

# Unit 3: Central European Jews Come to America

## CHAPTER 7

### BECOMING AMERICANS



What contributions did central European Jews make to the American economy and society?  
What impact did the new immigrants have on Jewish community life in the United States?

**J**ews had come to America from the earliest colonial days. But the first big wave of Jewish immigrants arrived in the 1830s. Already, most of the nation's 10,000 to 15,000 Jews were Ashkenazim. Now, their brothers and sisters from Germany and other central and eastern European countries—such as Poland, Austria, and Hungary—joined them. A trickle became a flood. By 1880, there were between 230,000 and 300,000 Jews in America. Most were determined to become Americans.

#### BACK IN EUROPE

There were many reasons that Jews, as well as non-Jews, chose to leave central Europe in the nineteenth century. Along with their non-Jewish neighbors, Jews encountered difficulties adjusting to the changes brought about by the Industrial Revolution. Many crafts became obsolete. Many people lost jobs. About half of the Jews were living below the poverty line.

In addition, there were strong anti-Jewish feelings. Jews in many areas suffered the loss of their civil rights. Violent anti-Jewish riots had rocked central Europe in 1819; and there were other riots in connection with the revolution of 1848. In the German states, laws barred Jews from some trades and professions unless they had letters of “protection.” In the state of Bavaria, in southern Germany, in order “not to enlarge the number of Jewish families in places where they already exist,” laws limited the rights of Jews’ to settle and to marry. A Jewish man who wanted to marry had to buy an expensive certificate, called a *matrikel*, proving that he was in a “respectable” trade or profession. Usually only the firstborn son could obtain a *matrikel*. Jews often had to pay especially heavy taxes as well, and some faced discrimination by gentile craftsmen. Making matters worse, one German newspaper wrote that killing a Jew should be treated as a misdemeanor rather than a serious crime.

America had great appeal; it was a land of opportunity. The idea of going to America grew in popularity as Jews who had made the trip wrote to family and friends at home. There were plenty of opportunities for anyone who was willing to work. German Jewish newspapers discussed the idea. One paper asked, “Why should not young Jews transfer their desires and powers to hospitable North America, where they can live freely alongside members of all confessions . . . [and] where they don’t at least have to bear this?” Jews were eager to go to a place where they would be seen as compatriots, not as outsiders. During the nineteenth century, some German communities lost as much as 70 percent of their Jews.



How would you feel about leaving your home—even one where you faced prejudice and discrimination—to live in a new country?

At first, most of the immigrants were the poorer Jews from small towns and villages. Most were artisans. They could not afford to move their families to America. Individual family members traveled to America alone, and once they had earned enough money, they would send for other family members. Usually, it was young, single men who came, but some young, single women came in the early years as well. After 1848, a small number of better-educated Jews from the larger cities arrived.



# The Jews' journey from the old country

Circle the places mentioned in Unit 3 on this map of Europe:

- |                            |         |
|----------------------------|---------|
| Bavaria, Germany           | Poland  |
| Amsterdam, The Netherlands | Austria |
| Cadiz, Spain               | Hungary |
| London, England            |         |



from Samuel Rawson Gardiner, ed., *Gardiner's Atlas of English History* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co. 1914)

The trip to America was very hard. First, immigrants traveled across Europe by coach, or wagon or on foot to reach port cities. They carried with them dried kosher food, family Bibles, and prayer books. Then, they faced the difficult voyage across the Atlantic, by sail.

## One journey to America

In a letter to his family in 1819, Wolf Samuel wrote,



*I left Amsterdam on September 13th with 96 passengers, including 6 Jews. First of all we entered the North Sea where I was seasick for four days. I thought I was going to die. Then we had a very bad wind for a whole month and no prospect of getting to America. We hadn't much food left and the water was foul, and the . . . captain put into the harbor [in Falmouth] in England. . . . We stayed there ten days. We put out to sea and again we met a great storm and we all thought that we were going down. The stores ran out a second time and the captain had to run for shore and we arrived in Cadiz in Spain, where none of us Jews was allowed in the town as our lives would not have been safe. We lay in Cadiz for 14 days. Then we left Cadiz and put out into the Atlantic Ocean and with a good wind arrived at Baltimore in 62 or 63 days, that is . . . after a voyage of 5 months."*

from Howard M. Sachar, *A History of the Jews in America* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993)



Find out who in your family came to America from another country. If possible, interview them to find out what the experience was like. How did they get here? What kind of jobs did they find? Where did they live? Tape-record or videotape the interviews.

## LIFE IN AMERICA

While most of the new Jewish immigrants tended to live in cities—such as New York, Philadelphia, Saint Louis, Cincinnati, Baltimore, New Orleans, and San Francisco—others lived in smaller towns and even outlying areas. They played an important part in America's growing economy, especially in manufacturing and sales. While a few of them became bankers and department-store owners, most had more modest success.

Many of the immigrants were **itinerant** peddlers, and some set up shops. Peddlers filled their packs with anything and everything they could carry. Peddling did not require an outlay of much money, only enough to buy a license. Things to sell—such as dishes, sewing supplies, and tools—could be bought on credit from Jews who had arrived in the country earlier. Quite a few immigrants sold secondhand clothing. Others worked as artisans, especially as glaziers, cigar makers, and tailors. Women usually worked as shopkeepers, seamstresses, boardinghouse managers, and teachers. Some of the new arrivals remained very poor and received financial assistance from Jewish charitable organizations.



**Itinerant** means "wandering" or "traveling."

In time, Jewish immigrants became manufacturers of various goods, including clothing and shoes. They were especially important in the production and sale of ready-made clothing. This was a field that had grown in the mid-nineteenth century because of the invention of the sewing machine—by Elias Howe in about 1846—and the demand for uniforms during the Civil War. In New York by 1880, Jews owned about 80 percent of all retail and 90 percent of all wholesale clothing firms. Outside New York, about 75 percent of clothing firms were Jewish owned. The Chicago company, Hart, Schaffner and Marx, would become the largest manufacturer of men's clothing in the world.

Joseph Seligman and Marcus Goldman were among the Jewish immigrants who arrived with very little money, worked as peddlers, and became wealthy businessmen, financiers, and bankers. They joined a small but influential group of community leaders and philanthropists, some of whom later played key roles in the American government. Joseph Seligman had a close relationship with President Ulysses S. Grant. Two sons of the immigrant Lazarus Straus (who with his sons, became owner of Macy's department

store) also had illustrious careers. Isidor Straus was a U.S. congressman and was offered, but did not accept, the Democratic nomination for mayor of New York City. His brother Oscar was U.S. Ambassador to Constantinople, and as the secretary of commerce and labor under President Theodore Roosevelt, became the first Jew to serve in the cabinet.



Why was the business success of these Jewish immigrants important to the future of the American Jewish community?

Most of the new immigrants were traditional Jews. In America, however, observance was not easy. Jewish communities were small and scattered, and Jews remained

a tiny minority. Sometimes the need to earn a living made the observance of Shabbat and Jewish holidays difficult. And the American emphasis on individuality encouraged some immigrants to throw off their traditions. For others, the choice was difficult. One man wrote in his diary, “God of Israel, thou knowest my thoughts. Thou alone knowest my grief when on the Sabbath’s eve, I must retire [alone] to my lodging and on Saturday morning carry my pack on my back, **profaning** the holy day, God’s gift to His people of Israel.”



**Profaning** means “treating disrespectfully.”

## A peddler’s journal



In 1842, twenty-three-year-old Abraham Kohn of Fürth, in Germany, set out from New York for Massachusetts.

There were few Jews in New England—the first congregation in Connecticut was not formed until

1840, and the Newport Jewish

community had virtually disappeared after the Revolution. The first religious services in Massachusetts were held in 1842, the first Jewish community in Maine was begun in the late 1840s, and there was no Jewish community in Vermont or New Hampshire until after the Civil War. Life was difficult for Kohn. On the right are some sections of his journal.

Write a journal entry of your own, telling what it is like for you to be a Jewish peddler wandering through America, trying to make your living.

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from Kenneth Libo and Irving Howe, *We Lived There Too: In Their Own Words and Pictures—Pioneer Jews and the Westward Movement, 1630–1930* (New York: St. Martin’s/Marek, 1984)



*Is it liberty when, in order to do business in a single state, one has to buy a license for \$100 and profane the holy Sabbath, observing Sunday instead? True, one does not bear the name “Jew,” but only because one does not utter it. Can a man, in fact, be said to be “living” as he plods through the vast, remote country, uncertain even as to which farmer will provide him shelter for the coming night? O, that I had never seen this land, but had remained in Germany, apprenticed to a humble country craftsman!*

*As far as the language is concerned, I am getting along pretty well. But the Americans are a peculiar people. Although they sit together by the dozen in taverns, they turn their backs to each other. No one talks to anybody else. Is this customary of a republic? I don’t like it. Is this the fashion of the nineteenth century? I don’t like it either.*

*How much more I could write about this queer land. It likes comfort extremely. The Germans, by comparison, hardly know the meaning of the word. The wife of an American farmer—for hours she can sit in her rocking chair shaking back and forth as she thinks of nothing but beautiful clothes and a fine hairdo. The farmer himself is able to sit down for a few hours every day to read his paper and smoke his cigar.*

*The whole country looks to me like an adolescent youth. That is America! Although she appears to know everything, her knowledge is, in truth, very elementary. American history is composed of Independence and Washington—that is all.*

DO  
IT

Find out  
which activities,  
according to  
halachah, are and are not  
permitted on Shabbat.  
What is the reason for  
these prohibitions?

In most places where Jews settled, if there were at least ten Jewish men over the age of thirteen, a prayer group was formed. When the Jews in an area collected enough money, they hired a leader. This person, who was not an ordained rabbi, filled many roles in the Jewish community. He acted as a religious leader and preacher. He circumcised baby boys, read Torah, blew the shofar, and collected members' dues. Most of these men knew a little bit of Hebrew, and they needed the work. Sometimes, however, they were reprimanded for not displaying behavior befitting a rabbi.

THINK  
ABOUT  
IT

What do you think the most difficult part of being a new Jewish immigrant in America would have been?

## ONE JEWISH LEADER

One of the most outstanding Jewish leaders of the time was Isaac Leeser, of Philadelphia's Sephardic Mikveh Israel synagogue. Leeser attended high school in Europe, studied Hebrew grammar, and had some knowledge of the Talmud.

When he arrived in the United States in 1824, he worked in his uncle's general store in Richmond and served as an assistant to the *hazan*. Even though he was Ashkenazic, he mastered Sephardic rituals in a few weeks. He learned to read and write English in



two years. Because of the reputation he earned in Richmond, he was invited to serve as the *hazan* of Mikveh Israel in 1829.

Many Jews who arrived from central Europe enrolled their children in public schools. The newer immigrants found those schools unsatisfactory, however, and in the 1840s there was an increase in Jewish day schools. Leeser believed that Jewish children needed an education rooted in Judaism, and he favored day schools. He was also practical, however, and he supported Rebecca Gratz's Hebrew Sunday School Society in Philadelphia, a school that students attended only one day a week. Since there were few textbooks for Jewish children, Leeser began to publish them.

His first book, in 1830, was a translation of *Instruction in the Mosaic Religion*, a textbook for children published by a teacher in Germany. In 1835, Leeser published *Catechism for Younger Children* and, three years later, *The Hebrew Reader*. He prepared the *Reader*, a first book of lessons in Hebrew, for Rebecca Gratz's Sunday school. Gratz wrote of Leeser, "with his strangely pock-marked face, golden spectacles and inexhaustible fund of ever-ready information, he knew every child and teacher, called each by name, and nothing was too trivial or intricate to claim his clear explanation."

LEARN  
IT

A **catechism** is a summary of the principles of a religion in the form of questions and answers. Catechisms were used for educational purposes, mostly in Christian religious schools. Some Jews adapted the format in their own schools.

THINK  
ABOUT  
IT

Why was it important for Jews in America to establish Jewish schools—either day schools or "Sunday" schools?

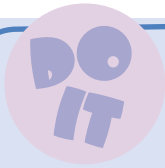
In order to promote day-school education, Leeser organized the Hebrew Education Society of Philadelphia in 1846. The society provided for "the establishment of a school or schools within . . . Philadelphia, in which are to be taught the elementary branches of education, together with the sciences, and modern and ancient languages, always in combination with instruction in Hebrew language, literature and religion." In 1867, Leeser also helped establish Maimonides College, the first rabbinical seminary in America. (It closed in 1873.)

Although he was traditional in his observance of Judaism, Leeser wanted to unite Jews across the United States. He was open to change and gave religious services an American touch by using some English and delivering sermons. He traveled around the country, visiting many congregations. He was well-known for his speeches and his writing and published ten volumes of sermons.

Leeser produced English and Hebrew versions of both Sephardic and Ashkenazic prayer books, as well as an English translation of the Bible. His was the first such translation in America by a Jew. In 1843, he began editing the first successful English-language Jewish magazine, *The Occident*. He used the magazine to unite Jews and to

promote Jewish literary achievements in English. He made sure that each issue included poetry and fiction by Jewish writers. In his magazine, Leeser also defended Jews against the efforts of Christian missionaries. In one article, "The United States Not a Christian State," published in 1850, he wrote that America was not Christian by law, even though most Americans were Christians.

In 1845, Leeser organized the Jewish Publication Society, which published fourteen volumes of works by Jews, including Leeser's own book, *The Jews and Their Religion*, before a fire, in 1851, destroyed all its books and put it out of business. (Another Jewish publication society was established in 1871, and a third, which still exists, in 1888.)



## Catechism for Jewish children

*Designed as a Religious Manual for House and School* by Isaac Leeser

Below are the first four questions and answers from Chapter VI: ("The Moral Law") of Leeser's book.

**What does the moral law teach?**

*It teaches us our duty.*

**What is this duty?**

*We must do whatever God demands of us.*

**What obliges us to do this?**

*By the possession of the life given by God we are from motives of gratitude compelled to obey his wishes; and by the benefits which He daily and hourly bestows on us, we should be induced to show that we are not unworthy of his fatherly care; and lastly, as children of the covenant with the Lord, it is reasonable that we should repay his especial kindness by a more ardent display of activity in the fulfillment of our duties.*

**Towards whom have we duties to perform?**

*Towards God, through whose favour we live.*

*Towards our fellow-men, who, as well as ourselves, have received life and being from God.*

*Towards ourselves, both as regards our body and our soul.*

(Philadelphia: L. Johnson, 1863)



You can read more of Leeser's catechism online at [www.jewish-history.com](http://www.jewish-history.com) in the "Virtual Library."

Choose a Jewish topic that you know well—or one that you want to know more about and can do some research on. Write your own catechism about it below. Try to write at least three questions and answers.

Question 1: \_\_\_\_\_

Answer 1: \_\_\_\_\_

Question 2: \_\_\_\_\_

Answer 2: \_\_\_\_\_

Question 3: \_\_\_\_\_

Answer 3: \_\_\_\_\_

## “Not A Christian state”

Leeser wrote:

*We have often maintained, both in private conversation and in our writings, that no one can claim for the United States the name of a Christian state, in the legal sense of the words; which does not say that the whole people of the country might not, for all that, be Christians. . . . The proposition, we always thought, was so evident, that we could not help wondering, and our astonishment is not lessened at this day, that people should even dare to call this a Christian country, and speak of the population as a Christian people. . . . The laws of the country . . . leave every man to pursue whatever religion he pleases. . . . All men have an equal right to be here; one does not tolerate the other, nor has he to thank him, legally, for leaving him undisturbed, however practically the minority are at the mercy of the majority. Might makes right here as well as elsewhere; and the fanatics for all opinions know this perfectly well, and they therefore endeavour to make their views those of the majority, that they may carry them through and force them on the community by the brute power of numbers.*

from Jonathan D. Sarna and David G. Dalin, *Religion and State in the American Jewish Experience* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997)



What is your reaction to Leeser's article? Do you agree that America is not a Christian country legally? practically? Do you agree that members of the majority religion sometimes try to force their opinions on others? Has this ever happened to you? What do you do, or would you do, when this happens?



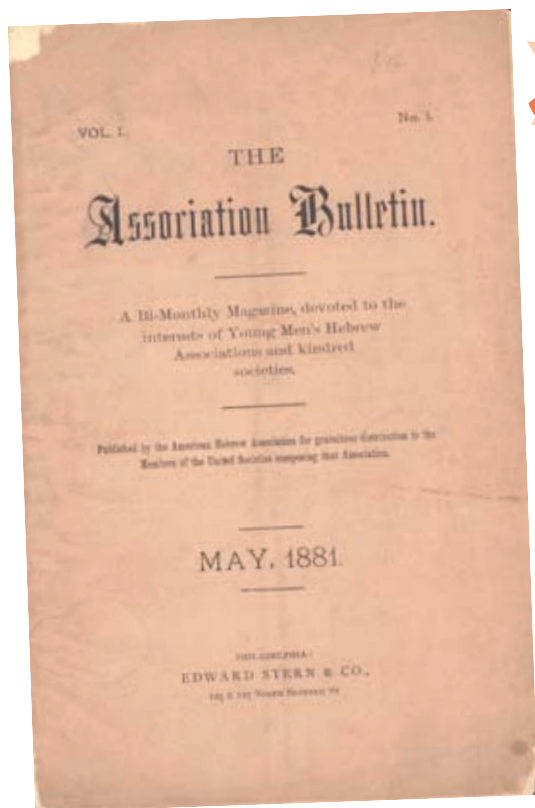
Find out about the Jewish charitable, social, educational, recreational, and other organizations in your community. Do you, your parents, or your friends belong to any of them? Why belong to a Jewish organization, rather than a secular one?

## THE JEWISH COMMUNITY SPREADS

Jewish community life was developing in the United States in the nineteenth century. Many philanthropic, social, cultural, recreational, and educational institutions were being formed. Benevolent societies provided needy Jewish families with food, fuel, loans, shelter, care for the sick, and burial. In many communities, Jewish orphanages served the neediest families. By 1860 in New York City alone, there were forty-four charitable organizations. Jews' Hospital (now Mount Sinai Hospital) began as a shelter serving kosher food. Over time, it added medicines and other modern services. Jews in Philadelphia also wanted to help one another. The city had seventeen charitable and **fraternal** groups. In many towns, such organizations met the immigrants' social, cultural, and economic needs. Many charitable groups were supported by membership dues and fund-raising events, such as charity balls.



**Fraternal** has to do with a society of men.



A cover from a magazine for YMHA members.

Jewish literary societies also began around this time. The first were founded in the 1840s for men only, but women soon started their own groups. Several Jewish publications, such as Leiser's *Occident*, Isaac Mayer Wise's *American Israelite* and *Deborah*, and Samuel Myer Isaacs' *Jewish Messenger* were founded. The immigrants produced novels and poetry that focused on Jewish and American themes. And for the first time in the United States, traditional Jewish scholarship began to develop. **Haggadot**, prayer books, Bibles, and Bible translations, educational materials, and collections of sermons were published.

In the 1850s, clubs for young Jews in America began using the name Young Men's Hebrew Association (YMHA). The name was adapted from the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA). But while the YMCA's activities were mostly religious and athletic, the YMHA's program included literary groups, classes, athletics, lectures, orchestras, glee clubs, libraries, drama, debates on topics of Jewish interest, and sometimes, employment bureaus.



**Haggadot** (Haggadahs) are books that contain the story and prayers read at the Passover seder.

Another big effort to help Jews band together throughout the country was an organization called B'nai B'rith ("Children of the Covenant"). It began in New York in 1843 to reach out to Jews, some of whom did not belong to synagogues, giving them an opportunity to spend time with people who shared their ethnic and cultural heritage. Using the motto "Benevolence, Brotherly Love, and Harmony," B'nai B'rith did not stress religious practice but emphasized the ties that bind Jews together even if they disagree about matters of faith. It was modeled after the general—not specifically Jewish—lodges of the day, and some of B'nai B'rith's founders were members of those groups.

Although there were a number of other Jewish lodges, B'nai B'rith was the best known. It provided its members with social activities, as well as sick and burial benefits. It also supported educational programs, charitable institutions (such as orphanages), and protested against discrimination against Jews both in the United States and abroad. B'nai B'rith was so successful in bringing together Jews of all backgrounds and religious beliefs that by 1861 it had branches in every major American Jewish community, and by 1890 national membership had reached 30,000. The organization even started branches in Europe.



Find out what B'nai B'rith does today. Also learn about the work of the Anti-Defamation League (ADL, founded in 1913 and now an independent organization) and Hillel, an organization of students on college campuses, first established at the University of Illinois in 1925. (Hillel has been independent since 1988.) Visit or call the Hillel office at a college near your home.



Go online to Hillel's national website at [www.hillel.org](http://www.hillel.org).

## JEW S PEAK OUT

As they built new community institutions and developed their cultural life, American Jews felt a greater sense of unity. Christians who got to know their Jewish neighbors generally treated them fairly. And when Jews were not treated fairly, they realized that they could speak out. They could become involved in issues of religion and state and forcefully meet any challenges to Jewish rights.

In 1840, American Jews organized themselves, for the first time, in order to protest the Damascus affair. That name refers to a false accusation by the French consul in Damascus, Syria. The consul claimed that in a religious ritual, Jews had murdered a Capuchin monk, Brother Thomas, who indeed had disappeared. Many Jews were arrested, and more than sixty Jewish children were taken by the Syrian authorities in order to make their parents “confess.”

The French and English Jewish communities sent delegations to Damascus to protest. Led by Isaac Leeser and others, American Jews organized protests in many cities, requesting that President Martin Van Buren intervene in the case. The president instructed American diplomats in Constantinople and Alexandria, Egypt, to express American outrage at the blood **libel**. In addition, Secretary of State John Forsyth wrote to the Syrian authorities, protesting the persecution. The combined European and American efforts were finally successful in obtaining the release of the prisoners, as well as an official decree from the sultan acknowledging that the charges were false.



A **libel** is a false, damaging statement about someone.



Why was the Damascus affair important to the Jewish community in America and around the world? Are there situations today that you think the American or world Jewish communities should speak out about?

## John Forsyth steps up

Secretary of State John Forsyth wrote to John Gliddon, the U.S. consul at Alexandria and instructed him to intercede for the Jews of Damascus. This letter was written on August 14, 1840:



*In common with all civilized nations, the people of the United States have learned with horror, the atrocious crimes imputed to the Jews of Damascus, and the cruelties of which they have been the victims. The President fully participates in the public feeling, and he cannot refrain from expressing equal surprise and pain, that in this advanced age, such unnatural practices should be ascribed to any portion of the religious world, and such barbarous measure be resorted to, in order to compel the confession of . . . guilt; the offenses with which these unfortunate people are charged, resemble too much those which, in less enlightened times, were made the **pretexts** of fanatical persecution . . . to permit a doubt that they are equally unfounded.*

from Jacob Rader Marcus, ed., *The Jew in the American World: A Source Book* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1996)



**Pretexts** are excuses.

In another infamous incident, the Mortara affair of 1858, an Italian Jewish boy was secretly baptized by his nurse and later kidnapped, to be raised in the Catholic Church. Once again, American Jews organized protest rallies in many cities. This time the president, James Buchanan, was not willing to get involved. However, the affair led to the organization of the Board of Delegates of American Israelites in 1859. The Board, which was intended to unify American Jews, had cultural, educational, charitable, and religious functions. It was mainly a defense organization, however, protecting Jewish rights in the United States and abroad. Even though it was not entirely successful in achieving its goal, the organization's existence was important. It became part of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations in 1878.

In 1850, the United States and the Swiss Confederation had signed a treaty that stated, “Christians alone are entitled to the enjoyment of the privileges guaranteed by the present Article in the Swiss Cantons.” This meant that American Jews could be denied entry permits and commercial privileges that American Christians had in Switzerland. (In some cantons, native Jewish residents were also denied civil rights.) This provision became known in 1857, when a visiting American Jewish businessman, A. H. Gottman, was asked to leave the canton of Neuchâtel because of his religion. American Jews objected strongly and spoke out against the treaty. They pointed out that the American government did not allow religion to be a consideration in granting political and economic rights in the United States, and therefore should not permit such a provision in agreements with other countries.

President Buchanan asked Secretary of State Lewis Cass to express American objections. In the end, the expulsion order against Gottman was rescinded, and the Swiss constitution was amended to guarantee equality to all citizens and foreign visitors regardless of their religion.



Should the United States get involved in political or religious events in other countries? Why or why not?

## The Swiss Treaty

Part of a protest by American Jews against the Swiss Treaty says,

*As citizens of the United States, we can not but consider such a construction antagonistic to the progressive, liberal policy of our government, and unworthy of the . . . fame which that policy has achieved; and as Israelites, we must feel mortified, should our government sanction Switzerland's slander upon religion.*

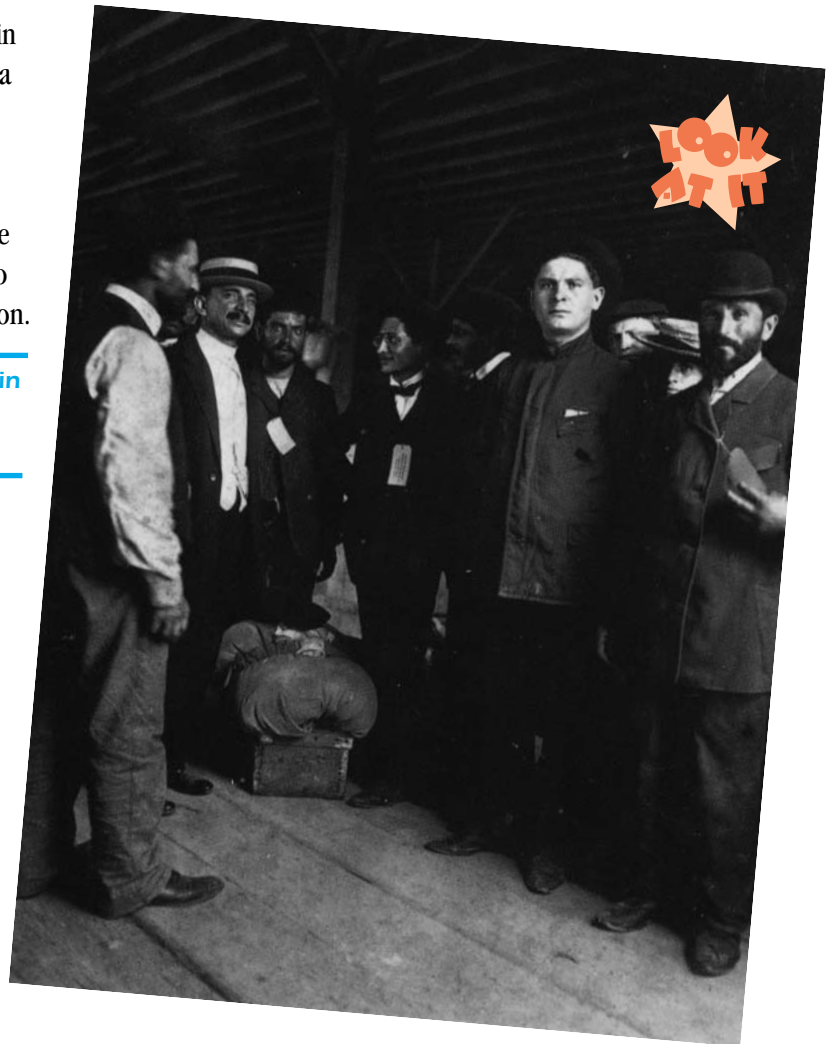
from Jonathan D. Sarna and David G. Dalin, *Religion and State in the American Jewish Experience* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997)

## A LASTING INFLUENCE

The immigration of Jews from central European countries to the United States had greatly increased the number of Jews in America. It also had a lasting influence on their cultural, political, and social lives. The community grew, and grew stronger, thanks to the contributions of this remarkable group of immigrants.



Is there one event, person, or contribution that you think had the greatest effect on the lives of Jews in America in the nineteenth century? What is it, and why?



Jewish immigrants about to enter the United States through Galveston, Texas.