In the United States, economic success or failure measured a man. Thrust into a society where a male breadwinner ethic prevailed, most immigrant Jewish men wholeheartedly embraced the American pursuit of economic success, even when their wages proved insufficient to support their families. This drive for financial stability and aspirations for a better life, coupled with American cultural standards that defined male success in terms of economic accomplishment, weighed heavily on successive generations of American Jewish men.

The study of Jewish men as gendered subjects opens up new insights for scholars of American Jewish history, a field that has generated copious scholarship on Jewish women but has produced relatively little on the gendered experiences of Jewish men. Immigrant Jews from Eastern Europe found the male breadwinner ethic particularly jarring, since they came from a society that endorsed married women’s work as a cultural norm. Yet once in the United States, most Jews quickly embraced middle-class standards of gendered economic behavior despite their initial poverty. As Jewish immigrants sought to conform to middle-class standards of respectability, Jewish men increasingly staked their self-worth on their ability to succeed financially. Constant pressure to find steady work in their early years in America, and profound concern with maintaining middle-class status once achieved, became overwhelming preoccupations for most American Jewish men.

In their choices as new immigrants, Jewish women and men seemed to want to create at least the appearance of an ideal, middle-class American family, even before it
New York City (detail), 1936, Russel Lee
was financially feasible. Young Jewish women often worked for wages, particularly in the garment industry, but typically only while single. Married Jewish women seldom joined the paid labor force, and in fact, were employed outside the home at a rate far below that of married women of other ethnic groups. Jewish wives supported their families in vital but “unseen” ways, such as by taking in boarders or working alongside their husbands in a family business—occupations that effectively concealed the role of married women as workers.

Progressive American reformers, both Jewish and non-Jewish, often mistakenly assumed that the stereotype of the Eastern European male scholar, whose wife worked to support his Talmudic studies, was a widespread reality and worried that it might interfere with immigrant acculturation. In 1903, the staff of New York’s Educational Alliance compiled a Yiddish-language guidebook titled *Sholem Aleykhem tsu Immigranten* that provided all sorts of advice for new immigrants. The authors felt compelled to include a stern warning to immigrant men, explaining that unlike in Europe, husbands in America had a duty to support their families and not place the burdens of work upon their wives.¹ The ideal image of the full-time Torah scholar never reflected the reality of Jewish men’s lives. Yet well-meaning progressives regularly repeated the notion that Eastern European Jewish men lacked the requisite skills to be successful providers. A 1904 American Hebrew article lamented the many “broken down mechanics and men who have been peddlers, storekeepers, clerks, laborers, factory hands, religious teachers, and what not,” who claimed “that they can do anything and everything [but] can do nothing in particular.”² Even those who portrayed immigrant Jewish men as toiling laborers, such as progressive Christian journalist Hutchins Hapgood, penned a distorted portrait that reinforced the notion of men as insufficient breadwinners. He described old, “pathetic,” bearded Jewish men, “carrying or pressing piles of coats… or standing for sixteen hours a day by [a] pushcart.”³ Although Hapgood wrote with the best of intentions, he nonetheless furthered the portrait of Jewish men as downtrodden providers.

Contrary to these depictions, most Jewish men, like most other immigrants throughout the United States, worked constantly, struggling to provide for their families. They endured slack seasons in factories, oppressive working conditions, and often a sequence of low-paying jobs after arriving in America. In the labor movement, securing a fair wage was a political mission, but Jewish men also described attaining financial stability as a source of self-respect. Writing in 1905, former labor organizer and social worker Phillip Davis recalled the exploitation that he endured for five long years in a coat factory, until “I woke up to find myself a full-fledged workman making about $14 a week, sure of my job and proud of my skill.” That transformation rendered him, in his own estimation, “a conqueror—master of myself again… a free and independent workman.”⁴ Conversely, an inability to find work weighed heavily on Jewish men, both economically and psychically. In her memoir of growing up in the Bronx, Kate Simon reflected on the gendered toll that unemployment took on the fathers of her childhood friends; the lack of work “seemed to silence and emasculate them and they became quiet, slow-moving old women.”⁵ In this formulation, as in so many others, masculinity hinged on the ability to provide.

Most Jewish men faced periodic struggles, shouldered the pressures of work, and garnered a sense of satisfaction from their economic accomplishments. Still, an undercurrent of anxiety accompanied their
pursuit of success. Chaim Kusnetz, who emigrated from Belarus to Brooklyn in 1923 to join his father, offers a unique but revealing retrospective account of his professional and personal life. Finding a job as an ironworker, he remained cognizant of pressures for career advancement in his early years in America. “It was a time of prosperity and success,” Kusnetz observed. “In every newspaper and magazine there were screaming advertisements: ‘Success! Learn this, do that, and you’ll have success!’” Writing in the early 1940s, Kusnetz had attained, in his own words, “the petty life of a settled, happy petit bourgeois.” He not only had a wife and daughter, but also “a steady job and... quite good money.” Yet, Kusnetz remained lonely and discontented despite his secure employment and “nice few dollars in the bank,” and reaped little personal fulfillment from his economic success. While certainly an enigmatic case, Kusnetz’s memoir points to a more prevalent uneasiness with newly attained middle-class status that percolated, particularly among the children of immigrants. Rabbi Joshua Loth Liebman’s 1946 self-help book Peace of Mind climbed atop the best-seller lists, in part because it addressed the “very real anxieties” that men held about their business success and economic status.

The pursuit of American success remained a constant struggle and a persistent preoccupation, even once Jewish men had reached the middle class. In fact, by the 1920s, their concentration in business and the white-collar professions left Jewish men feeling particularly vulnerable to the unpredictability of market forces in an era when they were not yet fully secure in America. Before the mid-20th century, Jewish men remained somewhat uncertain about their economic futures and not quite fully confident of their abilities and opportunities to live up to prevailing standards of American manhood.