Theodor Herzl, the father of modern political Zionism and leader of the movement until his death in 1904, was also a journalist, playwright, and novelist. In 1902, he published Alteuroland ("Old-New Land"), a utopian novel that imagined the masses of European Jews immigrating to Palestine and establishing a new society. The novel begins, however, not in Jerusalem or Haifa, but in a Viennese café:

Sunk in deep melancholy, Dr. Friedrich Loewenberg sat at a round marble table in his café on the Alsergrund. It was one of the most charming of Viennese cafés. Ever since his student days he had been coming there, appearing every afternoon at five o’clock with bureaucratic punctuality. The sickly, pale waiter greeted him submissively…. After that, he would seat himself at the round reading table, drink his coffee, and read the papers with which the waiter plied him. And when he had finished with the dailies and the weeklies… there were chats with friends or solitary musings.¹

In Herzl’s novel, the Viennese café represents the stagnation of “old Europe” in its decline, and signifies Herzl’s vision of Europe as a dead end for emancipated, acculturated Jews. The narrator of Alteuroland emphasizes the “sickly, pale waiter” as a sign of “degeneration,” which is in turn mirrored in the character of Dr. Friedrich Loewenberg—an overeducated, unemployed, young Jewish man, who does nothing but read newspapers and chat with his friends in the café.

In characterizing acculturated European Jews as consumed with words but lacking action, Herzl echoed the ideas of another influential Jewish intellectual and Zionist leader, Max Nordau. In his well-known address to the Second Zionist Congress, Muskeljudentum (“Muscular Judaism,” 1898), Nordau called
for Jews to become “men of muscle” instead of remaining “slaves to their nerves.” Unlike the “coffeehouse Jews” of the Diaspora, the “New Jews,” Nordau insisted, should “rise early...and not be weary before sunset...have clear heads, solid stomachs and hard muscles.”

Both Herzl and Nordau lived for some time in Vienna, as well as in Paris and elsewhere in Europe, where they participated in the renowned café culture of those cities. Both considered cafés an institution inextricably tied to the urban culture of acculturated Jews. Indeed, a dictum in fin de siècle Vienna announced, “the place of the Jew is in the coffeehouse.” In spite of the fact that many non-Jews frequented Viennese cafés, and that there was nothing recognizably Jewish about them, cafés were seen and experienced, for better or worse, as “Jewish spaces.” For Herzl and Nordau, the café represented not only a Jewish locale, but also a gendered space, associated with a “degenerated” masculinity of melancholic, pale, bookish Jewish men who were “slaves to their nerves.”

Ironically, the “new men” with “solid stomachs and hard muscles” whom Herzl and Nordau imagined as transformed by Zionism remained attracted to the bourgeoning café culture even after they immigrated to Palestine. By the 1920s and 1930s, Tel Aviv—which took its name from the title of Herzl’s Altnueland in its Hebrew translation—became especially renowned for its cafés. Immigrant writers, journalists, artists, and intellectuals who wrote in Hebrew (but also in Yiddish, German, and other languages) gathered around tables in European-style cafés like Retzki, Ararat, Sheleg Levanon, Ginati, and the most famous of all, Casit.

Indeed, across continents, cafés in Odessa, Warsaw, Lvov/Lemberg, Vienna, Berlin, New York, Tel Aviv, and Jerusalem played a crucial role in the creation of modern Jewish literature and culture. A map of these interconnected urban cafés constitutes a kind of Silk Road of modern Jewish creativity, a place of cultural exchange. Moreover, Jewish writers constantly described the physical space of the café in their poems, stories, and novels, often as a microcosm of the Jewish urban experience in an age of immigration and rapid modernization. For the Yiddish writer Chaver Paver (Gershon Einbinder), who immigrated to New York in 1923, the “land of Yiddish writers in America was an area the size of the interior of Café Europa, about twenty feet wide and forty feet long. If you pushed open the door and stepped outside, you found yourself on the other side of the border, in an alien country.”

Café Europa on East Broadway was only one of many small and simple cafés in the Lower East Side. By the early years of the 20th century, New York’s Lower East Side housed 250–300 cramped and lively cafés,
which began to attract the gaze of Christian outsiders, such as journalist Hutchins Hapgood and writer Henry James, who became enthralled with their unique cultural rhythms. In some of these cafés, writers and intellectuals gathered alongside others from many walks of life. But Chaver Paver understood the café to be a transformative space, one that marked a real or imaginary border between inside and outside, between the cherished, homey, literary, yet public space of the café, and the dreaded, alien space outside it.

Using the tools of gender analysis, the café can be fruitfully interpreted as (primarily) a male space, where Jewish men enacted complex dynamics of modern Jewish masculinity. For many male writers and intellectuals from Eastern Europe with traditional Jewish backgrounds, the café represented a modern, secular substitute for the beys medrash (House of Study). An essential space for young and aspiring writers, the café contained its own internal meanings. The older and more established writers, like the rabbis of previous generations, clustered around a café table reminiscent of the tish, where the rabbi sat at the head of the table and his Hasidim gathered around to listen to his words. Instead of Talmud or the weekly portion of the Torah, this secularized rabbi and his followers interpreted, discussed, and analyzed a modern poem or a story.

For Paver and others, the café, like the yeshiva and house of study, was a homosocial space, of men and for men, despite the fact that it was open to anyone—Jews and non-Jews, women and men—who could pay for a cup of coffee or tea. In fact, cafés sometimes became a ground for enacting the gendered identity of modern Jewish women, both for the few women who frequented them and the men who wrote about those women. Male Jewish writers and poets who reflected upon the women they encountered inside the café often negotiated and interpreted modern Jewish masculinity through the simultaneously alluring and threatening figure of the “new [Jewish] woman,” as well as in the context of changing discourses about homosocial desire and homosexuality.

Indeed, cafés served both as male literary spaces and as places where various permutations of sexual desire were performed. From the late 19th through the mid-20th century, the specific context of the urban Jewish café emerged as a key locus for intense explorations of Jewishness, gender, and modernity.

2 Max Nordau, “Muskeljudentum,” Judische Turnzeitung, June 1900, 10–11.