

Jewish Life in Latin America: a challenging experience

Judit Bokser Liwerant

Approaching the Region

Jewish communities around the world are facing today diverse socio-cultural, economic, political and existential challenges closely linked to the ways in which their collective life or lack of it is experienced and organized. It certainly reflects the diverse social settings, cultural milieus and political and institutional arrangements of the countries in which they live. Globalization processes, among other factors, have reinforced the global character of Jewish life, allowing a scenario of a world Jewish society based on a wide network of links and interactions that include voluntary and compulsory frameworks, primordial and elective foci of identities, associative and institutionalized structures (Eliezer Ben Rafael *et al*, 2003; The Jewish People Policy Planning Institute, 2004-2005). From this perspective, Latin American Jewish life becomes a reality which is worth to be known and analyzed in its own singularity as well as in its current and potential interaction amidst the Jewish world.

When the renowned French historian Fernand Braudel was asked to dedicate an issue of his Review of *Les Annales* to Latin America, he titled it *A travers les Amerique Latin*, in the plural, emphasizing the diverse nature of the different countries and cultures that make up this region. This diversity which comprises economic, political and historical dimensions might best be understood in terms of the ethnic and cultural composition of its populations. Significant differences exist between Indo-America, with countries such as Mexico, Peru, Ecuador and Bolivia, among others, where limited immigration emphasized the indigenous highly hierarchical composition of their populations, and Euro-America, with countries such as Argentina and Uruguay, that attracted mass immigration in the 19 and 20 Centuries. In both categories we may distinguish further differentiation between, for example, the homogeneous mestizo Chile and Colombia as opposed to Brazil, Cuba and some Caribbean

areas where the complex multiracial societies have a pronounced Afro American element. (Eisenstadt, 1998; Avni, 1999) In Euro-American societies, multi-national, multi-ethnic and multi-religious societies were built with a *de facto* tolerance towards minorities that countervailed the primordial, territorial and religiously homogeneous profile the State aspired to achieve. In Indo-America, the original ethnic composition of the population enhanced the primordial content of national identity and its unified and homogeneous profile. Countries such as Mexico expressed it in the category of ethnic fusion -*mestizaje*—meant to unite the Spanish-Catholic and the indigenous population. This category became a resource for identity building and an instrument of national integration. It was also a central criteria to evaluate full incorporation of minorities.

Brazil, in its own specificity, developed a model of ethnic pluralism that has fostered openness and enhanced multicultural encounters.

Despite all these differences we can still talk about Latin America as an entity sharing both an ideological discourse of unity and a shared geopolitical, social and economic reality. As Eisenstadt (1998) has stated, the crystallization of distinctive American cultures or civilizations and the different patterns of collective identities have determined the shaping of social boundaries and public spheres, with far reaching implications for the ongoing construction of their national identity and the dynamics of social integration: Specifically, the patterns of formation and transformation of the criteria of membership into, and exclusion from, the national communities In Euro-America Jewish life was more exposed to social interactions. Indo-America countries, on the contrary, favored the communal strategy of limited integration and autonomy to preserve cultural, religious and social differences. The well defined frontiers of Jewish life reflected and reinforced other socio-economic differences.

Among the common basic premises developed by Latin American cultures and societies, the hierarchical worldview in which ethnicity and social stratification met played a central place. In this sense, Latin Americans are the first group of citizens in the Modern West to have failed in their attempt to reconcile social equality with cultural differences, thereby causing public life in the continent to become socio-ethnically fissured. (Forment, 2005) On its turn, many values and institutional arrangements were culturally hybrid; thus, while religion embedded the whole social construct, the internalization of Catholicism

implied also its conversion into a civic culture. If “Civic Catholicism” opened the possibility to the creation of new meanings and codes it simultaneously set the limits and scope of secularization processes. The central place and role of the Catholic Church as well as European corporate traditions led to difficulties dealing with religious and ethnical diversity.

Whereas at the beginning of their life in the region Jews were often seen as “unwanted others”, as a source of risk to a unified national identity to be built, Jews never had to fight for Emancipation; freedom and equality were granted. What was at stake was the capability of societies to deal with the difference and otherness as a legitimate component of the national scenario (Avni 1998, 1999; Bokser Liwerant; 1994, 1999) This dimension sheds light both on the commonality and on the diversity that exists in Latin America.

In Argentina the primordial, territorial and religious bases of the national state’s collective identity tended to conceal the multiethnic composition and the religious and cultural tolerance of its civil society. Due to mass migration, there was a growing gap between the goal and discourse of the melting pot that the State promoted and a society that developed as multi-national, multi-ethnic and multi religious.(Senkman, 2005; Avni, 1999) Thus *de facto* ethnic and religious tolerance in a society of immigrants was the framework for the building of communities which sought to keep their links with their “homelands” on an ethnic basis; such was the case with Spaniards, Italians and Jews, among others.

Mexico, throughout its history, was in search for its own national identity and culture as the base for national unity. Its original ethnic composition enhanced the conviction that a unified and homogeneous society with an homogeneous identity was both possible and desirable (Bokser Liwerant, 2005) Thus, Jews, as other minorities, developed their life as “enclaves”, amidst a *de facto* tolerance but lacking visibility and recognition as a legitimate component of the national chorus.

As stated, Brazil represents a *sui generis* case of an ethnic-textured society opened to diversity, interactions and legitimacy of Otherness (Sorj, 1997)

Building Jewish Life

For the Jewish immigrants to the continent, building a Jewish community was a driving force that impelled collective energy to provide for the material, spiritual and cultural needs. This collective drive hinged upon the concept of structuring Jewish life, led to community organization, and the building of institutions, which served both as a sphere for channeling public energy and as a source of identity. Continuity seemed to be the overall choice.

During their initial period of adjustment and consolidation, Latin American Jews became one with the ideal of immigrant absorption and building of institutions. Their achievements were impressive. Eastern European Jews established “replicas” of the European *kehillot*. Founded by secularist, but seeking to answer communal and religious needs, the communities were built in the mold of modern Diaspora nationalism and emphasize the secular collective side of Jewish life, its inner diversity and ideological struggles: political parties, social and cultural movements, organized communities, religious expressions (Bokser Liwerant, 1990). As in the Old Home, *Prophecy and Politics* intertwined (Frankel, 1981) Countries of origin were also determinant in the pattern of communal building of Sephardic and Arab speaking Jews, which had a more traditional profile and religious based process of organization.

Argentinian Jewry followed the pattern of a continuous trend toward secularization and politization. Varying ideological and political currents flowed energetically in the Jewish street: from communists to Zionists; from assimilationist to Orthodox Jews. The highly differentiated evolutionary process of communal structures both reflected and shaped the growth of the Jewish community which was projected as one of the strongest in the region. Simultaneously, it led to an intensive participation in economics, culture and science in the national arena, but impelled a collective presence in the public sphere specifically in the political field.

Since its inception, Jewish life in Mexico was characterized by a dense cluster of structures and institutions. Building Jewish life implied at least two different features.. While the small size of the community and its lack of material resources led to

centralization, the diversity of origins, traditions, customs and cultural practices strengthened internal differentiation and diversity. The latter may be seen as a specific trait of the Mexican Jewish community and as a central principle of self-definition. Organizational life was built around ethnic-communal origins. A “community of communities”: mutual assistance, education, synagogues, cultural clubs, intense ideological struggle and consequent organizational differentiation. It embraced journalism, literature, debates, a rich imported and original Jewish street, with changing functions and meanings.

Thus, contrary to what happened in the USA, both in Argentina and Mexico, as in the rest of Latin America, the communal dimension overshadowed the individual one. In the United States the process of nation building implied the incorporation of the separate components into a collective higher order, while the right to self-fulfillment was normatively supported as part of the national ethos. Tolerant of community diversity, the American society promoted individual gratification which in fact has had the opposite effect (Sarna, 1996; 2004) There, religion has played a far more pervasive role; religious organizations found wide space in civil society. Additional clue factors such as mobility and internal migrations didn't fix nor promoted a steady communal organization.

Latin American Jews found in community and in communal endeavors the space where to be Jewish: transmit, create, redefine and “imagine” continuity.

New Challenges

In recent decades Jews are witnessing profound changes which grant legitimacy to their presence and widen their visibility in the national arena. Overall changes have affected prevailing concepts of national identity, expanding the receptivity to multiple identities and broadening the spectrum of legitimate loyalties. Outwardly, societies opened up to the world and inwardly, towards the recognition of cultural, political and institutional pluralism. The public sphere became a space in which to build citizenship and express collective identities. Starting in the 1980s, the continent underwent a process of economic liberalization linked to democratization and to exogenous ideological influences. The dynamics of globalization processes, while fostering political change, brought about an overall decline in the standard of living: low incomes, recession, unemployment, under-employment, and the growth of an unofficial informal economy. Close to half the

population of Latin America now lives below the poverty level. The top five percent enjoys 25% of the total income, while the bottom 30% receives less than 8% of the income (Kliksberg, 2002)

The Jewish communities of the continent have certainly felt the impact of this crisis. Its scope and intensity varies according to the size of the middle class, the place of the community in the social and national arenas, and the ability of groups and leaders, both national and communal, to maneuver in each country. In Argentina, Jews who typically belonged to the middle class in a society where the middle class was dominant experienced a severe downward mobility giving birth to a previously unknown “new poverty”. (Kliksberg, 2002) This had a far reaching impact on communal life, weakening its institutional order.

In Mexico, by contrast, the majority of the Jews belong to the upper and middle class which constitute less than 10% of the general population. Only 5% of Jews belong to the lower class, compared to 63% of the general population. As a consequence, the Jewish community’s highly differentiated institutions not only were not affected but continued to grow (Comité Central, 2000)

Latin American Jews share the common challenges of the Jewish world but also face singular ones. They live in a context of shrinking communities which partially parallels population declining trends in Jewish communities all over the world. Emigration accompanies the varying degrees of out-marriage; low birth rates and ageing (Della Pergola, 2006). The specific critical conditions of the region, both the recurrent economic crises as well as the political upheaval and lack of stability acted as expulsive forces with an overall shrinkage effect.

In the past 30 years, the number of Jews in Latin America dropped from 514.000 in the 1970’s to 394.000 today (Della Pergola, 2006) In Uruguay it has dropped from 50.000 to 22.000; in Venezuela from 30.000 to 15.000; in Chile from 30.000 to 21.000. El Salvador, Ecuador, Peru and Paraguay have also experienced a significant decrease in their Jewish population over this period of time. In Brazil the number of Jews moved from 140.000 to 90.000, mainly as a result of assimilation. In the last years, however, this trend has stabilized an even shows a slight increase.

In Argentina, demographic decline became a central trend of the Jewish community. Following Della Pergola's studies already three decades ago the estimate of the Jewish population was revised downward, from half a million to only 310 000. Towards the 80's, the Jewish population's shrinkage trend continued up to the figure of 280.000 Jews. Today, the core population of Jews in Argentina numbers slightly over 180.000.

In Mexico, Jewish population has shown a more stable demographic profile, due to its more traditional socio-demographic patterns and the influx of Jews from other parts of the continent. Mexican Jews number today 40.000 to 45.000.

In the last years a new type of migration has developed in the region. There is no longer a one-way movement towards a definitive new place of destination but rather a kind of constant commuting occurring between the home place and an elected new residence. This type of movement is well represented by the commuting taking place between Bogotá or Caracas and Miami or between Mexico City and San Diego. It certainly poses a challenge to the need to find new ways of communal adscription and membership required in order both to maintain the links between the Jewish commuters and their original communities and to allow them to build bonds within the new communities.

Paralleling the diversity of social settings, cultural milieus and political arrangements, the overall Jewish presence in the region reflects a variety of models of organized communal life and identification processes.

Diversity of communal life

In a broader sense, current demographic changes as well as changing patterns of Jewish identification, certainly its pluralization, represent new challenges for organized communal life. The widening of the non-core Jewish population and the growing of non-affiliated individuals become trends that characterize important Jewish communities such as Argentina and Brazil. These varying degrees of ethnic as well as cultural dimensions of Jewish life, in its broader sense, show diverse qualitative and quantitative realities. Out group marriage, non-affiliation and non-communal adscription represent the loosening of collective ethnic bonds; new ways of building and expressing Jewish identifications require to attend the more individual and subjective dimensions of Jewish identity today. Renovation and reconstruction of Jewish communal life constitutes one of the main

challenges Jews face today; new dynamics between individual and collective express also in new dimensions of communal life, which include personal meanings, symbolic and cultural belongings, in other words, equally important though less material aspects of Jewish communities. It certainly impels the exploration of the bonds between individuals and their societies, both in territorial and cultural dimensions. It requires an examination of institutional patterns of Jewish commonality which respond to new individualized trends and to the quest for meaningful belonging.

This task of utmost importance demands the development and institutionalization of tools for diagnosis and planning of communal life, which are still lacking in the continent. Communities were first built in the mold of modern Diaspora nationalism and emphasize the need for mutual assistance as well as the inner diversity and ideological struggles of Jewish life. Later, became typical of Latin American Jewry the emergence of Jewish sports or community centers to spend leisure time; at first they were private bodies with no Jewish content but since the 70's there has been a transformation that underscores their Jewish and communal character. In Argentina, the Jewish clubs played an important role during the military repression, serving as a place where members could gather. Perhaps in compensation, the clubs adopted a more Jewish stance during this period and in the aftermath of the return to civilian rule. Paralleling the democratization process, their place and role were further weakened by the impact of the economic crisis

While Brazil and Argentina represent in its own style models of centrifugal communities –more centralized the latter, more federated the former- Mexico represents a model of both centralized and inner diversified structural and institutional proliferation. The organizational spectrum built around ethnic-communal origins which nourished the evolutionary process of communal structures, shaped the growth of the community and reflects its prevailing patterns. Membership rates are higher than 80%.

The conjunction of Anti-Semitic attacks, economic upheaval and leadership failures in Argentina led to an overall decline of the community, whose rate of affiliation lies beyond 50%. "From Crisis to Crisis" was the expression used to characterize this situation by the World Jewish Congress, which labeled it as a "community in distress" (World Jewish Congress, 1998). Latin America's general social scenario of growing levels of poverty and inequality had a severe impact on its organizational dimension. While all the symptoms and

processes reinforce this socio-economic characterization, there is still need to underscore the crisis of the organizational model of the community, unable to renew its frameworks (Goldstein, 2005)

Brazilian Jews, while showing high rates of assimilation, didn't define their organizational life in terms of crisis. Moreover, their perception of a growing social integration confronted the old concept of *kehila* with the need of a more pluralistic approach to the community's institutional arrangements. Therefore, their reality has been lived and explained in terms of the impact of modernity, social integration and the loosening of communal ties, therefore emphasizing identity's dilemmas. (Sorj, 1997; Grin, 1997)

In the different cases analyzed, the transition from associations based exclusively on common descent to associations based on common interest has been slow and limited. Thus, Jewish communities in the region face challenges that point to the permanent need to rethink and restructure the different axes of Jewish life- whether normative, cultural or organizational.

Jewish education

The differentials in organizational and institutional order are highly reflected in a central realm of Latin America Jews -education. As a space for social and cultural mediation between individuals and collectivities, education was for Latin American Jews the central foundation to define their continuity. Jewish education became the main arena to transmit, to create, to project the cultural profile of Jewish communities; to build differences both between the communities and the host societies and inside the community themselves; the main field where to display Jewish collective life while handling with the challenges of incorporation and integration.

Thus, integral Jewish education, as expressed in Jewish Day Schools, became a priority over other aspects of collective needs. The characteristic of the host societies, the particular and differentiated profile of Jewish immigrants coupled with the lack of adequate public educational facilities (a condition that varied over time and according to the country) led to enhance the trend to establish Jewish Day Schools. Education first reflected the gamut of political movements and religious strands that shaped communities. Bundism, Yidishism, Communism, religious strands and Zionism found expression in the educational

realm. With the conquering of the community by the latter, Hebrew language and Hebrew culture -together with the unique phenomenon of the continuation of Yiddish schools- molded the educational system, which became the head of the cultural texture which shaped the face of Jewish life.

However, the educational system has been changing not only as a result of social and community modifications but because it acts as a source in itself of new trends in Jewish life. The historical political and ideological currents that gave birth to the original differentiation of schools have been replaced by more defining criteria, mainly the communitarian one and the religious one. Still other criteria, more “modernizing”, such as the learning of instrumental tools and languages to guarantee a better professional incorporation to a growing global occupational and professional market has been behind the emergence of Jewish schools where English acts as the main foci of language learning. Moreover, with different degrees of intensity and visibility, a “clandestine” debate is conducted regarding the functionality of Hebrew (Goldstein, 2005). While the Brazilian community has been the first one where Hebrew has vanished from some schools, Argentina has already shown this trend (Arlene Fern and Beth schools) and Mexico experiences it in new growing offers (Atid school).

In Mexico, over 90% of children attend Jewish schools with a constant student population from kinder through High school. A strong organizational structure of 17 Day Schools has developed -one school for each 2.500 Jews in Mexico City. The student population has grown 16.5% in the last 8 years vis-à-vis an estimated 6% of the population growth during this same period. Thus, Jewish education still encompasses all the socializing influences (Fainstein, 2005). Educational policies, as expressed in a significant system of scholarships, brought back to Jewish schools those families who previously have abandoned them. There has been a differential dynamics of growth and decrease. The Haredi schools, which cover 26% of the student population, show the highest population growth: 55% in the last 8 years. Regarding communitarian belonging: The Ashkenazi schools show the greatest percentage of decrease-28 % and the Maguen David schools, the highest growth rate. It gathers 46% of the total student population. From this total, 40% attend Haredi schools. Jewish education is strongly linked to Israeli organizations and programs. Mexico City has the highest concentration of educational *shlijim*, that number

40. Thus, a country that represents 0.5% of the total Jewish population gathers 18% of the total of *shlijim* (*Ibid.*)

These changes in the educational realm both express general religious and cultural changes and act as an arena where they are being shaped through contents, visions, policies and institutional differentiation. The main strategies of the leadership have been oriented toward minimizing integration and maximizing social, cultural and religious differences. This powerful cluster of structures has been functional for this purpose. This “educational ecology” certainly corresponds to the deep structures of the Mexican society.

In Argentina, once the leader of Jewish education in the continent, there have been severe expressions of institutional weakness. In the last decade a total of 16 schools were closed while only 6 were able to pass through an institutional rational redesign. The 34 Day Schools and 6 supplementary schools cover a population of 17.864 students. While this figure shows a systematic recovery of population compared to the previous years (17.075 in 2002 as compared to 19.274 in 1999) it points to a total coverage of 43%. The highest population growth is registered amidst the 10 religious schools. Joint efforts of the Jewish Agency for Israel and Israeli universities and local actors became strong stimuli to revitalize the field (Vaad Hajinuj, 2005)

In Sao Paul, 5 religious schools were founded in the last years and there is a growing incorporation of Orthodox teachers into secular schools. (Topel, 2005)

The above mentioned educational development should be seen on the light of the changing approach to education in the Jewish world. Precisely over the last two decades the number of children educated in Jewish Day Schools has increased at an unprecedented rate. In the United States, it is estimated that in 1962 there were 60 000 pupils in day schools, that by 1982-3, there were some 104 000 students (10% of the Jewish school age population and in 2000, approximately 200 000, nearly one quarter of all Jewish school age.

Alex Pomson’s analysis of Jewish Day Schools in Toronto throws light to shared trends with other contexts such as the decay of public schools; multicultural trends and thus legitimacy of particularism and the search for Jewish continuity, among others. However, the high proportion of Jewish school age children in Day Schools (it was already 66% in 1981) is explained through retention in school rather recruitment of new pupils in first grades. It also shows a growth of the Orthodox Jewish community, which has made a great

contribution to the overall increase in Day/school population, even though a majority still attends communitarian schools.

Let us remember that the linkage of the concepts “continuity” and “education” in public discussions of Jewish education is a relatively new phenomenon developed in its full force in the deliberations of the Commission on Jewish Education in North America (A Time to Act, 1990-1991) In this respect the contribution of Prof. Shlomo Fox, (z’l) was central to the awareness of the need to formulate visions of Jewish education. To address the prospective life situations, thought worlds and spiritual environments both required when structures are not as intense or heavy, and when you educate in interaction. From this perspective, visions and congruent policies are also highly relevant for Latin American educational system.

Cultural and religious trends

Religion shows a noteworthy strengthening among Jewish communities in Latin America, not only in the educational field, but also in the overall community life. Religion played a minor role in what were basically secular communities; this trend was reinforced by the scarcity of religious functionaries, a factor which dates back to the earliest days of Latin American Jewry. Daniel Elazar wrote in his seminal book *People and Polity. The Organizational Dynamics of World Jewry*, published in 1989 that “Traditional religion plays a very minor role in what are basically secular communities. Its status is further diminished by the lack of religious functionaries which dates to the earliest days of Latin American Jewry.”

Although ethnicity has been traditionally a more defining element of Jewish life in the region, important changes have taken place in its religious life, as in education. One may see it as part of contemporary developments that point to the growing public role and visibility religion has assumed. Religious traditions have gained a new public relevance as a result of their claims to a new sort of interaction between private and public morality, a sort of “de-privatization” of religion (Casanova, 1994). It certainly point to the ways religion may inhabit the public sphere in the framework of differentiated advanced modern arrangements in its search to redefine the boundaries between individual and community, reason and faith. the public and the private spheres.

These changes point both to identity processes and as to patterns of organized life. Beginning in the 1960s, the Conservative Movement spread to South America, as the first model of a religious institution not “brought” from Europe but “imported” from the United States. As the Conservative Movement adjusted to local conditions, the synagogue began to play a more prominent role as a communal sphere both in community life and in society in general. The Conservative movement has mobilized thousands of otherwise non-affiliated Jews bringing them to active participation in Jewish institutions and to religious life.

One proof of how deep was the lack of religious leadership to which Elazar refers and its importance to religious development is found in the success of Rabbi Marshall Meyer who took upon himself the task of preparing a new rabbinical leadership. In Argentina, where the *Seminario Rabínico Lationamericano* was established, this new rabbinical group was formed and serves today throughout Latin America and also in communities in the United States. This phenomenon not only is due to the lack of opportunities available in local communities, but also reflects the new phenomenon of regional migration. As stated, Latin American Jewish migration moves from South to North and simultaneously is no longer only a one-way movement.

In the last years, paired with changing trends in World Jewish life. Orthodox groups have formed new religious congregations. Today, the spread of Habad movement and the establishment of Habad centers both in the large, well-established communities as well as in the smaller ones are striking. More than 70 Habad rabbis are currently working in close to 50 institutions.

In Mexico, however, the presence of Habad is marginal at best. Nevertheless, there are more than 50 synagogues, study houses, *kollelim* and *yeshivot*, of which over 30 were established in the last 25 years. Fourteen of the 24 existing *kollelim* belong to the Syrian Halabi community.

In Brazil, where the Jewish community was mainly built on pillars of liberal Judaism and secularity and was influenced by Brazilian society with its syncretic components, in the last 15 years, 15 orthodox synagogues, 3 *yeshivot*, 2 *kollelim* and 5 religious schools were established (Topel, 2005)

While the extreme religious factions and the strategies of self-segregation are still marginal to the whole of Jewish life in the continent, its growing presence corresponds to

general developing processes and tendencies. Amidst the global de-secularization process marked by the return of religion into the public sphere, both organized Jewish life and Jewish identities face new challenges. There has been a redefinition of external identification components, such as place of origin and the dilution of ideologies which were the source for hard core values and a consequent emergence of new types of spiritual calls. Thus, for example, the Brazilian experience throws light paradigmatically on how *Habad* was able to develop benefiting from the search of absolute values, spirituality and a sense of belonging, linked to the need of a new sense Jewish communal life in a postmodern context. What drives this process seems to be the need of many Jewish individuals to “feel at home” in the community, sharing values that are considered transcendental in their individual lives (Topel, 2005).

After the economical upheaval of recent years, religious developments not only respond to deep cultural and spiritual transformations but also to the reconstitution of the social fabric. Thus, religion acts not only as a moral code but as an anchor of belonging and social order.

A shared challenge for the communities lies in the question whether moderation as well as pluralism will take roots in order to foster a peaceful collective life, meaning by that not the lack of diversity but the appropriate channels through which recognition and consensus are built. This question has been raised with all its force by Johnathan. Sarna while analyzing the diverse sources of uncertainty for American Jews in the new Millennium. He emphasizes the dual dynamics of assimilation and revitalization. Following Jack Wertheimer’s memorable phrase “A People Divided” he posed the question whether Judaism in the years ahead will be characterized by religious polarization or whether there will be a return to the “vital center” in Jewish life. (Sarna, 2003)

The actual scenario points to the importance to guaranty institutional arrangements that promote public dialogue. This is necessary for achieving basic accords that may reflect and enhance the plurality and inner diversity of Jewish life. Today, the idea of a homogeneous community and a unique definition of Jewish identity have shown their limits. Jewish life in the 21 century requires a more complex and differentiated approach. It has proved hard to reconcile the growing inner Jewish differentiation with the idea of a unified institutional

structure. In this line of thought, it is necessary to review the two main political functions- participation and representation- amidst its organizational frameworks.

The latter is closely related to the profile, place and role of Jewish leadership. While the tendency of communities exclusively governed by lay leaders has been slowly reversed and there has been a gradual incorporation of professionals, the rhythm of replacement of the traditional *askan* by younger cadres has not been easy and varies according to the different communities. Broadly speaking, in this field there are urgent steps to be taken.

In Argentina, where a group of leaders ran the various institutional frameworks, Jewish communal leadership has been profoundly eroded by the intertwining of private financial interests and public economic requirements. The presence of wealthy patrons as leaders of central institutions willing to offer an alternative model to the old *askan* model and the overlapping of personal with communal agendas signified the breakdown of institutional life and the discrediting of the leadership moral authority. The collapse of the Mayo and Patricio banks in 1998 in Argentina generated profound crisis of legitimacy in the community.

The efforts to renew the leadership - among which the initiatives led by the Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) since the 90's have been central-, have accomplished more substantial results in the field of professionals rather than in the field of volunteer leaders. (Goldstein, 2005) In the context of a vacuum created by the crisis in leadership, religious leaders played an important role in confidence building and legitimization of institutions.

In Brazil, financial support by wealthy donors has continued to function without political implications. In other communities such as Mexico, however, the incorporation of a new generation of activists with more pragmatic profiles and explicit commitment to efficiency might lead to awareness of the changes required for the redesign of communities.

While the incorporation of professionals is a growing mark, it still demands efforts to create new paradigms of leadership in order to explain, understand, diagnose and articulate the whole differentiated spectrum of Jewish interests. Thus the community realm must be seen as a public space where increased rationality and operational dynamics cannot be undertaken without appropriate visions. It demands, therefore, to foster a public dialogue among lay leadership and professionals and central actors of Jewish life where restructuring Jewish life demands also a serious reflection on purposes and meanings.

Between ethnicity and citizenship. Being Jewish in Latin America Today

To date, a wide range of identification nuclei developed in the framework of the vital and complex processes of restructuring the normative, cultural and organizational axes of Jewish life. While on the one hand the accent is on an increasing individualization, on the other hand, collective identities assume a renewed importance. The diverse ways of being Jewish today in the region reflect both inner differentiation as well as the wide spectrum of social interaction. Thus, in the dynamics of 'similar-different', Latin American Jews are expressing in many realms the search for new definitions of their collective identity and are experiencing the opportunities opened by democracy and pluralism. While in the first dimension individual and collective; secular and religious axes draw a plural world of identities, in the second, the different patterns of socio-political changes in the region point to diversified scenarios.

In Argentina. Jews still live the shadow of the traumatic events that the Jewish community went through. Argentinean Jewry suffered the tragedy of a twofold attack-1992, the Israeli Embassy and 1994, the AMIA building. Its impact can be seen, among other consequences, in an existential sense of insecurity.

However, amidst the processes of democratization, the dynamics between ethnicity and citizenship has led to a growing collective presence in the public sphere, both in government and in civil society. The public political action of the Jewish community intertwined the fight against anti-Semitism with the fight against impunity of the former military regime. The specificity of Jewish values such as mourning, memory and solidarity is projected to the society at large seeking to achieve through these causes a contribution to democracy and human rights. It is this line of thought that I would like to recognize Rabbi's Yeoshua Aizenberg *Dvar Tora* on *Parashat Hashavua Shabat Zajor* honoring this Rabbinical Assembly. Tracing Y.H. Yerushalmi's reflections on *Zajor*, he underscores the opportunity to help Argentinean society to find new ways of collective memory through the experience of Jewish public collective mourning.

The traumatic events in Argentina represent what both researchers and Jewish leaders have termed "the new Anti-Semitism", in which Jewish communities, individuals

and Israel are perceived as a single evil entity. As part of an overall trend, the linkage between events in the Middle East and violence against Jews worldwide has provoked increase in anti-Jewish expressions. Probably one of the most dramatic expressions of this world trend, also seen in Latin America, is the fact that the de-legitimacy of Jews and of Israel is no longer restricted to the radical fringe of the political spectrum but has been embraced by the mainstream media. The connection between hostility toward Israel, Anti-Semitism and anti-Americanism constitutes an important chain of significance in Latin America. Although we might affirm that there is no substantial level of Anti-Semitism, its expressions are largely a by-product of anti-Israel positions.

The Argentinean fatal attacks as well as other Anti-Semitic manifestations in the region reinforced the awareness of survival that has characterized Jewish life throughout history, nurtured both by the concept of Diaspora/Galut and by the territorial concept of Eretz Israel. This consciousness as well as the demand for the right to be different and the legitimacy of the particular has become the province of dozens of Latin American Jewish intellectuals. There is an important and recognized Jewish literature that is distinguished by a recurrent emphasis on the heterogeneity that paradoxically differentiates and relates the national Latin American experience and the Jewish one (Senkman, 2000; Sosnowsky, 1987) serious efforts are oriented to discover the challenges of an hyphenated identity. The possibility of approaching it in the public discourse obeys mainly to the progress of multiculturalism and pluralism in the prevailing narratives.

Brazilian Jews show a sense of more certainty in general and vis-à-vis changing political conditions due mainly to the more open character of Brazilian society, its reaffirmed tolerance towards minorities and its forging of ethnic and cultural encounters (Sorj, 1997).

Regarding Mexico, we have to point to diverse ways and rhythm of increasing political visibility and participation. Differing from the instability of democratic regimes in the Southern Cone, the non participative character of Mexican political system has been a continuing disincentive to minority political participation. Today, we witness important changes which, though still uncertain their final outcome, are pointing to new scenarios. Among others changes, it is worth to mention the systematic widening of the public sphere and the pluralization of actors; a significant recognition of cultural pluralism, intertwined

with a trend to political and institutional pluralism; the fading away of important ideological constructs which nourished the past; the new pattern of relationship with the USA and Mexico's insertion in the Northern region. Also the new relationship between State and Church has an important impact.(Bokser, 2006). While the Jewish community historically benefited from the anticlerical stand of the revolutionary regimes, it has recently sought to benefit from the new public legal stand of the Church(es) in terms of public self-adscription (Jews as a religious minority) and thus, as a source of legitimacy. The new regime has promoted an open public relation with the community, one which has been defined much more in terms of the community's religious affiliation and its socioeconomic stand than in terms of ethnicity (Bokser, 2006)The gradual incorporation as individuals in politics, which started in the 90's was reinforced by its collective representation in civilian organisms and agencies during the political transition in 2000- Citizens Commission Against Discrimination; Commission on Religious Affairs; Public Security Commission, among others. The new and still cautious presence of Mexican Jewry in the public realm finds its expression more in the practical than in the reflexive dimension.

This new reality is part of an overall trend in which local Jewish communities have gradually joined the commitment with social causes, the fight against poverty, the attention of educational needs and the fight for human rights at the society at large. Their interaction with Non Governmental Organizations and diverse sectors of society has defined a new agenda where citizenship building and collective identity seek to converge. While this trend towards increased interactions is gaining momentum, challenges arise from the fact that two poles have simultaneously developed: a strong civil society, very much like those of established democracies, and a marginal one, susceptible to clientelistic co-optation. The first pole generates citizens, the second apathetic subjects, whose participation and their potential alliances are not sustainable due to the weakness of autonomous organizations. (Waisman, 2002).This double pattern also lies behind the governmental and political changes that the region has experiences in the last years.

Today Latin America may be considered a political fractured region. At least three main currents are today present in its political mapping: a defined left represented by Venezuela, Bolivia, Nicaragua; a more center-left profile found in Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay, Chile,

Panama and Paraguay; and a right and center-right strand in countries such as Mexico, Colombia, Peru, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras and Costa Rica. However, there is still a growing differentiation between populist governments, highly personalized, that seek to build new autonomous hegemonies and the more liberal regimes that arrive to power as a type of countervailing movement.

The quest for a democracy of higher intensity that might be instrumental to solve critical problems appears as a central question. Following Oxhorn's (2003) analysis, while Latin Americans enjoy an unprecedented level of political rights of citizenship, their basic civil rights are increasingly precarious and their social rights of citizenship are being narrowed in scope. It is this contradiction—the apparent inability of citizens to use their political right to vote to find democratic solutions for their most pressing needs—that is perhaps the greatest threat to democracy in the region. “At best, it could suggest to Latin Americans that democracy is irrelevant to improving the quality of their lives; at worst, democracy could appear as an obstacle to finding practical solutions to the most serious everyday problems people must confront.”

Final remarks

The organized Jewish World has not been acquainted with the inner diversity of Latin American Jewish communities and the nature of their Jewish life. Rather it has extended its concerns to the region mainly in times of crises. These concerns have included economic and philanthropic help. Thus, support has been channeled to the Argentinean community through a diversity of institutions in North America, such as the United Jewish Communities and global organizations such as the JDC and the Jewish Agency for Israel. This type of relationship unfortunately can lead to a sort of asymmetry and dependency that weakens the local Jewish leadership by depriving them of the power of making decisions that affect first and foremost their own lives.

However, the local representatives of the international institutions were able to devise methods and systems that regulate the allocation of financial support and social services. Although there are still close to 25 000 Jews under the poverty line who require assistance, the JDC decided to gradually pull back its support during the next 5 years, by 20% each

year. This decision challenges the community and its leadership to develop new capabilities for recruitment of resources and the determination of their uses.

Not only philanthropy has defined the relationship of Latin America Jews with world Jewry. On the political level there has been a growing flux of interactions with North American Jewish institutions that aims to advance the interests of the communities. American Jewry has become attractive not only as a source of support and a focal point of this attraction but also as a model.

It represents a departure from the previous pattern of almost exclusive interaction with Israel and Zionist organizations which have always played a central role in shaping Latin America Jewish life. For Latin American Jewry – Zionism and Israel have been a source of identity, an organizational axis and the focus of legitimacy. The centrality of the State of Israel reflected not only at the educational and cultural level but also, and sometimes mainly, at the political level as well, both in the inner life of the community and in its relationship with the general public.

Historically Zionism found itself caught between two different perspectives: on the one hand, Israel's expectations of a massive affluence of immigrants were high; on the other, by equating Zionist identity with Jewish continuity, involvement in Jewish life in the Diaspora was validated. At this level an interesting paradox was revealed: the awareness of the centrality of the State of Israel didn't lead to the realization of the Zionist dream, but in fact, it perpetuated activities and obligations in the life of the community. According to the conceptual differentiation of Gideon Shimoni, in Latin America a "substantive centrality" of Zionism and Israel developed; in time, moved into a circumstantial one. The presence of nearly 100,000 Latin American Jews in the State of Israel testifies to the success of this substantive centrality. At the same time, it is clear that the motivation to make Aliyha has changed over the years and today the main motive is precisely circumstantial (Bokser Liwerant, 2006)

The reinforcement of communal life coupled with advocacy of local continuity and Israel is seen as a source of responses to economic necessities. Amidst a globalized world, concepts such as "center" and "periphery" acquire different and new meanings that request a multi-focal approach. A diagnosis for the 21st century demands recognition of a multiplicity of actors and shared responsibilities in the Jewish world. Promoting understanding and mutual

contact to seek after new venues of belonging and community participation suggests also new opportunities to build a regional and global agenda based on common grounds and specific traits. In spite of the structural limitation at the institutional and organizational levels, Jewish life in the region accounts for a dual dynamics of diminishing communities and also signs of revitalization of Jewish life which cannot be disregarded.

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