood. Poverty became the hallmark of shtetl Jewry.

The shtetl's isolation helped preserve the Jews' spiritual character and lifestyle. Cultural centers were far away and they lived in contact with downtrodden peasants. This relationship posed no cultural challenge to the Jews and this reinforced their relationships within their community and their loyalty to Jewish society. In the shtetl, business meant a market stall

where one could buy the local peasants' agricultural produce, or perhaps a narrow shop. There was no industry, only small crafts. Many Jews were butchers and tailors—butchers because of the laws of kashrut and tailors because of the prohibition of shatnes (the combination of linen and wool in a garment). In later years, when they were forbidden to trade or produce wine and beer, which had provided many with an income, they turned to trades such as shoemaking, carpentry, and watchmaking. These trades served the Jews well when they migrated from the shtetl to the town or emigrated abroad. At the end of the nineteenth century many of the Jews were living in towns. Some of these, such as Zhitomir and Berdichev in the Ukraine, were small towns with a distinct Jewish flavor; others were industrial centers, like Lodz and Bialystok in Poland. The concentration of Jews in the large towns left their mark on the profile of Jewish society. In independent inter-war Poland (1918–1939), there were about 350,000 Jews in Warsaw and 200,000 in Lodz. In the towns in the Pale of Settlement the workforce was by and large employed in Jewish-owned workshops and businesses. As the number of university-educated Jews rose, they too moved to the towns. Practitioners of the liberal professions, such as lawyers, doctors, journalists, and writers, lived in Jewish neighborhoods in the towns; they gathered around synagogues and Jewish educational institutions, thus creating a kind of ghetto. In Russia, in the second half of the nineteenth century, when the Jews began to merge into the larger economy, they played a part in commerce and industrialization.

At the start of the twentieth century, we see signs of an incipient Jewish bourgeoisie concentrated chiefly in the major cities, while in the industrial towns of the Pale of Settlement, where some one million Jews—about twenty percent of Russian Jewry—were living, there were concentrations of Jewish workers, most of whom had come from the shtetls. In general, Jews worked for Jewish capitalists. At the outbreak of the First World War there were approximately 500,000 Jewish workers in the Russian empire.

In the areas of Poland that were not part of the Russian Empire, the situation of the Jews was different. Here competition from Polish merchants had pushed the Jews from their trades. The poverty of the Galician shtetls

was a matter of concern for Jewish organizations around the world. Until 1900, most commerce was in Jewish hands, but this was no longer the case after the First World War. After the war, Galicia became part of newly independent Poland. The right-wing leanings of the Polish government also made things difficult for the Jews. This gave rise to a wave of internal migration across Europe and departure for foreign strands, mainly to America.

The Hassidic movement arose in the eighteenth century and spread to and conquered most of Eastern Europe. Hassidism was to a large extent a buffer against the winds of change. In Lithuania, an opposition movement (the Mitnaggedim) formed. The battle between the Hassidim and the Mitnaggedim turned into a fierce conflict that sometimes went so far as appeals to the gentile authorities. It was Mitnaggedim who took the initiative to establish a network of yeshivas in the towns and shtetls of Lithuania for studying Torah and teaching it to the poorer strata. Most were established in the small shtetls of Lithuania. It is here that we find the archetype of the perpetual student devoting his life to the Torah, of the sort described by Bialik in his poem "Hamatmid." Towards the middle of the nineteenth century, these two streams took up their positions against the Haskalah, which had infiltrated from the west and was rocking the foundations of traditional Judaism. The Haskalah sought to change Jewish life. In order to remove the barriers between the Jews and other peoples, its adherents—the Maskilim—fought against the traditional ways of life, which, they believed, prevented the Jews from integrating into society. The collapse of the socioeconomic structure of the shtetl and the flow of people towards the towns helped the Haskalah gain a foothold. Many young people tried to acquire a secular education by their own efforts. They studied German and Russian and endeavored to enroll in universities in Russia and abroad. In this context, the role that women played in disseminating the ideas of the Haskalah is interesting. In yeshivas too, students organized and read secular literature. Although the attempts by the czarist regime to force Jews to acquire a secular education met with some opposition, the cracks in Jewish insularity grew wider and wider. Many Maskilim fought to change the image of the Jewish community. Others assimilated. Until the reign of

Alexander II (1855–1881), there were fewer than 300 Jews in Russian universities. With the spread of the Haskalah, the number increased; because of difficulties and restrictions, many went to universities abroad, especially in Germany and Switzerland. Young people were also drawn to the revolutionary movements that were operating underground against the czarist regime. Some even severed all contact with Jewish society. Starting in the 1880s the social unrest reached the Jewish street. Those who believed in assimilation were not all of the same hue: Some preached identification with Polish nationalism; others identified with German culture. There was, for example, a dispute between those who favored the Polish language, most of them concentrated in the Warsaw, and the Lithuanian advocates of Russian culture. The watershed year was 1881, when the Pogroms dashed the idea of assimilation as a solution. Zionism became a possible political solution.

The national revival was linked to the Haskalah and influenced every walk of life. In education, the traditional heder was replaced by the modern "reformed" Hebrew-speaking heder, the root from which a network of Hebrew schools developed. Rabbis and Hassidim, too, joined the Zionist movement. Later on, the Zionist movement split into different streams.

In the year that the First Zionist Congress was held in Basel, 1897, the Jewish workers' party—the Bund—was established. For many years it was a rival to Zionism on the Jewish street. The Bund—the General Federation of Jewish Workers in Poland, Lithuania, and Russia—was a socialist party aimed at the Jewish public. Its language was Yiddish and it rejected Zionism outright. Its solution to the Jewish problem was to continue Jewish existence in the Diaspora while striving for socio-cultural autonomy for the Jewish minority as a recognized national group. Until the 1917 revolution in Russia, and even after that in Poland, the Bund had enormous influence in the Jewish street. Eastern European Jewry was a mosaic of ideological streams, movements, and organizations until the Second World War.

(Based on articles by Ya'akov Tsur, *Dyukanah shel Hatefutsah* (Portrait of a Diaspora community) [Jerusalem: Keter, 1975], pp. 25–58; Shmuel Ettlinger, "Darkah hahistorit shel Yahadut Polin"

[The Historical course of Polish Jewry], *Massua Yearbook* 27 [1999])

WOMEN AS AGENTS OF CHANGE



WOMEN AS AGENTS OF CHANGE*

■ GUIDANCE FOR FACILITATORS:

This topic is chiefly about women in the Jewish community. The texts we have chosen illustrate a facet that has been somewhat overlooked: the place of women in the processes of change that took place in Jewish society at the end of the nineteenth century. Women are romantic objects, mothers, and breadwinners. Nevertheless, they are presented as “marginal” in traditional Jewish society.

The texts included show women taking a stand against the traditional norms and being closer to the younger generation, while at the same time preserving these norms. They also reflect the changes that occurred in Jewish society. See, for example, text 5, in which the young girl expresses an idea about her future husband and even describes the kind of husband she would like. Texts 6 and 7 represent women as cultural “go-betweens” who spread the ideas of the Haskalah. Judah Leib Gordon’s criticism of the situation of women in Jewish society is also interesting—the very fact that the criticism was made at all reflects the way the winds of the Haskalah were blowing.

■ INSTRUCTIONS TO THE GROUP:

The group will prepare a profile of women in the shtetl as agents of change. The texts and photographs include descriptions of several women. Share out the documents among yourselves, and read and consider the questions attached to them. After you have read them by yourselves, discuss the general questions in your group. You must also decide what kind of an article you want to write for A Different Voyage. After the discussion, write the article.

■ **General questions for group discussion:**

1. *Is there tension between change, on the one hand, and tradition and continuity, on the other, in Jewish society during the period under discussion? Try to define it.*

* Agent of change—a sociological concept that is also used in other fields: A person who plays the role of bringing about change in social, cultural, or moral structures, consciously or otherwise.

2. *What was the role and place of women in introducing the winds of change? As opposed to this, what did they do to preserve the status quo?*
3. *How are the texts connected to questions of identity? Do they indicate a change in society, family structure, and relations between men and women?*

■ **STUDY MATERIALS:**

- Source documents
- Summary of the article by Iris Parush
- Historical introduction
- Glossary

SOURCE DOCUMENTS

TEXT 1:

Hebrew Woman, Who Can Know Your Life?

Hebrew woman, who can know your life?

You came in the dark and you will go in the dark;

Your pain and your joy, your aches and your longings

Will be born inside you, will end within you.

The world and its fullness, everything that is good and restful

Were given as a treasure to the daughters of another people,

But the life of the Hebrew woman is perpetual servitude

You will never sets foot outside your shop;

You will conceive, give birth, suckle and wean,

Bake and cook, until you wither before your time.

.....

Cover your head with a scarf, hide your face,

Your stubble under the razor.

Why should you look at the man who stands beside you?

Whether hunchback or dwarf, old or young?

WOMEN

It is all the same to you! For you do not choose—
Your parents will choose, they will rule you,
Like merchandise you are bought and sold.

.....

Your father controls you in your youth,
And when you leave his house— your husband is over you.

(Judah Leib Gordon, 1830–1892; taken from Zvi Scharfstein, *Jewish Life in Eastern Europe in Recent Generations*, pp. 145–146 [Hebrew])

TEXT 2:

“The young couple, that’s to say my grandfather and grandmother, who were eleven and twelve years old, “ate kest” (see Glossary) in Kamenets in the home of my elderly great grandfather. My grandfather, Aaron Leizer, was a real mischief-maker in his youth. He would play on building sites and jump on the planks and make them into seesaws. My grandmother looked after him, but she was scared by what he did and wouldn’t let him seesaw. He used to hide from her and run far away so she couldn’t find him. . . . At the age of twelve or thirteen, my grandfather was a spoiled and unruly child. My grandmother was wise beyond her years, and slowly and cautiously she began to wean him away from his pranks. After they were married and had become parents, she told him that it would be appropriate for him to behave in a more seemly fashion, as behooves the father of children. So many people were coming to his father’s house to discuss the affairs of the town (she said), and he ought to sit with them, listen and take part in these dealings, like all the other adults. He agreed to what she said, and thanks to her became a mensch.”

(Yekhezkel Kotik, *Mayne Zikhroynes* [My memoirs], p. 150).

■ **Questions for discussion:**

1. How is the woman described in Gordon’s poem?
2. What can be learned from Kotik’s description about marriage and about men and women?
3. How does Kotik describe his grandmother?



TEXT 3:

“Life in Grodno was dreary. . . . I was far removed from the business and interests of the community . . . and the only thing left for me to do for a social life was the Zionist group. And yet there was nothing in it to satisfy me. . . . I found my company in the home of an anti-Zionist, . . . Tatiana Ilinishna, the daughter of Eliyahu Greenberg. She did not have the greatest education and she was less than beautiful, but despite this she held top rank in Grodno society—and not just in Jewish society. She was attuned to people’s suffering. . . . All day long she was busy—at home and in her shop and in the street. The Greenbergs had a large fabric business. Their child, their only son, had died and the

couple's life was more like a business partnership than a family life. . . . Tatiana maintained a salon. In one room her husband sat and played cards with his friends, while in the other the local Maskilim town would gather—myself included. . . . It was here that I met the first members of the Bund, including a wonderful young lady named Fisher. I was very jealous of this party because it was able to attract such dear hearts as this lady.”

(Shemaryahu Levin, *Mezikhronot hayyai* [Memories of my life], pp. 144–145)

Questions for discussion:

1. Draw up a list of the information you can assemble from this text; for example, about family, women, trades, leisure activities, and various political movements in the Jewish community.
2. What role did this Tatiana play in the community? Try to imagine a salon like this and work out what part it played in disseminating new social patterns.

TEXT 4:

“My mother was altogether a different type, quite different from my father, to the extent that it was difficult to understand how these two people who were as far apart as east and west could live together. She was educated and even something of an epikoros (freethinker). She was not a heretic—Heaven forbid! But she did have some tough questions for the Lord and his Messiah! Yet my mother's heresy was intermittent rather than consistent: Sometimes she behaved as if she were pious and wore a headcovering like all the modest women and prayed every day and read prayer books, and sometimes she would suddenly break out, tear off the headcovering, and stop praying. She had a superficial knowledge of the Bible, especially the stories in it, as well as all the legends in the Talmud, which she knew from hearing them rather than from the written word.

“She was a magnet for the young people in the town and they would all come running to her, because her home was a gathering place for both wise and foolish. They all came to her with whatever was on their mind to consult about private matters, including their romances. She knew everything, and she would sometimes help bring a romance to a good conclusion and mollify the parents' opposition.

“On Shabbat afternoon a few young men and women would gather at her house to

read the new literature they had received that week and talk of current affairs, and just get closer to one another.

“When father left the house everyone would breathe a sigh of relief. First of all the young men and women would move closer together and begin to talk among themselves. Sometimes the discussion became so heated that one of the young men would take his hat off his head. At first, he would fan himself with his hat, ostensibly because of the heat, but insensibly, as if he had forgotten it, he would keep his hat in his hand and sit there bareheaded.”

(Chaim Tchernowitz, Pirkei hayyim [“Chapters of life”], pp. 29–31)



WOMEN

■ **Questions for discussion:**

1. *What kind of woman is depicted? Try to characterize her. Try to describe the difference between the mother and father.*
2. *The author describes his mother as playing hostess to a salon. Try to describe what took place in such a salon. What subjects were discussed? What does such an “institution” teach us about the society in which it took place?*
3. *What was the relationship toward his mother of those who frequented the salon? How could shtetl residents relate to her? Think about her personality. What kind of woman was she? Does she match your image of a shtetl woman?*
4. *What do you think are the differences between the salons described in text 3 and text 4? Take into account the characters of the woman and their socio-economic status.*

TEXT 5:

“I asked Reb Zvi about the change that had taken place in the young woman and to my great amazement learned that war had broken out at in the house because of me: The young woman did not want to marry me. Her parents cajoled her, and my aunt cried and pleaded with her, but she, the young woman, was steadfast in her refusal.

“I said, ‘Pray tell me, what is this that you refuse to be my wife? Am I not worthy to be your husband?’ Her white cheeks reddened slightly, like roses in bloom, and she had no answer to give. ‘Don’t be shy. Don’t hide anything from me.’

“And she answered me ingenuously: ‘I love you and I respect you dearly. I would be proud to have a spouse like you. But I want to marry a young and modern man, who knows the ways of the world and speaks good Russian.’

“I said to her, ‘The modern young man will love your beautiful face and your dark eyes. But he will not understand your spirit and soul. And when you understand that, his love will make your life bitter.’ ”

(Israel Isser Katzovitz, *Shishim shnot hayyim* [Sixty years of life], 1923)

■ **Questions for discussion:**

1. What can be learned from this text about changing norms in the institution of family?
2. Try to define traditional values and modern values as they are reflected in the text.



TEXT 6:

“Grandma Leah was about sixteen when she became pregnant with my father. Grandma Leah often told me about those days. She lived in a small attic next to the women’s gallery of the synagogue in Kutno. She was very bored. Grandma Leah, the Hassidic granddaughter of the Warka family, was educated in an atmosphere of simple love for all Jews among cheerful, high-spirited Hassidim. . . . Grandfather Moishl, the hero of Grandma Leah’s girlhood, spent day and night at the Warka shtibl, having a riotous

time with his Hassidic friends and never even forswore playing cards. That too was one of the activities of the Warka Hassidim. They said that card-playing brought people together and inspired fraternity and love. Grandma Leah would sit out the long nights in her attic next to the forlorn women's gallery, all alone, herself little more than a child and already big with child. She was terrified, because it was well known that at midnight dead women thronged the adjacent women's gallery to pray and recite supplications.

“Overcome by her fear, Grandma Leah would undress and lie down to sleep. She would sit by the light of a candle stub and wait for her young husband to come home at last from the shtibl. Until then, in the dark of night, by the weak light of her penny candle she trained herself to read Jewish adventure stories. These were the Yiddish stories written by the early maskilim. These books made a great impression on Grandma Leah, opened her eyes to see life as it was, and made her critical of many conventional things. The maskilic Jewish adventure tales determined the spiritual destiny of the children born to Grandma Leah.” (Y. Trunk, Poland, vol. 1, pp. 16–17).

TEXT 7:

“All that time, while Aunt Itke was making good progress with her *loshen kodesh* (Hebrew) studies and devouring Haskalah literature, my grandfather, Reb Moishl, was trying to find her a shidduch in the courts of Polish rebbes. Aunt Itke was not beautiful. . . . She dismissed all those things as ‘women’s nonsense.’ . . . This stubborn, masculine young woman was not going to rush to the huppah with the kind of young man described in Haskalah literature as a nightmare of ignorance. . . . Aunt Itke began to study humash with the Yiddish commentary. Grandma Leah was shocked. In the first place it was forbidden for a daughter of Israel to study Torah, for after all, at Mount Zion the Torah was given to men only.” (ibid., pp. 226–256).

■ **Questions for discussion:**

1. In the first passage, Trunk depicts his Grandma Leah reading Haskalah literature in Yiddish. Given this, how do you explain her reaction to her daughter Itke's reading the humash?
2. Describe Grandma Leah's conflict of values, as shown in the two texts.
3. In your opinion, was Grandma Leah an “agent of change?” Read Parush's article.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

WOMEN AND EDUCATION

"Young girls' education was all but left by the wayside. Many did not go to heder to learn to read, or else attended for a short time and were then pulled out. There were private female tutors who taught reading and writing in their pupils' homes, but there were few students. Therefore, an 'educated' woman was one who could read and write. These 'educated' women used to read Yiddish books intended specifically for women. On Shabbat they would read about the weekly portion, translated from the Pentateuch, together with talmudic aggadot (legends) and midrashim, in the book Tse'ena u-re'ena. Sometimes when they had completed this duty they would read another Yiddish book. The neighboring women would come to the house for this reading too. (Scharfstein, *Jewish Life*, pp. 143-144).

SUMMARY

Iris Parush: "Women Readers as Agents of Social Change among Eastern European Jews in the Late Nineteenth Century"

It is conventional to think of the male maskilim as the pioneers of change in Jewish society (see "Identity and Belonging"). The maskilim, who were the Jewish intelligentsia, devoted themselves to propagating the ideas of the Haskalah: enlightenment and the integration of Jews into European society. But the role played by women in propagating these ideas was no less important. What, then, was the part played by women in the processes of modernization and secularization experienced by Eastern European Jewish society under in the nineteenth century?

Traditional Jewish society is fundamentally patriarchal. The normative ideal in that society was for the man to devote himself to Torah study while the wife concerned herself with the family and making a living. As a result, boys and girls in that society received different educations. For example, the number of illiterate women was significantly greater than the number of illiterate boys. What is more, marriage customs were influenced by the need to balance the demands of life and the demands of religion and

marriages took place at a young age: the boy at bar mitzvah age, the age of religious maturity. The objective was to ensure that the bridegroom continued his studies. Even after marriage it was customary for the bride's father to support the young couple for the first years of their marriage (see, for example, text 4 in the chapter "Identity and Belonging"). Haskalah authors often took a stand against these marriages, which were often accompanied by suffering and traumatic experiences (see texts 1 and 2 in this section).

The bride was usually older than the bridegroom and the two remained under the watchful eye of a "housemother" who took care of all domestic matters and supervised them. Despite this, and even though there are almost no texts that illustrate the role of women in the processes of modernization and secularization experienced by Jewish society, women—and not necessarily those of the upper socio-economic class—did play a part in these processes (see texts 3 and 4 in this section).

Women were agents of change because they were more exposed to Yiddish Haskalah literature and Russian and Polish literature than men were (see text 6). Because women had to provide an income for their families while their husbands studied Torah, no one bothered with their education. However, they had more freedom and were permitted to read things that were forbidden to men.

As the family breadwinners, women had to negotiate with the outside, non-Jewish world (in the marketplace, customers in their shops, etc.), and therefore they had to speak Russian and Polish. Hence they were allowed to learn these languages.

Two social customs actually gave women real influence; through them we can see women as agents of change: women raised and educated their children; and women were matchmakers and determined marriage customs and norms. We learn about this role of women indirectly through the memoirs written by their children and through the ambivalent attitude of male maskilim towards educated women. Hebrew literature was intended chiefly for male maskilim and was one of the main tools for imparting the ideas of Haskalah to nineteenth-century Jewish society, but Yiddish and

European literature also did this. Women read these languages and thereby contributed to the processes of change. Because women were exposed to Yiddish romances, they came to marriage with a different level of maturity and different expectations than their husbands. Romantic literature gave them a different model for relationships, which led them to oppose matchmaking and forced marriages (see text 5).

Yiddish literature influenced women's romantic notions while Russian literature influenced their revolutionary and feminist ideas. The women educated their sons and this is where their influence was brought to bear. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, with the rise of socialism and Zionism, the number of educated women increased and the phenomenon was no longer so rare (see bibliography).



IDENTITY AND BELONGING



GROUP 1: PERSONAL CONFLICTS AND DILEMMAS

■ GUIDANCE FOR FACILITATORS:

The theme of identity and belonging relates to various facets of the concept of “identity”: personal identity, professional identity, and one's class, gender,* community, and other affiliation. Some of the texts reveal the torments of adolescence, such as the conflict between fulfillment in love and the acquisition of a profession as a means to escape a low socio-economic status (text 2); or between fulfillment in love and religious and social taboos (text 3); etc. The texts show some of the tensions that the memoirists felt in these areas.

In the nineteenth century, Jewish society was gripped by the struggle between continuity and tradition, on the one hand, and the influences of Haskalah, on the other. The Haskalah offered possibilities for dealing with the non-Jewish world. These options threatened the traditional way of life: instead of insularity, there would be openness and integration. We want to emphasize this tension as expressed in personal dilemmas.

The group will be divided into four sub-groups. The first will deal with personal conflicts and dilemmas, the second with Haskalah and identity, the third with political identity, and the fourth with the subject: Hassid or Mitnagged?

■ (SIX PARTICIPANTS) WILL PREPARE A REPORT ON “BEING A YOUNG MAN IN THE SHTETL”:

Here are texts that relate to different types of personal conflicts and tensions. Distribute the texts, excerpts from memoirs, among yourselves according to the sub-topics. Answer the questions attached and write reports relating to the texts in accordance with the instructions. After this, discuss the general questions in the group and prepare a report on what it was like to be a young Jewish man in the shtetl. The report will consist of items prepared by the sub-groups. You might include the following: an imaginary interview

* Gender—the distinction between men and women as expressed in the social division of roles and definition of behavioral traits.

with a young Jewish man, a dialogue, diary entries, a general discussion about “Where is this generation headed,” a diagram showing the different circles to which a young man in the shtetl would belong, identity cards of different young people in the shtetl, etc. Discuss ways of incorporating the different items together in a cohesive whole.

■ **General questions:**

1. *What are the values and norms of the traditional Jewish society as described in the memoirs.*
2. *Describe the tension between personal identity and the identity of society at large.*
3. *Describe the tension between individual identity and the values and norms of traditional Jewish society: Where is this generation headed?*

■ **STUDY MATERIALS:**

Fact sheet
Source documents
Historical introduction
Glossary

PERSONAL CONFLICTS AND DILEMMAS

TEXT 1:

“The image of my mother flickers dimly in my memory as if she were an imaginary person: Tall, slender, pale-faced, dark-eyed, black-haired, melancholic, of few words and much silence, and her silence is a plea for pity. Her love for me was boundless. It was if she knew in her heart that she was going to leave me an orphan soon.

“My father was a water-carrier. From first light until late morning he would plod along, carrying his yoke and buckets through the streets and alleys of Minsk, his home town, going from courtyard to courtyard, supplying water to their residents in exchange for a pittance. He was consumed by dryness in summer, by dampness in autumn, and by ice in winter.

“The first feeling I remember from earliest childhood was a feeling of humiliation, as if I were branded with a mark of disgrace on my forehead and on my soul: the son of a water-carrier and a deranged mother. This feeling made me bitter towards the whole world, as I childishly understood it, and made me pity my miserable parents who had come to this! I closed myself up like a snail in its shell, repressing my feelings of humiliation, of the bitterness and pity of it, and this repression filled me with such a burning distress that when it attacked me I went out to a lonely corner in our yard and cried secretly.”

(Ephraim Lisitzky, *Ayleh toldot adam* [A man's life], pp. 8–10)

Questions for discussion:

- *Ephraim Lisitzky expresses harsh feelings about his parents, which also derive from their socio-economic class. Have you experienced such feelings or do you know similar cases?*



TEXT 2:

“Among the young girls who came to my grandfather’s house every Shabbat was one girl of my age, named Basya. She wasn’t the most beautiful. Her facial features were pronounced and she had an expression of courage and impertinence. But her face was daubed with a captivating wild charm. Like a moth drawn to a flame in the dark of night, so my heart was drawn to Basya. I tasted the taste of hell in that flame. I took care not to let her know, even with the slightest hint, of my secret love, but my eyes met her eyes and murmured the secret. And her eyes answered my eyes. I recognized her secret love for me.

“I pinch myself and rock my body against the bookstand and hope that I will shake off my inner thoughts. But in vain! My body rocks and my thoughts continue. My eyes are on the Gemara, and between the lines I see Basya. While I am stealing a glimpse at her, her brilliance penetrates my soul and she brands it: Oh! Basya! Basya!

“A shiver passes over my body at the touch of her hand, and while I’m still trembling, fire streams through me and floods my bowels. I am on fire. . . . My friends at the yeshiva eventually discover the secret of my stolen love. A little bird told them! They begin to talk about me and some of them, those who are closest to me, begin to reprimand me. I began to do a reckoning. I thought about it again and again, and there was only one conclusion. With Basya, there can be no yeshiva, and with the yeshiva there can be no Basya.

“Sometime later, I was stricken with the fever that I had had as a child. As I lay in my bed, after the fever had gone down, in a state of semi-consciousness—half awake, half asleep—I heard an inner voice speak to me: ‘Son of a demented mother and a water-carrier, you have been driven into a world that isn’t yours, and where there is no place for you! Go back to your own world, where you have a rightful place, not one given out of charity. Go back and be what you are, and what you can never run away from, and find the peace and security of a man that knows himself and knows his place. Leave the yeshiva. Learn a trade that will keep you and share life with your beloved Basya.’ While the first voice was still speaking to me, another voice began ringing in my ears, chiding me and urging me on at the same time: Don’t agree! Don’t listen! It’s the voice of the evil inclination that’s tempting you and driving you out of your mind! Basya is the devil’s handiwork, whom he made to turn you away from the ways of the Torah. Go back and ascend in the ways of the Torah that rise upward. Greatness awaits you in the end and you shall be rewarded, son of a demented mother and a water-carrier. You will be a rabbi and teacher among the Jews.”

(Lisitzky, *Ayleh toldot adam [A man’s life]*, p. 10)

Questions for discussion:

1. Write some of Ephraim Lisitzky's diary entries for *A Different Voyage*.
2. Set up a role-playing game in which you act out the inner voices calling to Ephraim.
3. "With Basya, there can be no yeshiva, and with the yeshiva there can be no Basya." What do you think? Use your own words to describe the dilemma that Ephraim is facing.
4. What can you learn about this society? Is this a society in which social mobility (movement and change) is possible?
5. What question of identity emerges from Ephraim's dilemma? Formulate it.
6. Which option do you think Ephraim will choose? Give reasons.

TEXT 3:

“From the day that I began to prepare myself for my bar mitzvah celebration, I underwent a mental crisis and began to experience a strong internal battle of urges. It was as if there were two souls running about inside me, each pulling in a different direction. I was not one lad named Chaim, but rather two lads, each of them called Chaim, different from each other—one was good and one was bad. I painted myself an image of the evil inclination as a fly—as in the legends—that would pierce my heart. And I remember standing on my bar mitzvah night and waiting for the evil inclination to make its way into my body through my mouth or my nostrils.

“It happened that on Shabbat afternoon some friends, cousins who were older than I was, came to visit and invited me to their house in honor of my special day. I went with them; when I reached their house I was horrified by what I saw. The house was full to bursting with young women and girls. My first thought was to turn on my heels and flee. But I sat down and the young men urged me to come into another room where one could peep through holes and see the girls dancing. And, as if my own moral instincts weren't enough, I heard my mother's awful preaching: 'How can a boy, on the very day of his bar mitzvah, when he should be spending all day in Torah study and prayer, and praying to the Almighty to give him a new heart that he may be an observant and God-fearing Jew, go out with naughty boys and watch girls dancing? What will God have to say about this? And what will people say?'"

(Tchernowitz, *Pirkei hayyim*, pp. 58–60.)

■ **Questions for discussion:**

1. How are women portrayed in this description? In your opinion, is there a conflict between social norms and sexual maturity? Explain. Also note how the mother represents social norms.
2. Which social norms are reflected in this text?
3. Formulate the problem raised in this story.
4. "What will God have to say about this? And what will people say?" Put into words what God and people would say. Is it the same or different? Explain.
5. Write an editorial entitled "Where is this generation headed?"

TEXT 4:

“His name was Joel Levenstein and he was the son of a hazzan. His father was a hazzan in Vilna. Even as a child he showed signs of genius and his father tried to educate him appropriately. He hired the very best teachers of religious subjects in town for him, as well as teachers of Polish and German, and piano and violin teachers. In his eleventh year he went to pray in the town’s great synagogue, and made such an impression that a woman named Reineke, the wife of Mattitياهو Strasson, one of the important figures in the town, blessed with wealth, lineage, and respect, decided to acquire the wonderboy as a husband for her daughter. Shortly afterwards the betrothal terms were drawn up, and at the age of 13 he became a groom and an independent householder, and because he was so young he was nicknamed ‘Little Householder.’

“A year went by and his father passed away. The fourteen-year-old took his father’s place. His influence in the Jewish community increased greatly until it was almost unlimited. Within a short while, they say he was such a genius at singing that his melodies could not be written down in notation. It was not only the Jews whom he impressed. Christians of all classes would come to fill the synagogue, particularly on Kol Nidre night, and rhapsodized about him. The famous Polish composer Moniuszko, who was a professor at the Warsaw Conservatory, heard him once and latched onto him. He visited the hazzan’s home, invited him to his own home, gave him music lessons, and tried to convince him to stop being a cantor and to travel abroad for further studies. He promised him a glorious future and worldwide fame.

“An inner battle raged in his gentle soul—a struggle between the confined Jewish world and the great world that beckoned to him. Moniuszko invested a great deal of effort and finally persuaded his parents-in-law to let their son-in-law go to Warsaw and give a concert. There are many tales of his stay in Warsaw. The concert he gave there produced an enormous sensation.

“Rumors spread in Vilna that ‘Little Householder’ was misbehaving. He appeared a few more times in Warsaw and his reputation grew and grew. The leading journalists wrote articles and described him as a prodigy. Suddenly he returned to Vilna. What happened to him is not clear. Some say that the synagogue wardens refused to let him come back and lead services in the synagogue. Others say that he no longer had the peace of mind required to sing in public because of his tortured inner struggles. He stayed in Vilna, but never returned to his former world. The synagogue stifled him and he had other personal troubles: his two beloved sons died. His wife became estranged from him and he wanted to divorce her. All this led to dissension and division. Then he fell into a bitter and black depression and all the doctors’ efforts to save him were to no avail. He contracted tuberculosis and went to Warsaw, where the greatest physicians endeavored to cure him, but failed. The prodigy, the musical genius, passed away from this world at the age of 34.”
(A. Litvin, “Yidishe Neshomes” [Yiddish souls], in Scharfstein, *Jewish Life* pp. 90–91).

Questions for discussion:

1. *The story presents the struggle in Joel’s soul between two worlds, the traditional Jewish world (Vilna) and the non-Jewish world (Warsaw). What dilemmas does he face? Draw up a list of pros and cons for each side of the argument.*
2. *What problem of identity does the text deal with?*
3. *What choices does Joel Levenstein make? Do you think he is depicted as a man who makes choices and is in control of his life and destiny? Explain.*
4. *Does Joel’s personal fate reflect the narrator’s stance? What is it?*
5. *Write a profile: Joel Levenstein, a success story?*

TEXT 5:

“**B**ut take Frumke, the daughter-in-law of Isaiah Leib the doctor, walking about bare-headed, nothing on it, and she isn’t afraid that she’ll go to hell! And take the goyshe (non-Jewish) women, who have no shame, and who walk half naked in the garden behind the Beit Midrash. Unlike us, for the goyim everything’s permissible. Why did the Almighty have to choose the Jews and abandon the goyim to their fate? They do whatever they want and enjoy this world. Why is our street full of all these shegetsim (non-Jewish men) and these barefoot, practically naked shikses (non-Jewish women) in the garden behind the Beit Midrash, tempting the boys into transgression? Phooey! says the good inclination, you shouldn’t be looking, you should stick to your learning.”

(Tchernowitz, Pirkei hayyim, pp. 58–60.)

■ Questions for discussion:

1. How does the author describe the goyim?
2. How are the temptations depicted in this passage? In what way is this description similar to those in the previous excerpt from Tchernowitz (text 3). Explain.

GROUP 2: HASKALAH AND IDENTITY

(THREE PARTICIPANTS) ?

Write an article on “Haskalah vs. the traditional world.” Distribute the texts among yourselves, so that each person has his or her own text and can answer the questions. Then write the article based on this work.

■ STUDY MATERIALS:

Fact sheet

Source documents

Historical introduction

Glossary

TEXT 1:

“Tidings of the Haskalah reached even our remote shtetl. Amazing and frightening news came from Uman in the Ukraine, the principal town in the region: People spoke of dyed-in-the-wool Hassidim who became sectarians and derided certain customs and stringencies; they spoke of certain well-known people who until recently had been fervent zealots and were now sending their sons to the Russian schools and even to the high school. They spoke of young men, including some with important fathers, who were about to go to Zhitomir to study at the seminary for modern rabbis. And more and more of these terrible things were happening for all to see in Uman: Sons and even fathers were shortening their clothes, young men were cutting their sidelocks and shaving their beards—and no one protested. All these stories had a great influence on us, boys from a remote town, who were already receptive to the Haskalah. The boys of our shtetl, the pioneers of Haskalah, particularly enjoyed the books of Abraham Mapu, and best of all Ahavat Ziyon. Ostensibly we had the Gemara open in front of us, but the open Gemara was merely a cover for the copy of Ahavat Ziyon beneath its pages. The zealots burned all of our (Haskalah) books that they could get hold of, and we continued to replenish the stock, either from the itinerant

booksellers who in those days roamed from town to town and made a living by trading also the secular books for which young readers had developed an appetite, or by going to Uman and bringing back books and newspapers, food for our Haskalah-hungry souls.” (Zvi Kasda'i, in Scharfstein, pp. 128–129).

■ **Questions for discussion:**

1. There was an atmosphere of change in the shtetl after the spirit of Haskalah penetrated it. What form did this change take?
2. What is the price of change?

TEXT 2:

“We had been studying for half-a-year, Berel—my friend from the ‘little table’ class at Rebbe Nehemiah’s yeshiva. Before half a year was past I detected the change in him. He did not come out of his shell, and his face expressed anger more than sadness, his will to study weakened, and his love and friendship for me dwindled. . . . In the end he left the yeshiva and we grew apart. We became citizens of two distinct and different worlds: I immersed myself in the garden of Torah and he, having taken a look and been burned, uprooted himself from it and planted himself in the grove of the Haskalah. We lost contact with each other. . . . Six years later, when I was in America, and I too had taken a look and been burned and had traded the Torah for Hebrew literature, I met one of my former classmates from Rebbe Nehemiah’s yeshiva. We began to discuss our memories of the past and our conversation turned to our other friends, including Berel. He let out a cry of wonder: ‘Who would have thought then that Berel would hold such an honorable position in our Hebrew literature and would become the leading young author? In a flash I recalled the young Hebrew authors I had known and the words shot out of my mouth: ‘He’s none other than Y. D. Berkowitz!’ ”

(Lisitzky, *Ayleh toldot adam*, pp. 21–22)

■ **Questions for discussion:**

1. Why couldn’t the two friends maintain their friendship in spite of their differing world views?
2. Try to describe the tensions in families or wider circles in Jewish society caused by differing world views.



TEXT 3:

“Is it possible? Has anything like this been heard of in among the Jews? That a father should deliver his son to idolatry with his own hands? The father stipulated two conditions: First, that his sons should not write on Shabbat, and, second, that they should not be in the classroom when the priest teaches religion to the Christian children. The second obstacle that the little ones ran into at school was the foreign language. Their knowledge of Russian was very limited indeed, making them the laughingstock of all, both teacher and pupils. They laughed until it seemed that not only were the people laughing, but that the benches and the tables and all the school equipment were cackling at them. But when school was finished and the Jewish children—‘the little kikes’—came into the yard, the goyshe boys would gang up and catch them and throw them to the ground—all in good-natured fun—would pin down their arms and legs, and give their kosher little lips a good wiping with forbidden lard. Then the children would go home miserable and depressed, afraid to tell the grown-ups what had happened, lest they make the school loathsome to their parents, who would pull them out.”

(Sholem Aleichem, *Hayyei Adam* [The life of man], in Heb).

Questions for discussion:

1. What can be learned from the text about the changing attitude toward education?
2. What, in your opinion, are the advantages and disadvantages of a general education?
3. What difficulties did the Jewish children face in the general education system?

TEXT 4:

¹⁸⁷⁷ This was the famous age of divorces when many couples got divorced because of the Haskalah. It was the parents-in-law who divorced their sons-in-law, since the young women themselves did not have a mind of their own. The father would tell his daughter that her husband had become an epikoros and she had to divorce him.”

Questions for discussion:

1. Continuity vs. change—how is the tension between the two shown in this text?
2. Examine the tensions in the family caused by affiliation with different streams and movements in Jewish society.

GROUP 3: POLITICAL IDENTITY

■ (TWO PARTICIPANTS) ?

Make an identity card for a young man or woman: Name, age, profession/trade, political identification, family status. Write a short article comparing the situation of a Jewish worker in contemporary American society with what is described in the texts you read.

■ STUDY MATERIALS:

Fact sheet

Source documents

Historical introduction

Glossary

TEXT 1:

“In its early years the Bund did not accept the principles of nationalism. . . . What right did a specifically Jewish socialist organization have to exist? . . . Since the Jewish worker lived in and spoke Yiddish, there was a point to establishing a special organization that would look after him, this special worker. It was only later that another reason—the special structure of the Jewish proletariat—was added to this first reason, and later they acknowledged the national factor. . . . We would be doing an injustice to the Bund if we said that its sole aim was to improve the economic lot of the Jewish worker and not a deep desire to help the entire Jewish community in its struggle for political freedom. The Russian Social Democrats viewed the Bund as a Jewish nationalist creation and said that the Bundists were the same as the Zionists except that they were afraid of the ocean voyage. . . . The Bund fought socialists on the outside and Zionists on the inside.

“I myself suffered terrible anguish in that battle, because ideologically I could never acknowledge the contraction between the demands of Zionism and the socialist tenets of the Bund.

“I was distressed from the bottom of my heart over the excessive divisions and disagreements within Russian Jewry. . . .”

(Shemaryahu Levin, pp. 144–155)

■ **Questions for discussion:**

1. What is Shemaryahu Levin's dilemma?
2. What are the differences between the two movements, the Zionist movement and the Bund?

TEXT 2:

“In Grodno, I first encountered the type of the Jewish factory worker, so different from the artisan. The artisan, whom I had known previously, even as a child, still had a personality. He was a machine, a little machine, but a whole and complete one. Whereas the factory worker was only a cog in a large machine, forced to renounce his concept of himself as a whole and complete and autonomous being. . . . When I saw hundreds of young women in Grodno being swallowed into the Sharashevsky tobacco factory at dawn and emerging from it in the evening, their lungs having absorbed and swallowed tobacco dust, I did not see them as separate and individual beings. What I saw was . . . mechanical humanity. A young factory doctor and my friend Mrs. Fischer spoke to me a great deal about the inner life of industrial workers. They led deprived and miserable lives. And yet people sought jobs in the factory desperately and feverishly. Every time a place became vacant, dozens jumped at the chance. . . . In Grodno at that time there was a shortage of servants and domestic help. A maid in a well-to-do household was materially far better off than a factory worker, yet the poor girls preferred to work in the factory.”
(Shemaryahu Levin)



■ **Questions for discussion:**

1. What are the differences between the artisan and the factory worker?
2. Why, in your opinion, did women prefer to work in the factory to being servants in wealthy households?

GROUP 4: WHO AM I, HASSID OR MITNAGGED?

■ (TWO OR THREE PARTICIPANTS) ?

Write a debate between a Hassid and a Mitnagged—pro and con. The battles between the Hassidim and Mitnaggedim were no longer the main issue in nineteenth-century Jewish society. However, they do represent an integral aspect of the life of traditional Jewish society.

TEXT 1:

“What is the secret of Hassidism’s charm? What is it about it that has stirred up the entire Jewish world and what has attracted so many Jews from the towns and shtetls to it? . . . Why has Hassidism succeed in attracting even the sons of Mitnagged rabbis, wreaking havoc on their families? . . . The Mitnaggedim follow the Shulhan Arukh, which includes all the rules of the written and oral law. These are practical rules: What a man should do and what he is forbidden to do; but what a man should contemplate or think is not written in the Shulhan Arukh. . . . The commandments pertaining to the human spirit and soul, like pride, humility, love, hate, jealousy, anger, flattery, peace, and conflict, as they were understood in the Torah and in the Prophets, became incidental and marginal. They were recognized as important but, despite this, they were passed over and ignored. . . . The devout Mitnagged was always morose and dejected, with a gloomy expression. He was not allowed to enjoy this world, and he was afraid of the next world. He never fulfilled any duty without first checking what the Shulhan Arukh and rabbinical literature had to say about it. He always felt he had a debt of faith, and was always afraid that he would not be able to pay it off. . . . The Mitnaggedim were contemptuous of artisans. . . . The Beit Midrash, the House of Study, was the only place where Jews should congregate. At one time they used to spend almost every hour of the day there. They come to pray three times a day and study, and simply talk. So the Beit Midrash is the only “club” for the Jews.

“As we said, the poor stand right beside the door. They have nowhere to sit—they are like stones, not people. Not a single Mitnagged has ever contemplated the question—

not even for a moment—whether it is fitting to segregate among those coming to God’s house—the comely and the loathsome, the rich and the poor. . . . The poor are almost never called up to the Torah. This obviously caused them great distress and anger, as it would any fervent Jew. This is the reason that most of the poor and the artisans organized their own minyanim. . . . Hence there is no solidarity in the Batei Midrash of the Mitnaggedim, no peace and no joy. And on Shabbat and the festivals, things were the same as on weekdays. After services every Mitnagged goes home, eats with his family and then goes to sleep. No singing, no dancing, no joy. . . . To sum up, the disadvantages of the Mitnaggedim’s way are separatism and insularity; fear of the next world and no pleasure in this world; hatred and scorn for the innocent unlearned Jews. . . . It is obvious that in such conditions it was only natural for a new and revolutionary way to develop among the Jews. . . . It began 170 years ago with the Ba’al Shem Tov. . . . He believed it was necessary to strengthen Jewish faith so that the European enlightenment, which was already pervading all nations, would not destroy the Jews as a people. He said that the Jewish people had been redeemed on account of three things: they had not changed their dress, their language, and their names. . . . He smashed the somber wall that the Mitnaggedim had erected between Judaism and joy, between faith and life. He said that happiness gave God pleasure and that even eating and drinking can be for the sake of heaven. . . . And the Jews streamed to Hassidism. It may have been the same faith, the same religion, and the same Shulhan Arukh, but it was easier, life was easier, the burden of faith was lighter, there was joy, wonder, and ecstasy. And above all, everyone was equal—everyone was equal, there was no such thing as lineage. . . . Hassidism brought real contentment to the simple Jew. . . . But I could not become a Hassid. It did not appeal to me. First of all, I was revolted by the idea of a rebbe, which was totally foreign to the Mitnagged character. I could have coped with the rebbe himself. But all the commotion around him, the great importance accorded to him, and the hereditary leadership status that was passed on like a royal crown, all this was totally repulsive. I believe that there is no way that you can pour out your heart and reveal all your shortcomings of character or habit before an unelected person who has attained his position by dint of inheritance, that such a person can instruct the confessant how to mend his ways and desist from his bad character and rotten customs, and the confessant hears and obeys.

“And one other thing that had alienated me from Hassidism already in my youth—the sight of the unbearably difficult life of the wives of the poor Hassidim. The Hassidic

men were always joyful and glad, ate and drank, danced and sang, whereas their wives and children sat at home, cold and hungry. . . . And I should mention another aspect of Hassidism that made a bad impression on me: it was not possible for learned men to flourish among them.”

(Kotik, pp. 364–376).



● **Questions for discussion:**

1. What distinguishes the Hassidim from the Mitnaggedim? What criticism is made against the Mitnaggedim? What against the Hassidim?
2. Kotik mentions the differences and social gaps in Jewish society. What are they?
3. Discuss the tensions between men and women in Jewish society.

TEXT 2:

“As a naturally enthusiastic type of person, who gets involved and meddles in everything, I became totally ensconced in the merry turmoil going on in the three houses. I spent a great deal of time with Esther Gitl and her children, where there was always a commotion. I spent a bit of time in the home of Rabbi Zalman-Sander with the young students, all of whom were Mitnaggedim, and some time with Leizer, the grown-up son-in-law, and his Maskilim. I enjoyed it there. They were enthusiastic, but not religious, Jews and they took a keen interest in the Bible. What was important to them was humanity, interpersonal relationships, the friendship of one person for another, general happiness, and this world. I had never studied the Bible. As I have already mentioned, in those days Bible study was considered epikorsus, especially among the Hassidim and in particular for my father, who was totally immersed in Hassidic affairs” (Kotik pp. 344–345).

Questions for discussion:

Consider the role of the Bible for the different groups: Hassidim, Mitnaggedim, Zionists, and Maskilim. What, in your opinion, reinforced the importance of the Bible for the national movement and the Haskalah? And why, in your opinion, was reading the Bible forbidden and considered epikorsus?



INFORMATION

Scharfstein, pp. 75–77:

HASKALAH AND NATIONALISM

“Until now, insufficient recognition has been given to the positive effect of the Haskalah period on national question. If the Haskalah had some negative motives in that it did not adhere to some of the religious customs, it had an important positive side, beyond the aspiration to know the world and science. The Haskalah increased love of the Bible. Bible study, considered by the Orthodox to be less important than study of the Gemara, increased at that time. Love for pure Hebrew grew stronger, because the Orthodox and the rabbis were disdainful of it and were accustomed to mingle Aramaic with their Hebrew. And the love of Hebrew literature grew, as all the memoir writers testify. In brief, the national spirit was uplifted by it. But the Haskalah also had undesirable results—the alienation we refer to as assimilation. It was very apparent in Western Europe and there were also signs of it in the east. The Jews of Western Europe preserved a limited affiliation to religion. They neglected the language of the Jewish People and their special way of life. And the same visions began to sparkle in the east. Although they did not encompass the masses, they were evident mostly in large cities and among the few professionals who succeeded in acquiring a liberal education at university. These people adopted the language of the country as their own language, thereby showing their alienation from the Jewish masses, their dress, customs, and thinking. Their relationship with Judaism was very tenuous. Every lawyer and physician and high-school student aspiring to these professions were alienated from us.”

(Scharfstein, pp. 134–145).

Question for thought:

What are the positive and negative sides of the Haskalah? How does the author relate to the Haskalah? What is the connection between the Haskalah and nationalism, and between the Haskalah and assimilation?

SPACE: SPACE WITHIN THE SHTETL AND BEYOND IT



■ GUIDANCE FOR FACILITATORS:

The texts chosen for this chapter deal with “spatial” movement. The concept of “space” relates both to the “space” inside the shtetl, in other words, its topography, institutions, social norms, social stratification, including various aspects of the typical way of life in the shtetl (clothes, cuisine, occupations, etc.), and to “spatial” migration between towns and shtetls in Eastern Europe, migration from the Eastern Europe to Central and Western Europe (Shemaryahu Levin), and emigration from Western Europe overseas, chiefly to America—in other words, migration from the shtetl to “the outside world.” But within the shtetl, too, some occupations were also associated with movement in space. Some of the occupations you will read about in the texts were internal to the shtetl and were sometimes practiced in specific streets. Others involved coming and going from the shtetl, and still others involved leaving the shtetl altogether. So the question arises: Can we see those who practiced these occupations—for example, the bookseller who traveled from shtetl to shtetl or the maggid—as agents of change?

The texts chosen reflect a kind of camera pan from inside to outside. The texts reveal the different types of movement in space.

■ THE GROUP (SIX PARTICIPANTS) WILL PREPARE A REPORT:

Is it really the end of the shtetl?

Instructions to the Group:

Divide yourselves into three subgroups. One group will look at the shtetl and its institutions. These documents describe the shtetl, its socio-economic classes, different occupations, lifestyle (food, dress, etc.). The second group will deal with internal migration from the shtetl to urban centers in Eastern and Central Europe. The third group will examine texts about emigration from the shtetl to America.

After you have read the texts, discuss the questions attached. Prepare a report entitled: **“Is it really the end of the shtetl?”** You can interview imaginary characters, etc.

The article will include the research performed by the subgroups. The first group will prepare a descriptive article about life in the shtetl. You can

include sketches of the shtetl based on the texts, as well as photographs. The second and third groups will deal with migration, including an interview with an imaginary “migrant,” which examines the various dilemmas a migrant could face.

■ **STUDY MATERIALS:**

Fact sheet

Source documents

Historical introduction

Glossary

SPACE

GROUP 1: THE SHTETL AND ITS INSTITUTIONS

TEXT 1:

Description of Nesvizh:

“The whole town straddled a single long street from Citadel Hill to the Hill of the Hassidim, which wound diagonally, sort of like a hook, towards the end. There were rows of houses on either side. In the middle of the town was the large market place, with shops arranged in a semicircle around it. This was the market where the townspeople traded and negotiated. The wealthy people lived in the east end of the town. Those closest to Citadel Hill had more class and wealth. As the road descended towards the west, so the houses became smaller and more modest. These were the dwellings of the meaner sort and the masses. This end of town was called “Vehan,” or “Vegan” in Russian, meaning “driving out,” because this was where the shepherds would drive their beasts out to graze every morning and call them back in the evening with flutes and bells.

Opposite Hassidim Hill was a line of small hills called “the Batteries,” where brothels had been established by some prince or other who came to the town. Upstanding Jewish young men refrained from walking there, lest they get a bad name. The town of Nesvizh was beside a river. On the other side of the river was the shloss—the castle. The townspeople were allowed to walk in the woods around the castle and we Jewish boys actually dared swim in the river in the summer. Although the Christian population almost equaled the Jewish population, Nesvizh was chiefly a Jewish town in its Yiddish language, its social customs, and its religious character, which was evident everywhere. In contrast to the two Christian chapels, which made hardly any impression on the town’s life, there were nine or ten synagogues, not of any great architectural note, most of them being simple wooden structures, but they were open every day from early in the morning until late into the evening.”

(Mordechai Zev Reisen, *Mispar hayyai* [Story of my life], in Scharfstein, pp. 2–3).

TEXT 2:

“All agree that the market is the heart of the shtetl, because the coming-and-going and bustle there went on round the clock. It was the source of life, plenty, livelihood. There was no end of shops, noise, tumult, crowds of Jews bumping into one another and being bumped, and the prodding of the carts left and right. . . . Most of the houses did not have wooden floors—we’re talking about the houses of the poor—and they walked on bare earth, which they would daub every Sabbath eve with reddish clay or paint it red, with stripes of another color around it. In the homes of the well-to-do, there were smooth, varnished wooden floors covered with a variety of rugs, according to the owners’ means. The water barrel stood in the kitchen or in the entranceway to the kitchen, and every day the water carrier would come with his cart and fill up the barrel from his bucket. . . . Side roads radiated out from the market; here were the homes of the artisans, the laborers, and the poor. These streets were sometimes given the names of the trades of the people who lived there: Tailors’ street, Shoemakers’ street, even Musicians’ street. In these side streets were synagogues and institutions such as the paupers’ hospital, which consisted of a hospital and a place to sleep for poor travelers, and it was called the ‘Hekdesh’ (charitable trust).”
(Mendele Mokher Seforim, *Masa'ot Binyamin ha-shlishi* [The travels of Benjamin the Third])



SPACE

TEXT 3:

“I never saw the entire shtetl in one glance. I didn’t have a bird’s-eye view of it. . . . The highest place from which I observed it was the attic. . . . In my imagination I see the shtetl as a giant two-headed tortoise: its fat belly was the rink (main square), the business center, and the Jewish residential quarter.

“The community took care of two main institutions for which it was responsible: the cemetery and—not to be mentioned in the same breath—the bathhouse. . . . Living conditions being what they were in those days, when there were no bathtubs or showers in houses, not even running water, and people washed in basins only, the bathhouse fulfilled an important function. . . .

“On three of the sides of the rathaus (town hall) were large clocks with Roman numerals that disconcerted the children, confusing their sense of time, and delaying them on their way, making them late for heder, for which they were severely punished. . . . And before there was electricity in the shtetl they used kerosene lamps in homes. . . .

“We would not be painting a faithful picture of shtetl life if we did not mention the lunatics and village idiots whose disabilities prevented them from raising a family. They lived alone near the homes of their relatives, in a corner allotted to them, like domestic pets—saving the comparison! Or they ended up in or around the houses of prayer. Apart from the lunatics, there was another class of unfortunates, the retarded and the feeble-minded. . . . These unfortunates were the most useful members of society. They did all the dirty work that no one else was prepared to do, and they did it all for a slice of bread or a bowl of soup. . . .”

(Avraham Levita, *Halikha el he-Avar [Back to the past]*, p. 13)

Questions for discussion, based on texts 1–3:

1. From the descriptions of the shtetls pick out the information about the topography of the shtetl, its various institutions, the socio-economic classes, and the relations between Jews and non-Jews.
2. Sketch or build a model of a shtetl.

TRADESMEN AND ARTISANS:

TEXT 4:

Artisans

“Artisans of various kinds, a category that covered most of the Lithuanian Jews who lived in shtetls or towns, lived by hard work. They were engaged in all the crafts that provided the needs of those times—their own needs and the needs of the goyim in the towns and countryside. They were the millers, bakers, tailors, cobblers, plasterers, glaziers, blacksmiths, carters, and porters. Jews also worked in the forests and on the water. They wove rafts and floated them down the rivers. Vegetable cultivation was the province of the Jews. So was shopkeeping, which in most cases gave the owners a meager living.”
(Lita mekhorati [Lithuania, my homeland], in Scharfstein, pp. 8–127)



SPACE

KLESMER:

“The performers came from the two chief towns of the region, Brisk and Kobrin. The players from Kobrin were particularly good, especially Reb Shabtel, who could bring tears to his audience’s eyes. His fame spread as far as Prince Passkovitz. The count summoned him . . . The listener marveled and suggested that he convert and make a mark in the world.”
(Kotik, p. 115)

BOOKSELLERS:

“Once a year, the itinerant bookseller would come to our town. His name was Reb Nehemiah, and he was himself a learned and educated and distinguished man. He would stay in my father’s house and eat at my grandfather’s table. Among his bundles of books was one that contained Haskalah books, and he would keep a careful and constant watch over it, and in particular he would make sure that I did not get at it. Needless to say, I had my eye on this very bundle. I took out the crème de la crème, such as Mapu, Smolenskin, Asher Broides, and others.”
(Tchernowitz, p. 80)

THE LIBERAL PROFESSIONS:

“There were several doctors in Piriasslaw in those days. All of them were Christians, except for one who was of our faith, and he wasn’t really a doctor, just a half-doctor—Yankel-the-doctor. The Jews in the town loved Yankel-the-doctor more than all the others, because Yankel-the-doctor was a God-fearing Jew and you could bargain with him. . . . He didn’t insist on his price. Any currency was good. His oldest son, Solomon, a high-school boy, when he finishes high school he’ll go to university and come out a doctor—a real and proper doctor!
(Sholem Aleichem, Hayyei Adam [The life of man] [ibid.], p. 343)

MERCHANTS:

“My father had a store that sold everything, from needles and thread and buttons and awls, to books to read and guns to hunt with. In the lower story of our house my father established a hat factory producing summer hats of cloth, velvet, and silk, and winter hats of sheepskin, both simple hats and expensive hats. Our shop had everything a person and his family could need, even things needed for “modern” life—glossy rubber collars that do not need laundering; white paper collars good for a day or two . . . ; white or colored cuffs you stick on your coat sleeves so they stick out; modern shoes with narrow toes . . . ; high rubber

galoshes for getting across the muddy shtetl during the rainy season; calendars; little silver and gold crosses for the Christian women . . . ; textbooks in Russian and textbooks in Hebrew; and guns, pistols, and gunpowder for hunters.”

(from Scharfstein, p. 49)

CARTERS AND WATER-CARRIERS:

“There were laborers who were at the very bottom of the pile, such as carters and water-carriers—the latter were the lowest of the low, because a carter travels and takes passengers and talks with them, sometimes he can have a laugh and a joke, and he sees “the world.” But a water-carrier is a prisoner of his physical toil. . . . In those days there were no water pipes. Every house had a water barrel in the entrance or at the doorway to the kitchen; the water-carrier would come every morning, with two buckets of water suspended on a yoke across his shoulders, and he would empty them into the barrel. . . . Nevertheless there were water-carriers who took the public path and even studied, depending on their strength.”

(Scharfstein, p. 62)

■ **Questions for discussion**

Interview a tradesmen or artisan. Discuss whether they can be seen as agents of change. Explain.

WAY OF LIFE IN THE SHTETL:

FASHION AND CLOTHING:

“In those days clothes were made of such strong fabrics that a garment could be handed down from father to son. There was a material called regen-kamnet (evidently canvas or tarpaulin that could be used for work on rainy days); it was as strong as steel and thick and tough, almost like sheetmetal. When you wore a kapota or a coat made of this material, every crease made noise you could hear someone walking a mile away! The material was available in different colors and at different prices. . . . You couldn’t tear the garment. After about 50 years it might have become a little damaged and faded and one of the sons would inherit it. It was a sign of distinction to wear such a faded kapota, which was seen as a memento of someone who had passed away. After several decades, when the garment was completely faded, it was used for daily work and in inclement weather. . . . There was also a woolen fabric

called last (a kind of tightly woven material of durable wool) worn by rich men. The following fabrics were used to make men's clothing: four kinds of regen-kamnet, two kinds of last, three kinds of smot (a velvet cloth used for fancy hats), four kinds of atlas (satin, a soft, smooth, and expensive silk-like fabric, usually used for kapotas), and various types of silk. The women wore tsits (a plain dyed cotton) or wool. Only rich women wore woollen clothing. The furs in which they wrapped themselves were of the most expensive kind—fizem—(evidently the fur of some kind of vole), shurkes (fleece), squirrel, or beaver. The women wore fox, sable (very expensive), or marten. The usual jewels were pearls. Even the poorest women wore pearl necklaces. . . . They had rings on their fingers and gold pins on their collars.” (Yekhezkel Kotik, *Ayyerati . . . [My shtetl . . .]*, chapter 17)

SUPERSTITIONS:

“There were no end of superstitions in town. They believed in demons, the Devil, and all the evil spirits in the world. . . . When a man died, he was laid out on the floor, but not on the bare floor, rather on a bed of straw so that each of the bundles of straw would puncture his body like pins (the superstition was that this would keep evil spirits from entering the body).” Kotik, Chapter 1, pp. ... (to add)

■ **Questions for discussion:**

In what sense does “clothing make the man?” Consider the differences between men's clothing and women's clothing and the clothes worn by the different classes. Pay attention to the photographs, too, and analyze them.

GROUP 2: MIGRATION FROM THE SHTETL TO THE LARGE TOWNS

TEXT 1:

“I spent the third and last period of my years of wandering in Germany. It was an altogether new and different world, another people, another kind of Jew. . . . And if we consider that for Russians “abroad” did not mean France, England, or America, but Prussian Germany and Austria-Hungary, and saw these countries as paradise. . . . The moment I crossed the Russian border and reached the first Prussian station I felt as if I had come out of bondage and found freedom. In the half-light of an autumn morning I arrived in the city of Berlin.”

(Shemaryahu Levin, *Mezikhronot hayyai* [Memories of my life], pp. 160–170)

TEXT 2:

“My father passed away in his 69th year. My mother was inconsolable. She immediately fell gravely ill and soon found her peace in the Minsk cemetery. . . . Four brothers gathered in my father’s house, along with one sister and close to 20 grandchildren, in the quiet nest of the shtetl where I was born, which had not changed, not even in the slightest detail. . . . That was my last visit to Sabislovitz. I never saw my shtetl again. I bid farewell to its people, its rivers, its fields, its forests, and my lips whispered a blessing of thanks for the wonderful years I had spent with them and in their company.”

(Shemaryahu Levin, *Mezikhronot Hayyai*, vol. 2, pp. 220–221)

Questions for discussion:

Levin left his shtetl twice. What was different about the two departures? Why do you think that after the death of his parents Levin left his shtetl for good?



TEXT 3:

“Kalonimus Ze’ev Wissotzky: An educated Jew, half teacher, half preacher (maggid), came from Zhagure, a small town in the Kovno district of Lithuania, to Moscow. . . . The story of his life is like a tale from The Arabian Nights. How he used to carry small packages of tea from house to house, from friend to acquaintance, and how he discovered that the Almighty had blessed him with a sense of smell that was so valuable in the tea trade . . . He competed with Popov & Sons, which was famous in towns and the countryside. He bought plantations in China and Ceylon, and made a serious business out of the tea trade. Popov could not compete with him and went under. . . . Wissotzky was faithful to the Jewish tradition and lifestyle he brought from his small shtetl in Lithuania. . . . He was an adherent of the Hibbat Zion movement, dreamed of establishing a Hebrew university. . . . His grandchildren were socialist revolutionaries.” (Shemaryahu Levin, *Mezikhronot Hayyai* p. 74).

TEXT 4:

“I stood at a crossroads. My studies in Germany had torn me loose from the soil of my native land. During the five years I spent in Germany, I admired that nation’s penchant for learning and knowledge. Above all, I admired the German language and literature, which I mastered better than Russian. . . . Of the three centers of Jewish culture in Russia, I chose Warsaw. I did not have the right to settle in St. Petersburg. I could have overcome this prohibition—I could have registered as a servant in a wealthy Jewish home, or I could have obtained an artisan’s certificate and paid monthly bribes to the police. But the transition from a townsman with almost free run of Berlin and Koenigsberg to a person living in disguise did not particularly attract me. Odessa was strange to me and far away. A ‘center’ of ‘my Jews’ was getting a foothold in Warsaw—that’s to say Lithuanian Jews, including a large and strong band of Hovevei Zion, and not simply Hovevei Zion, but members of the “Benei Moshe” order founded by Ahad Ha’Am, of which I was a member. So I took the line of least resistance and moved to Warsaw.”

(Shemaryahu Levin, *Mezikhronot Hayyai* pp. ???)

■ **Questions for discussion:**

1. *What are some of reasons that motivate people to move from place to place?*
2. *What kind of a picture do you have of the shtetl as opposed to the big city?
How does Eastern Europe compare with Western and Central Europe?*

GROUP 3: EMIGRATION TO AMERICA

TEXT 1:

“Our bitter condition in Russia and the good life in America gave me a strong desire to go there. They say that America is a golden land, but what do I care for its gold? I am not going there to get rich; I want only freedom and equality. They don’t have a single dominant religion like we have in Russian; all creeds are equal to one another, and all citizens are equal, and there is no king who rules as the mood takes him, because there they elect a president, like we elect the gabbai (warden) of our synagogue. Can one imagine a greater happiness than being a citizen of this land of the free? I particularly liked the idea of working on the land there. The Jewish Maskilim have already proclaimed that we need to create a farming sector. Is it not outrageous that an entire nation should live off the fruits of others’ labors? It is up to us to show that we can live off our own hard work and even provide food to others. And what is more pleasant and noble than the life of a farmer—a life of peace and contentment, a life of honesty and justice?”
(Israel Isser Katzovitz, *Shishim shnot hayyim* [Sixty years of life], [Jerusalem and Berlin, 1923], p. 151)

Questions for discussion:

1. *Dreams vs. reality: How is America depicted? What kind of Jewish life does the author imagine? What criticism does he make about life in Eastern Europe?*
2. *Is this description of America on the one hand and of the Eastern European shtetl on the other similar to the way that Zionists contrasted Palestine with the Diaspora? How do you explain the similarities?*

TEXT 2:

“Once again my father was in trouble with informers and he had no choice but to leave for America. He wrote to his sister who had settled in Boston and asked her to send

him a ticket. She responded immediately. He left Slutsk secretly, but this time he stole away secretly not only from his mortal enemies, the informers, but also from me, his only son, his beloved son. My father concealed his impending trip to America from me, but I felt that my father was about to go away from me and did not leave him alone until his departure. Whenever I came home from heder I would attach myself to him and shadow him everywhere. I would get up every morning at dawn to go to the synagogue near our house for shaharit. But one morning when I got up I realized that my father was not beside me. ‘Where’s father?’ I asked my stepmother, rousing her from sleep with a stifled sob creeping into my voice. ‘Father has gone to synagogue,’ she replied. I rushed to the synagogue in a frenzy, running half the way there, and as I entered my eyes scanned the congregation looking for my father—but my father was not there! I understood at once that father had left and abandoned me to my woes.”

(Israel Isser Katzovitz, *Shishim shnot hayyim* [Sixty years of life], p. 151)

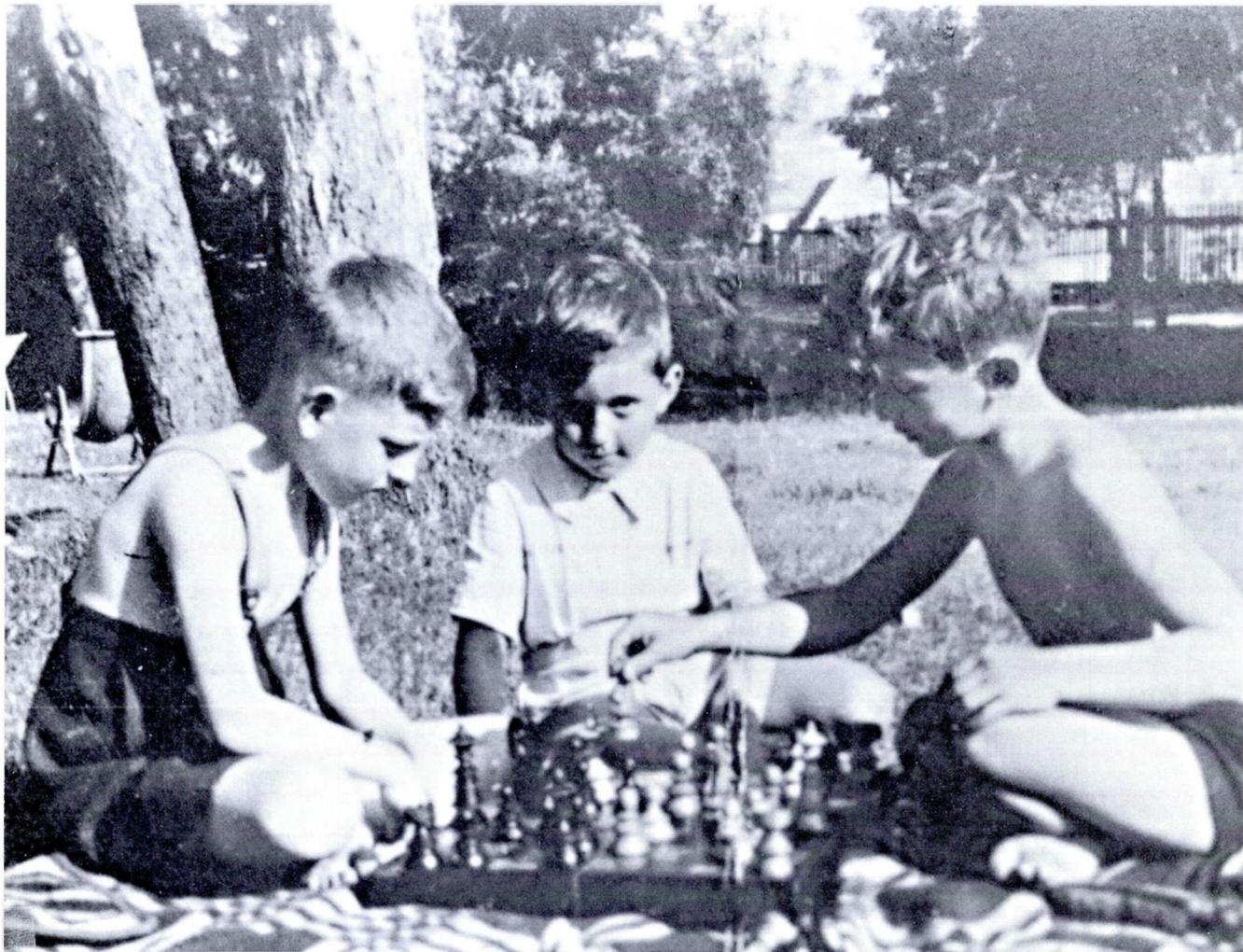
TEXT 3:

“**F**or some time [Lisitzky’s uncle’s] sons and daughters in America had been imploring him to come and enjoy his old age with them, and after he recovered from his illness they sent him a ticket. He gave much consideration to the journey and he did not take his decision lightly. It was hard for him to uproot himself from the land of his birth, where he had lived peacefully and where he had prepared for himself a resting place after 100 years, and it was even harder for him to exile himself to this unknown America where, he had heard it rumored, even the door handles were treif. Even the actual journey to America filled him with horror: It was not an easy thing to cross a great and wide ocean in which many ships had gone down like stones. Who knew whether the same thing would happen to the ship he sailed on? And then, God forbid, he would not have a Jewish burial.”
(Lisitzky, pp. 21–22).

Questions for discussion:

1. What were the difficulties associated with emigration? Why did people emigrate?
2. Compare the first text with the other two (by Ephraim Lisitzky). Do they show different attitudes towards emigration? How do you explain this?

TIME IN THE SHTETL



■ GUIDANCE FOR FACILITATORS:

In the shtetl, the Hebrew-Yiddish word **zman**, “time”, usually referred to a class or lecture in the heder. But we are using it in sense to which we are accustomed, namely, the concept people used to organize their daily lives.

We will use it to understand the meaning that people give to their lives.

Life is organized around intervals of time—the seasons, festivals and Sabbaths as distinct from ordinary days—and one’s daily timetable. The way of life in Jewish society is dictated by “religious time,” in other words, the daily, weekly, and annual timetables are organized around and dictated by religious practice. In Jewish religious life, even the profane becomes sacred because it is directed towards God.

The daily life of a shtetl Jew was made up of prayers interspersed with profane activities such as working, keeping house, and socializing. That is why the Beit Midrash and synagogue were such important institutions. In any discussion of the concept of time we may consider different sequences—for example, linear time and cyclical time. Our lives progress from birth to death—this is linear time. But our lives also go round in cycles, day after day, year after year. This is cyclical time. Both concepts exist in Judaism. Events that took place and became part of the collective memory of the Jewish People, such as the Exodus, the Destruction of the Temple, and the story of Joseph and his brothers appear again, year after year, in the order of prayers and the festivals, and are experienced again as if new. In addition, Jewish daily life is oriented towards a future goal, the coming of the Messiah.

From this point of view, Jewish life is directed towards the future, to the coming of the Messiah. The coming of the Messiah depends upon the repentance of the Jewish People and their submission to God. Some say that it depends exclusively on God’s will. The present is seen as an interim period, and the question is: how should we behave in it? The Sages are unanimous on this question. The function of the Jews during this period between destruction and redemption is to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. In other words, to obey the written and oral law and create a Jewish society entirely based on the commandments of the Torah. The Biblical past is known, while the Messianic future is promised.

The Haskalah changed the Jewish attitude toward the events of the past. There was no longer a need for these events to prove they were essential to Judaism; instead, it was now up to Judaism to prove that it was essential to history. And if former generations knew less about the past but felt more connected to their identity and their sense of continuity, those of the modern era knew more about the past, but their senses of identity and continuity were weaker.

During the 1880s, the winds of change brought alterations in the way of life. For example, the life of a young Maskil did not revolve around times of prayer. In other words, the departure from a religious way of life meant a total change in one's understanding of the meaning of life and this was also reflected in the attitude to time. The difference between a secular society and a traditional religious society is particularly noticeable when you compare their different attitudes toward time.

We suggest that you explain to your students the Jewish concept of time and its importance.

INSTRUCTIONS TO STUDENTS:

The group will be divided into subgroups that will deal with the following subjects: work time, sacred time, leisure time. Read the texts and discuss the questions that follow them. **Discuss the following two questions in the entire group.**

59. What can you learn from the daily agenda about the meaning of life for Jews in the shtetl?

60. Was their daily agenda different from ours today? In what respect?

The group will write an article entitled "**Our time and their time.**"

STUDY MATERIALS:

Glossary

Historical introduction

Summary from Yerushalmi's book *Zakhor*

"Work Time" in Jewish Society



GROUP 1: A HEDER CHILD'S SCHEDULE

TEXT 1:

“The children studied at heder from 9:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m., and then had a one-hour lunch break. At 3:00 p.m. precisely they had to be back at heder. If they were late they received blows, slaps, or a whipping. After 3 o’clock the day went like this: in summer, they learned until sundown, when the teachers went to the Beit Midrash for the afternoon service; in winter, the little children studied until 8 o’clock and the bigger ones until 9. The teachers prayed the afternoon and evening services with the boys in the heder itself. That’s how it was every day of the week except Friday. On Friday, the schedule went like this: till 2 o’clock in winter, till 3 or 4 in summer. Even on Shabbat they didn’t let the children rest. First of all, the boy was examined, in the presence of his father, by a teacher or other maven (expert). In addition, the child had to go over everything he had learned in the past week and then go back to the heder to study the Ethics of the Fathers or midrash with his teacher. The children had no free time except on the festivals: Purim, Pesach, Shavu’ot, Rosh Hashana, Yom Kippur, and Sukkot—a grand total of 26 days in the year.”

(Yekhezkel Kotik, *Ma shera'iti* [What I saw], p. 133)



Questions for discussion:

What can you learn about the life of a Jewish boy in the shtetl from his school schedule? Compare it with the schedule of a child today.

TEXT 2:

A woman's schedule

“My maternal grandfather lived in abject poverty; he was given nine portions of poverty and nine children, including six girls who reached marriageable age one after the other. He had formerly been a carter, carrying goods and passengers in his wagon, back and forth between Slutsk and Minsk. When he got old, he exchanged his wagon for a carriage and bought a station on the market square among the other carriage owners who parked their carriages in a queue. My step-grandmother helped him. In summer she hired herself out to work with the other poor women in the vegetable gardens on the outskirts of Slutsk. She would go out at daybreak and work there all day long, hoeing, furrowing, weeding. On her return she cut up squash and onions. In winter she sold frozen pears, potatoes, and apples in the market, spending all day there. On her return she would thaw out her dress, set a pot of water on the flame, toss slices of potato and barley into it, plus onion and pepper, and brew her brew. After she fed the members of the household she cleared the table and piled it high with the chicken and goose feathers she plucked for a pittance. Between Purim and Pesach she found a job in a matzah factory.”

(Ephraim Lisitzky, pp. 30–32).

Questions for discussion:

Interview this woman. Ask her what she thinks the meaning of her life is.

TEXT 3:

A merchant-shopkeeper's schedule

“I’ll tell you a few of my memories of my father’s house and my surroundings. My father was a merchant who owned a haberdashery, including shoes and galoshes, and so

on. My father had an easy-going nature; he was not extreme, and his circumstances were easy too. He had grown-up sons who tended the store, leaving my father free to do whatever he wanted. And what did he want? To know what was going on in the world. The daily newspaper distributor used to bring him Ha-Melitz and Ha-Zefirah and father would read them with interest. . . . Father would get up early every morning, go to synagogue for the morning service, come back and eat breakfast, and start reading the papers—all of this in the shop. He would get the mail from the postman, look over the letters, answer the urgent ones, order merchandise, and in between would talk to the important customers who came into the store. The conversations were not necessarily about buying and selling and the quality of the goods, but centered on political life in Russia and elsewhere. Towards evening he would go back to the synagogue for the afternoon and evening services and chat with his acquaintances there. In the evening he would sit in the shop, which stayed open until late, and read, chiefly books about travels and about our Jewish world.”
(Scharfstein, p. 32)

Questions for discussion:

What is the relationship between work time, leisure time, and sacred time in the father's schedule? Which time frame determines the others? Explain.

TEXT 4:

A bookbinder's schedule

“It was my father's custom to rise every morning at 3 o'clock for tikkun hatzot (midnight prayer). Sobbing, with tears in his eyes, he would recite the prayers from Sha'are Tsiyyon lamenting the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, our holy city, and hoping for the coming of the Messiah and the ingathering of the exiles; afterwards he would sit and study Gemara and the Zohar, and then go to the daybreak morning service like the vatikin (the God-fearing who were punctilious about the commandments and fulfilled them with alacrity). Afterwards he would spend all day at his trade, and would not retire to sleep until he had studied Gemara, Zohar, and more. In the small hours of Shabbat morning, my father would rise to the call of the beadle . . . it would be sometime between two and three in the morning, and my father would go to the local Beit Midrash to recite

psalms. Afterwards he sat and studied until it was time for prayer. On Shabbat afternoon he studied again until the afternoon service.”

(Asher Korekh, Bagolah uvamoledet [In the Diaspora and the homeland], in Scharfstein, p. 25)

■ **Questions for discussion:**

1. On what basis did the father arrange his daily schedule and what can be learned about him from his daily schedule?
2. What do you think was missing from his schedule?
3. In your opinion, is there a conflict between the sacred and the profane? Explain in what way.

GROUP 2: PROFANE TIME AND SACRED TIME

TEXT 1:

“In the morning they ate krupnik, a dish made of barley and potatoes (one of the most popular foods in Lithuania). At noon they ate borscht (a sweet-and-sour vegetable soup usually made from beets) with bread, topped with a piece of herring or a pat of butter. In the evening they ate groats or noodles with milk. The poorer people made their noodles from rye flour. On Shabbat everyone, even the poor, ate fish. The rich bought big fat fish, and the poor ate wee tiny fish. The fish were minced with onions and made into balls. The meat was veal, lamb, or beef, but it was thin and lean. The butchers bought skinny cows that could hardly stand on their legs. . . . The rich, of course, bought beef; the poor—veal . . . and the poorest of all—the teachers and artisans, who had no relations with the Poritzes, made do with lamb. There were several kinds of kugels (puddings, usually of noodles), even in the homes of the poor. On Shabbat, there was a royal feast. In every home they baked hallah and prepared cholent.”

(Kotik, pp. 121–122)



■ **Questions for discussion:**

What can you learn from the text about the connection between meals and way of life: the way daily life was organized, the types of foods and dishes, class differences, and differences between sacred time and profane time.

TEXT 2:

A tailor's schedule

“**E**very day, he would gather his strength like a lion and rise early, perform the ritual washing of hands, and recite the daily portion of psalms. . . . At daybreak he would go to the synagogue for shaharit, and stay there afterwards to study a chapter of Mishnah. When he came home he would open his siddur, a large, leather-bound volume, its pages yellow from age and use, and recite the ma’amadot (excerpts from the Bible and the Midrash, which it is customary to read after morning prayer), eat a hearty breakfast, and then turn to his sewing. He sewed the way he prayed. . . . At one or two in the afternoon he would lie down on his couch. After a brief nap he would get up, perform the ritual washing of hands, open the Midrash Rabba, and study the weekly Torah portion. It was hard for him to make his way in the holy books and follow the tortuous paths of the Midrash. Along the way, he encountered difficult words, got stuck in them, until he finally gave up in confusion. . . . When he finally got back on track he would take a short break, pull out his pouch and take a pinch of snuff, flare his nostrils, and sneeze with great gusto. . . . When he finished his daily study of the Midrash Rabba, he would go to the synagogue for mincha and then apply himself to the Ein Yaakov (an anthology of legends from the Talmud), recite the evening service, and stay a while longer to hear the news from those who read Ha-Melitz or Ha-Zefirah. When he came home from the synagogue he would eat his evening meal and finish it off with a chapter of Menorat Hama’or or Kav Hayashar, with the Yiddish translation in the margins. He read aloud, melodiously, and my stepmother and the neighboring housewives who were visiting her would break off their conversation, prick up their ears, and, with awestruck faces, listen to his reading.”

(Ephraim Lisitzky, pp. 8–27, in Scharfstein, pp. 25–26)

■ **Questions for discussion:**

"He sewed the way he prayed." What do you think this means? On what basis did the tailor organize his daily agenda?

TEXT 3:

The Daily Schedule of a Jew in the Shtetl

“As everyone knows, a man’s day begins with prayer. Everyone prayed in his own Beit Midrash, of which there were two: the large one, known as ‘The Old Beit Midrash,’ and a smaller one, known as ‘The New Beit Midrash.’ There was also a small Beit Midrash called ‘Rebbe Hershel’s Beit Midrash,’ and there was a synagogue, and a few of shtiblakh (the term for small houses or rooms in which Hassidim prayed). They were all in one courtyard, in front of which, beside the road, was a very deep and wide ditch that flowed down to the river. . . . There was another Beit Midrash further along, in Adolina Street, which has a high hill at one end. In this Beit Midrash they were already discussing political affairs. After prayers, some of the people studied a page of Gemara and some studied Mishna. At one table some of the men would listen to a fellow who taught Ein Yaakov (legends from the Talmud), while the rest of them spoke of municipal affairs and told stories of sages and great Torah scholars. The ‘politicians’ were a group unto themselves. Every day they sat round a table, before and after prayers, and spoke of wars and peace, of news from the wide world, and of politics. Their business took these men traveling twice a week and they would return with all the news. There was one table where the old men sat and told tales of emperors and empresses of yore. . . . And another table where the God-fearing, along with the Perushim (devout ascetics). These last-named had left their wives and children and gone off to study in a different town. . . . They would talk about the world to come. . . . Young yeshiva students—kest eaters (an arrangement common in Eastern Europe, in which gifted young men continued their Torah studies after marriage, supported by their brides’ fathers because the latter were interested in having a learned son-in-law)—the sons and sons-in-law of the ‘householders’ (the term for Jews who had some property), milled around the tables, gossiping about their in-laws and good food. . . . At ten o’clock they went home to eat something. Having eaten, if it was Sunday and no one had anything else to do, they went back to the Beit Midrash and again sat around the tables, ostensibly to study. They opened the Gemara, but gradually conversation began to develop again, and when they had run out of subjects they would move on to the iniquities of the town, to epikorsus and that sort of thing.” (Kotik, pp. 110–112).



■ **Questions for discussion:**

What, do you think, was epikoros behavior? The next excerpt describes a mixture of daily matters and a religious milieu. Why, then, do you think the Maskilim were considered to be epikorsim? Why did the Haskalah offer something else, and what?

TEXT 4:

“On Shabbat the father would don a silk caftan and cover his head with a velvet skullcap and the mother would wear a black silk dress and put pearls round her neck. Shabbat really begins the day before. . . . The woman of the house rises earlier than usual, performs the ritual washing of hands, recites the prayer for the start of the day, puts on

an old housedress, ties a kerchief over her head, and rolls up her sleeves. . . . After the house has been cleaned, it is time to bathe the children and dress them in the Shabbat clothes. She prepares the clean clothes, including a laundered tallit katan (the special four-cornered undergarment on which the ritual fringes or tzitzit are hung). When the men return after shutting their stores or from their workshops, one hears the voice of the beadle as he passes through the street, calling ‘Jews—to the bathhouse.’

“The men and the boys go to the bathhouse with a package under their arms, a package of laundered undergarments, to put on in place of the old ones. And they get dressed and go home. . . . The woman sits and waits for her husband and her children to return from the synagogue.”

(Scharfstein, p. 51).

Questions for discussion:

What do the sacred and profane have in common? Consider this with regard to food, clothing, and customs.

GROUP 3: “LEISURE TIME” IN THE SHTETL

TEXT 1:

“Between minha and ma’ariv—that was the hour when it was customary for men to recover their strength after the day’s toil. . . . The shoemaker and the tailor, the watchmaker and the carter, the small shopkeeper and the businessman, the wealthy Jew and the poor Jew, all set their cares aside and went out to enjoy themselves a little, to while away a pleasant moment. So where did they go? Obviously—to the synagogue or the Beit Midrash. There simply was no other place to spend one’s free time.”

(Ephraim Lisitzky, pp. 25–26)

TEXT 2:

“I soon discovered the young people and we became devoted friends: My house became our spiritual home. We took out a joint subscription to the Jewish newspapers and reviews, in Yiddish, Hebrew, and the vernacular. It was our mobile library and was passed around from one person to the next. On Shabbat afternoons during the summer we would go to the forest where we would spend the day reading, debating, and sometimes even playing. On Simhat Torah, we would all gather at my house to have a good time as befits the festival: And if the wine was a little ‘off,’ we would fill our glasses with water, say lehayyim to one another and drink water instead of wine, and sing and dance as if intoxicated on wine.”

(Katzovitz, pp. 166–167)

TIME



TEXT 3:

A Theater in Soroki

“The theater also presents the town with a variety of shows, albeit not frequently. In the early years, when they town had not yet become ‘enlightened,’ citizens contented themselves with primitive shows such as amateur productions of stories from the Pentateuch, the selling of Joseph, or Ahasuerus. Later, with the new generation, professional troupes of Jewish actors would come to the town, with a repertoire of Goldfaden, Gordin, Latteiner, and others. Goldfaden’s plays always left a strong impression. After a performance of Shulamis, Bar Kochba, The Witch, or Two Oddballs, there was not a house in town where they were not singing songs from the play, which expressed yearnings for Jerusalem, the Temple, and Jewish heroes. . . . Amateur shows and theater were not peculiar to Soroki. Traveling players made the rounds of the shtetls of the Ukraine and other districts, where they enjoyed large audiences, particularly among the young. . . . It was all started by the Haskalah movement and afterwards by that immense movement that swept up mainly the young people—the Zionist movement. But sometimes, when there was a dead season, with no hazzanim, no weddings, no circus, and no theater, and when there was nothing to .

entertain the public—for example during the counting of the Omer when material pleasures are forbidden—they would turn their hearts to the wonders of nature, notably the pleasures that the nearby river offered the townspeople: bathing, swimming, and boating during the summer; while in winter, when the river was frozen over solid, they skated on iron skates.”
(Ephraim Lisitzky, pp. 8–27)



TEXT 4:

Games

“Young boys aged four to six did indeed spend many hours of the day at heder, but their study periods were short What did they do with the rest of their time? Every heder had a large yard where the children played together. They spent their time in games and amusements. What did they play with? Buttons, sticks, pebbles, whatever came to hand. . . . When it was time for a child to go back inside and study, a youngster would come out of the heder and call him; when he was finished, he went back to the yard. When the weather was inclement, the children would stay with their friends in the classroom and play there . . . or talk and tell each other stories and legends.”

(Scharfstein, pp. 191–192)

TIME



TEXT 5:

Play

“We, the little pupils buried under the weight of prayer and Torah, also had moments of leisure and pleasure. Every Friday afternoon we were free. In winter we went ice-skating. . . . In summer we went to bathe and swim in the river, bathe, get dressed, get undressed, and bathe again. On Shabbat afternoon we would go out of town, hide among the tall corn, roam through the marshes that surrounded the cemetery and muddy our feet. . . . And in the vacation period before Sukkot we would troop out a long way from town, sneak into the gardens, climb the trees, and pick apples and pears.”

(Ephraim Lisitzky, pp. 8–27)



■ **Questions for discussion:**

1. *What was leisure time for Jews in the shtetl? Consider what you have read in the texts. Give some examples.*
2. *On the basis of these texts, what were the typical ways of spending free time?*
3. *What is leisure time for you? How do you occupy it?*
4. *What do you think are the similarities and differences between how you relate to leisure time and how Jews in the shtetl related to it?*

GLOSSARY

■ **Mapu, Abraham (1808–1867)**

One of the leading Hebrew writers of the Haskalah period, he wrote the first Hebrew novel. His first book, *Shlomith*, later known as *Ahavat Tsiyyon* (Love of Zion), aroused great interest (published 1848).

■ **Lilienblum, Moses Leib (1843–1910)**

Writer and essayist. One of the founders of *Hibbat Zion*. Influenced by ideas of the Haskalah, he called on Jews not to abandon religion, but to adapt to the *Zeitgeist* (the spirit of the age). He wrote of the Jewish revival in the land of their ancestors. He believed that antisemitism was not a passing evil and that a national homeland was the only solution to the problem.

■ **Smolenskin, Peretz (1840–1882)**

Hebrew writer, one of the pioneers of the Jewish national movement. Contributed to *Ha-Melitz*. Joined *Hibbat Zion* when it was founded. Did much to revive the Hebrew language as part of the national renaissance. Tchernowitz, Chaim (1870–1949)

Rabbi, Talmudic scholar, and Hebrew essayist. In 1897 was named head of a yeshiva in Warsaw. In 1902 he established "Kibbutz" for rabbinical education. His doctrine called for a combination of science and Torah and emphasized aspects of Zionism.

■ **Berkowitz, Y. D.**

Born in 1885 in Slutsk in White Russia (Belorussia). Hebrew journalist and author. In 1919 he emigrated to New York, where he founded the weekly *Ha-Toren*. Editor of a number of important journals. Immigrated to Palestine in 1928.

■ **Gordon, Judah Leib (b. Vilna 1830, d. St. Petersburg 1892)**

Hebrew poet and advocate of the Haskalah. The pogroms of 1881 shook

his world view but not his belief in the spirit of Haskalah. He believed that Jews should integrate into the society in which they lived and accordingly did not join the Hibbat Zion movement.

Kotik, Yekhezkel (Ezekiel) (1847–1921)

Born in Kamenets to a well-to-do family of community leaders and leaseholders. When his family lost its wealth in the aftermath of the social and economic turmoil in Russia in 1865, when he was 17, he married Leba. His grandfather's family were Mitnaggedim, but his father became an ardent Hassid. Even before his marriage Kotik had decided that the Hassidic world was not his and became a Mitnagged. This caused an irreconcilable split with his father. After their marriage, the couple tried but failed to make a living as shopkeepers. Kotik began his frustrating efforts to acquire an education and make a respectable living. In the 1870s he found his place in a small village in the Bialystok district, where he leased a dairy and tavern. At this time it was no longer considered shameful to leave the town in favor of the countryside. He moved to a small estate in the middle of woods and marshes. Thirtyish, with three children, he decided to make a change in his life. He and his family moved to Kiev, which, in the time of Czar Alexander II, became an important Jewish center. He purchased a small shop from which he made a meager living and once again felt that he was a failure. After the assassination of Alexander II and the pogroms of 1881, he decided to emigrate to Poland and moved to Warsaw. In the late nineteenth century, Warsaw was a magnet for Jews from elsewhere. Kotik became a leader among the Jewish immigrants from Lithuania, against the backdrop of the animosity that the Polish Jews felt for the Lithuanian newcomers. He joined the circles of Jewish intellectuals and published his writings. The focus of his activity was the coffee shop he managed. He had a burning desire to help the weak and did so. Pressed by his son Abraham, an active socialist, he began to write his memoirs in 1912. His first volume of memoirs was greatly acclaimed and his relations with the author Sholem Aleichem developed in its wake.

Alexander II (1818–1881)

In their early part of his reign, Czar Alexander II enacted comprehensive political, economic, and social reforms, of which the most important was the abolition of serfdom and emancipation of the peasants in 1861. The attitude to Jews was also greatly improved, and many of the tough discriminatory laws dating from the reign of his father, Czar Nicholas I, were abolished or eased, including the military conscription law. The conscription term of Jews was made equal to that of the general population.

Ba'al-shem

The term applied to miracle-workers and healers who used holy names, charms, and folk remedies. The title was given to Rabbi Israel ben Eliezer (d. 1760), the founder of Hassidism—known as the Ba'al Shem Tov. (See the series *Poland: Chapters on the Jews of Eastern Europe* (Tel-Aviv, 1981); E. Etkes, *Mehavurah le-tenu'ah: Tenu'at ha-Hassidut bereshitah* [From band to movement: the early years of the Hassidic movement] [Heb.], units 9–10).
Badhan (jester)The master-of-ceremonies at a wedding. He improvised rhyming songs—sometimes entertaining, sometimes coarse, at other times sad or provoking repentance, depending on the event. Badhanim usually recite their verses at weddings or other festive life-cycle meals.

Beit Midrash

The designation for any building intended for Torah study and prayer by the placement of a Torah scroll in the ark. For the reciprocal influence between the religious sphere and the social function of the synagogue and Beit Midrash, see Y. Katz, *Masoret Umashber (Tradition and crisis)* (Heb.) (Jerusalem, 1957/8), pp. 204–212.

Bokhur (young man)

A bachelor. A married man would never be referred to as a bokhur, no matter how young he was.

- **Borscht**

A sweet-and-sour soup usually made of beets.

BundA Jewish Socialist party. It worked for a solution to the Jewish question through a socialist revolution in Poland. It fought for the rights of Jewish workers.

- **Cholent**

Traditional Eastern European Jewish stew that cooked from before the start of the Sabbath until the Sabbath afternoon.

- **Eating Kest**

A Yiddish expression designating an arrangement common in Eastern Europe, in which gifted young men continued their Torah studies after marriage, supported by their brides' fathers because the latter were interested in having a learned son-in-law.

- **Epikorus**

Freethinker or heretic.

- **Gabbai**

The person responsible for collecting money from the congregation to be used for synagogue administration.

- **Grodno**

Capital of Grodno district, about 90 miles north of Kamenets. One of the oldest and most distinguished Jewish communities in Lithuania.

- **Haskalah**

The so-called Jewish Enlightenment, a movement that began at the end of the eighteenth century and championed the rule of reason. It held that people are intelligent and that everything is accessible to rational study and inquiry. The sociopolitical corollary of this doctrine was full equality among all human beings and the belief that they can live in harmony with

one another. Jews who accepted the ideas of the Haskalah tried to break down the barriers between Jews and their non-Jewish surroundings, both conceptually and socially.

- **Hassidism**

A widespread popular religious movement that began in the second half of the eighteenth century. It sought to nullify the scholarly side of religious observance.

- **Head coverings for women**

According to halakhah, women are required to cover their heads only after marriage. To make it easier to do so, the custom was to shave off the bride's hair the day after the wedding. This custom is described as traumatic both in memoirs and in literature.

- **Heder**

Religious primary school.

- **Hibbat Zion**

A social movement whose objective was the national revival of the Jews and their return to Zion (Palestine). The movement began in the 1860s, mainly in the Jewish centers of Eastern Europe. The followers of the movement were known as Hovevei Zion.

- **Householders (ba'alei batim)**

The term for Jews who had some property, mainly merchants or leaseholders, who were in a position to support a young son-in-law while he continued his studies during the first years of marriage and lived off his father-in-law's support.

- **Humash**

One of the five books of the Pentateuch (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy) or a volume containing one or more of them, as opposed to the parchment scroll used in synagogue. Loosely, the Pentateuch.

■ **Kapota**

The long black overcoat worn by men in traditional society in Eastern Europe. Many Ultraorthodox Jews still wear it today.

■ **Krupnik**

Barley, a staple food in Lithuania.

■ **Maggid**

The term for preachers who gave sermons in the synagogues on religious and moral issues. Large communities had permanent incumbents for the position, who preached every Shabbat. Itinerant maggidim visited the small communities. The maggidim played an important role in spreading Zionism and Jewish nationalism.

■ **Marriage**

It was customary for parents to make matches for their children at an early age, but they tried to delay the actual ceremony until after the age of religious maturity—12 for girls, 13 for boys. Child marriages were common in Poland. In the nineteenth century, these young marriages were at the center of the Maskilim's criticism of traditional society.

■ **Minyan**

Quorum of ten required for prayer.

MitnaggedThe term for Jews, mostly in Lithuania, who were associated with The circles that rejected Hassidism and fought against it.

■ **Perushim**

In the nineteenth century, this term was applied in Lithuania to Jewish men who had separated themselves (Hebrew: parshu) from their wives and families to devote themselves—usually in a strange town—to study Torah based on the concepts of the Vilna Gaon.

■ **Shaharit, Ma'ariv, Minha**

The three daily prayer services (morning, afternoon, and evening).

■ **Shtibl**

The term for a small house or room used by Hassidim for prayer.

■ **Tanakh (Bible)**

Bible study was not a regular feature of traditional society, and certainly not among the Hassidim. A cursory study of the Pentateuch was usually considered adequate. However, there were some heders in which study of the Prophetic books was considered important.

■ **Tikkun Hatzot**

An ancient custom of rising at midnight to recite prayers and mourn the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem.

■ **Tse'ena u-re'ena**

A popular Yiddish book by Ya'akov ben Yitzhak Ashkenazi of Yanov, which retells commentaries and midrashim on the weekly portion in easy language. In Eastern Europe women would read from it on Shabbat.

■ **Vilna**

In Warsaw, Odessa, and Vilna, Jewish Maskilim were active from the second half of the nineteenth century. At the end of the century, Hebrew and Yiddish had become the dominant languages. Warsaw was the cultural center of Poland. St. Petersburg was the cultural center for Russian Jews. The cultural center of Lithuania was Vilna. By the middle of the century, the town had become less important and from the 1880s Vilna became the center of the Bund.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

■ Sources:

- Agnon, S. Y., **Kol sipporav shel Shmuel Yosef Agnon** (The collected stories of Shmuel Yosef Agnon), Jerusalem, 1945–1966
- Bialik, Hayyim Nahman, **Kol kitvey Bialik** (Collected works of Bialik), Tel Aviv, 1938
- Gordon, Judah Leib, **Kitvey J. L. Gordon** (Works of J. L. Gordon), Tel Aviv, 1960
- Katzovitz, Israel Isser, **Shishim shnot hayyim** (Sixty years of life),
- Kotik, Yekhezkel (Ezekiel), **Ma shera'iti: Zikhronotav shel Yekhezkel Kotik** (What I saw: the memoirs of Yekhezkel Kotik), Tel Aviv, 1999
- Levin, Shemaryahu, **Mezikhronot hayyai** (Memories of my life), Tel Aviv 1960
- Levita, Avraham, **Halikha el he-Avar** (Back to the past), Tel Aviv, 1992
- Lisitzky, Ephraim E., **Ayleh toldot adam** (A man's life), Jerusalem, 1949
- Parush, Iris, Nashim korot. **Yitrona shel shuliyyut bahevra hayehudit bemizrah eropa bamea ha-19** (Women readers: The advantage of being marginal in Jewish society in Eastern Europe in the nineteenth century), forthcoming
- Sholem Aleichem, **Hayyei Adam** (The life of man), Tel Aviv, 1962
- Trunk, Yehiel Yeshaia, **Poyl'n** (Poland), New York, 1944–1953

■ General:

- Encyclopedia of the Holocaust
- The Hebrew Encyclopedia
- Etkes, Emanuel, **Polin: prakim be-yehudey mizrah eropa vetarbutam** (Poland, chapters on Eastern European Jewry and its culture), Units 9–10, Tel Aviv: Open University, 1991
- Ettinger, Shmuel, **"Darka hahistorit shel yahadut polin"** (The historical course of Polish Jewry), *Massua* 27, pp. 19–30
- Finkel, Yonatan, **"Mashber 1881–1882 kenekudat tafnit betoldot hayehudim ba-et hahadasha"** (The crisis of 1881–82 as a turning point in Jewish history in the modern era), *Z'manim* 74 (12)
- Gonen, Rivka, ed., **Behazara la-ayyarah hayehudit: An-ski vehamishlahat ha-etnografit hayehudit 1912–1914** (Back to the shtetl: An-ski and the Jewish ethnographic expedition) 1912–1914

- Katz, Jacob, **Masoret umashber** (Tradition and crisis), 1958
- Parush, Iris, "**Women Readers as Agents of Social Change among Eastern European Jews in the Late Nineteenth Century,**" *Gender and History* 9(1) (1997), pp. 60–82
- Raz-Krakotzkin, Amnon, "**Galut betoch ribonut: lebikoret 'shililat hagalut' batarbut ha-yisraelit**" (Exile within sovereignty: Critique of the negation of the Diaspora in Israeli culture), *Teoriya ve-bikkoret* 4 (Autumn 1993), pp. 23–55
- Roskis, David G., **The Jewish Search for Usable Past**, Bloomington, 1999
- Scharfstein, Zvi, **Hayyey hayehudim bemizrah eropa badorot ha-ahronim** (Jewish life in Eastern Europe in recent generations), Tel Aviv, 1973
- The Vanished World: **Jewish Cities Jewish People**
- Tsur, Ya'akov, **Dyukanah shel tefutsah** (Portrait of a Diaspora community), Jerusalem
- Yerushalmi, Yossef Chaim, *Zkhor: historiya yehudit vezikaron yehudi* (Remembrance: Jewish history and Jewish memory), Tel Aviv, 1988

* All the photographs are taken from Massuah project "Images Before My Eyes"