Rereading Space: Elma Lewis, Temple Mishkan Tefila and the Quest for Unity

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ABSTRACT

Rereading Space: Elma Lewis, Temple Mishkan Tefila and the Quest for Unity

A thesis presented to the Department of Near Eastern and Judaic Studies

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Explores the role of religious and cultural space in the formation, maintenance and dissolution of relationships between Blacks and Jews in Boston by examining the transfer of Temple Mishkan Tefila, a Conservative Jewish Synagogue, to Elma Ina Lewis, a Black Arts educator for the purposes of transforming it into an arts school in 1968. This research was based on archival findings, and made use of collections held at the American Jewish Historical Society in Boston, MA and the Elma Ina Lewis Papers at Northeastern University. It demonstrates how space can serve as a site of integration and contestation. Additionally, this study considers the role of gender and how it shaped relationships between Blacks and Jews, particularly the actions of Elma Lewis and her engagement with the leaders of the Jewish community during this time.
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INTRODUCTION

The Combined Jewish Philanthropies of Greater Boston announced today it had purchased two buildings valued at $1,125,000 and contributed the structures as a gift of the Jewish community to the Boston Negro community for cultural and educational use. The buildings, formerly the property of Temple Mishkan Tefila, are located in what is now a predominantly Negro neighborhood.¹

This announcement appeared in an article released by the Jewish Telegraphic Agency two days after the property transfer of Mishkan Tefila, “the oldest Conservative synagogue in New England,”² to Elma Ina Lewis, a black woman and arts educator. The daughter of Barbadian immigrants, Lewis expanded the image and legacy of the Black community in Boston by transforming the synagogue into The Elma Lewis School of Fine Arts, which also became the home of the National Center for Afro-American Artists. What had begun as a small arts school for Black youth in a Roxbury apartment³ eighteen years earlier, now received the accolade of being “a worldwide first in recognizing the values of black culture”⁴ in the words of Lamont L. Thompson, Vice-President of Boston’s WBZ Radio and Television. Although a significant step in the direction of black progress and recognition of talented black youth, Lewis’ accomplishment must be interpreted within the broader cultural narrative of Black and Jewish interactions in

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¹ “Boston Federation Gives Negro Community Buildings Worth $1,125,000.” Jewish Telegraphic Agency 19 Apr 1968.  
⁴ “From the letter of Lamont L. Thompson, Vice-president of WBZ Radio and Television” from compiled media responses to the transfer of the temple to the black community; Undated source; Boston Jewish Community Relations Council records; I-123; Box 67a; Folder 5; American Jewish Historical Society, Boston, MA and New York, NY.
public spaces, namely in Roxbury, Dorchester and Mattapan. This “gift of the Jewish community to the Boston Negro community” both demonstrated the alliances between the two groups, as well as magnified the opposition and intergroup tensions already present in the community. The plans and subsequent transfer of Jewish space to the Black community had alarming consequences, signaling the beginnings of a new chapter in Black-Jewish relations in Boston’s urban areas.

This study explores the role of religious and cultural space in the formation, maintenance, and dissolution of relationships between Blacks and Jews in Boston by examining the transfer of sacred space of one community to another community for secular purposes. Examining the ways in which Blacks and Jews organized themselves around physical spaces within communities-in-transition, can offer insight into the collective values of these individual communities, revealing what they saw as essential to their collective identity when faced with integration. In other words, investigating the attitudes of Blacks and Jews towards the acquisition and relinquishment of a particular physical space, respectively, sheds light on what made this space a site of both amicability and contestation. By exploring their public social interactions and private exchanges in the late 1960s and 1970s, this study argues that the factors that influenced Black-Jewish relations should be interpreted through a variety of lenses, not just through difference. There were moments when Blacks and Jews employed integrationist ideals to achieve some sense of stability within the urban neighborhoods that they saw transitioning right before their eyes (i.e. the transfer of Mishkan Tefila). This is important to underscore because most images of Black-Jewish relations have been

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5 “Boston Federation Gives Negro Community Buildings Worth $1,125,000.” Jewish Telegraphic Agency 19 Apr 1968.
negative, harping solely on the inability of Blacks and Jews to live harmoniously as neighbors or bordering communities.

At the center of this study stands the towering figure of Elma Lewis. How did her philosophy and pedagogy, which have been overlooked, provide a key to understanding her character and subsequent dealings with the Jewish community and its leaders? What was her relationship to the Jewish community, and how did the latter view her? This study seeks to answer these questions.

The temple transfer has been a foundational story in Bostonians’ cultural memory. By analyzing the transfer of Mishkan Tefila (Jewish religious space), to a Black woman, Lewis, for the purposes of transforming it into an Afro-American arts school (Black secular space), this study will argue that it represented some broader underlying dynamics. First, it will suggest that Blacks and Jews, both, were interested in integration efforts and creating ties that promoted a positive relationship between the two communities. Second, it will suggest that although space can be used to promote community stability, that same space can simultaneously be a site of contestation between groups, provoking anxiety over leaving and entering space, as well as provoking anxiety over relinquishing and gaining space; old Mishkan Tefila was both integrated and contested space, as it transitioned from sacred to secular space. Third, it will suggest that even though a large portion of the Jewish population no longer lived in Roxbury or its surrounding neighborhoods, they still held a vested interest in this community for a variety of reasons, including their desire to maintain Jewish buildings and businesses that were still active in the community, their desire to safeguard the lives of those Jews who remained as residents, and their desire to contribute to the advancement of Blacks. And
finally, it will call attention to how gender dynamics reverberated throughout this narrative inconspicuously, but with salience. Elma Lewis, a Black woman, and her engagement with white, male Jewish leaders sheds light on the role of gender displayed through their social interactions. The role of gender is analyzed in this research, something that has not been considered previously.

**Literature Review**

The history of Black-Jewish relations in Boston has generated a significant amount of scholarship over the last several decades. A handful of scholars have dedicated their research to investigating Boston’s race relations, to understand why a robust and thriving Jewish community migrated to the suburbs at an alarming rate during the 1950s, into the 1960s. Due to redlining, unethical real estate practices and blockbusting, among a host of other factors, Jews began to move out of the city at a more rapid rate. The racial and religious composition of urban neighborhoods changed, which resulted in the formation and crystallization of Black urban spaces in areas that were not as pronounced in former years.

The first scholarly exploration of these transformations was Yona Ginsberg’s *Jews in a Changing Neighborhood: A Study of Mattapan*, which was published in 1975. Of the other larger works written on this topic, Ginsberg (who began working on the subject as a Harvard graduate student) wrote within the closest proximity to the years of racial transition. Written in the mid-1970s, her work involved spending time interviewing Jews who remained in Mattapan after most of their coreligionists had left the area. Her work focused on their stories; Mattapan was the last of these areas to experience the final effects of ethnic turnover. In her book, she admitted,
I did not study the incoming black residents nor the white non-Jewish people. In order to get the whole picture of life in a transitional area, it is essential to do a comparative study of all groups involved in this process. Needless to say, it was impossible for me – a white, Jewish, foreign-born woman – to study any other group under such circumstances.⁶

She was concerned with the narratives of those who remained in Mattapan, narratives replete with expressions of fear and ambivalence towards the changing neighborhood. Stereotypes regarding Black identity were evident in her findings. Her interviewees provided insight into personally-held beliefs regarding race and identity which demonstrated the struggle that some had with interpreting racial difference and determining appropriate responses.

In 1991, Hillel Levine and Lawrence Harmon revisited these questions in *The Death of an American Jewish Community: A Tragedy of Good Intentions* and sought to contextualize the “death” of the Jewish community and the creation of a newly visible black, urban community. Offering a sociological and historical analysis of Boston’s race relations, the authors paid particular attention to the displacement of the Jewish community and the role of government and political figures in causing this series of events. Their work focused on the causes of communal change such as the plans concocted by bankers and real estate brokers who induced fear in order to get whites, Jews included, to sell their homes, casting both bankers and real estate brokers in a negative light. In some cases, Harmon and Levine questioned the morality of the Jews who decided to leave these communities for suburban ones. Additionally, they challenged the role of leadership during these transformative years, claiming that

“...leaders looked on helplessly as larger economic forces intensified the tendency toward conflict and mutual hostility.”

Levine and Harmon offered a comprehensive study of the key players who dictated and controlled the social economy of Boston during these pivotal years. They even dedicated a chapter to the analysis of the transfer of Mishkan Tefila, which I have studied and found helpful in drawing my own conclusions about this historical moment in Boston’s history. Yet, there is still more to be said about the transfer especially if one views it from the perspective of black residents. By looking at additional documents and perspectives, I hope I am able to shed more light on the context of the event.

Almost a decade later, Gerald Gamm wrote Urban Exodus: Why the Jews Left Boston and the Catholics Stayed in 1999. He offered a different approach to the study of race relations and group migration. Gamm compared the survival techniques that governed the mobility of religious and ethnic groups, paying attention to the lives of their institutions. Specifically, he argued that Jews and Catholics operated under a different set of rules, which dictated group and institutional mobility or the lack thereof. This is evident in the neighborhoods that they inhabited and left behind. “These rules [membership, rootedness, and authority, according to him]...,” he argued, “...dictated the actions that each institution could take to survive in the face of suburbanization. Those actions, in turn, have shaped the urban exodus.”

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Catholics, with respect to mobility, was less about racism than it was about territorialism, according to Gamm.⁹

Mishkan Tefila was one of the institutions on which he devoted much space in his book. In the epilogue, he recounted his visit to the temple building in 1996: “[. . .]I drove there expecting to learn something new, but realized – abruptly, as soon as I had parked the car – that this building had already given up its secrets. It is a structure that inspires stubborn hope.”¹⁰ My research engages this hope.

**Source Base and Methodology**

This study is primarily based on archival research conducted at the American Jewish Historical Society in Boston Massachusetts. In particular, I examined documents (i.e. letters) found in the Jewish Community Relations Council collection as well as consulted documents in the Combined Jewish Philanthropies and YMHA-Hecht House collections. Documents pertaining to Black-Jewish relationships were revealing, especially those specifically pertaining to the synagogue transfer. Also, I consulted Elma Lewis’ personal papers, which are held at Northeastern University. News articles and interviews given by Elma Lewis provided a new dimension to this research, as well. In addition to the secondary sources that were consulted, I utilized an array of theory to assist with my analysis, including space and place theory and gender theory.

Focusing primarily on the transfer of Mishkan Tefila to Elma Lewis was central to answering my research questions because of the invaluable insights that a microhistorical analysis lends to studying events of this nature. According to Giovanni Levi, “[m]icrohistory as a practice is essentially based on the reduction of the scale of

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¹⁰ Ibid., 286.
observation, on a microscopic analysis and an intensive study of the documentary material.\textsuperscript{11} Given this, in order to assess the state of Black-Jewish relations in urban Boston communities during the 1960s, it was critical to point to a particular event as my subject of study. Doing so, allowed me to bring new documentary material to the center of analysis, enlivening a nuanced reading of this material. Focusing on leading figures from both communities, and their attitudes towards the property transfer, largely reflected the views and opinions of the majority of the members of both communities, as well as, offered insight into the reality of the social context, in which Jews and Blacks forged or refused relationships. Additionally, past literature has not engaged the black perspective on communal change, more less the black community’s responses to the transfer. The gift, after all, directly affected this community on so many levels. This analysis incorporates these perspectives.

\textbf{Outline of Chapters}

This study is divided into three chapters and a conclusion. In chapter one, I discuss the history of Black-Jewish relations, highlighting the ways in which the culture of the 1960s influenced intergroup relations. Also, I examine migration patterns and residential history of Blacks and Jews in Boston. In chapter two, I provide an analysis of the transfer of Temple Mishkan Tefila to Elma Lewis, demonstrating how the former temple was a site of integration and contestation in Roxbury and surrounding communities. In chapter three, I offer an interpretation of Elma Lewis and her life’s work through the framework of gender and feminist theory. I explore how her

background, profession, and personal convictions shaped her civic involvement vis-à-vis arts education. Finally, I conclude by providing a summary of my research.
CHAPTER 1 – BACKGROUND: BLACK-JEWISH RELATIONS

Part One: Black-Jewish Relations (General History)

The 1960s was a pivotal, highly-politicized, decade in American history. It is remembered for its historical “landmarks” such as the outlawing of Jim Crow legislation, the height of the Civil Rights Movement, the emergence of second-wave feminism, the Vietnam War, and the Six-Day War. This era still captures the imagination of Americans today because of its far-reaching and profound transformations that affected all citizens in their everyday lives. Coming from various backgrounds and inheriting a variety of cultural narratives, Americans were learning what it meant to live in a diverse nation. In this regard, “[t]he heterogeneity that has made this country distinctive […] also introduced social strains.”12 Americans engaged an array of political events on the larger social landscape during these and immediately following years, while maintaining and negotiating group identity within the more intimate domains of their lives, namely their communities and neighborhoods.

Exploring the relationship between Blacks and Jews living in urban space, in particular, underscores the fact that “[a]lthough unlike groups have sometimes lived in a state of peaceful coexistence, the historical story of man is often dominated by the chronicles of national, religious, racial, and class conflict.”13 These chronicled differences and subsequent conflicts have manifested themselves in intergroup exchanges

13 Ibid., 1.
as shown in Black-Jewish relations in Boston’s neighborhoods. Boston’s narratives of ethnic transition have shaped the communities that exist today. “Boston,” as a cultural idiom, has often been used to capture the urban setting of the city; however, the term itself fails to encapsulate the specific communities that have existed on the margins of the center city. Places like Roxbury possess rich histories of metamorphosis, which serve as microcosms of the transformation that many major cities during the mid-twentieth century underwent as a result of government housing initiatives, which led to Blacks moving to these areas and the development of other changes.

Even though Blacks and Jews might have intended to live peacefully among one another, this was not always the case. In a 1963 address at the March on Washington, Rabbi Joachim Prinz, who was at the time the President of the American Jewish Congress, declared, “In the realm of the spirit, our fathers taught us thousands of years ago that when God created man, He created him as everybody’s neighbor. Neighbor is not a geographic term. It is a moral concept.” Had this bold concept been engaged more fully, the results of integration might have looked differently across America’s urban communities. Nevertheless, loose and tight bonds between Blacks and Jews were influenced, more or less, by the environments in which they lived alongside one another, performing daily duties and fulfilling the responsibilities that were ascribed to them as members of their distinct communities. Additionally, the relationships that Blacks and Jews entered into—amicable or antagonistic—depended largely upon whether they saw themselves as allies or adversaries and on what occasion.

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14 Rabbi Joachim Prinz was active in the Civil Rights Movement.
Writing in the 1960s, Arthur Hertzberg made the following observation regarding the differences between Black and Jewish identity and the influence their distinct histories have had on these identities:

. . . Negroes and Jews require quite different things from American society. The battle of the Jews for their equality in America has been waged under the slogan of career open freely to talent. Jews did not ask [for] any advantages to repay them for centuries of persecution. The structure of the Jewish family outlasted the ages, and the Jewish tradition of learning remained strong.\textsuperscript{16}

For the Negro, the problem is reverse. Slavery disintegrated the family and subjection permitted very little learning to penetrate. Most Negro individuals in America today need opportunities which are weighted in their favor to give them a fair start.\textsuperscript{17}

Hertzberg’s reading of Black-Jewish relations helps to contextualize this transfer because it offers a general sense of where both groups have been placed on America’s trajectory toward the improvement of race relations and group progress. Exploring both the Jewish and Black communities’ varied responses towards the transfer of Mishkan Tefila to a Black woman, whose purposes were to turn it into an arts center for Black youth, provides the opportunity to envision this ally-adversary dichotomy and the manner in which it materialized on this single occasion.

If one is going to consider Black-Jewish relations in Boston’s urban neighborhoods during the 1960s and the decade following, it is important to understand that minority groups have been predisposed to living in social enclaves amidst the white majority in America. In this case, Blacks and Jews formed communities that have mitigated the negative effects that have often arisen out of living as minorities among a majority that has not quite understood their identity as minorities or has not been able to


\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.
meet their needs as culturally distinct groups. With this being said, an exploration of the process of “ghettoization” is necessary here, as it helps explain the kinds of communities that Blacks and Jews have often lived in for one reason or another. A ghetto is “...any area in a city which is inhabited primarily by a racially or culturally distinct group as a result of either voluntary or involuntary segregation." Blacks and Jews possessed different impulses towards ghettoization, and for different reasons. Their histories, marked by interactions with oppressive groups, such as non-Jewish whites, played an integral role in the manner in which they separated themselves from the dominant American culture.

The formation of Black ghettos and the influence these residential environments have had on its inhabitants has its history in U.S. slavery and can best be interpreted through that lens. As Robert E. Forman pointed out in *Black Ghettos, White Ghettos and Slums*, “…the slave system destroyed strong traditional family and kinship patterns....”

“There was little for blacks to build upon and little from the old environment they were anxious to preserve in the new.” As descendants of American slaves, Blacks in America possess a unique coming-of-age story in America, and during the years which this research focuses, it was not easy arriving at a sense of collective identity as race relations across America, between Blacks and whites in general, were on the rockiest terrain. But there were moments when a black collective identity was necessary and present.

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19 Ibid., 6.
20 Ibid.
One of the important differences between Blacks and Jews’ experiences living in ghettos is the moments in their histories when living within these contexts were forced upon them or when they chose them voluntarily. Forman argued that during slavery, slaves were discouraged from and not allowed to live separately in unsupervised quarters.21 Their ability to form ghetto-like communities on plantations, as a result, was stymied by slave-owners’ relentless surveillance. After slavery, throughout the twentieth century, Blacks began to experience something quite different. Rather than being heavily surveillanced by whites and deterred from living in ghetto-like communities, Blacks were more likely to find themselves in ghettos, annexed from white society. In American society, blackness, often synonymous with “inferiority” and “criminality,” was perceived as the antithesis of the white, American identity.

Jewish history, on the other hand, offers a narrative, somewhat different from that of Black history. There was a history of Jewish ghettoization in Europe from the early modern period. The “ghetto” and its meaning for Jewish life has taken on different meanings throughout history. In more recent years, World War II became inextricably linked to the Holocaust. “The ghetto phenomenon was central to Jewish life under the National Socialist regime and is a keystone of Holocaust consciousness and memory.”22 Living in “ghettos” took on a different form for American Jews. They did not experience the legal enclosure within walls. Instead, they chose to live in ethnic communities.

Here, you see that both Blacks and Jews have experienced living in ghettoized contexts as a result of external forces that have been completely out of their control or

when faced with these living conditions, they possessed little agency in redirecting the trajectory of their fate as minority communities.

**Part Two: Black-Jewish Relations (Boston’s History)**

Jews and Blacks possess unique histories of mobility in Boston as a result of their different access to resources and social mobility, the effects of urban renewal, housing discrimination and a host of other external factors. They have been migrant peoples with their own narratives of movement. As for Bostonian Jews, “The half century between the First World War and the Six Day War saw Boston Jewry come of age. During this period, immigrants metamorphosed into ethnics, urbanites became suburbanites, and local Jews emerged as significant players on the national and international stage.”

Their movement in and out of these domains of existence was a reflection of their group achievement. In Julius Morse’s nostalgic words of 1955, he expressed great joy in the progress that Jews in Boston had made. Their upward mobility eventually led them to move out to the suburbs. Jews were not unique in this manner. Suburbanization often marked a family’s economic progress and entrance into middle-class society, and the socio-economic movement continued to be a trait of American families during these years. Additionally, class movement often meant geographical movement. Essentially, living in the suburbs meant that one had achieved success in America.

Contrary to popular belief, Jews had begun moving to the suburbs before an influx of blacks moved into Jewish neighborhoods between the early 1920s into the 1950s:

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24 Ibid., 99.
25 Ibid., 100.
Violence, ‘redlining’ by local banks, and blockbusting by unscrupulous real estate agents hastened the movement of Jews out of their Dorchester and Mattapan neighborhoods, but they were not, as recently alleged, the cause of their migration. Instead, Boston Jews moved because their socioeconomic situation improved – and because the suburbs proved so invitingly alluring.26

As Jewish neighborhoods were changing, and vanishing in many ways during the 1960s, African Americans became more visible and vocal. This was not because they were not previously part of the geographical landscape, but because they became more mobile and visible in the places they chose to live due to housing opportunities that opened up to them. Yet, Blacks were already living in upper Roxbury during the 1920s and following.27 As Gamm explained, “[s]ocially and physically, the black community on Elm Hill was removed from Boston’s principal black settlement, which was located in the South End and lower Roxbury.”28 Black and Jewish communities existed in these areas of Boston. “...[T]he growth of this African-American district in the 1940s continued a longstanding pattern of gradual expansion. It caused little excitement or comment among Jews.”29 The excitement would come a few decades later.

The 1960s brought about different intergroup relationships. The Black “ghetto” expanded into the white, Jewish neighborhoods. Some perceived Jewish movement out of these communities as “abandonment”, while others saw it as “just the way of life.” As Blacks saw this community as their own, they endeavored to make the neighborhoods reflect their image and their presence by transforming institutions, for example. With this image, unfortunately, came crime, poverty and a host of other systemic problems that plagued blacks attached to these newly formed communities. The rush of Blacks into

27 Gamm, Urban Exodus, 196.
28 Ibid.
29 Ibid., 197.
former Jewish neighborhoods had its repercussions. As Andrew Frank claimed in a paper entitled, Jewish Poor in the Mattapan-Dorchester Area, in 1973, “[a]ttitudes must be created, molded carefully, not blown up in a sudden explosion of confronting a polar opposite to everything one has ever experienced.” He also claimed in this same paper that, “[t]here are three kosher butchers, and the last remaining synagogue was just recently sold.” The disappearance of Jewish institutions, namely synagogues, was evidence that Mattapan, Dorchester and Roxbury had not withstood the evolving culture of the area. In this era, Blacks like Elma Lewis envisioned a different community, pushing for a rearticulation of community.

In regards to Mishkan Tefila, the Jewish community presented the synagogue buildings to the Black community for the “cultural and educational use” of their fellow citizens. This charitable act reflected the needs of the times in many ways. The significance of this gift, however, is best understood when it is contextualized, and when the perspective of the black collective is explored.

The Black community was not monolithic. However, the cultural milieu of the 1960s, called for an imperative black collective, and it was largely achieved through social efforts. According to Levine and Harmon, “Boston’s black community consisted historically of three groups, as different in terms of class characteristics as the German and ‘Russian’ Jews. Bostonians...spoke of black Brahmins, ‘Turks,’ and ‘homies.’” Listed in descending order, these groups represented the class stratification represented

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30 “Jewish Poor in the Mattapan-Dorchester Area” by Andrew Frank, January 23, 1973; Boston Jewish Community Relations Council records; I-123; American Jewish Historical Society, Boston, MA and New York, NY.
31 Ibid.
32 JTA, “Boston Federation.”
33 Levine and Harmon, The Death, 104.
within the Black community. Because of the diversity that stretched across the community during a time when black politics splintered into various directions, it was important to this research to see how a black collective was depicted in spite of class differences, especially in regards to Black-Jewish relations—media outlets provided invaluable insight. Public achievements that occurred in the black community and its members’ responses to them served as a reliable gauge of the general sentiment held by this minority group. A major event like the transfer of Mishkan Tefila heightened the collective identity. Virtually all Blacks wanted to see their community get ahead. The arts provided an ideal venue to achieve this. For the black community, the meaning of the transfer of Mishkan Tefila to Elma Lewis in 1968 cannot be understated. Because of the disenfranchisement they faced at every step in the public sphere, Blacks recognized this historic moment as a capstone event in the improvement of their relationships with other minority groups living in their midst.

E. Frances White argued in *Dark Continent of Our Bodies: Black Feminism and the Politics of Respectability*, “[o]ne of the successes of the 1960s was blacks’ revelation to a rich culture that others saw for a time as being superior to white culture in important ways. In a reversal of paradigms, black culture became a yardstick of authenticity for many radicals.”34 Through this defining decade, blacks were able to initiate a change in their status as citizens in the United States. Mel King, a black Bostonian community activist, and co-editor of *From Access to Power: Black Politics in Boston*, poignantly reflected on this past in his chapter entitled *Three Stages of Black Politics in Boston, 1950-1980*:

During the middle sixties we began to organize. We began to see ourselves differently. In this organizing stage, we understood that not only are we deserving of services in our own right as members of this society, but we are also capable of serving ourselves on our own terms. We were essentially powerless during the service stage [the fifties and early sixties], but as we moved into the organizing stage we began to assume some power in the process of working together to make institutions more responsive. Our collective voice began to be heard more clearly than our timid individual pleas for entry, and political implications of working together began to be obvious.\textsuperscript{35}

The group organizing, which King describes, laid the groundwork for Blacks’ autonomous action. Blacks, as a whole, were experiencing a shift in identity. Men and women alike, in the Black community, were refining their own voices and taking an active role in safeguarding their communities. Elma Lewis was one of these women.

CHAPTER 2 – THE GIFT: INTEGRATED AND CONTESTED SPACE

Affectionately referred to as the “gift” by both the Jewish and Black communities, the buildings once known as Temple Mishkan Tefila were transferred to Elma Lewis, “…a queen in search of a castle.” As the story goes, the queen and all her majesty had outgrown the royal court. The Elma Lewis School of Fine Arts, which began in a small Roxbury apartment, would no longer suffice for she and her students had outgrown the space. Attracting students with interests in music, dance and other forms of performance and cultural arts, Lewis needed to find a suitable venue to pursue her dreams for the African American community of Boston and its youth. In the opening pages of their chapter entitled “The Gift: Black-Jewish Exchanges,” Levine and Harmon paint a picture of Lewis, this queen, and her longtime Jewish friend, Lawrence Shubow, riding around these neighborhoods in 1967 scoping out several prospective sites for the future home of the arts school. Included in these sites were other synagogues, but it was clear that “[none] of the synagogues [that he had shown her] had sufficient grandeur or square footage to contain Lewis’ dream.” A big dream and a budget of $1, Lewis would later see the fruits of her colorful imagination materialize in real space. Lewis secured ownership of Temple Mishkan Tefila with the backing of the Jewish community at the transfer ceremony on April 16, 1968, all for $1.

36 This term has been used by many to describe the buildings.
37 Levine and Harmon, The Death, 128.
38 Lawrence Shubow’s uncle was Rabbi Joseph Shubow, who was a prominent Conservative Rabbi.
39 Levine and Harmon, The Death, 129.
“A short, hefty woman with electrifying eyes, Miss Lewis was a dynamo and a force to be reckoned with, whether you were a 6-year-old aspiring ballerina or the mayor of Boston.”[40] “Miss” Lewis, the name by which she signed off on her correspondences and the name by which people in the community referred to her, was an extraordinary figure, and her demanding presence would not go unnoticed. The Jewish community did not escape her aggressiveness either. The refinement that the “Miss” of her name embodied, in addition to the aesthetic nature of her life’s work as a Madame of the arts, was equally fused with her bold stature and rigidity. In a letter written a month after the sale of Mishkan Tefila, Robert Segal, the Executive Director of the Jewish Community Council wrote to Earl Rabb, the Executive Director of the Jewish Community Relations Council of San Francisco, California, saying:

A dynamic and persistent black, Miss Elma Lewis…has been after us for nearly two years to obtain the property. She was so successful in obtaining backing from practically every segment of sentiment in Roxbury that it finally became obvious that she must get the property if it was going to change hands.41

Her press was superb. You couldn’t beat her.42

When Dr. King was assassinated, that signalled [sic] the action taken. It seemed unnecessary then to continue the debate whether the property should go to her or to other persons or to a corporation. She had it made. The Community Council spurred by the American Jewish Congress, had for more than a year been trying to effect the peaceful and constructive transfer of “Emptying Edifices” (synagogues and schools) to blacks.43

Segal’s words reveal two important things. First, his words attest to Lewis’ dynamism and ability to effect the change she wanted to see in her community. Through

[41] Letter from Robert E. Segal to Mr. Earl Rabb, May 1, 1968; Boston Jewish Community Relations Council records; I-123; Box 67a; Folder 1; American Jewish Historical Society, Boston, MA and New York, NY.
[42] Ibid.
[43] Ibid.
efforts, which some viewed as manipulative and clever (a point that will be discussed more later) Lewis accomplished a tremendous feat with the vision of improving the livelihood of Black youth living in Roxbury and its surrounding neighborhoods. Second, this statement showed that the Jewish community considered this gift befitting, and it acted in accord with this sentiment, challenging the dominant narrative that has interpreted this exchange as forced, suggesting that the Jewish community acted without agency or their own volition. Exploring the idea that the Jewish community and the Black community, via Lewis, worked as allies to support positive interracial relations is the focus of this section. They integrated their efforts in order to create a site and symbol of integration.

The push to transfer Jewish spaces to the black community had been in effect for more than a year according to Segal, which proves that the neighborhood was not only changing racially and culturally, but the Jewish community was interested in aiding the Black community in shaping a community that reflected their culture and group identity. The question of whether or not the buildings were a gift from the Jewish community or were transferred out of desperation and fear was a source of debate before, during and following the transfer, even to this day. Even in a 1972 letter to Senator Jack Backman, Leonard Robins spoke of his own times in a letter, saying, “Indeed, the split opinion within the Jewish community toward Elma Lewis continues to this day.”\textsuperscript{44} Lewis, as the recipient of this gift, has often bore the blame for what happened between the Black and Jewish communities in relation to this event from the time she began pursuing the synagogue until the time she acquired it, even afterwards. Even Levine and Harmon

\textsuperscript{44} Letter from Leonard Robins to Senator Jack Backman, November 21, 1972; Boston Jewish Community Relations Council records; I-123; Box 67a; Folder 5; American Jewish Historical Society, Boston, MA and New York, NY.
referred to Lewis’ tenacity and tactics as the “…one-two punch of righteous anger and veiled threats delivered with wit and charm.”45 The fear of some Jews in the community was predicated on this idea that if the Jewish community had not offered up the synagogue, the relationships between them and the Black community would harden in negativity. While this could have been a likely outcome, and even after this transfer took place, there was still tension as one might expect, it is important to reexamine the motives and ambitions of the giver and receiver of the gift, and the symbol of the gift. Various urban legends continue to circulate about what really happened between this Miss Lewis and the transfer of the beloved Jewish synagogue. This question remains at the core of this analysis.

For such prominent members of the Jewish community to assert confidence that they could make Lewis’ dream become a reality meant that the Jewish community’s action could not have been performed solely out of desperation as some argued, but stemmed from a deep sense of desire to bridge the communities in a powerful way. There was a media explosion following the transfer of 1968, as well as a flurry of letters that poured in from all over Boston to the Combined Jewish Philanthropies (CJP) for making this dream a reality. The letters hailed congratulatory remarks for this great action that had been taken on behalf of the Black community. Bostonians were anxious to be on record praising the CJP’s charitable work. If you had read your local paper or a similar publication days following the transfer, you would have been steeped in the overflow of supporting statements such as the following:

“In these times of racial tension and turmoil, even the smallest gesture of conciliation between whites and blacks is cause for satisfaction.”

“There is more involved here than the simple transfer…. Of far greater significance is the climate of understanding which made it possible, and the atmosphere of co-operation in which, let us hope, we can continue to develop further moves to build peace, harmony, and progress.”

“It is fitting that the first of these (state experimental schools) be located in a Negro neighborhood, in a school building donated by a Jewish group.”

“This combined venture does not solve the immense and complex problems of our urban community, but it is a major step forward and a beacon for others to follow.”

Of the letters that were sent to the CJP, was a letter from Abram L. Sachar, the President of Brandeis University at the time, who expressed:

“What a joy it was to all of us to read about the CJP statesmanlike and timely gift to Roxbury and the black community. It is not just land and buildings, it is a handclasp, extended without patronage, which will do much to bridge the gulf between races…. I cannot exaggerate how effective this kind of gift is….”

The efficacy of this gift, which President Sachar so poignantly underscores, is vividly displayed through these comments. These words reveal the salvific nature of this gift, occurring at a time when both communities needed to see an action of its kind performed.

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46 “Boston Globe – Friday, April 19 Lead Editorial: ‘Hands Across a Racial Barrier’” from compiled media responses to the transfer of the temple to the black community; Undated document; Boston Jewish Community Relations Council records; I-123; Box 67a; Folder 5; American Jewish Historical Society, Boston, MA and New York, NY.

47 “Record American – Saturday, April 20 Editorial: ‘Giant Step’” from compiled media responses to the transfer of the temple to the black community; Undated document; Boston Jewish Community Relations Council records; I-123; Box 67a; Folder 5; American Jewish Historical Society, Boston, MA and New York, NY.

48 “Patriot – Ledger – Friday, April 19 (Quincy, Mass.) Editorial ‘Working Together’” from compiled media responses to the transfer of the temple to the black community; Undated document; Boston Jewish Community Relations Council records; I-123; Box 67a; Folder 5; American Jewish Historical Society, Boston, MA and New York, NY.

49 Ibid.

50 “From the letter of Abram L. Sachar, President, Brandeis University” from compiled media responses to the transfer of the temple to the black community; Undated document; Boston Jewish Community Relations Council records; I-123; Box 67a; Folder 5; American Jewish Historical Society, Boston, MA and New York, NY.
Furthermore, the corroborative remarks demonstrated the collective spirit of the Boston community and it also revealed the collective awareness of the racial tensions that were alive and growing in Boston’s first suburb turned urban community, Roxbury. Boston had been waiting for progress in this matter, and it appeared that it had gotten it, or at least was experiencing the initial steps towards it.

To borrow the above-cited editorial comments made in the Record American on Saturday, April 20, 1968, “[t]here is more involved here than the simple transfer…. Of far greater significance is the climate of understanding which made it possible…” 51 It is on the last statement on which this discussion hinges. The details of the transfer and what transpired behind the scenes are equally important in understanding the nature of this transfer to what Blacks and Jews saw transpire in public.

Before Lewis would assume ownership of this space, “[a]ll that stood between [her] and her dream of a first-class Afro-American center for the arts was a group of suspicious and strangely clothed men who hovered protectively over a handful of ragged schoolchildren.” 52 In spite of Levine and Harmon’s provocative description of the Hasidic schoolchildren and their guardians, their words provide a concrete truth: the gift could not have been transferred if the Jewish community had not decided on how to resolve the issues surrounding the Lubavitch Jews’ occupation of the space. This is an integral part of the narrative. Uprooting these children was a delicate matter. How might the Jewish community justify displacing Jewish children for the sake of creating a

51 “Record American – Saturday, April 20 Editorial: ‘Giant Step’” from compiled media responses to the transfer of the temple to the black community; Undated document; Boston Jewish Community Relations Council records; I-123; Box 67a; Folder 5; American Jewish Historical Society, Boston, MA and New York, NY.

52 Levine and Harmon, The Death, 131.
cultural center for Black children? Which educational values were more important, and of what sort, religious or secular?

Grandly named the New England Hebrew Academy, the yeshiva’s ambition soon outran its resources. Having purchased the temple in 1958, the yeshiva had a history of financial problems and possessed inadequate funds to keep the school and its buildings afloat financially. The school ended up relocating to Brookline, but before they would ever see those grounds, the yeshiva battled with the larger Jewish community and its leaders about how to make this transition smooth and suitable for all parties. Could the Jewish community imagine that the property’s successor be the Black community?

Once Lewis set her eyes on the temple, she believed that she should have it. This caused tension between her, the Lubavitch community and the Jewish community at-large. Here, a black woman, stood between a major Jewish entity, the CJP, and the Hasidic Jewish community and other Jews who believed that Blacks should not have been the property’s successors. Lewis stood at the center of negotiations, representing the passageway through which the fate of this segment of the Jewish community flowed. Essentially, in an effort to create an opportunity for Blacks in the community, Jews were placed at odds with one another. The support of a Black woman’s vision divided the allegiances of the Jewish community. However, this division did not mean that the larger Jewish community was necessarily abandoning the interests of its own, but instead, were working to build amicable relationships with the Black community that they believed were also deserving of their attention and resources. As Hasia R. Diner pointed out in her book, *In the Almost Promised Land: American Jews and Blacks, 1915-1935*:

Jewish leaders representing different socioeconomic classes, ideologies, and cultural experiences committed themselves to black betterment and gave time,
money, and energy to black organizations. The spectrum was so wide and the involvement so extensive that one must conclude that these leaders acted out of peculiarly Jewish motives.\(^{53}\)

What are we to make of these “peculiarly Jewish motives”\(^{54}\) in our reexamination of the communities’ gathering around social space and the discourse about it?

The plans to secure the synagogue in Roxbury continued to be an ongoing conversation between Lewis and Jewish leaders. There were several letters written between Lewis and Jewish leaders that lend more information about the negotiations that led to the transfer. Some will be discussed here and throughout sections of this analysis. Lewis wanted the transfer to be an expedient process, but as Rabbi Roland B. Gittelsohn\(^{55}\) reminded her in his reply to her letter on March 15, 1968, “[b]ecause there are longstanding vested interests of individuals and organizations involved, sometimes this work cannot be expedited as speedily as you, Bob and I would all like it to be.”\(^{56}\)

This was just one of many letters that Lewis had written to Jewish leaders to hasten the coming of the day that she would be able to secure this sacred space. And these exchanges offered a glimpse of the Jewish leaders own desire to act on behalf of the Jewish community, with the hopes of building bridges to connect the disconnected communities. Examining similar letters, like the one referenced above, and those specifically written during the month before the transfer was made and shortly after, demonstrates the complexities of emotion that were tied up in the relinquishment and


\(^{54}\) Ibid.

\(^{55}\) Rabbi Roland B. Gittelsohn was a Jewish chaplain, first to be appointed by the U.S. Marine Corps.

\(^{56}\) Letter from Rabbi Roland B. Gittelsohn to Elma Lewis, March 15, 1968; Boston Jewish Community Relations Council records; I-123; Box 67a; Folder 5; American Jewish Historical Society, Boston, MA and New York, NY.
acquisition of this space. The content of the letters themselves reveal a greater sense of the urgency that was pressing in on both Lewis and the leaders of the Jewish community. The letters offer a candid and unadulterated display of the terms of negotiation by which Lewis and the Jewish community brought this gift to life. This black woman spared no rhetorical expense when arguing her case for why Mishkan Tefila should have been transferred to her.

The rhetoric in her letters gave voice to the black collective. Therefore, her words should be read not only as her personal plea for the transfer of space for her own gains, but as a plea for the entire Black community. She was often viewed as brash and off-putting, but one must move beyond her actual words in order to penetrate their deeper meanings. In a letter written to Bernard Grossman, the President of the CJP of Greater Boston, after learning that the transfer would be made, Lewis captured the centrality and urgency of this matter for which she had been campaigning for over a year:

On behalf of the entire Black Community of Boston and, most particularly, the board, staff, parents, and students of the Elma Lewis School of Fine Arts, Inc., I gratefully acknowledge the donation of the two buildings at the corner of Seaver Street and Elm Hill Avenue and re-dedicate my life to the prospect before us—an introduction to the world of an as yet unrecognized fountain of artistic wealth: the Black citizen.  

For Lewis, this was about black, cultural elevation and redefining Black identity. This was very much an existential quest. Additionally, similar sighs of relief came from the black community.

After the transfer occurred, a letter appeared in the Boston Globe from a black member of the community who expressed,

57 Letter from Elma Lewis to Bernard D. Grossman, April 10, 1968; Boston Jewish Community Relations Council records; I-123; Box 67a; Folder 1; American Jewish Historical Society, Boston, MA and New York, NY.
As a member of the Negro community of Boston, I wish to express my thanks to Combined Jewish Philanthropies for their generous gift….the [sic] CJP has conferred a benefit on the whole city by creating the opportunity to cope with a source of frustration in the Negro community thus prompting a better understanding and a close rapport among all its citizens.58

During a time when the Civil Rights was at its peak, not to mention Martin Luther King, Jr.’s untimely death, black identity was at a crossroads. So, as Abram L. Sachar stated boldly in his letter to the CJP, “[i]t is not just land and buildings….”59 It certainly was not. The transfer of the temple symbolized something greater. This was a quest for unity. The Black community would now be able to experience their own cultural relevance within a larger social reality, one of changing neighborhoods. And the Jewish community would be able to witness the effects of their humanitarian work.

Of the many pleas Lewis made during the month before the plans to transfer were confirmed, she urged Jewish leaders to pay a visit to the temple. In a letter dated March 5, 1968 written to Rabbi David Weiss, the Executive Director of the Associated Synagogues of Massachusetts, she made the following statements:

It is, to say the least, shocking to see the magnificent edifice that was once the Temple Mishkan Tefila now abandoned to vandals and to the elements. It is absolutely essential that you go to Roxbury, no appointment is necessary, and enter through [sic] the back door which is wide open at all times.

The temple auditorium itself has birds flying through like South Station and bird droppings are on everything. In the chapel, tallises are all over the floor; the chapel containing the memorial lights to the dead is completely desecrated. If, indeed, the covenant is sacred, I feel that the rabbinical association should censurate the Lubavitz [sic] Congregation. Would it not be better to work diligently at a

58 “Boston Globe – Monday, April 29 Letters to the Editor” from compiled media responses to the temple transfer to the black community ; Undated document; Boston Jewish Community Relations Council records; I-123; Box 67a; Folder 5; American Jewish Historical Society, Boston, MA and New York, NY.  
59 “From the letter of Abram L. Sachar, President, Brandeis University” from compiled media responses to the transfer of the temple to the black community; Undated document; Boston Jewish Community Relations Council records; I-123; Box 67a; Folder 5; American Jewish Historical Society, Boston, MA and New York, NY.
method which would transfer this property to the black community with good feeling and relative speed than to leave it locked against us to create eyesores, blight and hostility when added facilities are so sorely needed.\textsuperscript{60}

Weiss responded two days later expressing his awareness of the matter and he agreed with her assessment.\textsuperscript{61} He assured her,

\textldots{}I and several other rabbis are pressing for this solution as speedily as possible. Not only because we are concerned about what is happening to this fine, historical religious structure, but also because we believe that there are many people such as yourself who could make excellent use of its facilities for the benefit of all. \textldots{}[P]lease be assured that there are many people in the Jewish community who are working diligently in the interest of organizations such as your own and others in the black community.\textsuperscript{62}

As she sought to harness Rabbi Weiss’ support in this matter, Lewis played on three elements: a) the defunct state of the synagogue, which in her opinion, the Lubavitch Congregation was to blame; b) the clash between sacredness of the synagogue and the sacrilegious treatment of its precious ritual objects; c) and the belief that Jews were hindering Blacks from advancing by refusing to relinquish spaces that Blacks needed or wanted. Her emphasis on the visible desecration of the synagogue by Jewish leaders was largely a rhetorical strategy, but it nonetheless prompted response and consideration. She had a plan. She also raised another issue that was at the center of conflict between Blacks and Jews. How and at what rate should Jewish spaces have been handed over to Blacks?

This question was at the center of discourse, and conflict to a large degree. Years earlier, in 1949, Roxbury’s Freedom House was established by Muriel Snowden and her husband Otto Snowden in what was formerly Hebrew’s Teacher’s College. Freedom House stood

\textsuperscript{60} Letter from Elma Lewis to Rabbi David Weiss, March 5, 1968; Boston Jewish Community Relations Council records; I-123; Box 67a; Folder 1; American Jewish Historical Society, Boston, MA and New York, NY.

\textsuperscript{61} Letter from Rabbi M. David Weiss to Elma Lewis, March 7, 1968; Boston Jewish Community Relations Council records; I-123; Box 67a; Folder 1; American Jewish Historical Society, Boston, MA and New York, NY.

\textsuperscript{62} Ibid.
as a symbol of hopeful integration between communities, however, the Snowdens
experienced similar politics that emerged as a result of transference of space. Over 60
years ago,

 Otto Snowden fashioned a makeshift Hanukkah menorah and placed it in the
window of Freedom House as a symbol of co-existence with Roxbury’s
neighboring Jewish community.63

These elements of negotiation are critical to highlight in an effort to show that integration
was sought after and these communities were hopeful in trying to arrive at positive ways
to address pressing issues in Roxbury and beyond. Lewis had Weiss’ support. Robert
Segal also wrote her expressing “…the strong hope that the properties you desire for your
excellent projects will be available to you very soon. I know [sic] number of people in
the Jewish community who share this expectation…”64 These peace-filled words and the
praiseworthy language used to describe Lewis’ work continued to be a salient aspect of
the discourse between her and Jewish leaders.

 Even the letters exchanged between Lewis and Jewish leaders after the transfer
showed that the transfer did not come as a relief only to the majority of the Black
community, but showed that the Jewish community was gaining some relief of its own.
Rabbi Murray I. Rothman, President of the Massachusetts Board of Rabbis, wrote Lewis
on April 18, 1968, “May the cultural and educational program which you plan for the
future enrich all of us who seek to develop a society characterized by mutuality of respect

63 Lawrence Harmon, “For Jews and blacks, a connection remains,” The Boston Globe, December 12,
nection_remains http://www.boston.com/bostonglobe/editorial_opinion/oped/articles/2010/12/12/for_jews_and_blacks_a_connection_remains/.
64 Letter from Robert E. Segal to Elma Lewis, March 13, 1968; Boston Jewish Community Relations
Council records; I-123; Box 67a; Folder 1; American Jewish Historical Society, Boston, MA and New
York, NY.
and suffused by all-embracing love.”

Bernard Grossman, President of the CJP, even expressed, “[w]e are confident that their use, in the ways that you have described to us in our recent pleasant meetings, will help to enrich the lives of this and future generations.” These words reflect a willingness and happiness to serve. The gift was viewed by many as a gift given out of love for humanity.

This reorientation towards the dominating narrative has allowed me to recontextualize the gift. These letters, some of which have been discussed here, illustrated the sentiments that Jewish leaders held regarding this transfer. Additionally, they offered new information about this historical moment in Black-Jewish relations in Boston. Lewis’ relentlessness must be viewed in light of the Jewish community’s acute interest in sharing this legacy with the Black community, as evidenced in the conversations that took place between Jewish leaders involved in the negotiations. Lewis was not afraid of the institutions nor their representatives whom she engaged in order to see Segal carry out his promises, which was to “use his offices to help secure the temple.”

In this research, it was important to consider the various mediums through which these interactions occurred, and documentary material of this kind was of significant import. These letters offer an additional lens through which to interpret the transfer.

Mishkan Tefila served as a site of integration and contestation. While the previous section demonstrated how the temple and its transfer to Lewis served as an

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65 Letter from Rabbi Murray I. Rothman to Elma Lewis, April 18, 1968; Boston Jewish Community Relations Council records; I-123; Box 67a; Folder 1; American Jewish Historical Society, Boston, MA and New York, NY.
66 Letter from Bernard Grossman to Elma Lewis, April 5, 1968; Boston Jewish Community Relations Council records; I-123; Box 67a; Folder 1; American Jewish Historical Society, Boston, MA and New York, NY.
instrument to effect intergroup peace, there is another reality that should not be overlooked, but instead, engaged in order to understand the narrative through the eyes of multiple characters. The transfer unearthed the anxieties for both the Jewish community and the Black community. Speaking on behalf of the Black community, Lewis felt that it was time to act. To put it as she did in a letter to Eli Goldston, the President of Eastern Gas & Fuel Associates, “Please, Eli, move as quickly and as positively as you can; we must save the day.”68 In a letter to Rabbi Israel J. Kazis, she also referred to the lack of resources in the Black community. She explained, “…there is not the capital within the black community to build large buildings. Those who make money in our community drain it out to build in other communities.”69 While it is undeterminable who she was speaking about, the problem that she expressed must be considered. Lewis was anxious to make this transfer a reality, and at the same the Jewish leaders who orchestrated the transfer were anxious, but both for different reasons. Lewis needed to save her community vis-à-vis creating a cultural center that reflected the “Black citizen,”70 while Jewish leaders were anxious to do justice while seeking to minimize the negative effects caused by the displacement of their fellow Jews, in order to save their own communities. Gaining and relinquishing space, respectively, caused anxiety for both parties.

This anxiety permeated the Jewish community. While many Jews were supportive of conversations about allowing the Black community, particularly Elma Lewis, the opportunity to have this space, some were not happy about such conversations.

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68 Letter from Elma Lewis to Eli Goldston, March 4, 1968; Boston Jewish Community Relations Council records; I-123; Box 67a; Folder 1; American Jewish Historical Society, Boston, MA and New York, NY.
69 Letter from Elma Lewis to Rabbi Israel J. Kazis, March 5, 1968; Boston Jewish Community Relations Council records; I-123; Box 67a; Folder 1; American Jewish Historical Society, Boston, MA and New York, NY.
70 Letter from Elma Lewis to Bernard D. Grossman, April 10, 1968; Boston Jewish Community Relations Council records; I-123; Box 67a; Folder 1; American Jewish Historical Society, Boston, MA and New York, NY.
or the actual transfer of the gift. Exploring this reality is the focus here. Examining this narrative has shown that when goals and visions were aligned, Blacks and Jews worked well together to achieve greater ends. The transfer of Mishkan Tefila served as an important event in Boston’s history of group migration in urban life. Lewis’ inheritance was the source of much controversy, and it exposed important fault lines between both communities.

The anxieties and contestation of the transfer came from different angles within the Jewish community. One of ironies in this story is that Lewis’ friend, Larry Shubow, was the nephew of Rabbi Joseph S. Shubow, a prominent Conservative rabbi in the community, and leader of the American Zionist Movement, who had grown very frustrated by what he had seen unfolding within the social landscape of the Roxbury community, especially pertaining to Jewish institutions (i.e. synagogues).71 Lewis even wrote him in March of 1968 acknowledging him as one “…to be very concerned with the desecration of religious property…”72 As Lawrence Shubow explained to his uncle, “Elma Lewis will restore that building as a holy site.”73 “The Jews have abandoned Roxbury. Give the blacks a chance to make it right.”74 It was these kinds of emotions that polarized Jewish Boston. Could the Black community be trusted with Jewish institutions when crime against Jews was increasing and both felt threatened by the other’s existence? Did the Black community “deserve” such landmark institutions? Ultimately, what did ownership of Jewish space symbolize?

72 Letter from Elma Lewis to Rabbi Joseph S. Shubow, March 6, 1968; Boston Jewish Community Relations Council records; I-123; Box 67a; Folder 1; American Jewish Historical Society, Boston, MA and New York, NY.
73 Levine and Harmon, The Death, 140.
74 Ibid.
At the crux of this polarization is the struggle over interpreting place and power. The transformation of the synagogue turned yeshiva turned Black arts school demonstrates how this is the case. Jacqueline Nassy Brown’s work on Black transnational identity is helpful here. In her book, *Dropping Anchor, Setting Sail: Geographies of Race in Black Liverpool*, Brown theorizes that “[p]lace is an axis of power in its own right. As a basis for construction of difference, hierarchy, and identity, and as the basis of ideologies that rationalize economic inequalities and structure people’s material well-being and life chances, place is a vehicle of power.” \(^7^5\) “Place is defined by its physical *particularity*, which exerts an intense effect on human experience.” \(^7^6\)

If Brown is correct, then we can assert that place and space are inextricably linked. The physical structures that are tied to any given geographical location mark and characterize that space in profound ways. Interpreted through Brown’s framework, one can see that by obtaining this space (Mishkan Tefila), Lewis then served as a conduit through which power could be displayed in a particular place, ultimately transforming Roxbury’s landscape. Working within the generosity of the Jewish community, Lewis was able to secure something for her own community. The actual space of the synagogue and the actual place, or soil on which it sat, intersected in ways that dictated how Jews and Blacks oriented themselves towards it. As the neighborhood was changing, the establishments and institutions as well as the spokespeople of those places changed. One form of power replaced the other. Lewis’ desire to own this building was largely motivated by the fact that she knew what it would represent within the greater socio-historical context. To have Black youth occupying the old synagogue meant that Blacks

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\(^7^6\) Ibid., 9.
had “arrived” in a significant way and had achieved a major accomplishment in a neighborhood that was changing. For a Black woman to initiate such a grand entrance of the Black community on the social stage, was to add a significant page to the book of Black history. This was just another example of the emergence of Black culture.

While race, ethnicity, class and religion played integral roles in the construction of Black-Jewish relations in Boston, gender must also be taken into account. The role that gender played in the kinds of relationships that Blacks and Jews formed has not been closely examined in existing scholarship, even though it has occupied a unique dimension in the study of this history. In this examination of intergroup social interactions in public space, considering gender allows us to explore the influence that gender differences had on the materialization and outcome of this particular examination of Black-Jewish relations.

As Doreen Massey argues in *Space, Place and Gender*, in addition to class, “…the intricacy and profundity of the connection of space and place with gender and the construction of gender relations” is of significant import. Put another way, Massey claims that “[p]articular ways of thinking about space and place are tied up with, both directly and indirectly, particular social constructions of gender relations.” Her theoretical position lends itself to this narrative of Black-Jewish relations via the transference of Jewish sacred space for Black cultural purposes.

This story is multidimensional. While the synagogue was very much a symbol of Jewish life, it would now be the symbol of positive Black-Jewish relations via the establishment of a Black cultural center. The collaboration between Lewis and her Jewish

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77 Doreen Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994) 2.
78 Ibid.
counterparts represented the direction towards solidarity that the community-at-large so desperately needed. Together, they enabled the Black arts school to continue its legacy. The Jewish community was proud to hand over this building for the purposes of Black advancement, which I have tried to demonstrate. Perhaps some Jews had taken Abraham Heschel’s words to heart when he said “[t]he plight of the Negro must become our most important concern.” Even in struggle, Jews leveled with Blacks in order to help their fellow brothers and sisters move towards group stability. Perhaps, the Jewish community did owe the Black community this gesture as Lewis claimed. However, this indebtedness to the Black community, however, seems to have been less about the monetary aspect, but about the fact that Blacks were the most suitable successors of Jewish spaces and institutions in Roxbury. This is complicated, but speaks to the affinity between the two groups. Maybe entrusting old sacred space to Black hands would revive the community. Once the synagogue was transformed to the arts school, members of the Jewish community did patronize the school and supported its activities. Additionally, it is evident that the Jewish community continued to make the Elma Lewis School of Fine Arts a priority, as shown in correspondences between Jewish leaders following the transition into the 1970s. Leaders seem to have met at the school for meetings on Black-Jewish relations and the like. As Shubow explained, Lewis would restore the synagogue back to its holiness. In the vein of restorative justice, a Black presence would breathe life into dry bones.

80 Memorandum from Leonard Robins to Senator Jack Backman, Steve Bressler, Elma Lewis, Fred Kastner and Skip Seisling, July 7, 1942; Boston Jewish Community Relations Council records; I-123; Box 67a; Folder 5; American Jewish Historical Society, Boston, MA and New York, NY.
81 Ibid.
The fact some Jews were reluctant to give up Jewish space to the Black community was only part of the contestation. Many found Lewis to be a less than ideal recipient. Some viewed her as manipulative and clever, one who forced Jewish hands in giving this gift. Some did not take her maverick-like demeanor as bravery and courage, but saw it as a fatal threat to Jewish survival. One of the best examples of this was the tension that existed between Lewis and Rabbi Marvin Antelman. Both were involved in a legal battle that revealed the tensions that were present between some Blacks and Jews. Rabbi Antelman served as the National Coordinator of the Jewish Survival Legion, which was an organization that started after many Jews who were earlier involved in the Jewish Defense League left to support the newly-formed organization in 1971. This was an “odd conglomeration of Jewish mystics, karate enthusiasts, talmudic [sic] students and Vietnam veterans.” Antelman was the very antithesis of a mainstream Jewish leader…. And as it appeared, he was the antithesis of Elma Lewis as well.

The antagonism that Jews like Antelman held for some Blacks was rooted in their negative experiences with Blacks in the neighborhood, which they believed stemmed from Black anti-Semitism. Black anti-Semitism and its presence in the community is essential to this reading. In a letter addressed to David L. Norman, the Acting Assistant Attorney General of the Civil Rights Division of the U.S. Department of Justice, Antelman wrote a letter detailing several cases of anti-Semitism that had arisen within the community where Jews were living among Blacks. He explained, “[a]ll the cases that I am about to discuss in this letter have one common denominator that is, that a person or group of people were forced to leave a residence or a building because of coercion which

83 Ibid.
can be traced to their religion.” The narrative that he offered in this letter reveals an alternative discourse that was maintained within the Jewish community, different than the one described earlier regarding the Jewish community’s affection towards the Black community and its achievements. He claimed that “[t]he Combined Jewish Philanthropies (CJP) attempted to publicly show that the building was a gift to Elma Lewis, however, this was not the case. This building was obtained by extortion.”

“After Elma Lewis took over the Academy, in addition to her cultural activities, she was engaged in teaching hate to Black children.” A Helen Blumenberg did not tolerate such claims. In a handwritten letter to Bob Segal in 1968, she wrote:

“I am writing…because of the insidious rumor about the exchange of the old Mishkan Tefila property which came to my attention yesterday.” “I am deeply distressed of the thought of such stories being circulated, especially since the person telling it at the gathering of which I was present to hear it, is an active, respected member of the Jewish community in greater Boston.” “We were all so pleased and proud when the transfer of the property took place…. “If this were done under duress or the threat of violence and not because of a genuine desire on the part of the CJP to help the community in question, it would be unthinkable.”

“I don’t know how one goes about squelching this kind of malicious gossip. I know I for one spoke up and refused to believe it, but others did not.”

Through a Jewish female voice, an extra layer of interpretation of the transfer is applied. Outside of the male Jewish leaders of the community, one gets a sense of how others within the Jewish community, namely women, were responding to the sentimentality

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84 Letter from Rabbi Marvin S. Antelman, National Coordinator of the Jewish Survival Legion, to David L. Norman, Acting Assistant Attorney General of the Civil Rights Division of the U.S. Department of Justice, dated September 13, 1971. Elma Ina Lewis Papers, M38. University Libraries Archives and Special Collections Department, Northeastern University, Boston, Massachusetts. Box 4, folder 2.
85 Ibid.
86 Ibid.
87 Ibid.
88 Letter from Helen Blumenberg to Robert Segal, June 27, 1968; Boston Jewish Community Relations Council records, I-123; Box 67a; Folder 1; American Jewish Historical Society, Boston, MA and New York, NY.
around the transfer, as it emerged as part of public discourse in the community. This demonstrates the disparity in opinion that arose because of this public space, immediately following the transfer and years later.

This competing narrative elucidates important factors that contributed to the disconnection between Blacks and Jews in these urban spaces. First, Jews were experiencing anti-Semitism at an alarming rate during this time. The threat of crime and the increase in a Black presence was a concern. Furthermore, the growth of anti-Semitism proved to be a threat to Jewish families, parents, and children alike. If Lewis was in fact teaching hatred to Black children, Jewish children were vulnerable targets. The need to protect the Jewish family was the priority. Levine and Harmon’s work dealt largely with the culpability of real estate brokers in the displacement of the Jewish community. Oftentimes, race and the stereotyped deviance of the Black individual were deployed in order to induce the sale of Jewish property. Additionally, the stereotype of the hypersexual Black body was used to increase Jews’ fear.

In the introduction of Levine and Harmon’s book, they give the account of one broker’s experience during these times seeking to push Jews out of the area. The anonymous broker explained,

We weren’t subtle about it. You’d say, how would you like it if they rape your daughter, and you’ve got a mulatto grandchild? I remember one particular family where this little girl was about twelve years old and blonde, she was a very pretty little kid. And I used that on them, and it did sway them. They sure as hell sold.89

Wrapped up in this comment were sentiments regarding fear of miscegenation through violence and a criminalized view of Blacks.

The broker above reveals one of the main issues of racial boundaries that characterized city life—mainly that communities possessed notions about the “other” based on how these stereotypes were emphasized in social exchanges. The broker was operating under the assumption that this Jewish (white) homeowner possessed a view of Blacks, Blackness, or Black culture that could be preyed on successfully. And obviously it works. Blacks were criminalized and purported as deviant and inclined to perform acts of violence like the one described above. To allow Blacks to move in Jewish communities threatened the racial and ethnic fabric of the group already present in the community. Allowing the “other” to move into these communities would jeopardize the safety of the Jewish family leading to, perhaps, violent acts like rape. This appears to be the embedded line of reasoning.

Additionally, their religious difference, the fact that they were Jewish, was at the core of Blacks’ prejudice against them according to Antelman. And, some Jews did not view gestures of kindness as unmediated, but saw them as the result of Blacks terrorizing Jews to get what they wanted. Had Lewis been behind the nasty phone calls and the fires that had been planted on the ground of Mishkan Tefila before she took ownership? These were the kinds of character attacks that were leveled against her.

In this same letter to Norman, Antelman articulated frustration regarding this Black anti-Semitism.

The black minority today has within its ranks militant groups who persecute another minority living among them; the Jewish minority which in this country amounts to less than 25% of the black total population. These groups who supposedly wish to be treated equally by the white majority set a bad precedent; for if they cannot guarantee equal rights to a minority that lives among them, then how can they expect society to grant them as a minority equal rights? My Jewish heritage has taught me the importance of the biblical admonition to the Jewish
people to be a kind to the stranger who lives among you because “you were a stranger in the land of Egypt.”

This personal statement is valid in many ways, but it warrants some critique. It is important to realize that, here, Antelman, was trying to understand the attitudes and behaviors of another minority group through his own experiences and values. It does not appear that he recognized that as a white man with a different set of privileges, his social standing was quite different than that of his Black counterparts. It is likely that other Jews tried to position themselves in a similar way. His statement was largely based in isolated experiences, and did not appear to take into account the larger context in which Blacks had lived their lives, often as disenfranchised citizens. This does not excuse hatred, but the point here is to engage the reasons for why Black anti-Semitism might have peaked during these times.

Another historical fact that is important to underscore is that these militant groups, which Antelman spoke of, had increased as the Black Power movement gained momentum in the Black community. It is important to contextual Black militancy during this time. Some fractions of the Black community had grown discontent with white participation in the advancement of Black causes, and Jews fell under the umbrella. Some attacks, therefore, might have been less about religious difference than it was about racial difference. The problem was with “whiteness”, not “Jewishness.” There was a “…paradigm for the way many blacks looked at Jews. Jews were both good and bad. They were some of the best friends blacks had. They were also some of their most

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90 Letter written by Rabbi Marvin S. Antelman, National Coordinator of the Jewish Survival Legion, addressed to David L. Norman, Acting Assistant Attorney General of the Civil Rights Division of the U.S. Department of Justice, dated September 13, 1971. Elma Ina Lewis Papers, M38. University Libraries Archives and Special Collections Department, Northeastern University, Boston, Massachusetts. Box 4, folder 2.
humiliating exploiters. The contradictions often existed side by side [sic].”\textsuperscript{91} Also, Nathan Glazer, in \textit{Ethnic Dilemmas, 1964-1982}, argued regarding the “…crux of the Negro anger and the Jewish discomfort”\textsuperscript{92}, that “[t]he Negro anger is based on the fact that the system of formal equality produces so little for Negroes. The Jewish discomfort is based on the fact that Jews discover they can no longer support the newest Negro demands…”\textsuperscript{93}

In Yona Ginsberg’s study of Mattapan Jews, Jews often expressed this same ambivalence towards Blacks. Jews’ perception of Blacks varied based on what they thought about the status of their particular neighbors. The common opinion was basically formed around actually owning a home. Homeownership represented stability and respect in the eyes of some Jews. “‘Those who can afford such a house must be of the better class; the homes here are $30,000.’”\textsuperscript{94} “‘If they could buy a house, they must be respectable.’”\textsuperscript{95} Based on Ginsberg’s findings, the problems arose when Blacks who were visibly of the lower class, such as “…‘those who live in the three-deckers,’” referring to the renters who occupied the old apartment buildings in Dorchester and the northern part of Mattapan. They were regarded as aggressive, rough, lazy, dirty, arrogant, and even immoral.”\textsuperscript{96} For Ginsberg’s Mattapan Jews, it came down to good vs. bad Blacks.

All of these factors provide insight into the ways in which Blacks perceived Jews as threats when it came to group negotiations that were often linked to resources and

\textsuperscript{91} Jonathan Kaufman, \textit{Broken Alliance: The Turbulent Times Between Blacks and Jews in America} (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1988) 36.
\textsuperscript{93} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{94} Ginsberg, \textit{Jews}, 137.
\textsuperscript{95} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{96} Ibid., 139-140.
Blacks’ access to them or lack thereof, and vice versa. Violence, unfortunately, became a method of dealing with intergroup tension. Analyzing Antelman’s grief-stricken language referenced earlier is significant because it does show that some Jews were disenchanted by the state of Black-Jewish relations, and this is significant to underscore.

This conflict between Lewis and some sectors of the Jewish community continued to be a part of an ongoing dialogue. After reviewing court documents regarding the lawsuit that Lewis filed against Antelman for alleged libel, in addition to looking at the literature of the Jewish Survival Legion, headed by Antelman, it is also evident that some Jews’ concern over the livelihood of the Jewish people extended beyond their concern over Elma Lewis, even though she was viewed as a real threat to some Jews in the community. In several press releases, the Jewish Survival Legion distinguished between those who they viewed as their friends and enemies. Among their friends were the Mattapan Block Association and the Community Action Patrol, which according to them were organizations with a Black presence and with whom they had worked.97 The Black Panthers, the Black United Front and Elma Lewis’ school were among those entities that they viewed as their enemies.98 This shows that this organization did find it possible to work with Blacks towards integration, but there were other Blacks and conflicting social agendas that caused them to refuse forging any relationship with them. Recounting the downturn that had befallen the community, one press release made by the Jewish Survival Legion included the following words:

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97 Jewish Survival Legion press release entitled “Jewish Persecution in Mattapan-Dorchester,” Undated source. Elma Ina Lewis Papers, M38. University Libraries Archives and Special Collections Department, Northeastern University, Boston, Massachusetts. Box 4, folder 2.
98 Ibid.
Mattapan became a Jewish concentration camp without walls. It was here that the atrocities [rapes, robberies, beatings and murders of Jews] were performed on a daily basis on its Jewish inmates. But not only were Jews victimized, but elderly blacks and the more affluent professional blacks who lived in the better parts of Mattapan. It was the Jews however, who suffered the most and who were murdered and physically harmed to the greatest extent.\footnote{Jewish Survival Legion press release entitled “Jewish Persecution in Mattapan-Dorchester,” Undated source. Elma Ina Lewis Papers, M38. University Libraries Archives and Special Collections Department, Northeastern University, Boston, Massachusetts. Box 4, folder 2.}

This account of the violence and discrimination is unsettling. The destructive nature of the community and its inhabitants, that Antelman describes, expose how deep the differences, hatred and ambivalence ran between Blacks and Jews and Blacks and other Blacks. Comparing the Jewish plight in Mattapan to that of a Jew bound to a concentration camp speaks volumes to the dire situation that Antelman and Jews that shared his views felt that they were in. He chose his words carefully, knowing which images to evoke, which likely had an effect on Jewish readers.

This articulation of circumstance is reminiscent of the language difference that Blacks and Jews in Crown Heights used to describe the violent acts in their community, which occurred a few days after the deaths of Gavin Cato and Yankel Rosenbaum in 1991. Henry Goldschmidt, author of \textit{Race and Religion Among the Chosen Peoples of Crown Heights}, stated the following regarding this difference in language:

\begin{quote}
…Black Crown Heights residents generally recall a “riot” in their neighborhood (as do most New Yorkers, and most of the media). Some, with more radical politics, even speak of a Crown Heights “rebellion.” Yet Lubavitchers nearly all remember the violence of 1991 as a “pogrom.” To the Lubavitch Hasidim it was, as one community leader later puts it, “the first pogrom here on American soil.”\footnote{Henry Goldschmidt, \textit{Race and Religion Among the Chosen Peoples of Crown Heights} (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2006) 59.}
\end{quote}

In Boston and Crown Heights, while separated by at least twenty years, some Jews invoked images of their horrible experiences in intolerable and violent communities by using the words “pogrom” and “concentration camp” to describe the depth of the horror.
that they were experiencing living among Blacks. This was hardly the image of the
community that was described earlier, one where the Jewish community affectionately
gave the synagogue buildings to Elma Lewis as a gift.

This essay has focused primarily on the recurring themes that characterize
discourse around intergroup relations, the places in which they live and their attitudes
toward public space. By looking at the transfer of Mishkan Tefila, one is able to learn
more about the range of opinions that Blacks and Jews formed about one another.
Additionally, it showed how Blacks and Jews responded to the events that were occurring
around them. The animus between Lewis and Antelman revealed important aspects of
Black-Jewish relations during this time, namely the role that Black anti-Semitism played
in the intergroup relationships. There was constant struggle over who was the real victim
and who was the real perpetrator. The debate went back in forth, as history shows.
However, it is important to offer a sense of how the Black community, at-large, was
interpreting the violence that they saw happening in the community towards Jews,
themselves and physical spaces, like synagogues.

An article, entitled, “A Time of Grief,” appeared in the Bay State Banner, the
African American newspaper in Boston, in 1970. Temple Agudath Israel and
Congregation Chevra Shas had been vandalized and the latter’s Torah Scrolls were
destroyed.\textsuperscript{101} The following excerpt was taken from that article.

\begin{quote}
While all blacks of good-will and sound reason deplore what has happened and
extend our heart-felt sympathies to our Jewish brothers, we must understand that
we cannot feel completely the abject tragedy to Jews of the destruction of the
sacred Torah. It is like sympathizing with a family that has lost a loved one. Our
sense of loss cannot be as profound as that of the bereaved family.
\end{quote}

Members of the Jewish community are now intent upon guarding their holy places against further desecration. We must understand this. Their loss and injury from the urban crime that ravages us all has already been great. And now the loss of what is most dear to their community has been more than anyone should have to bear….  

Here, Blacks lamented the fact that sacred places and objects would be the targets of terror in their community. This article offsets the image of the Black community that Antelman rendered in his expressions of grief against what he saw as Black anti-Semitism in the community. These words which appeared publicly in a local paper demonstrated that Blacks were not blind to what was going on, nor were they all seeking the destruction of Jews and their establishments. Alternatively, this shows that there was a collective sense of need to mourn the deplorable behavior of some in the community. Referring to their “Jewish brothers” Blacks viewed what Jews were going through as being “more than anyone should have to bear.” This moment of solidarity echoes the emotions that were present during the transfer of Mishkan Tefila. In that moment, the Jewish community stood ready to offer its support in providing something tangible to the community that would make it better. Blacks too, were reaching out to bridge the gap, representing their stance on the status of the community. In spite of differences, there were moments when Blacks and Jews united. It is evident that Blacks and Jews did not operate solely within difference and conflict, but there were moments when they felt bonds that manifested themselves through public actions and spoken word.

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103 Ibid.
104 Ibid.
CHAPTER 3 – MISS LEWIS (1921-2004)

At the center of this study stood the towering figure of Miss Lewis. While conducting research for this project, Miss Lewis’ life, especially the ideologies that governed it, her teaching philosophies, and world views became subjects of curiosity. I wanted to know more about this “doyenne of black culture,” the woman who had been dubbed a “cultural icon.” By examining an event in the history of the Roxbury community, Lewis, the person, became a subject of study. This Black woman engaged in social and cultural politics with the men who represented the interests and general views of the Jewish community at the time. Lewis’ positionality, in a literal and symbolic way, challenged the status quo. Here was a Black woman standing in for her own personal interests and the interests of a community that so desperately needed this kind of activism. She confronted the salient hegemonic forces of white patriarchy and through support of both the Black and Jewish community, she secured footing in Roxbury through her efforts to expand the vision of her arts school. Lewis made negotiations with the Jewish community, interfacing with its male spokespersons, defying gender, as well as, racial constructions. She engaged this community, across gender and racial lines, in order to achieve a substantial gain for her community.

While these are general observations, which are important to underscore, a deeper interpretation of this woman’s life is essential. In this chapter, I will demonstrate how Lewis challenged typical interpretations of the Black female in popular imagination and racial discourse by analyzing critical aspects of her life, namely her upbringing and education. Black feminist thought, in particular, challenges the stereotypical images of the Back, female body. Secondly, I will discuss the shape her activism took and how this defied gender and racial constructions. Lewis’ dominant presence in the community, as a woman, during these years is significant to highlight as women’s leadership in Black activism was often overshadowed by the Black men who were often at the forefront of such activism. Lewis would never settle for a subordinate position.

Black women have typically been viewed through a racialized and heterosexist lens. Slavery inculcated the formation of racially inferior bodies, and as a result Black women’s bodies were subjugated and regulated to the margins of human existence. Since, Black women have been cast as degenerative characters, such as mammys, jezebels, just to name a couple. As Patricia Hill Collins argues in *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*,

> These controlling images are designed to make racism, sexism, and poverty appear to be natural, normal, and an inevitable part of everyday life. Even when the political and economic conditions that originally generated controlling images disappear, such images prove remarkably tenacious because they not only keep Black women oppressed but are key in maintaining interlocking systems of race, class, and gender oppression.107

One cannot ignore the fact that Lewis invoked images of the Black, mammy figure.

“...[T]he mammy image is one of an asexual woman, a surrogate mother in

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blackface….“ Round and dark-skinned with her signature bun placed at the top of her head, she captured the “look” of one of the stereotypical, Black female figures. However, her family life, education and robust engagement with the world outside of the domestic sphere undermined the power of this image because Lewis represented something else.

Lewis was highly educated. As a school-aged girl, she attended Boston Public Schools, and went on to attend college at Emerson College where she studied the arts, and where she received her Bachelor of Arts Degree. She then went on to obtain her Master of Education from Boston University. For many years she specialized in speech therapy and special education. These accomplishments were foundational to her development as an arts educator. She gained steady momentum in the Black community over decades, teaching dance and developing the talents of Black youth. This was her love. She would later obtain many honorary doctoral degrees from universities such as Harvard University and various civic awards for her leadership and activism.

Lewis owed these exemplary accomplishments to her parents and upbringing. She was reared in a home that esteemed education and Black excellence. Her brother also was educated, and attended Harvard Medical School. Subscribing to Marcus Garvey’s “Up You Mighty People, You Can What You Will” ideology, Lewis’ parents instilled these same values in their children. Lewis’ strong inclinations towards self-will and Black power and progress were buttressed by these strong ideologies such as this one, which shaped a significant segment of the Black community, especially the Black

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immigrant population. In a 1997 interview, Lewis recalled, “I never, I never was
developed to a life of leisure. A life of pleasant work, yes, but work. You must be a
contributer.”112 “You have to be productive. There’s no entertaining you. You don’t
come in the world to be entertained, you come into the world to make it a better place.
And that’s automatic.”113

Her ability to obtain a quality education and her success as an educator and
purveyor of artistic culture hardly served as representation of an oppressed mammy
figure. In that same interview, she recalled,

My earliest memory is three years old, standing on the stage reciting a poem
about the beauty of black women. I played with dolls that looked like me. I,
everything [sic]. I had a strong cultural identity from the beginning. And it was
not very possible for me to be denigrated by white people because I always had a
strong sense of self, always. And I have been encouraged in my teaching and in
my directing of people to give them that same sense. That liberates.114

These were not words of a woman who lived up to the submissive mammy figure or the
“…dominant group’s perceptions of the ideal Black female relationship to elite white
male power.”115 Lewis would never succumb to being someone’s distorted ideal.

Now, we must deal with this idea that “…the mammy image is one of an asexual
woman, a surrogate mother in blackface….”116 While Lewis undercuts the mammy
stereotype, it is important to highlight the fact that she never married or had children of
her own, which might suggest that she in fact was this “asexual woman, a surrogate in
blackface….”117 However, I challenge this notion. The reading of the mammy figure is,

Smithsonian Institution.
113 Ibid.
114 Ibid.
115 Collins, Black Feminist Thought, 71.
116 Ibid., 72.
117 Ibid.
altogether, a misreading of Black, female gender. If a Black woman was not producing, she was considered gender-neutral and deemed asexual, based on this line of reasoning. No one can know why Lewis forewent marriage or childbearing, but to reduce such female bodies to asexual categories is to perpetuate impulses that label some bodies as deviant and not others. Lewis is a reinstatement of the Black, female body.

What are we to make of the fact that “Miss Lewis” used the arts as the conduit through which she engaged her civic duties? What was it about the combination of arts and humanitarianism that made her activism unique? These were two important questions that developed through the course of my research. According to Collins, “[t]he black women’s activist tradition of individual and group actions designed to bring about social change has occurred along two primary dimensions. The struggle for group survival is the first dimension.” And, “[t]he second dimension of Black women’s activism consists of the struggle for institutional transformation.” I will deal with the former.

Lewis was intent upon elevating the status of the Black body. For her, the livelihood of the Black community depended on this kind of focus and reorientation towards Black activism. Through her preoccupation with dance and aesthetics, she sought to esteem the essence of Black existence through training actual bodies as a way to reinscribe the narrative of the Black individual. Her professional endeavors (i.e. opening up an arts school, etc.) was not just about finding “space” to carry on her business, but it was about creating cultural centers that would train Blacks in the arts, in

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119 Ibid., 142.
order to produce more positive Black images in the popular imagination. More so, she wanted Blacks to experience a renewed self, one that countered stereotypes.

The fact that Lewis was devoted to dance, particularly ballet, challenges the standards of beauty and distorted perceptions of which bodies constitute beauty and elegance. As Collins argues, “[r]ace, gender, and sexuality converge on this issue of evaluating beauty.”

In the world that Lewis created, Black was beautiful. Saving her community was about salvaging self-worth and helping young people regain rights to self-identification. She sought to restore beauty to the Black body by demonstrating how Blacks were artistic forms and were significant contributors to artistic life. It is likely that some of the fear that arose out of her acquiring old synagogue space in Roxbury was that those walls contained a breeding ground, for anti-Semites, not the refined “Black citizen,” which Lewis claimed. The space represented something larger.

The question that continues to linger in my mind is “was Lewis a feminist?” Could her life’s work be interpreted through a feminist framework? My research seems to suggest that Lewis was not a feminist. Her tenacity was not inspired by feminist ideals, for Lewis did not interpret her own progress through that model.

In a New York Times article, Lewis is said to have made the following comment during an interview where she was asked what she thought about the fact that she was one of a few women who had received a MacArthur fellowship:

Ms. Lewis said that she had felt exclusion more because of her race than because of her sex. "As a matter of fact," she said, "women's problems belong to white women, because it is in that white dominant group that men are keeping women from utmost dominance. The black man is

120 Patricia Hill Collins, Black Feminist Thought, 79.
oppressed, and I can't imagine a man brave enough to oppress me."122

Lewis offers a nuanced perspective on the relationship between racial and gender oppression. Her experiences caused her to see these aspects in ways that were vastly different from how her Black feminist contemporaries saw them, or perhaps how Black women, in general, viewed their proximity to racial and gender oppression. Women’s problems, according to her, were not even her problems, but they belonged to white women. What can we gather from her disengagement from her gendered category, when it has served as a critical aspect of her work? Her position can be seen as optimistic and courageous on one end and oppressive and misguided on the other. In such a comment, had Lewis dismissed Black feminist activism although her activity can been seen to be in line with what constituted a form of Black feminist activity? Lewis’ attitude seems to point to another framework in which Black feminism can be interpreted, and I think this stance is progressive. While Lewis seems to be dismissing gender as oppressive, at least to her, she does place race at the center of her oppression. So, how does gender get eclipsed, one might wonder. If she “can’t imagine a man brave enough to oppress” her, then, perhaps, she calls feminists to rethink their oppression in a way that is quite liberating. Might the preoccupation with oppression be the perpetuation of that oppression? Lewis leaves us dealing with that tension.

Throughout this analysis, I have attempted to interpret Elma Lewis’ character. While she has typically been depicted as the antagonist in the ongoing narratives about her life and her involvement in her community, I wanted to see if a careful reading of her character could shed new light on these negotiations – hopefully it has. Standing at the

forefront of the Black community, and respected by many living in its various class and social domains, Lewis’ persistence and relentlessness teaches something about the state of the Black community during these crucial years in American and African American history. No doubt, Miss Lewis was a woman of distinction.
CONCLUSION

I have tried to prove that the transfer of Mishkan Tefila to Elma Lewis was not solely based on the pressure of the Jewish community to act quickly out of desperation or fear, but I have tried to demonstrate that the transfer as well as the synagogue space represented something larger. I have attempted to show that the synagogue was very much a site of integration, even though it was a site of contestation. The transfer, itself, represented integrated efforts and a shared vision on part of the Black and Jewish communities. This transfer, and subsequently the site, allowed Blacks and Jews to forge positive relationships between one another. Jews acted out of their own will to serve the Black community in this way. The Jewish leaders who were involved in making this transfer happen, as well as their fellow Jews who supported their vision, wanted to see the Black community move in this direction. I was able to arrive at these conclusions by looking at letters written between Lewis and members of the Jewish community who served as its leaders.

On the one hand, the gift of the buildings sparked positive sentiments within the community, which were evident in the press following the transfer and in correspondences between Jews in the community. On the other hand, the gift of the buildings sparked controversy. I wanted to acknowledge that intergroup alliances (between Blacks and Jews) were challenged. Some members of the Jewish community were concerned about the interracial conflict that was increasing in Boston’s urban neighborhoods. The Elma Lewis School of Fine Arts was seen as a threat by some. The
prospect of it taking up residence in the synagogue unearthed anxiety in some Jews.

Bringing both realities together was significant in my quest to reread the transfer in order to arrive at a nuanced interpretation.
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Oral History Interview with Elma Lewis. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.


