"The whole prohibition question is a Protestant-Anglo-Saxon matter," Rabbi Louis Wolsey proclaimed in 1926. Jews, he added, ought to steer clear of it.

They did not - and could not. As Marni Davis, an assistant professor of history at Georgia State University, reveals in "Jews and Booze," the involvement of Jews in the alcohol trade (the fifth-largest industry in the country in 1900) confirmed the suspicions of many goyim that Hebrews did not belong in the United States. It also heightened tensions within Jewish communities between the determination to become fully American and the desire to retain a distinct ethnic and religious identity.

Informative and entertaining, "Jews and Booze" indicates that despite a reputation for sobriety in their own lives, Jews trafficked in alcohol "visibly and vigorously." In Cincinnati, where Jews constituted about 5 percent of the population at the turn of the 20th century, they accounted for nearly one-quarter of the city's whiskey entrepreneurs. During Prohibition, as many as half of the nation's bootleggers may have been Jewish.

The anger and anti-Semitism of "drys," Davis demonstrates, was exacerbated by a special dispensation in the Volstead Act that gave Jews access to sacramental wine for religious purposes. Government officials claimed that rabbinic wine stores were "the chief sources of the illicit liquor supply," serving fictitious or long-dead congregants, and dispensing "sacramental" vermouth, sherry and sparkling wine to Houlihans and Maguires.

Amid criticism that they were exploiting religious freedom for economic gain, some Jews supported the substitution of grape juice for wine on sacramental occasions. As the debate raged, the 18th Amendment was repealed.

Jewish alcohol entrepreneurs, Davis concludes, were no longer subjected to public scorn, in part because their presence in the industry had diminished significantly. But, alas, during the Great Depression and World War II, anti-Semitism did not disappear.