

The Future of Religious Life in Communist Cuba

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Daniel Elazar has described the Jewish world in Cuba as “a special blend of the Hispanic and North American worlds.”¹ The Cuban Jewish community is Hispanic, not only in the sense that Cuban Jews live in a Spanish-speaking society, but also that they are, to a large extent, integrated socially and intellectually. Part of the reason for this high degree of integration is the warm and accepting nature of the Cubans themselves, to which local Jews cannot help but respond favorably.

Only a small percentage of the Cuban Jewish population remained after the mass emigration of the early 1960s. Those who stayed were far too small a group to maintain a closed communal environment. Cuban Jews have much in common with their coreligionists throughout Central and South America, while at the same time having certain unique features. As Elazar suggests, the distinctiveness of Cuban Judaism is connected with its integration of North American elements into an Hispanic context.

The North American influence on Cuban Jewry is profound, going back to the origins of the Jewish community in the country. The very first synagogue in Havana, the United Hebrew Congregation, was founded in 1906 by American Jews. The American influence remained strong, even after large numbers of Turkish and Eastern European Jews arrived right before and after the First World War. After the Castro-led Cuban Revolution, the vast majority of the Jewish community fled the country, and the Cuban Jewish community went into a “dormant state.” However, in the early 1990s, the Cuban Jewish community began to experience a remarkable revival. This renaissance began during the worst years of deprivation and continues at the present day.

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Despite the limitations placed by the United States government on interaction with Cuba, the Cuban Jewish community has continued to draw on the American Jewish model. During the 1990s, the continuous flow of missions sponsored by Jewish federations from Detroit, San Francisco, West Palm Beach, and other American Jewish communities has exposed the Jews, particularly in Havana, to the American Jewish approach to religion and community.² The Cuban Jewish experience, in turn, has inspired these groups, who are in need of a focus for their philanthropic efforts and extracomunal loyalties. This has created a mutually beneficial relationship in which American Jews derive tremendous emotional satisfaction from aiding the "remnant community" to the south. This aid has proved of incalculable benefit to virtually every Jew left on the island.

After Soviet subsidies were withdrawn, the country entered "the Special Period," a time of great economic difficulty. A common answer to the question of how Cuban Jews have fared during "the Special Period" is that they are just as deprived as other Cubans. Indeed, Cuban Jews are concerned that their special relationship with world Jewry could promote feelings of resentment since so many Cubans are suffering from the lack of basic conveniences. Many seem determined to refute the unspoken accusation that they are actually doing better than their fellow *compañeros*. Nevertheless, the assistance provided by the North American Jewish communities makes being Jewish something precious, economically as well as spiritually.

Memory as a Moral Obligation and a Source of Identity in a Disillusioned Society

The realization that the Cuban government is incapable of shielding the people from the harsh realities of political change has created a huge crisis of faith. At the same time, the government is so firmly entrenched that it shows no sign of falling apart, being overthrown, or voluntarily relinquishing power. Cubans are faced with the realization that their conditions may continue unchanged indefinitely, with enough food to eat but without many of the amenities taken for granted in the United States.

Jewish identity in Cuba is based on the perception of a common history. This is true of Jewish communities throughout the world, but it has a different dynamic in the Cuban context. Most of the

Jewish families that were involved in the community before the Revolution emigrated to Miami in the early 1960s, and it is there that the bulk of the pre-Revolutionary community has evolved. Those who now constitute the Cuban Jewish community are, on the whole, the grandchildren of Jewish peddlers who married non-Jewish women and assimilated. Throughout the 1990s, Conservative rabbis sent to Cuba by the JDC converted significant numbers of descendants and spouses of individuals of Jewish background. The return to the Jewish community and to Jewish tradition since the fall of the Soviet Union is one of the fascinating aspects of Cuban life under Castro. Many Cuban Jews are now asking what their Jewish background can and should mean to them. They see the tremendous outpouring of support that they have received from American Jews, and they want to recover the memories that seemingly had been lost.

There is a deeply held cultural belief among Jews that memory is a Jewish value of great importance. Indeed, memory of the historical past is seen as a moral obligation, of sorts. And precisely because of this deeply held value, various parties struggle to present specific interpretations of the Jewish historical past in order to influence Jewish self-consciousness.³ The large role that the JDC and the Jewish federations have played in the revival of Cuban Jewish life has given these organizations tremendous influence over the reconstitution of Cuban Jewish memory.

Because it is not an unbroken historical chain of memory that stretches back for generations, the sense of a common Jewish history in Cuba is highly nuanced. Not only do most of those who affiliate have non-Jewish as well as Jewish ancestors, most of them have only recently rediscovered their sense of a Jewish historical consciousness. This fact may have been underplayed or ignored, but most young Cuban Jews will tell you that they have always had a basic awareness that they were Jewish or that they had some Jewish ancestry. This is not necessarily the case in other countries where small groups of individuals are recreating Jewish communities. For example, in Banska Bystrica, Slovakia, J. Shawn Landres found that "few of the middle-aged informants, and none of the youngest informants, knew from birth that they were Jewish; all were told during their pre-teen or teenage years by their parents."⁴

In many Eastern and Central European countries, the survivors of the Holocaust were traumatized, and some associated overt Jewish identification with physical risk and possible death, some-

thing that was not true in Cuba. Olga H. of Slovakia, now almost fifty years of age, was eleven years old when she discovered that her family was Jewish. She repeated the same pattern with her daughter Daniella, waiting to tell her until she was sixteen. A classmate had told Daniella, now twenty-four, that she might be of Jewish origin. When she got home, she began asking her mother about Judaism, specifically why there was so much anti-Semitism. Even at that point, Olga did not reveal the family secret. However, several weeks later she brought home a videotape of the movie *Fiddler on the Roof*. After the entire family had watched the movie, Olga revealed to her three children that they were Jewish. Daniella told the interviewer, "It is very strange because [I found out] after sixteen years of not knowing who I am and not knowing that my grandparents tried to hide who they were because they really had a hard time during the war. It was a subject we never discussed, but now it's more open and clear."⁵

D. M. Goldstein reports a similar phenomenon among Hungarian Jews, finding that many "explain almost ritualistically the surprise that they felt as teenagers when they found out that they were 'of Jewish origin.' Many of them replicated this strategy with their own children, delaying the mention of a Jewish past to this next generation."⁶ While there are such cases in Cuba, it is far more common for family history to be conveyed in a natural way. Cubans have relatively low levels of anti-Semitism, and so there is really no reason to hide one's Jewish origin. On the other hand, until the early 1990s there was little reason to become involved in Jewish communal activities. But in the Special Period, "community" has become a precious commodity.

Jewish identity in Cuba is based on communal solidarity, which may come easier to Cubans than to Americans. As Robert Bellah and coauthors have written, Americans are deeply committed to both utilitarianism and expressive individualism. Utilitarianism is the concept that if everyone pursues his or her own interest, the social good will automatically emerge.⁷ Expressive individualism is the desire to explore one's own sense of identity as a paramount value. In this mode, the search for one's "authentic" individual identity takes priority.⁸ In the United States, a consumer-driven economy that places economic consumption as the standard for goodness mediates these two seemingly contradictory impulses.⁹ The situation is obviously very different in a Cuba dominated by Fidel Castro. Cubans are much more communally oriented—and

for good reason. For Cuban Jews, the Patronato has developed into the central community organization. It sponsors a wide range of activities befitting a community center as well as a synagogue. The Patronato pharmacy, funded primarily by American Jewish philanthropic organizations, is an expression of the awareness that Jews have a responsibility to help one another. One of the most important functions of the Patronato is to provide, not only material assistance, but also a sense of community.

One might anticipate that the awakening of Jewish consciousness might fuel a revival of ideological Zionism. That this has not happened may say more about the state of Zionism in a postmodern world than it does about the specifically Cuban aspect of Cuban Jewish Identity.¹⁰ Mainstream Zionism has diminished greatly in the community over the last forty years, partly because of the loss of memory, and partly because of the Cuban government's hostility toward the State of Israel after 1973. Nevertheless, most Cubans understand their Jewish identity in terms of ethnicity or nationalism, rather than as a commitment to a universal religion, Judaism. Therefore, they have embraced the State of Israel as a practical solution to their economic woes, and several hundred have emigrated there over the past three or four years. Their attitude toward the State of Israel is similar to the emotional connection voiced by many American Jews and they share, as well, the vision of the Jewish State as a *miqlat* ("refuge"), as originally envisioned by Theodor Herzl and many other political Zionists.

The Permeable Boundaries of the Cuban Jewish Community

Many are seeking an identity to supplement their sense of being part of the Cuban Revolution, which no longer provides a sufficient sense of spiritual security and fulfillment. Therefore, they have turned to religion. The Communist government in Cuba had tried to repress most forms of religion. Although the Castro government had gone out of its way to be very sensitive to the needs of the small Jewish minority, the general atmosphere strongly discouraged people of all faiths from becoming involved in religious activities. As Andrew Greeley has put it, "Atheistic Communism thought of itself as pushing forward the inevitable process of secularization in which religion would disappear from the face of the earth."¹¹ Once the Cuban Communist Party reversed its policy on this issue in 1991, denominations of all sorts began to enjoy a revival. The Cath-

olic Church and numerous Protestant denominations have experienced phenomenal growth. For Jews, this impulse is expressed through Jewish religious activities, but it seems to be motivated primarily by a desire to find a secure sense of identity, rather than a narrowly defined quest of faith.

One concrete manifestation of the Jewish renaissance is the preference of many children of Jewish mothers and non-Jewish fathers to stress their Jewish family name. In Cuba, the father's family name is placed after the child's first name and before the mother's family name. Since, in Cuba, people tend to place greater importance on the father's family name, many of the children of intermarriage, in their twenties or thirties, choose, instead, to stress their mothers' family name, by initializing or shortening their patronymic. For example, Debra Gonzales Soriano shortened Gonzales to "G.," becoming Debra G. Soriano, thus stressing her mother's Turkish Jewish name rather than her father's Cuban family name. Similarly, Sonia Martinez Nissenbaum shortened her name to Sonia M. Nissenbaum. Arturo Lopez Calleja Levy dropped one of his father's two last names to become Arturo Lopez Levy.¹² Roberto Sarria Popowsky dropped his father's last name entirely, becoming simply Roberto Popowsky.¹³ If the father was Jewish and the mother non-Jewish, then the first family name would be the Jewish name. Since this is regarded in Cuba as the more prominent last name, the person would not have to change anything in order to stress the Jewish family name.

The Cuban Jewish community welcomes anyone with Jewish ancestry. It further extends that welcome to anyone who is married to someone with Jewish ancestry. The community does not, however, accept into a conversion program someone who has an interest in Judaism but no blood ties. There have been some exceptions to this rule, but only in a few cases of exceptional devotion, all of which occurred before the mass return to religion began. This policy reinforces the ethnic view the community has of ancestral solidarity with Jews all over the world.

A continuing source of worry is the enormous intermarriage rate among Cuban Jews. This is understandable in a country where religious expression is discouraged or repressed. About 90 percent of the Jewish community is intermarried. There is a sense that some of these individuals have shifting identities and might, at one time, identify themselves as Jews, e.g., during the Passover distribution of food, and at other times, e.g., during holiday visits to the non-

Jewish side of their families, as Cubans of no specific background. There is a basic willingness to accept these individuals into the community on their own terms, if they choose to participate. The small Jewish population's need to be flexible under trying circumstances has made tolerance and acceptance central values in the community. This marks a dramatic change from the stricter attitudes of the 1950s and earlier.

The Cuban Jewish community has permeable boundaries. With such a high degree of intermarriage, even the most traditional synagogue welcomes a variety of individuals. Virtually every family has a parent who was not born Jewish. There is a broad spectrum of active identification among this group. As previously noted, many have converted to Judaism, with most of those conversions having taken place between 1993 and 1996. But many others have not converted, and the degree of active identification varies dramatically.

Emigration: Personal Salvation and Communal Threat

The Jewish community in Cuba is undergoing a strong resurgence and, at the same time, is experiencing a drain on its numbers through continual emigration. Unfortunately, the recent emigration of several hundred Cuban Jews to Israel, via Operation Cigar, will certainly deplete much of the energy from this renaissance; the Cuban Jewish community faces the possibility of a new period of atrophy. Life in Cuba today remains a struggle. The few stores that exist are poorly stocked. Almost everything is rationed. Very few people have cars; most of the vehicles on the road are old and in constant need of repair. Yet the Cubans maintain a cheerful demeanor, concentrating on the good and trying to enjoy life as much as possible.

The big question that everyone asks is, what is going to happen after Castro? No one knows the answer, although this has not stopped people from speculating. Analysts have suggested everything from a military dictatorship to a government controlled by the Columbian drug cartels. Certainly, many are hoping that a moderate democratic form of rule will emerge. If that does happen, there will be an influx of Jews from North America, South America, Israel, and elsewhere.

Rabbi Stuart Kelman, a California rabbi who frequently takes missions to Santiago de Cuba, confirms this impression:

The question everyone poses, "Well, what's going to happen after Castro goes?" It's an interesting kind of question. I believe, strongly, that when Castro ultimately dies and when people in Cuba have free access to the internet, I believe that there will be an influx of Jews back into Cuba, particularly Israelis, because Israel holds the key to a lot of Cuba's socioeconomic problems. Or at least they have the answers to them in terms of technology, in terms of medicine, in terms of agriculture. So, it will be an interesting situation to watch.¹⁴

But that is hypothetical. It is inevitable that there will always be Jews who will emigrate. But there are sources of new vitality. Over the past few years, there has been a steady stream of "newly rediscovered Jews" who have Jewish roots, or are married or related to Jews, or want to be Jews. However, over the next couple of years, the supply of newly rediscovered Jews is likely to diminish—possibly even end.

Cuban Jews are concentrated in the largest cities, mostly in Havana. Cuban law is quite strict as to where one can and cannot live. Since it is forbidden to move to Havana without official permission, young people from the provinces go to Havana to study, which affords them government permission to stay in Havana during their university years. If they are offered a job in Havana at the conclusion of their studies, or they find a significant other, or are able to give another acceptable reason for staying, the government, then, might allow them to take up permanent residence there. Alternatively, students might use their university years in Havana to prepare for emigration.

Economic and political developments may attract new members to the Jewish community in the years ahead. But whatever political developments may emerge in the coming years, Cuba is certain to remain one of the most closely watched of our neighboring countries. For many American Jewish visitors, the Havana community will remain a focus for religious visitation and philanthropic energies. The contours of a Cuban Jewish identity will continue to emerge from the shadows of Fidelistic Communism.

Notes

1. Daniel J. Elazar, *People and Polity: The Organizational Dynamics of World Jewry* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989), p. 302.
2. For an overview of the events of the 1990s, see Dana Evan Kaplan, "A Jewish Renaissance in Castro's Cuba," *Judaism* 49, no. 2 (Spring 2000), pp. 218–36.
3. Jonathan Webber, "Lest We Forget!: The Holocaust in Jewish Historical Consciousness and Modern Jewish Identities," in Glenda Abramson, ed., *Modern Jewish Mythologies* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1999), pp. 107–35.
4. J. Shawn Landres, "'Something Else, and Maybe Something More': Jewish Identity in Banska Bystrica, Slovakia," *The Scottish Journal of Religious Studies* 20, no. 2 (Scotland: University of Stirling), p. 166. The article appears on pp. 159–76.
5. Ibid.
6. D. M. Goldstein, "Re-Imagining the Jew in Hungary: The Reconstruction of Ethnicity through Political Affiliation," in H. R. Wicker, ed., *Rethinking Nationalism and Ethnicity: The Struggle for Meaning and Order in Europe* (Oxford: Berg, 1997), pp. 198–99.
7. Bellah, Robert N., Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton, *Habits of the Heart* (Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1996), p. 63.
8. Ibid, pp. 32–35, 48–50.
9. Lewis A. Friedland, "Reform Judaism and Modern American Community" in Dana Evan Kaplan, ed., *Contemporary Debates in American Reform Judaism: Conflicting Visions* (New York and London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 40–41.
10. Laurence J. Silberstein, *Postzionism* (New York and London: Routledge, 1999).
11. Andrew M. Greeley, "A Religious Revival in Russia?," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* (1994), p. 253.
12. Arturo Lopez Levy interview, January 2001.
13. Popowsky moved to Israel in 2000.
14. Rabbi Stuart Kelman interview, June 2000.