

ROUNDTABLE ON THE ELDRIDGE STREET PROJECT

BIENNIAL SCHOLARS' CONFERENCE ON AMERICAN JEWISH HISTORY
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At the turn of the twentieth century, New York's Lower East Side was the largest Jewish city, home to 10 percent of world Jewry. One hundred years later, nary a pushcart graces the tenement-lined streets, nor is one likely to overhear a Yiddish phrase. Yet though the area is now decidedly part of an expanded Chinatown, the Lower East Side, as documented by historians and sociologists and heralded by guidebooks and tour guides alike, remains a stopping point for Jews and those interested in Jewish history. Toting bags of bialys and pickles, and often with school children in tow, Jews from Long Island to Los Angeles to Tel Aviv converge on the streets of the Lower East Side. As they soon discover, their "historic Jewish experience" is mostly limited to what can be gleaned from the streets, as the immigrant Jewish community's buildings, from the Forward building to the Yiddish Theaters are now privately-owned condominiums and workspaces.

The Eldridge Street Synagogue, a National Historic Landmark, offers an important exception: both its exterior and interior, in the process of being restored to its 1887 state, are open to the public for educational and cultural experiences. The building's heart, its elegant 19th-century sanctuary, features a 70-foot vaulted ceiling, ornate Moorish paint finishes, Victorian lighting fixtures, pastel leaded glass, and more personal and historical details, such as grooves in the wooden floorboards attesting to daily use by immigrant worshippers and the generations that followed them. These physical elements draw visitors into the sanctuary, an ideal setting in which to explore architectural traditions, immigration, New York City and Jewish history.

The **Eldridge Street Project** ["ESP"], a non-sectarian cultural organization, is steward of this important structure and, in its museum function, sponsors all public cultural and educational activities associated with the site. Now, as a multi-million-dollar restoration of the synagogue nears completion in 2007, permitting greater numbers to visit, expanded access to building areas, and enhanced opportunities for informing and inspiring museum-goers, **ESP** is embarking upon a comprehensive interpretive planning process. Because the Eldridge Street Synagogue is the only building in the district earmarked for a broad and public exploration of the American Jewish experience on the Lower East Side, the Project is committed to explore the myriad facets of Jewish adaptation to the City.

To this end, we have gathered scholars of American Jewish history (Jeffrey Gurock on "The Synagogue as an Artifact of its Era;" Annie Polland on "Beyond the Synagogue:

Religious Life;” David Kaufman on “Architecture and Observance;” and Jeffrey Shandler and Tony Michels on “Beyond the Synagogue: Culture and Politics”) as advisers on the writing of our docent manual in particular, and more broadly, the development of an interpretive spine for our historic site. In addition to devising ways to make various academic subjects applicable and compelling for a contemporary audience, ESP staff and scholars must keep in mind both the opportunities and challenges posed by collective memory and nostalgia.

As this is very much a project in the making, we relish the opportunity to gather three of our scholars for a roundtable discussion at the AJHS Biennial conference. Members of the Society, many of whom have written about the Lower East Side immigrant experience or the collective memory it has inspired, provide the perfect sounding board to explore the ideas and tensions inherent in bringing academic scholarship to a broader audience.

Jeffrey Gurock, in his overview of “The Synagogue as an Artifact of its Era,” will discuss:

- periodization of East European Jewish life downtown
- class and intra-ethnic differences among Kahal Adath Jeshurun members
- use of court records to tease out the story
- How Kahal Adath Jeshurun helps us understand steps in the Americanization of the immigrant synagogue.



Tony Michels, in his overview of "Beyond the Synagogue: Culture and Politics," will discuss:

- The problematic nature of discussing Jewish Lower East Side life in a synagogue, when very few immigrants attended with any frequency.
- How though the Orthodox leadership missed the boat in appealing to the masses, building a synagogue while the socialists were busy organizing, they later co-opted their vocabulary and means to reach the masses.
- How the Eldridge Street Project, through its educational and cultural programming, has initiated walking tours and literary series that highlight trends within the synagogue, outside the synagogue, and the intersections between.



Annie Polland, in her overview of “Beyond the Synagogue: Religious Life,” will discuss:

- From the women’s balcony to the tenement kitchen: using oral histories to broaden the scope of religious life.
- Temporary Synagogues: how the seasonal demand for religion transformed dance halls, liquor stores, churches, and even Tammany Hall into temporary synagogues...and how this relates to Eldridge Street.
- Gittel Natelson, the mikvah lady and wigmaker.

Dr. Jeffrey S. Gurock is Libby M. Klaperman Professor of Jewish History at Yeshiva University. He is the author or editor of thirteen books. His works include *A MODERN HERETIC AND A TRADITIONAL COMMUNITY: MORDECAI M.*

KAPLAN, *ORTHODOXY AND AMERICAN JUDAISM* (Columbia University Press, 1997). In 1998, *A MODERN HERETIC...* was awarded the bi-annual Saul Viener Prize from the American Jewish Historical Society for the best book written in that field. Gurock served from 1982-2002 as associate editor of *American Jewish History*, the leading academic journal in that field. He is also a former chair of the Academic Council of the American Jewish Historical Society. In 2004, The College of Charleston Library published Gurock's *Orthodoxy in Charleston: Brith Sholom Beth Israel & American Jewish History*. His most recent book is *Judaism's Encounter with American Sports* (Indiana University Press.)

Dr. Tony Michels is George L. Mosse Associate Professor of American Jewish History at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He is the author of *A Fire in Their Hearts: Yiddish Socialists in New York* (Harvard University Press, 2005).

Dr. Annie Polland is the Director of Education and History at the Eldridge Street Project, a not-for-profit that is stewarding the architectural restoration of the 1887 Eldridge Street Synagogue. She has served as a Visiting Professor of History at the Jewish Theological Seminary's List College since 2000. Her dissertation, "The Sacredness of the Family: New York's Immigrant Jew and Their Religion, 1890-1930" examines how East European immigrants adapted Judaism to America.

MODERATOR

Dr. Daniel Soyer is an Associate Professor of History at Fordham University. His research interests include the formation of American ethnic identities through fraternalism; the relationship of immigrant communities with communities of origin; Jewish immigrant radicalism; and New York politics. With Dr. Jocelyn Cohen, Dr. Soyer has edited *My Future Is in America: Autobiographies of Eastern European Jewish Immigrants*. Dr. Soyer is also the editor of *A Coat of Many Colors: Immigration, Globalization, and Reform in the New York City Garment Industry* (2005) and the author of *Jewish Immigrant Associations and American Identity in New York, 1880-1939* (1997).