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**W**hat have the suburbs wrought for Jews? Green islands of communal renewal, or culturally parched deserts of anomie? And what is the connection between, or obligation toward, the place we live and the larger metropolis? These questions seem especially pertinent now that older, urban centers are in the midst of social and cultural revival across the country. Are urban centers, inevitably, the true nub of Jewish cultural existence and broader creation? Is this a limited, parochial way of thinking about culture, and Jewish life? Are suburbs merely recipients or are they also distinctive, significant producers and, if so, of what? This issue also touches on home ownership — the “American dream” — and whether it is available to *all* Americans, as well as the concept of *HaMakom*, one of God’s names that means, the Place. —SB

**The Place of Cultural Production**

*Shaul Kelner*

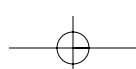
**A**s postwar America blazed a trail to the suburban frontier, the urban ethnographer Herbert Gans trained his sights on this new form of settlement. Did the shift to the suburbs really spell the demise of culture and community? To find out, Gans took a house in Levittown, New Jersey, living there for over two years. The result, *The Levittowners*, is a sociological classic that debunked popular notions of suburban banality and anomie.

A study of New Jersey suburbs would be hard pressed to ignore Jews, and Gans integrated the Jewish case into his broader scholarly project. From his work there and in Park Forest, Illinois came seminal insights on suburban Jewish life, including the well-known idea of “child-centered Judaism.”

Although we have been living through an urban revival for two decades — as much a cultural as a geographic reversal of the 1950s move to the suburbs — there has yet to emerge a Herbert Gans for our era, a scholar of the urban renaissance who also traces its implications for Jewish communities. Still, we can investigate the new work in urban studies to gain perspective on American Jewish life.

In *Neo-Bohemia*, an ethnographic study of gentrification of Chicago’s Wicker Park neighborhood, my colleague Richard Lloyd situates the revival of America’s cities in the broader transition to a postindustrial economy. Abandoned factories left to rot are once again producing. In their second life as open workspaces for ad agencies, dot-com startups, artists, and the like, they produce marketable content. Reconfigured as lofts, salons, clubs, and cafés, they produce the city’s new aura as an object of desire, not fear. To understand the transformation of hollowed-out urban cores into zones of cultural production and consumption, Lloyd tells us to look to the relationship between postindustrial work and the “neo-bohemian” workforce. An economy that demands creative, flexible, and autonomous workers gathers people who express these values in their leisure time, too.

Jewish neo-bohemians, drawn by the renaissance of urban life, have invigorated Jewish culture in cities across North America. Take New York, which by virtue of its global prominence, successful revitalization, and Jewish concentration, has again become the dominant locus of American Jewish cultural production. The lifestyles



celebrated in *Seinfeld*, *Friends*, *Sex in the City*, and *Rent* form the contexts that sustain phenomena like B'nai Jeshurun, Drisha, Kehilat Hadar, and Brooklyn Jews. Likewise, SoHo, Nobu, and the Knitting Factory are part of the cultural milieu that breeds innovations like Makor, Storahtelling, JDub, and *Heeb*.


New York has produced two distinct forms of the new Jewish culture, exemplified by B'nai Jeshurun (BJ) and *Heeb*. Call it the latest uptown/downtown split — a yawning chasm between *kavannah* and irony. It is partly a matter of demographic niches, but the professional vs. artist dichotomy is blurry.

Only when we look at BJ or *Heeb* as expressions of urban (not Jewish) identity, do we find the principle unifying uptown and downtown. Their common foil? The dreaded suburbs. *Heeb's* advertisers take this to the bank. In a LoHo Realty ad, a 20-something stares slack-jawed at a pinwheel ornamenting a suburban lawn, to the caption “As soon as they could afford to, your grandparents moved away from the Lower East Side. And they wonder why you never ask them for advice.”

For its part, BJ's meaning emerges through awareness not only of what it is, but what it is not. Members contrast their passionate, progressive *avodah* with the child-centered ethnicity-in-the-guise-of-religion that Gans identified with suburban Judaism. Suburbanites affirm the notion that BJ is different by packing its pews as tourists and *shlichim*, taking notes for the congregations back home.

Manhattanites' identities as city-dwellers are increasingly structured by positing a binary opposition between life on and off the island. For neo-bohemians who have chosen to

abandon the suburbs for the city, this serves as a framework for thinking about why they came, why they stay, and why they might or might not leave. New Yorkers contrast apartments with McMansions, walking with driving, Gramercy Tavern with T.G.I. Fridays, and Central Park with a private backyard. Structural anthropologists would reduce these to core dichotomies: lean vs. fat; society vs. self, *matzah* vs. *chametz*. This structure readily absorbs the presumed contrast between a “cutting edge” Jewish culture on Manhattan island and a derivative, staid Judaism across the Hudson. The result is a new urban Jewish culture defined through *shelilat haparbar*, the “negation of the suburbs.”

Can a culture defined in opposition to the suburbs revitalize Jewish life there? If the post-industrial economy homogenizes consumption, bringing Saks to the local mall and the Disney Store to Fifth Avenue, then perhaps so. But if the concentration of creative work in urban cores constitutes these spaces as fundamentally different, then attempts at translation will be self-defeating. For if urban Jewish culture is made meaningful by the particular lifestyle in which it is rooted, then ripping it out of its context will change it fundamentally. Rather than importing a culture premised on *shelilat haparbar*, should suburban Jews raise the banner for a Jewish life rooted in and affirming of their own experience? Whether their communities are structured to enable such cultural production is an open question. But if they succeed, then at least the city folk will have something to look forward to when the real estate bubble prices them out of the urban market. 

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## Reflecting on Suburban Judaism: Steven M. Cohen and Herbert J. Gans

**Steven M. Cohen:** This issue of *Sh'ma* is looking at the suburbs and the implications for constructing a Jewish community. Your work on suburbs — on the two planned communities of Park Forest, Illinois and Levittown, New Jersey — was understood at the time, in the late 1940s and late 1950s as countering the image that suburbs were sterile, lonely places. You discovered and portrayed suburbs as places that were building community. Could you either refute or elaborate this view?

**Herbert Gans:** Originally I went to both Park Forest and Levittown because they were new towns and thus had to build community as you put it — and they happened to be in the suburbs. I seem to have been the first sociologist to venture outside the city limits after World War II and see a new Jewish community. I actually went to Park Forest to research my MA thesis on political participation and discovered, really by accident, that a Jewish community was emerging.

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