Looking out on the great turn-of-century metropolis of Warsaw, A. A. Friedman, editor of the Hebrew daily *Ha-tzofe* (The Observer), could not help but notice that the city and its residents were changing. Among the many changes unfolding before the paper’s keen journalistic eye was the appearance of numerous “Jewish” cafés: coffee houses that were patronized almost exclusively by Jews.

Typical of a turn-of-century daily’s love-hate relationship with the modern city, the newspaper was both drawn to and repulsed by Warsaw’s many sites of urban attraction and horror, including cafés. Indeed, not only had “the Jews” changed the face of “the city,” the city had changed the face of “the Jews”:

The number of cafés in our city has grown at an alarming rate of late and some of these institutions are even open on Shabbat. The reason for this phenomenon is the growing number of solitary people [*aneshim bodedim*] living in our city without their families. These people have much difficulty finding a place where they can go on Shabbat…

This seemingly innocuous item about the changing nature of Warsaw’s cityscape speaks volumes about a series of fundamental social transformations—the massive in-migration of single Jewish men to the city, noticeable changes in levels of religious observance, and the appearance of a new public life created by these men.

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2 *Ha-tzofe*, no. 498 (25 VIII/ 7 IX 1904), 849.

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* Research for this article was made possible by a generous grant from the Israel Science Foundation, ISF, Grant No. 361/12.
culture. Together, these changes altered Jewish society and culture in urban centers across turn-of-century Eastern Europe. These and related developments will serve as the backdrop to this article’s discussion of the emergence of Jewish coffee houses in Warsaw, vital public spaces that will serve as a rubric here for examining the Jewish encounter with and response to modernity in Eastern Europe. What can the triangular relationship between coffee, Jews and the urban ideal tell us about Jewish perceptions of and responses to the very epitome of modern society, the metropolis?

For over a generation, coffee houses have stood at the center of critical theories interrogating the development of modern, liberal societies and their ostensible guarantor, the bourgeois public sphere (or, alternatively, civil society). In his now classic The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere, Jürgen Habermas persuasively argues that coffee houses were part of a series of new spaces and institutions that emerged in eighteenth-century Western Europe to form a “public sphere,” the bedrock of modern, western society, politics and culture that guaranteed Western Europe’s path from enlightenment and democracy to cosmopolitanism and co-existence. At its core, the bourgeois public sphere was a collection of institutions—coffee houses, newspapers and theaters—that enabled the assembly of individuals and the crystallization of “the public.” Its key characteristics were its open nature, rational foundations, and new spaces in which individuals could assemble to debate rationally the issues of the day and form a collective public without abandoning their individual autonomy. According to Habermas, “the bourgeois public sphere may be conceived above all as the sphere of private people come together as a public; they soon claimed the public sphere regulated from above against the public authorities themselves, to engage in a debate over the general rules governing relations in the basically privatized but publicly relevant sphere of commodity exchange and social labor. The medium of this political confrontation was peculiar and without historical precedent: the people’s use of their reason.”

3 For more on Jewish public culture at the time, see: Jeffrey Veidlinger, Jewish Public Culture in the Late Russian Empire (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009).
