

THE AVRAHAM HARMAN INSTITUTE OF
CONTEMPORARY JEWRY
THE HEBREW UNIVERSITY OF JERUSALEM

THE SOCIAL SCIENTIFIC STUDY
OF JEWRY:
SOURCES, APPROACHES,
DEBATES

STUDIES IN
CONTEMPORARY
JEWRY
AN ANNUAL
XXVII

2014

Edited by Uzi Rebhun

Published for the Institute by

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

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Latin American Jewish Social Studies: The Evolution of a Cross-disciplinary Field

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Latin American Jewish social studies has evolved along a highly diversified conceptual and methodological spectrum, with new challenges arising from developments in the convergent disciplines as well as from transformations in Jewish life and in Latin American society. Following the prevailing pattern of social sciences, it has attained a high level of specialization and makes use of increasingly sophisticated investigatory tools and techniques. At the same time, growing cross-disciplinary interaction in the field—for instance, between history and sociology, political science and anthropology, psychology and economics, diaspora, ethnic and regional studies, international relations, linguistics and literature, sociology of religions, Jewish studies and contemporary Jewry, demography and semiotics—gives rise to a good deal of complexity, as does the far from uniform path of regional development in Latin America and an awareness of the global and transnational nature of Jewish existence.

Jewish social studies and research were initially driven and defined by developments from abroad, which gradually were adjusted, contested, and refined. Resting on the dual foundations of Jewish studies (centered on the social and cultural collective experience) and regional studies (focusing on Latin America), Latin American Jewish studies has faced numerous obstacles in gaining a firm foothold in the academic and organized Jewish world. Until recently, Latin American culture stressed “universal” concerns and homogeneous national identity rather than promoting the study of particular and collective belonging, with liberals and nationalists alike seeking to downplay minority cultures and legacies; this attitude permeated the academic milieu as well. Today, however, as part of the process of globalization, political and cultural transformations in the region favor pluralism, and there is increased interest in identity politics. Thus, while the transnational character of Jewish life acted as an initial stimulus to the field, the growing visibility and legitimacy of Jewish life in Latin America provides an additional incentive for research.

Notwithstanding its current growth, the field evidences strong disciplinary imbalances, in part reflecting shifting theoretical conceptions and in part structural and institutional constraints. As has been the general tendency of social sciences in Latin

America, Jewish social studies has developed within the framework of changing and often conflicting external expectations and demands.¹ The field's importance for communal life has been underestimated, and it is only recently that Jewish leaders have voiced a (belated) awareness of its relevance and importance for developing strategies and programs aimed at Latin American Jewish communities.

A Non-Linear Path of Development

Pioneering efforts in Latin American Jewish studies took the form of comparative studies of contemporary Jewry. The leading assumption was that local Jewish realities needed to be explained and understood through a systematic contrast with parallel processes elsewhere in the Jewish world. Such research sought to underscore the global and civilizational character of the Jewish world. In this larger context, Latin America presented a particular case or modality. During the late 1950s and the 1960s, the Institute of Contemporary Jewry at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem established the basis for such comparative research, the goal being to "outline, by means of comparison, some disparate and common elements in the three main Jewish centers in the Western Hemisphere [United States, Canada and Argentina]," emphasizing broad organizational issues as well as the study of representative institutions.² These first steps, led by Moshe Davis at the Institute of Contemporary Jewry, were followed by a second phase that featured frontier society as a basic analytical tool.

In 1983, political scientists Daniel J. Elazar and Peter Medding published *Jewish Communities in Frontier Societies*, a systematic study of Argentine, Australian, and South African Jewry.³ "Frontier society" referred both to general societies and to their Jewish communities. The latter were frontiers in the sense of their being located far from the "motherland" in Europe or in the Middle East; this distance accounted for the persistence of cultural codes and patterns that were sometimes no longer present in the countries of provenance. The political-organizational approach that was developed by Elazar and Medding nourished fruitful comparative research with a strong typological character. Emphasis was placed on the development of Jewish institutions and on factors influencing community-building. A central theme was the process of institutional adaptation to the surrounding society, as influenced by key conditions such as the societies' level of development and the rhythm and profile of Jewish migratory trends.

In asserting that the Latin American experience differed from that of North America, these analyses stressed an incomplete process of integration that hindered the construction of strong and publicly recognized Jewish communities. The main obstacle, so it was argued, was the Catholic ethno-religious character of Latin American countries and the concomitant search for a homogeneous national identity, which marginalized from its national narrative those groups that were alien to its Hispanic/Catholic core. Other factors accounting for Latin American Jews' limited integration in the surrounding society were the socioeconomic profile of the Jewish communities, their high institutional density, and their intense internal socio-political dynamics. The autonomous character of Latin American Jewish communities was also explained by the significant role played by Israeli and Zionist organizations—far more central than in North America or Europe.⁴ The comparative approach was largely based on a

prevailing paradigm of middle-range theories of modernization, which posited that modernity, as it developed first in Europe and thereafter in the United States, would ultimately become the path for all other societies. Models that would apply to the particular characteristics of Latin America and its Jewish communities were lacking, and Shmuel Noah Eisenstadt's concept of "multiple modernities," which questioned the premise that cultural programs and institutional constellations of western modernity would necessarily dominate all modern societies, was not yet known.⁵ Notwithstanding the shared characteristics and global trends of the Jewish world, Eisenstadt's pluralistic approach is a useful tool in analyzing the diverse trajectories of Latin American societies and their Jewish communities.

Although the comparative approach enabled significant data collection, the knowledge it generated was mainly descriptive. The lack of further theoretical elaborations limited its breadth and heuristic potential. However, the initial research on Jewish communities represented the first systematic and academic efforts to study Latin American Jewish life from a world perspective. Over time, there evolved a new orientation toward the study of both regional and national cases, combined with a global Jewish perspective.

The search for interconnections between societies and their Jewish communities served as the organizing principle of the new historical studies led by Haim Avni in the 1970s. His studies pivoted on an analysis of integration patterns that regulated the visibility and legitimacy of Jewish life in Latin America.⁶ Avni drew a distinction between countries comprising "Euro-America" and those of "Indo-America," according to the impact of immigration on each country's population profile and ethnic composition, thereby enabling the analysis of the social role of minorities, in particular the Jews. Such categorization of the societies' ethnic and cultural composition provided a starting point for studying a diversity of political, economic, and historical trajectories. Thus, in "Euro-American" societies such as Argentina and Uruguay, massive immigration changed the socio-ethnic profile and gave rise to multiethnic societies that granted civil equality and constitutional rights to members of minorities—though this did not translate into the legitimization of minority cultures within the dominant culture. In "Indo-American" societies experiencing limited immigration, such as Mexico, Peru, or Ecuador, the original and *mestizo* ethnic composition of the population worked even more against the acceptance of diversity. Avni's comparative perspective focused on what was defined as the main shared dilemmas of Jewish life in Latin America: a lack of public legitimacy; limits on the right to be different; and dependency on international Jewish organizations. In addition, the central role played by the state of Israel in organized Jewish life was stressed.⁷

Communal diversity emerged as a major theme in the dominant historical approach focusing on the structure of Latin American Jewish communities. A variety of studies offered detailed descriptions of specific communities while at the same time examining their links with the international organized Jewish world and its institutions. This research model was applied globally as well as in connection with specific locales within the region, taking into account both migratory processes and sub-ethnic patterns of organization—for instance, the diverse Sephardi and Ashkenazi communities. Research dealing with each community's relationship with Israel was extensively developed, analyzing and also challenging the dominant assumption concerning unidirectional ties between a periphery diaspora and Israel.⁸

Simultaneously, the perspective advanced by Daniel Elazar combined political science with Jewish traditional thought, emphasizing the importance of organizational relationships, power distribution, and patterns of action within the Jewish collective. Highlighting federalism as the dominant model, it defined community as a multidimensional matrix with an extensive network of communication, in which interacting institutions share cultural patterns and work under a common leadership.⁹ In this framework, political links of Jewish communities with their surrounding societies are analyzed in terms of how a given local, regional, or national Jewish leadership promotes group interests. This perspective is especially suited to research on Latin American Jewish life, which is structured around the communal rather than the congregational model. It also accommodates sub-ethnicities and, more significantly (at least in the Ashkenazi sector) varying political ideologies, parties, and organizations. In fact, the region provides a test case for approaches that privilege the *kehillah* as the main analytical focus.

Another advance in Latin American Jewish studies came about in the early 1980s, with Judith Elkin's research and establishment of the Latin American Jewish Studies Association (LAJSA) at the University of Michigan. Her book, *Jews of the Latin American Republics*, along with a collection of essays she co-edited with Gilbert Merx, provided a systematic comparison between United States Jewry ("the North") and Latin American Jewry ("the South").¹⁰ Elkin also analyzed exogenous factors influencing these different Jewries, such as the (Latin American) Hispanic legacy with its Catholic and medieval elements. Converging with previous approaches, her analysis pointed to the limited and partial integration of Jewish immigrants in Latin America, with greater integration in the cultural domain than in the political arena. In her view, Jewish loyalty was continually being questioned and Jews were invariably regarded as foreigners; consequently, Latin American Jews lacked "civic assimilation." Moreover, according to Elkin, they were essentially "history's orphans," with the vision of the South continually compared with an ideal-typical understanding of western processes. Whether due to "history by analogy," or the uncritical adoption of prevailing theories, the hierarchical conception of the world that represented the North as its model limited the understanding of the singularity of Jewish life in Latin America.¹¹

Although the 1980s and 1990s witnessed several regional efforts to develop social research, mainly in the framework of communal structures such as the Center for Social Studies at the Asociación Mutual Israelita Argentina (AMIA), local communities did not follow suit. In line with a general tendency in Latin America, the Jewish leadership did not value empirical knowledge as a tool for policy-making. Paradoxically, even though the Jewish educational system was well developed, Jewish studies and research at the university level did not achieve a significant presence and started to emerge only at a handful of universities.

Expanding Disciplines and Approaches

As noted, Latin American Jewish studies received its first impetus through research carried out by the Institute of Contemporary Jewry in Jerusalem. Socio-demographic studies sponsored by the Institute gradually evolved from efforts to describe the main

trends and characteristics of the Jews toward a more complex appraisal of the interaction between Jewish communities and the surrounding societies. For example, in his analysis of socio-demography in the Latin American region, Sergio DellaPergola notes the relevance of a global perspective in identifying factors influencing the main (and changing) characteristics of the Jewish population.¹² Roberto Bachi was the first to address the need for tested data on Jewish demography, social structures, and identity, both in order to conduct research and to formulate communal policies.¹³ Through the Institute's division of Jewish demography and statistics, he actively promoted the collection of systematic data on Latin American Jewry. Another member of the Institute, Uziel Oscar Schmelz, began a critical revision of Jewish population estimates, which until then had been based on the assumption of continuing annual growth.¹⁴

By the 1970s, demographic research on Latin American Jewry was well established, thanks to the availability of a number of national censuses as well as data provided by Jewish community sources. An important technical and analytic turning point was marked by Schmelz and DellaPergola's detailed and rigorous analysis of the 1960 census of Argentina. In looking at the country's main demographic trends, Schmelz and DellaPergola noted differentiation of its population's behavior at the detailed level of local geographical divisions, social and economic stratification, and changes in migratory patterns.¹⁵ Trends such as low fertility rates, population aging, and the possible reversion of international migration patterns were also investigated and brought into the public realm of knowledge.¹⁶ The interaction between relevant knowledge, advanced research methods, and empirical investigation enabled a radical shift in socio-demographic research. The growing realization that information obtained through national censuses was often incomplete or seriously distorted led communal bodies to initiate their own studies of local Jewish populations.

The increasingly sophisticated level of methodological research also prompted theoretical and practical debates that reflected more general processes in the Jewish world—as illustrated in the demographic debate in the United States—as well as local realities and concerns.¹⁷ Adding complexity to Jewish population studies was the fact that notions of identity and belonging were shifting, as shown in a number of more recent studies. In Argentina, research has focused on the Jewish population both in the Buenos Aires metropolitan area and in major provincial regions.¹⁸ Some of these studies have shed light on the critical issue of changing parameters of Jewish identity and the mobile borders of belonging, especially in communities marked by decreasing rates of affiliation and high levels of exogamy. Ascription and self-ascription, identity and normative criteria, subjectivity, and institutional definitions have become part of the ongoing discussion. The contested nature of the subject is expressed, for instance, in proposals to approach the issue of exogamy by moving the focus of analysis from individuals' family origins to families' self-ascription.

In Brazil, demographic research on organized Jewish life, social interaction, patterns of exogamy, and communal affiliation has revealed changing components of ethnicity in this multiethnic society.¹⁹ In Mexico, a formative socio-demographic study was carried out in 1991 under the guidance of DellaPergola and Susana Lerner. Later updating of the data was handled directly by Jewish institutions, without

academic involvement.²⁰ Other communities in countries such as Chile, Uruguay, and Venezuela have also sponsored socio-demographic studies in order to assess their changing profiles—reflecting local, regional, and global processes as well as longer-term historical constraints and opportunities presented by new and significant migratory processes.²¹

Historically, the growth of Latin American Jewry resulted from large-scale immigration waves. In recent decades, there has been a reversal, with about 150,000 Jews from Latin America migrating to places such as North America and Israel. Research has been undertaken on the rates of emigration and exogamy and the impact of both on organized Jewish life in Latin American communities. Uruguay and Colombia, for instance, experienced a sustained population decline; Brazil, Mexico, and (especially) Venezuela had varying degrees of growth followed by decline.²² Panama remains the only country in Latin America that has significantly increased its Jewish population since 1970. The demographic profile of Jewish populations in Mexico and Venezuela has been more stable relative to other countries both because of more traditional socio-demographic patterns and because of an influx of Jews migrating from other parts of Latin America. In Mexico, the average level of affiliation remains at about 80 percent, in contrast with Argentina, where the average affiliation rate has declined to around 50 percent.²³

Demography is probably the area that reflects in most visible and acute terms the relations and tensions between meta-theoretical assumptions, scientific knowledge and data, and public communal interests. For many years, Latin American Jewish communal leaders were interested in promoting a public image of continual growth, not only because this enhanced the status of the Jewish community vis-à-vis the society at large but also because their capability to provide services depended on international Jewish institutions such as the Jewish Agency that allocated resources based on population.

The dialectical relationship between demographic findings and public narratives persisted in the communal discourse and in interactions between Jews and non-Jews. The general perception of a numerically larger Jewish presence was due in part to the vibrancy of Latin American Jewish life. Eventually, as noted, socio-demographic findings regarding the drop in Jewish population were acknowledged not only by scholars but also by Jewish communal organizations, with the latter reorienting their priorities.

The changing character of Jewish communities and identities has also acquired a prominent place in the new research agenda. Part of this agenda is directed toward what is perceived as a twofold process of individualization and transformation of the organized Jewish communities. The growing number of non-affiliated Jews, especially in the Southern Cone (comprising Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Paraguay, and Uruguay), gives rise to questions connected with definitions of Jewishness and criteria of belonging. Debate is taking place both among scholars and within the Latin American Jewish community regarding the interaction between culture and ethnicity, religion and secularity, religious currents and conversion, and institutional affiliation versus non-affiliated options. In this regard, one should underscore the need for historical perspective on the transformations that are taking place. For instance, the argument claiming that research has concentrated exclusively on the formally consti-

tuted community while ignoring non-affiliated Jews does not take into account the methodology that initially built representative samples, nor the historical processes that modified the size and growth of the organized and affiliated Jewish world, nor the fact that percentages of affiliated versus non-affiliated Jews have changed over time.²⁴

Growing social interactions have also led to an expansion of comparative studies that cover non-Jewish groups. Such research, variously characterized by valuable insights and reductive analyses, often highlights the singularity of historical connections between ethnicity and dispersion, as expressed, for instance, in the concept of “archetypal diasporas” (generally referring to that of Jews but also to that of the Armenians) or the functional formulation shared by various ethnic collectives falling into the category of “middle ground” groups.²⁵ Cultural attributes, internal cohesion, and organizational patterns, as well as objective visibility, have played a crucial role in the differential impact of external conditions on minorities, and specifically on Jews.

In the field of Jewish identity research, comparative approaches have fluctuated between those that stress structural factors and those that focus on instrumental, cultural, or symbolic dimensions. Although there are evident advantages in broadening the topics and referents of the research on Jews, the ideational motives and methodological weakness of some of these approaches come to the fore when they exclude parallel and systematic comparisons with Jewish life in other national, regional, and world experiences. It is precisely the interaction between the national, diaspora, and transnational dimensions of the Jewish condition that makes it a unique and universal case study.²⁶

Certain scholarly work, while incorporating the diaspora-transnational analytical perspective, nonetheless privileges the ethnic category within the national framework. Raanan Rein illustrates this school of thought, which is centered on processes of integration by ethnic groups—Jews, Arabs, and others—into the nation. Although he characterizes Jewish communities as diasporas, his main focus is on defining local/national borders of Jews’ collective identity; that is, as Argentine-Jewish, Mexican-Jewish, Brazilian-Jewish, or Jewish Latin American, rejecting the identity categorization of Latin American Jews. His critique of the historiography on Latin American Judaism largely questions the global character of the Jewish condition and thereby emphasizes the category of “ethnic group” over “ethno-national diaspora.” Even though Rein rightfully characterizes Latin American Jews through hyphenated identities, the tensions between national and transnational identities are downplayed; instead, Rein’s work highlights the fluidity of interactions between these two spheres.

Such arguments, which underscore the national realm as the main identity referent, seem to replicate the traditional theoretical assumptions of liberalism, namely, its expectation that all attributes of citizenship are to be subsumed in a national identity, with the public sphere (the universal) prevailing over the private (the particular) or the communal. This stance misses the point that collective membership, specifically with regard to the Jews—which includes ethnic, civic, and national layers of belongingness—has been informed by a shared and unique tension between being equal/being different.

The complex tensions and negotiations between ethnicity and the nation require a conceptual lens wider than Rein’s. Rather than questioning the exceptionalism of the Jewish diaspora, Rein assumes that “transnational ethnicity is not necessarily an

identity component with a heavier weight than the national identity.”²⁷ Further, his analysis gives rise to questioning the relevance of ancestors’ place of birth or the significance (or symbolic centrality) of an imaginary homeland. In our case, it challenges the prevailing Zionist identity of Latin American Jews and their links with Israel; the commitments of the latter toward its diaporas; and the recognition that there may be more than one “center” for ethnic communities outside the borders of their national state of residence.

The Institutionalization of Latin American Jewish Studies

As has been seen, Latin American Jewish social studies and research underwent a slow process of institutionalization in the academic world. Two professional associations contributed to the field’s expansion: the Israeli Association of Latin American Researchers (AMILAT), established in 1975 at the Institute of Contemporary Jewry,²⁸ and the aforementioned U.S.-based Latin American Jewish Studies Association (LAJSA). Whereas AMILAT has emphasized the relevance of Judaic studies to advance regional knowledge, LAJSA has given priority to Latin American studies as the theoretical/regional framework.²⁹ Differences between the research developed by AMILAT and LAJSA are not only or even mainly theoretical and conceptual, but also result from diverse patterns and degrees of institutionalization.³⁰

In the 1990s, following an increasingly dominant path of cultural studies dealing with the literature of minorities, Latin American Jewish studies in the United States expanded mainly in the literary area. This trend was accelerated by courses offered in university departments of Spanish and Portuguese literature. As has been correctly underscored, the main underlying premises of literary studies reflect a North American mode of academic discourse, as expressed by concepts such as diaspora, exile, immigration, antisemitism, assimilation and *mestizaje*—“living in the hyphen.”³¹ In this fashion, ethnic and cultural studies overshadow other theoretical and methodological approaches while projecting the dominance of imagined “Latino” and “Jewish” worlds in literary narratives. Radicalized constructivist approaches to ethnicity and identity are expressed in the questioning of concepts such as Jew, Jews, and Jewishness in order to “denaturalize” their meaning and to challenge alleged essentialist assumptions.³² Attention has also been paid to multicultural motifs in literary works by Latin American Jews and in the function of Jews as a litmus test for cultural difference and multiculturalism—areas that partially parallel the cultural production of North American Jews and their place in general society. Literary studies have become an important point of entry to the research of Jewish life and identities. New generations of scholars have entered the field, a situation that both reflects and defines the growing influence of Latin American culture in the United States.

Various recent studies have focused on interactions between national and transnational aspects of identity among Latin American Jews in the United States. The complexities of identity are manifold: alongside a sense of continued “belongingness” to the Latino (Hispanic) world, there are clearly felt differences. The essential interplay between difference vis-à-vis the Latino/Hispanic migratory world and vis-à-vis

the American Jewish community—and other groups of immigrants—marks a new reality. Additional disciplinary approaches are required in order to reconsider the transformation of the concept of Hispanic/Latino categorization and the place of Hispanic culture in the construction of a new transnational identity of Latin American Jews in the United States.³³

Meanwhile, the number of academic courses in Latin American universities has been increasing apace, and research has also gradually been expanded. This is exemplified by institutions such as the Center for Judaic Studies at the universities of Sao Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, in Brazil; the Judaic Studies Center at the University of Chile; the Judaic studies program at Iberoamericana University and Universidad Hebraica, in Mexico; and in Argentina, among others, the Tres de Febrero University and more recently the Núcleo de Estudios Judaicos at the Instituto de Estudios Económicos y Sociales (IDES). In Israel, too, Latin American Jewish studies have expanded and diversified, expressing bifurcation, oscillation, and attempts to build convergences between Judaic studies and Latin American studies.

Traditionally, Latin American Jewish studies have been marked by an emphasis on history. Some of the research has been comparative in nature—for instance, that focusing on Latin American immigration policies and the role of rescue during the Holocaust. In contrast, the proliferation of research on antisemitism has focused less on comparisons within and/or outside the continent. Thus, historical and socio-political studies of European fascism and its impact on nationalist and populist Latin American regimes (1930s–1950s) have centered on specific national settings in their examination of ideology and social history. Attention has also been channeled to the creation of quantitative indexes that enable comparative historical research, based on the periodic reports published by the Stephen Roth Institute for the Study of Contemporary Antisemitism and Racism at Tel Aviv University and the Vidal Sassoon International Center for the Study of Antisemitism (SICSA) at the Hebrew University. However, additional in-depth conceptualization and theoretical formulations are required to address the issue of antisemitism in the region. Both the Centro de Estudios Sociales (CES-DAIA) in Argentina and Tribuna Israelita in Mexico have published periodic reports on antisemitic incidents that also include socio-political analyses.

Studies on antisemitism have become part of a broader spectrum of investigation dealing with societal parameters of inclusion and exclusion. This perspective considers the interfacing between national, social, and political antisemitism. Diffuse and latent prejudice in Latin America, which is present both on the structural level and in the (officially frowned upon) rhetoric of individuals and collective sectors, is yet to be identified by serious studies. The historical course of this prejudice, which does not necessarily translate into discriminatory practices, needs to be contextualized within each country's political culture.

At the same time, concern has been voiced with regard to an excessive focus on antisemitism as a primary characteristic of the continent—against a simplistic and reductionist identification of Latin America with intolerance and anti-Jewish displays.³⁴ This critique calls for more balanced and nuanced distinctions between different times, places, and modalities of antisemitism. As noted, we still face the challenge of linking standardized criteria (such as those provided by the aforementioned periodic

reports) with comprehensive theoretical approaches that account for changing meanings of antisemitism.

Political regimes have posed diverse challenges to scholars focusing their studies on collective action and the political practices of community leaders and individual members. Authoritarian and military regimes in the Southern Cone have been analyzed from different perspectives—communal and civil demands, the role of actors, the behavior of individuals and communities, and the alliances and place of the organized Jewish world—emphasizing the wide political and ideological spectrum of local, provincial, and national political action.³⁵ This research has been bolstered by newly available archival material.³⁶

As a younger generation of scholars enters the field, the debate has widened to include postmodern discourse. The traditional hard-core components of Jewish identity and ethnicity have been challenged, while the validity of the concept of Jewish peoplehood has been questioned. Although such debate is not exclusive to the Latin American context, it acquires a more acute and singular relevance in this region, given the fact that in Latin America, the modern and the post-modern coexist with pre-modern conditions.

A Conceptual Shift: The Transnational Paradigm

Whereas a comparative perspective of the Jewish world guided the first studies in the field, transnationalism provides a more current conceptual framework to explore theoretical and methodological venues related to the changing profiles and borders of Latin American Jewish communities. A transnational approach, partly enhanced by globalization theories, interacts with and challenges the scope of the concept of diaspora and its underlying assumptions. It underscores bordered and bounded social and communal units as transnational constituted spaces interacting with one another. Thus, a dual condition that involves both dispersion and national belonging is highlighted, influencing the ways in which identities and communal membership might be modified. The transnational framework is particularly relevant for Latin America, both past and present, in which migration processes, narratives, and parameters of Jewish identities are built in a shifting context of revival, transformation, and negotiation.³⁷

During the past 40 years, as noted, more than 150,000 Jews emigrated from Latin American countries: in consequence, the Jewish population dropped from 514,000 in 1970 to 390,000 in 2010.³⁸ Contradictory trends that have characterized the region—democratization and de-democratization; liberalization and economic crisis; emerging civil societies and political instability; high levels of public violence alongside the search for new personal opportunities—have increasingly led to migration waves and to multiple experiences of leaving and joining. These processes have given rise to the contrasting realities of shrinking Jewish communities in some areas and revitalized Jewish life in others, both within Latin America and abroad. Accordingly, the focus of research now extends to four regions: Latin America, North America, Western Europe, and the Middle East as represented by Israel. Although migration, dispersion, and regrouping is a worldwide historical phenomenon affected by

macro-level political and economic forces,³⁹ it assumes particular forms in Latin America and has had a differential impact on Jewish communities. Waves of migration were of different nature and scope. One type encompassed forced migration and exile of individuals under high risk, such as politically involved activists and intellectuals in the Southern Cone. Another was characterized by voluntary household decisions to emigrate, taking into consideration safety, security, and economic factors. Still others added to the previous determinants a number of ideational considerations, such as proximity to Jewish religious and communal institutions, the availability of Jewish educational frameworks, and prospects for Jewish continuity. Further research is needed in order to explore beyond the collective push-pull drivers of migration, focusing on the more particular Jewish collective dimension as well as on individual factors underlying forced and free-choice migration.⁴⁰ The transnational paradigm may be particularly relevant in developing pluralistic approaches toward migration that simultaneously take into account agency and structure, individuals, and the high institutional density of the local and global Jewish world.⁴¹ Socio-demographic research on communities and identities may also benefit from this paradigm in confronting shifting (and increasingly porous) ethno-religious-cultural territorial population borders and the challenges derived from boundary maintenance, renewed dispersion, and connections to one or more (real or symbolic) homeland(s).

As with other social sciences, Latin American Jewish studies needs to overcome the burden of “methodological nationalism.”⁴² The concepts of diaspora and transnationalism cannot really be separated; moreover, their meaning can be inferred only from the ways in which these terms are used. Thus, while older notions of diaspora implied a return to a real or imagined homeland, the newer terminology replaces “return” with dense and continuous “linkages” across borders.⁴³ Similarly, the binomial terminology of “origin-destination” has been widened to comprise countries of onward migration, which also takes into account multilateral or lateral diasporic axes. Clearly, issues of multiple boundary expansion and redefinition are central to the Jewish experience as well as to the research concerns of the social sciences. In diaspora studies, the Jewish case has been attenuated, whereas transnational studies tend to lose sight of boundary maintenance related to the diasporic density present in contemporary migratory movements, with the latter subsumed under the rubric of the “ethnic lens.”⁴⁴ In contrast, social science research in the realm of contemporary Jewry tends to leave out the global dimension of Jewish life, focusing on national cases and thereby underscoring exceptionalism.

Research agendas must therefore include mapping the relocation of Latin American Jews moving inside Latin America—for instance, migration from Argentina to Mexico or from Uruguay to Venezuela—and outside Latin America, mainly to the United States and Israel. There is also a need to address the reconstruction of the main transnational social networks following relocation, and the nature of persisting links with the countries of origin and, consequently, the need to differentiate and relate chain migrations, migrant regrouping, and processes of re-diasporization or de-diasporization. These new topics claim social and demographic perspectives and analytical tools that respond to the redefinition of spaces and territories.

The state of Israel and the Jewish/Zionist ethos have a singular, catalyzing role in both the traditional and newer conceptual frameworks of transnationalism.

Numerous scholars have analyzed the ways in which political concepts, values, aspirations, and organizational entities that were imported from previous Jewish locales were instrumental in the process of cultural and institutional formation of Jewish communities in Latin America—perhaps even more so than in other regions of Jewish immigration such as Western Europe or North America.⁴⁵ In this sense, the perception of a dialectical relationship between a perceived “center” in Palestine/Israel—with Latin America as an ideal “periphery”—was probably more widespread and acute in this region than elsewhere. Today, however, the social, cultural, and political transformations related to diffused patterns of international migration call for a serious and critical reconsideration of the earlier bipolar model, in light of a Jewish collective reality that has increasingly become multi-centered.

Final Remarks

As noted, Latin American Jewish social research reflects a nonlinear trajectory and faces challenges prompted by the trans-disciplinary nature of the field. One exemplary challenge illustrating the convergence of general and particular trends is that of analyzing the role of religion, and particularly the religious transformations of Jewish life in Latin America and worldwide. Historically, religion played a minor role in Latin American Jewish communities. However, more recent developments, both across the region and throughout the Jewish world, point to the increasing weight of religious claims and affirmation in the public domain, a situation that has led to the “de-privatization” of religion.⁴⁶

During the 1960s, it was the Conservative movement that mobilized thousands of otherwise non-affiliated Jews into Jewish life. In recent years, however, in tandem with changing trends in world Jewry, Orthodox groups have taken the lead in forming new religious congregations. Today, for instance, the expansion of Chabad (Lubavitch) institutions, both in large and well-established communities and also in smaller ones, modifies the Latin American Jewish landscape. In Argentina, competing religious forces came to the forefront in the 2011 elections to AMIA, the central communal organization of Argentine Jewry. Brazilian Jewry, too, is displaying increased interest in Orthodoxy and in Orthodox outreach.⁴⁷ In Mexico, meanwhile, socio-demographic data indicate a marked trend toward greater religious observance. Categories such as “very observant” and “observant” increased, respectively, from 4.3 percent and 6.7 percent in 2000 to 7 percent and 17 percent in 2006, representing an overall growth of almost 300 percent. In contrast, “traditionalists,” who still represent the majority of the Mexican Jewish population, experienced a reduction from 76.8 percent to 62 percent. When analyzing the population below 40 years of age, these trends appear even more acute: for “very observant” there was an increase from 7 to 12 percent, the “observant” category grew from 17 to 20 percent, and “traditionalists” decreased from 62 to 59 percent.⁴⁸ Across Latin America, ultra-Orthodox factions and self-segregated communities are still marginal; their presence, however, is growing. These trends are the subject of ongoing debate both in academic and public communal circles.

Throughout this essay, we have emphasized the need to guarantee a serious comparative approach that takes into consideration the specificity and distinctiveness of the object of study. Yet it is equally important to affirm the need to widen the study range of groups and referents as well as other experiences of the Jewish world. For instance, given the significant influence of past and present migratory movements of the Jewish collective, it is necessary to conduct rigorous comparisons of assimilation patterns, hybridity, reconfiguration processes, and changing ethnic profiles. There is also a need to compare and contrast recent Jewish emigration flows from the region with general migration waves of Latin Americans and with Jews worldwide. Concurrently, one has to bear in mind the paradigmatic transnational nature of the Latin American Jewish ethno-diaspora of the 21st century. In parallel, research needs to further focus on sub-ethnicity and its impact on the changing composition of Jewish communities.⁴⁹

Latin American Jewish studies and research aspire to have a greater scientific and communal impact, a twofold goal that requires establishing procedures that link the new findings with appropriate institutions.

In the framework of a diversified Jewish world, new trends of theoretical knowledge and applied research need to address internal diversity. Researchers have to be aware that their work deals with categories and measures of inclusion and exclusion that delineate the contours of Jewish peoplehood: successfully meeting all of these challenges is the best guarantee of the field's continued growth, its scientific pertinence, and communal relevance.

Notes

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8. Silvia Shenkolewsky; "La conquista de las comunidades, el Movimiento Sionista y la Comunidad Ashkenazi de Argentina (19239–1945)," in *Judaica Latinoamericana II*, ed. AMILAT (Jerusalem: 1992), 191–201; Haim Avni, "The Origins of Zionism in Latin America," in *The Jewish Presence in Latin America*, ed. Judith Laikin Elkin and Gilbert W. Merkx (Boston: 1987), 135–155; Judit Bokser Liwerant, "El lugar cambiante de Israel en la comunidad judía de México: centralidad y proceso de globalización," in *Judaica Latinoamericana V*, ed. AMILAT (Jerusalem: 2005), 185–208, idem, "Globalization and Latin American Jewish Identities: The Mexican Case in Comparative Perspective," in *Jewish Identities in an Era of Globalization and Multiculturalism: Latin America in the Jewish World*, ed. Judit Bokser Liwerant, Eliezer Ben-Rafael, Yossi Gorny, and Raanan Rein (Leiden: 2008), 81–105.

9. Elazar, *People and Polity*.

10. Judith Laikin Elkin, *Jews of the Latin American Republics* (Chapel Hill: 1980); idem, "The Evolution of the Latin American Jewish Communities: Retrospect and Prospect," in Elkin and Merkx (eds.), *The Jewish Presence in Latin America*, 309–323. The Latin American Jewish Studies Association is currently based at the University of Texas at Austin.

11. Judith Laikin Elkin, *Jews of the Latin American Republics* (Chapel Hill: 1980).

12. Sergio DellaPergola, "¿Cuántos somos hoy? Investigación y narrativa sobre población judía en América Latina," in Avni et al. (eds.), *Presencia y Alteridad*, 305–341.

13. *Ibid.*, 309.

14. Uziel O. Schmelz, "Evaluación crítica acerca de las estimaciones de población judía en Argentina," in *Comunidades Judías en Latinoamérica 1973–1975* (Buenos Aires: 1977), 198–223.

15. Uziel O. Schmelz and Sergio DellaPergola, *Hademografiyah shel hayehudim beargentina ubearatot aherot shel amerika halatinit* (Tel Aviv: 1974).

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27. Rein, *Argentine Jews or Jewish Argentines?* 38–39.

28. AMILAT leads the Latin American Division of the World Congress of Jewish Studies. It has organized the corresponding congresses and has published seven volumes of the series *Judaica Latinoamericana* (Jerusalem: 1988, 1993, 1997, 2001, 2005, 2009, 2010).

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30. *Reflexiones sobre enseñanza e investigación académica del judaísmo latinoamericano*, report presented to the XIII Congress of LAJSA, Institute of Contemporary Jewry, Division of Latin America, Spain and Portugal (2007).

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32. See, for example, Erin Graff Zivin, *The Wandering Signifier: The Rhetoric of Jewishness in the Latin American Imaginary* (Durham: 2008); also see Judah M. Cohen, "The Ethnic Dilemmas of Latin American Jewry," in Lesser and Rein (eds.), *Rethinking Jewish-Latin Americans*, 231–266.

33. In 1970, seeking to provide a common language by which to "promote uniformity and comparability for data on race and ethnicity" for various population groups, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) created a broad definition of Hispanic as "a person of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture or origin, regardless of race." In 1997, a revision was made to the definition to equate Hispanic with "Latino." See "Revisions to the Standards for the Classification of Federal Data on Race and Ethnicity," online at www.whitehouse.gov/omb/fedreg_1997standards (accessed 18 November 2012). The U.S. Census has a broader definition of what constitutes Hispanic; in theory, anyone who considers him/herself to be Hispanic or Latino is indeed defined as Hispanic or Latino, which therefore can also include persons of Portuguese and/or Brazilian descent. For a table showing comparisons in terminology, see Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ), "Race, Ethnicity, and Language Data: Standardization for Health Care Quality Improvement," online at www.ahrq.gov/research/iomracereport/reldata1tab1-1.htm (accessed 18 November 2012).

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