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CHAPTER 6

The Jewish Community in Cuba in the 1990s[1]

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The analysis of the Cuban Jewish experience in the 1990s is impossible without referring to the situation prior to that decade.[1a] *A review of the previous period allows us to identify clearly how, starting in 1992, a new era in the history of the Jewish community in Cuba was initiated. Following are some of the major developments within Cuban Judaism from the outset of the Cuban revolution in 1959 up to the 1990s:*

1) Between 1960 and 1962, there was a massive exodus of members of the Jewish community, most of whom were destined for the US, while others went to Latin America particularly to Mexico and Venezuela. This exodus was stimulated, especially for members of the Jewish upper and middle classes, by the nationalization laws of 1960 and 1961. A smaller group emigrated to Israel motivated by Zionism. Overall emigration was the result of:

a) the effect of the nationalization of businesses and the transition to socialism on the upper and middle classes. Cuban Jews, without belonging to the country's elite, had taken advantage of economic growth in the 1940s and 1950s. Many of them were successful in retail commerce and in small and medium scale enterprises;

[1] Translated from Spanish by Margaret E. Crahan and Mauricio Claudio.

[1a] In July 2001, I presented an earlier version of this paper at the Congreso Internacional de Estudios Socioreligiosos, organized by Centro de Investigación Psicológicos y Sociológicos under the auspices of the Cuban Ministry of Science, Technology and Environment. Here, as I did then, I reiterate that my experiences as a Cuban Jew and as a leader of the Bnai Brith are fundamental in understanding my views. Nevertheless, only the author is responsible for what is written here and not the Cuban Jewish community nor the Cuban Bnai Brith.

b) although the Cuban revolution did not develop an anti-Jewish strain, the experience of Jews in other socialist countries led some members of the community to fear possible discrimination;

c) the Decree for the Nationalization of Education of 1960, though extremely sensitive to the needs of the Jewish community, generated apprehension among some sectors;

d) the anti-religious slant of Marxist theory and praxis posed a challenge to the Jewish cosmovision. This was reinforced by the imposition of coercive measures such as the notorious Unidades Militares de Abastecimiento a la Producción (UMAP, Military Units in Support of Production) in the mid-1960s which incorporated those designated as social deviants, as well as those who "made religion a way of life."

Complementing these factors were close ties with Jewish communities in the US and in other countries involving familial, business and religious networks. This made it much easier for those who decided to leave. In addition, due to World War I and World War II, as well as the tragedy of the Holocaust, there existed numerous Jewish support and immigration aid groups that served to lessen the difficulties of relocating abroad.

The effects of the massive emigration that continued intermittently until the 1980s, resulted not only in the loss of more than 90% of the Jewish community, but also of many of its leaders. The principal donors, rabbis, Hebrew school teachers, kosher restaurant and business owners, artists, writers and magazine and radio personalities, as well as persons in charge of the central rituals such as the Brith (Mole), the Kashrut (Shojet) departed.

2) While the Cuban revolution represented a significant disruption for Jews, it also encouraged greater integration of Cuban Jews into the broader community. Although Cuban identity since the wars of independence has been a porous entity with various levels of integration and assimilation, the Cuban revolution, via its socializing project, had considerable impact on national, religious, racial, cultural and ethnic differences. A sense of Cuban identity and belonging was heightened for those Jews who stayed on the island, at times to the detriment of their other identity.

The promotion of equality in the discourse and the practice of the revolution accentuated even further the dissolution of the secondary identity

of Cuban Jews, who increasingly felt themselves a part of the whole. The social space where they developed the core of their lives was increasingly less distinct from that of other Cubans. They attended the same schools, nursery schools, beaches, etc. On the other hand, Jewish welfare institutions lost space in the wake of the state taking over the administration of educational and health services.

The official distrust for any civil society organization outside the strictest state control posed a challenge to any organization on the margins, including Jewish ones. Through the state, the Communist Party generated a hostile environment towards the development of any independent group, irrespective of whether it was political, religious or fraternal in character. Moreover, for those revolutionaries who were part of the system and had an interest in participating in Jewish activities, there developed a complex dilemma of loyalties.

Nevertheless, to focus on the abandonment of the synagogues, community centers, or other organizations solely from a dynamic of the relations between state policies and Jewish institutions is to reduce drastically the richness of the topic at hand. Those persons who lived in Cuba during the era in question did so immersed not in a simple period of political change, but rather in an authentic revolution. Irrespective of the turbulent epoch in which they were immersed, many of them ended up thinking that they "were storming Heaven." For them, it was more important to take part in the agrarian and military mobilizations, in literacy campaigns, or in the harvesting of the sugar-cane crop, than in the religious or social life of the synagogue.

PERIOD OF DECLINE: 1963-1989

The Jews who remained in Cuba after the early 1960s were, in general, the most assimilated ones, that is, the poorest and, as would be expected, the most closely identified with the values of the left. It was the Ashkenazi Jews from Eastern Europe and Russia who, given their countries of origin, the economic resources with which they arrived, presence or absence of familial ties in the US, customs and language, were the slowest to assimilate into the country's culture. The Sephardim from

Turkey, Greece, Syria, and Lebanon enjoyed the advantage of language and various characteristics which turned them into Cubans more quickly. That was the principal reason that one finds a predominance of Sephardim among the Jews who remained in Cuba.

The Jewish Cuban experience under the revolution was also quite different than the cases of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. Even in the 1970s, there was never an anti-semitic environment in the country, or the closing down of synagogues by force. The government attempted to provide some possibilities for Jews to maintain their customs and traditions. The Cuban government cooperated with the continued operation of a kosher meat shop in Old Havana, the distribution of special products for the celebration of Pesaj, and until 1974 allowed for some optional Jewish subjects at the Albert Einstein School in the Santos Suárez quarter.

Nevertheless, Jewish institutions went into a marked decline as a result of:

1) A significant reduction (around 90%) in the members affiliated with the different community centers due to assimilation and emigration. The number who regularly attended religious services was even lower.

2) For almost 40 years, the Jewish community in Cuba has lacked rabbis who resided permanently in the country, as well as educators and professional leaders.

3) A lack of funds for the maintenance of community facilities and organizations, as a result of the emigration of the principal donors and a decrease in links abroad. The financial situation became truly critical in the 1980s. The Patronato de la Casa de la Comunidad Hebrea de Cuba (The Foundation for the Home of the Cuban Hebrew Community), at one time the most powerful Jewish association in the country, was forced to sell half of its facilities to the Ministry of Culture in order to deal with its debt and to create a minimal means to finance its activities. Likewise the Cuban Sephardic Jewish Center rented part of its installations.

4) The closing of some synagogues and centers due to lack of funds and members. The most extreme of such cases was the Unión Israelita de Oriente (Eastern Israelite Union) in Santiago de Cuba, which shut down in 1983 and was handed over to a traditional Afrocuban dance troupe and the closing of the Camagüey Synagogue. In Havana, a similar situation took place with the United Hebrew Congregation.

5) Diminution of space for Jewish education and social life via

the disappearance of restaurants, interest groups, the University Hebrew Association and cultural organizations. Total suspension of community publications such as "Vida Habanera" (Havana Life) in Yiddish and Spanish, as well as a community radio hour. Hebrew and Jewish history courses at the Albert Einstein School eventually ceased.

6) Significant reduction in relations with Jewish communities abroad. The Cuba-United States conflict distanced Cuba's Jewish community from the most important nucleus of diaspora Jews with which it had relations. The US embargo and especially travel restrictions further undercut relations.

7) The rupture by Cuba of diplomatic relations with the state of Israel deserves special mention. This act increased the distance between Cuban Jews and international Jewish institutions. The action was motivated by Cuba's aspirations to the leadership of the non-aligned movement, and ignored the spiritual and identity needs of the Jewish community. It also resulted in the closing by government order of the Unión Sionista de Cuba (Cuban Zionist Union) in 1978, and the handing over of its property to the neighboring Unión Arabe de Cuba (Cuban Arab Union). Cuban support for the UN resolution equating Zionism with racism also contributed to the rupture in relations. According to Jack Rosen, President of the American Jewish Congress, upon meeting with President Fidel Castro in 1999: the most lively exchange occurred in relation to the point raised by the AJC to the effect that Cuba was the only country in the Western Hemisphere that voted against the elimination of the infamous 'Zionism as Racism' Resolution. Surprisingly, President Castro said that he was not aware of this vote. Nevertheless, he offered to consult with the relevant officials on the issue...the issue seems to continue to be examined, although informally it has been communicated that the vote reflects Cuban irritation with the fact that Israel votes consistently on the side of the U.S. and against Cuba on every issue debated by the United Nations (Baum, 217).

With respect to foreign views of the Cuban Jewish community, the categorization of the Jewish community as "Castro's Jews" by some outside the island is simplistic albeit some Cuban Jews identify with the revolutionary project. Others adopted a less political position, but did not perceive any incompatibility between Judaism and living in a revolutionary society. A third group simply survived. Being Zionist, differing with

the prevailing Communist conceptualizations or adapting to the reality of the country in which they lived, they attended synagogue as a means of finding space for their community identification and faith.

That group's greatest accomplishment was precisely the preservation of space, especially in the capital. Almost without resources or external aid, oftentimes without constituting a minyam,[2] the minimum number for religious services, these believers preserved properties, rituals and community. They were responsible for preventing the disappearance of religious services, for the operation of the Jevra Kadisha in charge of funeral services and for preventing the disappearance of various organizations such as the Bnai Brith. It was due to them that the kosher meat shop in Old Havana maintained its uninterrupted operation and that the special relationship between community and cemetery never disappeared. That work would be the basis upon which the community revival was possible.

THE RENAISSANCE OF JEWISH LIFE IN THE 1990S

Three events occurred in the decade of the 1980s that served as a prelude for the community's revival in the decade to follow.

1. At the outset of the decade, Dr. José Miller Friedman assumed the presidency of the Patronato. Miller, a surgeon, was a man with an active professional life and was involved in the revolutionary process above and beyond the needs of the Jewish community. Miller's leadership was of great importance in the insertion of the community into the Cuban context, be it in its relationship with other religions or with the party and state institutions. For example, in 1984, he assisted in the initiation of a new Sunday school project. Starting with courses in Hebrew, Jewish History, and Traditions and Religion, the "little school" grew in breadth and reach, managing to become one of the fundamental bases of community revival.

The separation of a whole generation from Jewish activities and services and the aging of those who attended them regularly caused grave concern. Towards the end of the 1980s, however, a new generation began

[2] Given this, a concept of a "Cuban Myniam" was developed, in which God, and at times even the Torah, was counted in order to have the required 10 "persons" established by the Halajic ritual.

to gather, almost imperceptibly, in search of the identity of their ancestors. Some of those leaders of the 1990s revival created in 1989 a new Jewish youth organization whose aim was to revive work among youth.

The Jewish revival was also facilitated by the fall of Communism in the USSR and Eastern Europe, with the corresponding impact on the Marxist cosmovision of the world. This contributed to changes wrought by the Fourth Congress of the Cuban Communist Party (1992) which recategorized Cuba as a secular rather than a Marxist-Leninist state and allowed believers to be members of the Communist Party, thereby providing religious leaders with greater possibilities for influencing state policies.

Those transformations served as fertile ground for Jewish community institutions and encouraged the return of some former members as well as the incorporation of new members. In some cases, the latter were individuals with minimal prior Jewish education. Products in most cases of mixed marriages or families in which one grandparent was a Jew, the majority began by coming alone, only to bring other family members later. The reasons for their incorporation into the community were diverse, but all shared a lack of inhibition about the issue of religion due to the greater space accorded by the new constitutional and party principles. For some it was to discover a familial heritage, while for others it was the loss of credibility of the government and the disappearance of belief in Communism. Others were searching for social and entertainment spaces due to their absence elsewhere. The majority claimed to be in search of their roots and desirous of developing an increased sense of identity.

As early as 1993 there emerged a new challenge for the community, that is, how best to absorb the new adherents who were not Jewish by even the most general of religious criteria.[3] It was also necessary to structure a more ambitious educational program that would build the community's capacity to reach a minimum level of Jewish knowledge in order to establish a less atrophied community life. It was at that moment that relations with other Latin American communities in Venezuela,

[3] We refer in this case to the criterion within the orthodox and conservative Jewish movements which hold that a person can only become a Jew through matrilineal descent or by election after having gone through a rabbinical court and undergone the mikveh and, in the case of males, the Brith Mila.

Mexico and Argentina and particularly with the Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) began to gain momentum.

In the beginning of the 1990s various rabbis, Jewish educators, and regional leaders began to visit the island, and in coordination with local leaders they designed a program that resulted in the establishment of permanent education and development working groups sponsored by the Joint Distribution Committee. These teams created a group of young people able to administer religious services and community activities in all the synagogues, and provided financial support for these activities as well as for the community's educational activities. Instruction in Jewish history, Hebrew language, and religious traditions became more prevalent.

The Joint Distribution Committee also undertook to provide rabbinical attention for Cuban congregations. For almost 30 years, the Jewish community lacked even periodic rabbinical attention. The JDC arranged for rabbis from other countries to visit Cuba, which facilitated the conversions that took place in the 1990s. The latter included individuals who had at least two years of participation in the community, had Jewish ancestors or had married Jews and had previously attended educational courses of about a year's duration. In accordance with conservative ritual, all passed through a Rabbinical Court, the mikveh ritual and, in the case of men, the Birth Mila. Out of these processes later emerged many leaders of youth groups and other activists.

Towards the middle of the decade, there developed a more consistent structuring of community organizations. Under the aegis of the JDC, Gusher groups for adults between the ages of 30 and 60 years of age and Simian groups for the elderly were created. The Bnai Brith revitalized its social, including welfare, fraternal and cultural activities, as well as its monitoring of anti-semitic activities. In 1996, the Asociación Femenina Hebrea de Cuba (Cuban Jewish Female Association) held a national meeting. In 1994 a Cuban branch of Hadassah was created under the direction of Dr. Rosa Behar. This organization, which links members of all the synagogues, channels medicinal aid from congregations all over the world to the Cuban community. As part of the collaboration with the JDC, an exchange program with the Ministry of Health was designed whereby renowned Jewish doctors, mostly North American, visited the country and engaged in exchanges with local doctors.

What stands out since 1993 is the Cuban Jewish community's international exchanges, including the hosting of many delegations from the United States, Canada, Venezuela, Mexico, Argentina, etc., as well as the participation of Cuban delegations in numerous regional and international events. In 1997, for the first time since the revolutionary period, a Cuban delegation participated in the Macabeadas, a sports tournament attended by people of Jewish origin from all over the world.

Of particular note was the religious revival in the provinces. The reopening of the synagogue in Santiago de Cuba, now under the name of 'Hatikvah', in July 1995 was the culmination of a process which contributed very favorably to Jewish life in that city. In Camagüey, where there were two Sephardic synagogues until shortly after 1959 a group of families began to organize again. A new temple was opened and there has been an active religious life including weekly services, Sunday schools and Jewish dance and cultural groups. There has been a revival among Jewish groups in other cities such as Santa Clara, Cienfuegos, Caibarien, Manzanillo, Guantánamo and Campechuela. In those cities, Jewish groups meet once or twice per month to celebrate Shabat religious services or other festivities, as well as to take part in educational projects or community meetings.

The revitalization of Cuban Jewish life brought with it an increased presence in national life. Whereas towards the end of the 1980s, Dr. José Miller and other community representatives began to be part of a dialogue with state officials, the decade of the 1990s witnessed an intensification of such exchanges.

President Castro's visit to the Jewish Patronato for the Hannuka celebrations in 1998 signalled the new relationship. On that visit, President Castro was accompanied by Vice-President Carlos Lage and current Foreign Relations Minister Felipe Pérez. President Castro's references to the importance of Jewish religious traditions as a revolutionary inspiration are unparalled in the history of relations between Communist governments and Jewish religious groups.

Dialogue with the country's other religions also reflects the expanding role of the Jewish community within Cuban society. Of special mention was the invitation of the presidents of the Patronato and Adath Israel to a meeting with the Pope during the latter's 1998 visit to Cuba and the visit to the Adath Israel synagogue of Cardinal Jaime Ortega in the year 2000. Relations with the Consejo Nacional de Iglesias (National

Council of Churches) and with some Protestant churches that do not belong to it have developed in an environment of solidarity and respect.

One of the greatest challenges to the survival of the Jewish community was the emigration to Israel in the 1990s of more than 400 Cubans, mostly young people, as a result of the Israeli law that considers all Jews in the diaspora as potential citizens of that country. It is difficult to predict the effects of this outflow though it is to be expected that in the medium term, depending on the evolution of the two countries, it will have some impact.

As a result of the increased economic opportunities for foreign investment and international tourism in Cuba beginning in the 1990s, some Israeli businesses and Jews from other countries have started to invest in Cuba. Foreign Jews, though not integrated into the local population, participate sporadically in the life of the community and provide financial support. Among the most important individuals in this group is Rafi Eitan, a former colonel in the Mossad and a legendary figure for his participation in the capture of Adolf Eichman.

The relation of Cuban Jews with Israel encompasses both exchanges between the community and the Jewish state and inter-state relations. In the first case, there has been a significant activation of links including the participation of many Cubans in Congresses, conferences and even sporting events. In the second case, the Cuban Jewish community has been limited in expressing its diverse positions in the public sphere, including its positions concerning the state of Israel and the Arab-Israeli conflict. This is in the face of considerable anti-Israeli, pro-Palestinian bias in the Cuban media.

THE FUTURE

In present-day Cuba no one doubts that at least the Catholic and Protestant Churches, as well as the Afrocuban religions, have considerable promise. Can the same be said of a Jewish community which does not total 1,500 members? Nevertheless, there is evidence to suggest that the Jewish community has passed through its worst moments. The isolation and ostracism of the old era and the increased space for Jewish educational and community life guarantee at least a minimum survival.

The majority of the Jewish community in Cuba awaits what the

future will bring. The community's permanency depends a great deal on a peaceful future due to its extremely small numbers. Absent major traumas, the community will remain in the country because, for more than a century now, it has had very deep organic roots, and the national Cuban context is receptive and open towards Jews. Cubans have always been idiosyncratic in their openness and tolerance. The Jews of Cuba today are as pluralistic as Cuban society itself and include whites, blacks, mulattos, Communists, ex-Communists, the self-employed, apoliticals, dissidents, physicians, lawyers, engineers, workers, etc. Their attachment to Judaism is, unlike that of the pre-revolutionary period, more rooted in their Cuban identity.

The state via the Communist Party's Central Committee's Office for Religious Affairs led by Caridad Diego accepts that Cuban Jews are in their majority pro-Zionist, but abstain from expressing that position outside the synagogue walls. That situation has become increasingly difficult to sustain as many Cuban Jews have familial and fraternal bonds with Israel. Nevertheless, the Cuban state has made a considerable effort to make viable the development of Jewish community life. This mutual acceptance suggests the degree to which both sides are committed to work towards greater tolerance of their respective views, as well as the growth of space for religious groups within Cuban civil society.

It is unlikely that the future of the Jewish community in Cuba will be as trying as the past. Earlier predictions that the Jewish community would disappear within 10 or, at most, 20 years have proven false. David Ben-Gurion, the founder of the state of Israel, once said that the Jew who did not believe in miracles was not a realist. The Jews of Cuba know this all too well.

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