

# A Rich Brew

## How Cafés Created Modern Jewish Culture

BY SHACHAR M. PINSKER

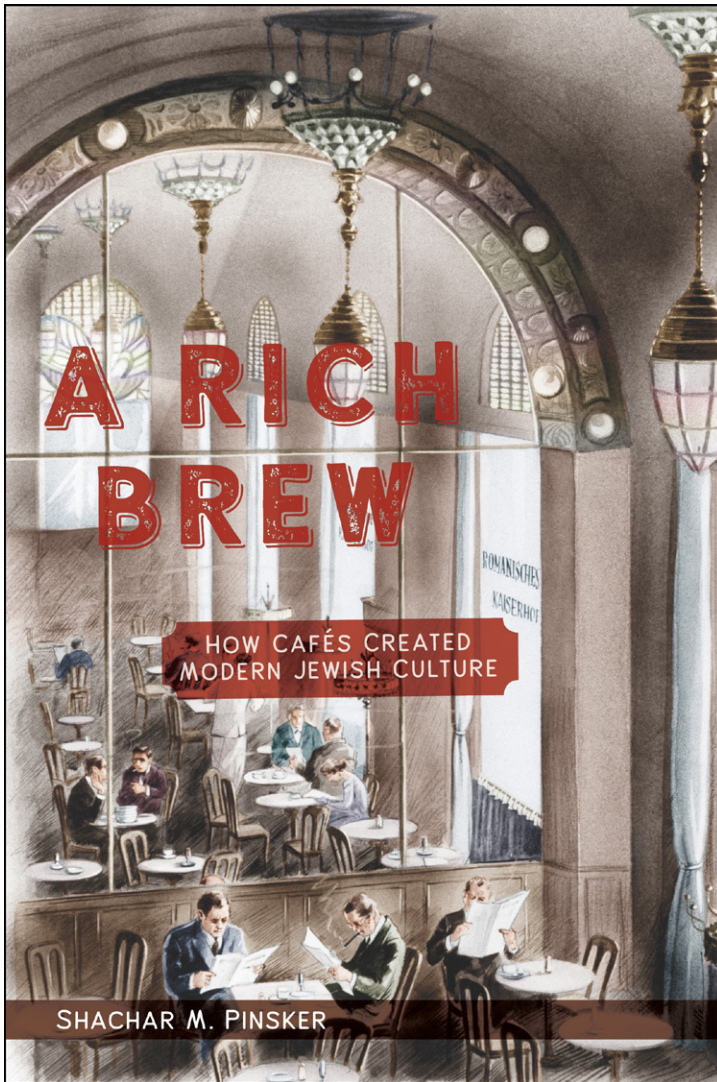
### Instructor's Guide

DEVELOPED BY SHACHAR M. PINSKER AND ISABELLA BUZYSNKI

**A fascinating glimpse into the world of the coffeehouse and its role in shaping modern Jewish culture**

Unlike the synagogue, the house of study, the community center, or the Jewish deli, the café is rarely considered a Jewish space. Yet, coffeehouses profoundly influenced the creation of modern Jewish culture from the mid-nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries. With roots stemming from the Ottoman Empire, the coffeehouse and its drinks gained increasing popularity in Europe. The “otherness,” and the mix of the national and transnational characteristics of the coffeehouse perhaps explains why many of these cafés were owned by Jews, why Jews became their most devoted habitués, and how cafés acquired associations with Jewishness.

Examining the convergence of cafés, their urban milieu, and Jewish creativity, Shachar M. Pinsker argues that cafés anchored a silk road of modern Jewish culture. He uncovers a network of interconnected cafés that were central to the modern Jewish experience in a time of migration and urbanization, from Odessa, Warsaw, Vienna, and Berlin to New York City and Tel Aviv. *A Rich Brew* explores the Jewish culture created in these social spaces, drawing on a vivid collection of newspaper articles, memoirs, archival documents, photographs, caricatures, and artwork, as well as stories, novels, and poems in many languages set in cafés. Pinsker shows how Jewish modernity was born in the café, nourished, and sent out into the world by way of print, politics, literature, art, and theater. What was experienced and created in the space of the coffeehouse touched thousands who read, saw, and imbibed a modern culture that redefined what it meant to be a Jew in the world.



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## PART I: ABOUT THE BOOK

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The institution of the coffeehouse had a profound influence on the creation of modern Jewish history, literature and culture in the mid-nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries. In spite of taking root in various cities, both the coffeehouse and the drinks consumed there originated far from the local soil. This “otherness,” and the mix of the national and transnational characteristics of the institution, helps to explain why many cafés were owned by Jews, why Jews became their most devoted habitués, and how cafés became associated with Jewishness. Examining the confluence between cafés, the urban environment, and the creativity of multilingual, diasporic culture, Professor Shachar Pinsker uncovers a network of cafés that were central to the modern Jewish experience in a time of migration and urbanization. He pays attention to the gender of the café, experienced by many as a homosocial space.

The book explores Jewish culture created in cafés ranging from Odessa, Warsaw, Vienna, and Berlin to New York City and Tel Aviv. It draws on a wealth of newspaper articles, memoirs, archival documents, photographs, caricatures and artwork, as well as Jewish literature in Hebrew, Yiddish, German, English, Russian and Polish. Crucial aspects relevant to this study (maps, network, timeline, hundreds of images) cannot be communicated in a traditional, linear monograph. In order to overcome this challenge, the book is complemented by a digital, open source, media-rich scholarly publication. Together, the book and the [interactive digital project](#) illustrate how transnational Jewish modernity was born in the café, nourished there, and sent out into the world of print, politics, literature, visual arts and theatre. In this way, what was experienced and created in the space of the coffeehouse influenced thousands who read, saw, and imbibed a modern culture that redefined what it means to be a Jew in the world.

Themes for your students to track throughout your course or module:

- Urbanity
- Multilingualism
- Diasporic culture
- Jewish modernity
- Transnationalism
- Gender
- Migration
- Acculturation
- Journalism

# PART II: CHAPTERS, DISCUSSION QUESTIONS, AND LESSON PLANS

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## INTRODUCTION

This introductory chapter establishes the link between modern Jewish culture and the institution of the coffeehouse, using the example of S.Y. Agnon’s mobility and his writing. It explores the role of the network of cafés in Jewish acculturation, and the creation of a public sphere. It lays out the historical scope of the book, its theoretical approach to cultural geography and the thirdspace, its methodology, and the sources used.

### Discussion Questions

- Referencing the excerpt from Agnon’s *Tmol shilshom* (Only Yesterday), why would a character like Yitzhak Kumer go straight to a café when arriving in a new city? What role does the café play in a big city that sets the urban environment apart from a small village?
- How did the coffeehouse aid in the emergence of a distinct “public” sphere? How was the café an open space? How was it, conversely, an exclusive space (thinking about class, profession, gender, religious identity)? Explain the concept of a “thirdspace” and how it contributes to a revised understanding of the café as an ideological and geographic space of business, leisure, and productivity.

### Lesson Plans

- After reading the Introduction, have students view the StoryMaps online about [Agnon’s](#) and [Sholem Aleichem’s](#) travels, as well as a general overview of the [maps](#) and the [network visualization](#)
- Answer the questions: How does mobility and migration shape the life and literature of Jewish writers? How does migration color their experience of the cafés in the cities they travel to? How do we see the idea of a “silk road” of modern Jewish culture reflected in these examples?
- Look at the timeline and think about the question: When and where is “Jewish modernity” as related to coffeehouses located?

## CHAPTER ONE: ODESSA

### *Jewish Sages, Luftmenshen, Gangsters, and the Odessit in the Café*

This chapter explores the importance of cafés to the history and culture of Odessa, a new city in the south of Russian Empire that attracted Jews, among other national and ethnic groups. It shows that Odessa cafés have been part of both the history and the myth of the city and Russian-Jews, constituting a liminal space between the real and the imaginary that can help us to understand both. By reading a variety of texts by multilingual writers, ranging from Peretz Smolenskin, to Sholem Aleichem and Isaac Babel, the chapter follows the confluence of establishments like Café Fanconi with the world of business, literature, theatre and journalism, from the mid nineteenth century to World War I and the establishment of the Soviet Union.

#### Discussion Questions

- How do the popular cafés in Odessa fit into the idea of a “thirdspace,” established in the introductory chapter? What does it take to be “respectable” in the café? How does respectability relate to Jewish modernity in particular? Is social and economic hierarchy suspended or upheld in the Odessa café?
- How is the atmosphere of the Odessa cafés before and after the 1905 failed Russian Revolution depicted in Jewish literature? How does nostalgia shape the literary and mythical “Old Odessa”?

#### Lesson Plans

- After reading Chapter 1, have students sample [\*The Letters of Menakhem-Mendl and Sheyne-Sheyndl\*](#). Referencing this text alongside Rich Brew, explain how Odessa was both a “curse” and a “blessing” to its Jewish inhabitants as an urban crossroads. How do the cafés in Odessa reflect this tension? How do varying notions of Jewishness factor into these evaluations of the café as a center of productivity, or of leisure and sin?
- Following the failed Russian Revolution, a series of pogroms, and the Sovietization of Odessa, many Jews fled from the city. World War II and the Holocaust decimated the remaining Jewish population. Using the [“People” network visualization](#) on the digital project website, note connections between cafés in Odessa and those in other cities. Reflect on the effects of Jewish migration from Odessa to other cities, other cafés. How might geographic separation from the “City of Life” have shaped later literary representations of Odessa?

## CHAPTER TWO: WARSAW

### *Between Kotik's Café and the Ziemiańska*

This chapter discusses Warsaw as a “Jewish metropolis” in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, and shows that cafés played a key role in Jewish culture created in Yiddish, Hebrew and Polish. It follows the rise of Warsaw as a cultural Jewish center in the interwar period, in which the city and its cafés—places like Kotik's, Tłomackie 13 and Ziemiańska were at the heart of cultural conflicts between Polish-Jewish groups like Skamander and Yiddish modernist groups. The chapter ends with a discussion of the role of cafés in the Warsaw Ghetto during the Holocaust.

#### Discussion Questions

- Given that the café culture of any given city is internally diverse, compare the café culture of interwar Warsaw with the popular cafés in Odessa. What sorts of habitués did they attract—in terms of profession, language, class, native or immigrant? What were the typical activities undertaken in the Jewish cafés of the respective cities?
- What do the literary and cultural tensions between Tłomackie 13 and the Polish Café Ziemiańska reveal about language and how it relates to national identity, Jewishness, and notions of “assimilation”?

#### Lesson Plans

- After reading the “Warsaw” chapter, have students read an excerpt from Sholem Asch's Hebrew story “Mi-ḥaye ha-yehudim be polin-rusya” (From the life of Jews in Russia-Poland, 1901) and/or from Lamed Shapiro's story “Berte” (“Bertha,” 1906). Discuss the apparent role of women in the café(s) in this story. How does the café as an exclusive, homosocial space emerge here? How are sentiments about women in this story related to the narrator's experience of urbanity?

## CHAPTER THREE: VIENNA

### *The “Matzo Island” and the Functioning Myths of the Viennese Café*

This chapter explores the myth of the Viennese café and the complex interplay between Jewishness and coffeehouses in the city between the mid nineteenth century and the Anschluss. It shows how during the period of the Habsburg Monarchy, Jewish emancipation and acculturation that went together with intense antisemitism, created a situation in which Jewish intellectuals and writers, such as members of the well-known modernist group Yung Wien, as well as Zionists like Theodor Herzl gravitated to places like Café Griensteidel and Café Central. The chapter discusses the interwar period in which Jewish writers like Joseph Roth, David Vogel and Veza Canneti wrestled with issues of gender, masculinity, and relations between Jewishness and Austrian identity in the city cafés.

#### Discussion Questions

- Explain some of the implications of a public perception of the Viennese café as a “Jewish space.” Compare ideas like “Muskeljudentum” (in contrast to the “coffeehouse Jew”) in relation to Viennese café culture with critiques of Jewish activity in Odessan cafés. Note changes and continuity in the perception of Viennese cafés as “Jewish spaces” before and after WWI.
- This is the first time that we’ve been introduced to female writers like Veza Canetti in the café. Reflecting on the excerpts included from *Der Tiger*, does Canetti consider the café to be a space equally accessible to men and women? Compare the presence of women in the cafés of interwar Vienna with the women in Café Robina in Odessa cafés, or those written about by the café habitués of Warsaw.

#### Lesson Plans

- Read a few excerpts from Theodor Herzl's *Altneuland* (“Old New Land”). Discuss Herzl’s portrayal of the “coffeehouse Jew” and Jewish masculinity. What about the café makes it a place of degradation to Herzl?
- Have students explore the [StoryMap about prominent women](#) in Jewish café culture. How do these women, from waitresses to anarchists, uniquely experience the café as a “thirdspace”?

## CHAPTER FOUR: BERLIN

### *From the Gelehrtes Kaffeehaus to the Romanisches Café*

The chapter begins with an exploration of cafés in the eighteenth century, in the context of Enlightenment and Haskalah, examining Moses Mendelssohn's writings in Hebrew and German. It moves to the nineteenth and early twentieth century, and discusses German-Jewish writers, from Heinrich Heine to Else Lasker-Schüler, who linked Berlin's cafés with the feuilleton, journalism, literature, censorship, gender and Jewishness. The chapter ends with the Romanisches Café that came to epitomize Weimar Berlin, and Jewish multilingual modernism in German, Yiddish and Hebrew.

#### Discussion Questions

- Why were *Café-Konditoreien* so important to the publication and consumption of journals, newspapers, books, and feuilletons in Berlin before the 1848 revolution? How did the legal and social status of Jews change under the new constitution?
- How was the literary production in popular fin-de-siecle Berlin cafés like Café des Westens different from earlier cafés? How did Jewish immigrants to Germany, especially from Eastern Europe, change this cultural landscape?

#### Lesson Plans

- After reading the chapter, have students read Martin Buber's essay "[On the \[Jewish\] Renaissance \(1903\)](#)". Discuss his ideas in the context of Weimar Berlin.



## CHAPTER FIVE: NEW YORK CITY

### *Kibitzing in the Cafés of the New World*

This chapter moves away from Europe to the United States, and explores the productive tension between American capitalism and the institution of the coffeehouse. It shows how migrants became American-Jews, creating in the early twentieth century a robust café culture in the Lower East Side that was of intense interest to people like Hutchins Hapgood and Henry James. The chapter examines institutions like Café Royal and the Garden Cafeteria that were at the center of multilingual Jewish literature and Jewish theatre, and their representation in the work of writers like Anna Margolin and Isaac Bashevis-Singer, as well as in visual representation by Jewish photographers and artists.

#### Discussion Questions

- What were the ‘outsider’ impressions of the immigrant Jewish café culture in New York’s East Side which emerged in the late-19th century? Compare the descriptions of Jewish cafés written by Hapgood, Fishberg, and James.
- Explain the idea of a *kibitzarnya* and how it applies particularly to Jewish, and to Yiddish, café culture in America. How was the society in the café like a *yeshiva*, as Chaver Paver calls it, to Yiddish writers in the early 20th century? How did women fit into this society, if at all?

#### Lesson Plans

- After reading the “New York” chapter, have students explore the [StoryMap on Yiddish theater and cabaret](#). Take the opportunity to discuss theater as a unique form of cultural and artistic expression. How did Yiddish theater engage and help create a modern “public sphere” while also catering to an exclusive, Jewish audience.
- Explore New York City on the [“Cities” map](#) of cafés. Use the time-slider to illustrate the spread and geographic distribution of cafés over time. Reflect on the demographic, linguistic, and literary changes that accompanied the geographic shift of Jewish café culture from the East Side to Greenwich Village, Second Avenue, and to the cafeterias of the Lower East Side.

## CHAPTER SIX: TEL AVIV–JAFFA

### *The “First Hebrew City” or a City of Many Cafés?*

This chapter moves to Jaffa and the new city of Tel Aviv in Palestine, exploring the role of cafés in an urban space that was central to Zionism and the Yishuv, yet was connected to both Arab culture and diasporic, Jewish multilingual culture. It examines the creation of Hebrew modernism in the café, by writers such as Avraham Shlonsky, Nathan Alterman and Leah Goldberg, and its relations to Yiddish, German, and Middle Eastern culture. The chapter ends with the State of Israel, examining Café Kassit as the last post-Holocaust “Jewish” café.

#### Discussion Questions

- Were the cafés of Jaffa and Tel-Aviv unique from those of European cities like Berlin and Vienna, from the cafés in New York City? How so (or not)? How do perceptions of Tel-Aviv cafés uphold or undermine the mythology of the “First Hebrew City” as a unique experiment born “out of the sands”?
- Why was linguistic diversity such an important and divisive issue in the cafés of Tel-Aviv? Why did Hebraists accuse the “foreign” languages of Tel-Aviv’s immigrant population of creating a “new Babel”?

#### Lesson Plans

- After reading the chapter, have students use the [timeline tool](#) to observe the concentration of significant “Jewish cafés” over time in the cities they have read about so far. Discuss why the most recently active cafés are located in New York and Tel Aviv-Jaffa. Explore the connections between the earlier “golden era” cafés and the late cafés and cafeterias using the [“People” visualization](#).

## CONCLUSION

### *Closing Time*

The concluding chapter contemplates the different roles of cafés in Jewish modernity and in contemporary Jewish culture. It analyses twentieth-first literary texts by Aharon Appelfeld and Michael Idov, as well as Mor Kaplansky's film "Café Nagler." In these examples, it becomes clear that cafés are spaces of diasporic Jewish "reflective nostalgia" in Svetlana Boym's terms.

### Discussion Questions

- Are Jewish cafés, as significant centers of literary, artistic, and cultural production, a thing of the past? Or has café culture simply changed, and why? Discuss the power of diasporic memory in contemporary Jewish cafés, and relate this to other examples of diasporic nostalgia in the 18th and early-19th century cafés you have read about.
- Read Adam Gopnik's review of "A Rich Brew" in [The New Yorker magazine](#). Discuss how coffeehouses created elements of liberal democratic societies and what might be the equivalent of these coffeehouses in today's world.

### Lesson Plans

- Using the "Mapping Modern Jewish Cultures" digital project as a reference, encourage students to use the digital tools along with the book to create their own StoryMaps on a relevant topic. Urge students also to explore people, cities, and themes which are not covered thoroughly by this project.