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Jewish Mass Migration and the Choice of Destination

The weight of quantitative evidence suggests that New York was the preferred destination. After all, around ten times more Jews settled there than in London. It is tempting to think that those who failed to move to the more popular city were therefore demonstrating some sort of inferiority, a disposition which may have spilled over into those strikingly different levels of entrepreneurship. Perhaps they were too poor to go further, perhaps there was some sort of psychological association with Europe which prompted the less adventurous to stay, perhaps there were other even less specific reasons which prompted the more entrepreneurial to go to New York and the less to settle in London. Perhaps, though, the temptation must be resisted because in truth we do not know.

There is certainly evidence that some contemporaries viewed the London bound Jews in a less favourable light. The Jewish Chronicle lamented the difference between them; those going on to America during the crisis migration of 1881 and 1882 were ‘a far superior class to the usual poor Jews that reach London from Poland’.¹ Chaim Bermant summarised the view of the two destinations, or at least how it appeared to their descendants:

The ultimate destination was America, die goldene medine, the golden land. Britain, at best, was thought of as the silver land, a poor man’s America, but those who did come brought others over and many who had thought of England as a staging-point remained for good.²

If this view is correct, then the implication for entrepreneurship in the two streams is that those immigrants moving to New York were surely more likely to become entrepreneurs, a likelihood determined by
differences in their backgrounds and make-ups. It is a big ‘if’, however. The testimonial evidence is by no means conclusive.

A Jewish immigrant in London countered the suggestion of New York’s greater economic attraction, saying ‘if New York’s streets were paved with gold, London’s were paved with platinum and diamonds’. In contrast to the focus of the Jewish Chronicle’s complaint, the typical immigrants to London were a people ‘of a more capable and self-reliant nature than those who seek refuge here in times of persecution’. Differences in the two streams of immigrants were not so obvious. While the recorded opinions of contemporaries are both conflicting and selective, some obvious influences on the levels of entrepreneurship among the London and New York Jews ought to be considered first – namely, any differences in the wealth and structure of the two groups of emigrants.

**Entrepreneurship and capital**

It is difficult to judge whether crossing the Atlantic was likely to have led to the more entrepreneurial migrants moving to New York. For one thing a psychological profile of a typical entrepreneur remains elusive. There is no consensus among social scientists about whether entrepreneurs have more or less adventurous personalities. Furthermore, as a matter of historical fact it is probably unwise to assume that moving to America was especially adventurous – it was simply the obvious choice. So regardless of the subsequent outcomes, New York might rather have been the choice of the conservative majority of emigrants, London the choice of the entrepreneurial few.

Economists avoid psychological stereotyping and assume that entrepreneurs essentially select themselves, primarily on the basis of their access to capital, both financial and human. Either entrepreneurs have preferential access to the necessary funds for entering business, or they are more talented, or both. Some evidence exists of the amounts of financial and human resources brought by the two streams of Jews.

Immigrants had to declare the funds they were carrying on arrival both in New York and London, so a comparison of how much financial capital each immigrant brought with them ought to be relatively straightforward. For instance, between 1895 and 1902 each East European native that arrived in steerage at the Port of London from Rotterdam, Hamburg or Bremen and on board a German or Dutch steamer expressing an intention to stay brought, on average, 26.3 shillings, or $6.40. East European Jewish immigrants to the United States during the same