

Bokser Misses-Liwerant, Judit. “Latin American Jewish Identities: Past and present challenges. The Mexican case in a comparative perspective”, en Judit Bokser, Eliezer Ben Rafael y Yossi Gorni (eds.), *Identities in an Era of Globalization and Multiculturalism. Latin America in the Jewish World*. Leiden-Boston, Brill Editorial House, 2008, pp. 81-105. ISBN 978 90 04 15442 1

ORCID: orcid.org/0000-0003-4766-1335 (Judit Bokser Liwerant)

RESUMEN / ABSTRACT:

Este artículo analiza la trayectoria cambiante de la identidad judía en América Latina, desde una perspectiva histórica fundacional y a la luz los cambios que ha evidenciado en como resultado de los procesos de globalización, la democratización y los escenarios multiculturales. Particular interés adquiere el estudio de las interacciones entre la singularidad identitaria judía y las características culturales colectivas de América Latina en general y de México en particular. En este marco, se exploran también las similitudes y traslapes culturales que se dan entre las distintas comunidades judías en los diversos contextos nacionales, así como las interacciones entre la identidad etno-cultural de estas comunidades. Las transiciones de un nacionalismo diaspórico bajo hegemonía sionista a nuevos contextos de pluralización de centros o bien de descentramiento proyectan escenarios particularmente ricos en expresiones de diversidad.

This chapter analyzes the changing trajectory of Jewish identities in Latin America, from the foundational phases through their redefinitions along the complex interplay of globalization processes, democratization and multiculturalism. It explains the interactions between the singularity of Jewish identity and the collective cultural characteristics in Latin America. From this analytical perspective, it explains the similarities and cultural overlapping between Jewish communities in their different national contexts. The transition from a founding ethno-cultural identity framed by diasporic nationalism under Zionist hegemony to new pluralization of centers or even decentered configurations throws light into rich regional scenarios defined by complexity and diversity.

Identities in an Era of Globalization and Multiculturalism

Latin America in the Jewish World

Edited by

Judit Bokser Liwerant

Eliezer Ben-Rafael

Yossi Gorny, and Raanan Rein



BRILL

LEIDEN • BOSTON

2008

CONTENTS

List of Contributors	ix
Introduction	1

SECTION I

KLAL YISRAEL IN THE CONTEMPORARY ERA

Between Center and Centrality: The Zionist Perception of <i>Klal Yisrael</i>	25
<i>Yosef Gorny</i>	
Contemporary Threats to <i>Klal Yisrael</i>	35
<i>Eliezer Ben-Rafael</i>	
Jewish Autonomy and Dependency: Latin America in Global Perspective	47
<i>Sergio DellaPergola</i>	
Latin American Jewish Identities: Past and Present Challenges. The Mexican Case in a Comparative Perspective	81
<i>Judit Bokser Liwerant</i>	

SECTION II

THE JEWS IN LATIN AMERICA

Waning Essentialism: Latin American Jewish Studies in Israel	109
<i>Raanan Rein</i>	
<i>Klal Yisrael</i> at the Frontiers: The Transnational Jewish Experience in Argentina	125
<i>Leonardo Senkman</i>	
Brazilian Non-Anti-Semite Sociability and Jewish Identity	151
<i>Bernardo Sorj</i>	
Jews, Blacks, and the Ambiguities of Multiculturalism in Brazil	171
<i>Mónica Gini</i>	

Jewish Communal Life in Argentina and Brazil at the End of The 20th Century and the Beginning of the 21st: A Sociological Perspective	185
<i>Yossi Goldstern</i>	
Revolution, Ethnicity, and Religions in Cuba: Similarities, Differences, and Dichotomies in the Case of the Jews	203
<i>Maritza Corrales Capestany</i>	

SECTION III

LATIN AMERICAN JEWISH CULTURE

Crypto-Judaism in Mexico: Past and Present	223
<i>Alicia Gajman de Backal</i>	
The Literary Construction of Jewish Identity in Chile: A Cartography of Recent Memories	231
<i>Gilda Waldman</i>	
In the Name of the Father: Identity and Family Memory in Andrés Rivera and Mauricio Rosencof	253
<i>Flornda F. Goldberg</i>	
A Mosaic of Fragmented Identities: The <i>Sephardim</i> in Latin America	267
<i>Margalit Bejarano</i>	
The Sephardic Diaspora Revisited: Dr. Ángel Pulido Fernández (1852–1932) and His Campaign	287
<i>Alisa Meyuhas Ginio</i>	
Latin American Israelis: The Collective Identity of an Invisible Community	297
<i>Luis Roniger and Deby Babis</i>	

SECTION IV

JEWS, SOCIETY, AND STATEHOOD:
COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVES

The Cultural Pluralism Perspective of North American Jewry During the Holocaust	323
<i>Ofer Shiff</i>	

North American Jews in the New Millennium	345
<i>Jonathan D. Sarna</i>	
Jewish Identity and Anti-Semitism	355
<i>Michel Wieviorka</i>	
Jews, Nationality, and Judaism: The Case of <i>Ha-rishon le-Zion</i> , Rabbi Meir Ben Zion Hai Uziel	365
<i>Shalom Ratzabi</i>	
Different Concepts of a Jewish Democratic State	375
<i>Benyamin Neuberger</i>	
Glossary	397
Bibliography	403
Main Index	433
Names Index	443

LATIN AMERICAN JEWISH IDENTITIES:
PAST AND PRESENT CHALLENGES.

THE MEXICAN CASE IN A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

Judit Bokser Liwerant

Approaching Jewish identities in Latin America while focusing particularly on the Mexican experience implies different conceptual challenges derived from the inner diversity of the region and its different patterns of historical development, as well as from the current impact of globalization processes. Latin American Jewish communities are characterized by common grounds while at the same time encompassing much diversity in their experiences. Shared features and singularities reflect the way the national, regional and global dimensions interact, and the different modalities in which they come together and intermingle with the particular, and yet global, condition of the Jewish people.

Structures, interactions and frontiers define collective identities. Their primordial as well as symbolic referents derive from a wide cultural spectrum that must be seen as never unitary, never indivisible, never organic, always as assemblages of distinctive ideas, elements, patterns and behaviors (Berlin, 1991). Thus, cultural diversity provides the domain where collective identities are built, internalized, created and transformed. Certainly, identities are not homogeneous totalities which express essentialist a-historical contents, on the contrary; they stretch and structure themselves beyond their original definitions. Their complexity and historical character is associated with the social and communal realms in which structural and cultural dimensions interact.

Thus, contemporary Jewish identities do not reflect a uniformed pattern; there is a plurality of trends, and each of them may be seen as relatively closer to or further away from others, inside the changing parameters of a wide 'space of identity' (Ben Rafael and Peres, 2005). Following Appadurai's concept of flows or streams, the main flows of Jewish identity may be distinguished according to the aspect of the identity structure which they most evince. In the same vein, Sergio DellaPergola (1999) underscores the different identification patterns that develop and prevail in the Jewish world more as a matter of intensity and composition than as the product of an intrinsically

different typology. Thus, identities must be seen as fluent junctures at which the past, the present and the future coalesce while simultaneous overlapping takes place.

From this perspective, Jewish Mexican and Latin American realities point to historical convergences and interactions between diverse identity configurations, amidst a singular common trait: a close historical interaction between ethno-cultural identity and the national dimension in the mold of diasporic nationalism under Zionist hegemony. The Zionist idea, the State of Israel and its center-Diaspora model acted as a focus of identification, as an axis for the structuring process of communal life, and as a source of legitimacy for the Jewish presence in Latin American societies. Closely built around communal life *vis-à-vis* the national arena and the dynamics and problems of the Jewish world, Jewish identities and narratives, in plural, developed through a contesting dialogue with a strong secular motive.

However, varying parameters of Jewish life in the region led to the pluralization of identification derived from the diversification of interactions with the surrounding world and amidst the Jewish world itself. While the Israel center model for Jewish life, acted as leading substratum of identification and institutional development, built on the differentiated current scenario of the region, new trends have put into action both individualization processes and public collective affirmation.

Today's radical transformations of reality, linked to globalization processes, pose new questions and confront Jewish life with unprecedented options. The differentiation draws a complex array of trends where tacit disagreement and even disputes take place regarding the frontiers of identity, its collective expression and, certainly, the place of the State of Israel. The emergence of new models of relations between communities and the center(s) and even new processes of decentralization shed light onto common trends in the Jewish world and singular developments in Mexican and Latin American Jewish communities.

The processes of building collective identities take place in different institutional arenas—be they territorial, communal or religious—and in different political-ecological settings—be they local, regional, national—within the framework of a global context in which they interact, intersect and overlap, and in which their components become re-linked (Eisenstadt, 1998). The different impact of the manifold scenarios as well as the plurality of networks of interaction both explain the increasing complexity of the arenas in which social identities are built. Our

analysis refers therefore to changes and transformations that have already taken place, as well as to emerging trends whose subsequent developments are still uncertain or vague, but which demand conceptual reflection.

Latin America: One Ideal, Different Realities

When the renowned French historian Fernand Braudel was asked to dedicate an issue of his review *Les Annales* to Latin America, he titled it "A travers les Ameriques Latin," in the plural, emphasizing the diverse nature of the different countries and cultures that make up the 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.

In Euro-America, with countries such as Argentina or Uruguay, in which mass immigration changed the socio-ethnic profile of the populations, multi-ethnic societies were built with a *de facto* tolerance towards minorities, counterbalancing the primordial, territorial, and religiously homogeneous profile that the State aspired to achieve. In Indo-America—i.e. Mexico, Peru or Ecuador—the original ethnic composition of the population enhanced the content of national identity in its unified and homogeneous profile (Eisenstadt, 1998; Avni, 1998).

Countries such as Mexico rooted their conception of national identity on an ethnic-religious cultural model—*mestizaje*—based on fusion, assimilation and the merging of Spanish-Catholic and indigenous populations. As a resource for identity-building and national integration, this model became a central criterion for evaluating the full incorporation of minorities.

Despite the differences, we can still talk about Latin America as an entity sharing both an ideological discourse of unity and a common geopolitical, social, and economic reality. Historically, 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 national identities and the dynamics of social integration. The latter includes, specifically, the patterns of formation and transformation of the criteria of membership within national communities (Eisenstadt, 1998). In Euro-America, Jewish life was more

exposed to social interactions, while in Indo-America, on the contrary, the communal strategy of limited integration and autonomy to preserve cultural, religious, and social differences was favored.

In their recurrent search after Modernity, Latin American societies faced enormous challenges. While cultural understanding influenced the different ways Modernity was built, modern institutions did matter as they were central to grant citizenship, pluralism and democracy. In as far as the public sphere and civil society became constitutive pillars of the modern forms of collective life and Modernity's legacy can be seen as a world of values and institutions that generated the capacity of social criticism and democratic integration, the region had to cope with the incompleteness in their achievements (Seligman, 1992; Alexander, 2006).

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 the socio-ethnically fissured nature of public life on the continent (Formant, 2003). In turn, many values and institutional arrangements were cultural hybrids. Thus, while religion was embedded in the entire social construct, the internalization of Catholicism also implied its conversion into a civic culture. And if 'civic Catholicism' opened the possibility of creating new meanings and codes, it simultaneously set the limits and scope of secularization processes while advancing them in the public sphere. Certainly, the central place and role of the Catholic Church, as well as European corporate traditions, led to difficulties dealing with religious and ethnical diversity, still actually projecting human encounters with Otherness as a combined reality of social diversity and homogeneous narratives. *De facto* collective coexistence acted as an open parameter to build Jewish life, to define its communal contours and to redefine its borders on the light of the always complex dynamics between social integration and group autonomy.

Dynamics of the Encounters: Communal Life and Integration Processes

Despite the fact that 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—they never had to fight for Emancipation (Avni, 1999). Liberalism attempted to define the nation in terms of its separation from the colonial and indigenous past looking therefore at

the European population as a source of inspiration. Thus the struggle for religious tolerance was also conceived and argued as a necessary instrument to attract this immigration. The strengthening of society as a means to development, progress and modernization required capital, abilities, and talent that were thought to be found in the European population. For these purposes, immigrants were seen as necessary both in their human as well as material capacities. However, the ideal image of national societies inspired a selective evaluation of the different groups of immigrants.

The Jews assigned image and identity *vis-à-vis* the national population took place in the framework of the immigration policies and laws, reflecting the ideal conception of national societies, its pragmatic requirements, and the changing correlation of political forces (Bokser Liwerant, 1994). While freedom and equality were granted, restriction to immigration fostered ambivalences.

In Argentina, while the territorial and religious bases of the national State's collective identity tended to conceal the multi-ethnic composition of its civil society, mass migration led to a growing gap between the discourse of the melting pot and reality. In spite that the latter was promoted by the State, society developed as multi-ethnic (Senkman, 2005; Avni, 1999). Thus, ethnic tolerance in a society of immigrants was the framework for the building of communities which sought to preserve their ethnic links to their 'homelands'. Such was the case with Spaniards, Italians, and Jews, among others.

Throughout its history, Mexico sought its own national identity and culture as the base for national unity. Its original ethnic composition enhanced the conviction that a unified and heterogeneous society with a homogeneous identity was both possible and desirable (Bokser Liwerant, 2005). Consequently, Jews, like other minorities, developed their communal life without the corresponding visibility in the public sphere, lacking their recognition as a legitimate collective component of the national chorus. Correspondingly, limited integration and autonomy to preserve cultural, religious, and social differences further reflected and reinforced social differences and the well-defined frontiers of Jewish life.

Therefore, the challenges of building a Jewish community was a driving force. Impelling collective energy to provide for material, spiritual, and cultural needs was at the core of the concept for structuring Jewish life. This collective energy led to self organization and the creation of institutions that served to channel public energy and became a source of identity. Continuity seemed to be the overall choice and

integration mediated by communal life was the strategy. Latin American Jews resonated to the ideal of immigrant absorption and building of institutions.

Regions and countries of origins were defining criteria of organization. Sephardic and Ashkenazi Jews developed their own spaces and institutions. The former developed communities around the different countries of origin, reflecting the fragmented character of this complex ethnic group that was textured by different sub-groups: *Sephardim* from Turkey and the Balkan countries, Middle Eastern Jews from Aleppo, Damascus, Lebanon and Palestine, North Africans from Morocco and Egypt and small groups of *Sephardim* from Italy and other countries in Europe (Bejarano, 2005).

Eastern European Jews established 'replicas' of the European *kehilot*. Founded by secularists, but seeking to answer communal and religious needs, the communities were built in the cast of modern Diaspora nationalism and emphasized the secular collective dimension of Jewish life, its inner ideological struggles, organized political parties and social and cultural movements (Bokser Liwerant, 1991). The dominant pattern was of a continuous trend toward secularization and politicization. Varying ideological, cultural and political currents flowed energetically in the Jewish street: from communist to Zionist; from yiddishist to bundist; from liberal to assimilationist; from it to orthodoxy.

The highly differentiated evolutionary process of communal structures both reflected and shaped the growth of Jewish communities. This structural dimension acquired an ulterior significant centrality in the shaping of Jewish identities in terms of a system of institutions that provided stability and a sense of continuity and regularity to the experience of social interaction. Therefore, Jews found in communal endeavors the space to be Jewish and to integrate into their different societies—to transmit, create, redefine, 'imagine' continuity and develop new traits.

If we consider the Mexican experience, since its inception, a dense cluster of structures and institutions has characterized Jewish life. Their differentiated strength may be seen as a specific trait and as a central principle of its self-definition as an organized 'community of communities'. Mutual assistance, education, synagogues, cultural clubs, ideological streams, and consequent organizational differentiation characterized the Jewish community, as did journalism, literature and debates. Thus, a rich imported and original 'Jewish street' developed. As in the Old

Home both prophecy and politics intertwined (Frankel, 1981). The communal domain, while prompting continuity, it also functioned as the substitute to the limited participation in national life and as the basic framework for identity shaping. Contrary to what happened in the United States, the collective domain 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 saw normative support as part of the national ethos. Tolerant of community diversity, the American society promoted individual gratification, which has in fact had an opposite effect (Sarna, 2004).

In Mexico, after a brief and uneasy initial period in which the links with the Jewish community of the United States defined the main direction of the external links and interactions, the European model of Jewish life became the central motif (Bokser Liwerant, 1991). The permanent struggle between world visions, convictions, strategies and instrumental needs fostered the Zionist idea and the State of Israel to become central axes around which identity was built and communal life structured and developed.

The links between an ideological, political and public center and the Jewish community, conceived as Diaspora, carried profound ambiguities around the conception of what the relationship meant. It relied on the wider idea of a national project for renewal of Jewish life and therefore gave birth to recurrent ambivalences and tensions. While an overall disenchantment with the diasporic condition was among the main causes for the emergence of Zionism in Europe, in the new community Zionism committed itself both ideologically and institutionally to the fostering of a new Jewish life. As any ideology in the process of being absorbed by other cultural and symbolic frames of reference, Zionism acquired novel sociological meanings without necessarily redefining or rephrasing its contents. Its organizational functionality was also altered and, beyond its recognized goals, it fulfilled diverse new needs. On both levels, the ideological and the organizational, it worked toward the enhancement of a one-center-model while, simultaneously, tacitly affirming the diasporic existence.

Historically, the wide range of problems Zionism sought to address deeply marked inner tensions. It defined itself both as a national liberation movement—seeking to achieve territorial concentration and political sovereignty—and as a movement of national reconstruction

and cultural renewal, expressed in a new Jewish secular and modern normative call to shape Jewish life wherever it was and would continue to be (Avineri, 1981; Katz, 1986). Therefore, its global goal of generating an overall *aggiornamento* in Judaism led to the coexistence of both the denial of the diasporic condition and the aspiration of a renewal of Jewish life as a whole (Vital, 1981; Almog, 1982).

From the perspective of new communities in the making, the divergent visions of the functionality of the center for Jewish continuity implied both ideological proposals and practical imperatives. It was certainly the cultural renaissance diagnosis—mediated by a political center—that first thought of the polyvalent functions of the center for Jewish life as a whole (Zipperstein, 1993; Schweid, 1984). Thus, from its inception, Zionism in Mexico, as in most of Latin American organized Jewish communities, had to confront its final goal with its contextual constraints, oscillating between its ultimate purpose(s) and the fluctuant margins of the new map of dispersion.

Moreover, the discrepancies around the changing boundaries of Jewish dispersion coexisted with specific strategies aimed to recreate, to head and even to strengthen life in the Diaspora, even without being explicitly recognized. While the other main national and social ideologies channeled their efforts to the societal realm to explore routes of interaction and integration, Zionists ‘conquered the community’ by seeking to become the leading force in shaping communal life while incorporating an ample and even eclectic range of identification referents. For Zionists, hegemony building thus meant its institutional insertion and the incorporation of non- and anti-Zionist contents. The limitations in some of its organizational endeavors were counterbalanced by its ability to head the central communal institutions (Bokser Liwerant, 1991).

The place and role of the national center evolved through different stages, expressing both the changing pattern of communal and national conditions as well as the ideological, normative and practical transformations that took place in the center. Through its successive phases, Zionism found itself caught between two different perspectives: on the one hand, Israel’s expectations of massive immigration from the Diaspora were high, and on the other hand, by equating Zionist identity with Jewish continuity, its 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 did not cause the Zionist dream ‘to come true’, but in fact perpetuated activities and obligations in the life of the community. Per Gideon Shimoni’s conceptual differ-

entiation a 'substantive centrality' of Zionism and Israel developed in Latin America and in time became circumstantial (Shimoni, 1995). A secular diasporic nationalism was conceived as the central dimension of Jewish identity, both regarding its content definitions as well as its institutional spaces and mechanisms.

However, Latin American distinctiveness and specificity was never understood by the central Zionist authorities, being seen alternatively as part of the West or as part of other peripheric regions (Goldstein, 1991; Bokser Liwerant, 1991). Initially Mexican and Latin American Jews were seen as the substitute for the vanishing European Jewry and were therefore identified as a source of *aliyah*.¹ They were also seen as a fruitful terrain for political activities, aimed to gain the support of their countries for the Jewish State. Zionist sectors invigorated the center with both the 'national home' and 'rescue place' qualities that simultaneously nourished and reinforced their own national diasporic profile. *Vis-à-vis* the new community, the center offered its functionality as a necessary referent for Jewish continuity in a new society which was both home and exile.

For a center aimed to set itself as a focus to legitimately influence Jewish life outside its borders, education was conceived as a domain through which the new Latin American Jewish world would commit to develop a shared existential substratum, an interconnected transnational world and identity. Indeed, the educational domain would play a vital role in the diffusion of shared visions regarding the importance of a national home for Jewish life. In the educational arena, Zionists found a privileged terrain on which to build continuity, as did other ideological and social currents. Moreover, due to the impulse and vitality that the diverse ideological streams reached in culture, education became a central foundation in defining their continuity. Jewish education became the main domain to transmit, create, and project the cultural profile of Jewish communities; to construct differences between the communities and the host societies as well as inside the communities themselves; and the main field for displaying Jewish collective life while negotiating the challenges of incorporation and integration.

While direct involvement with cultural work allowed Zionists a growing stronghold in community life, they certainly gained further

¹ "Letter from Dr. A. Lauterbach to I. Blumberg", July 20, 1940, in *Central Zionist Archive of Jerusalem*, S5/7B, Jerusalem.

recognition due to the ability to mobilize and recruit support for the State of Israel in the public sphere. Their successive initiatives capitalized expressions of solidarity that were channeled to the community as a whole. Their experience, however, was not univocal in as far as their action was surrounded by the shade of alleged external loyalties that acquired diverse meanings through time.

Identity building processes and the significance of the plurality of identification would sway between Israel and Mexico, the former progressively building itself as the substitute of the original homeland and as the spiritual and cultural center even for those who would not emigrate to it. In this sense, but still acknowledging the differences of each milieu, one may interpret that being Zionist in Latin America provided Jews with the possibility of having a *Madre Patria* too, either just as other groups of immigrants to the country had or as a substitute to the original ones, that rejected them.

From Dependency to Interdependency

A relevant chapter in the redefinition of the patterns of identification and the dynamics of the Israeli-centered model was defined by the Six Day War. The war can be seen as a turning point in identity building, experienced as a 'founding event' where different dimensions converged: reality, symbolism, and the imaginary. Discourse and social action met, and together they stretched the boundaries that define the scope and meaning of collective identity. Its perception as a historical watershed in the domain of solidarity and cohesion was fostered at the very time of its unfolding, given the growing perception of a life-threatening situation, the rapidity of the developments, the magnitude of Israel's victory as well as the type and intensity of the responses it elicited (Bokser Liwerant, 2000).

One of the main paradoxes brought about by the large scale response to the war was that it further propelled a process which diluted the boundaries between Zionism and non-Zionism to the extent that a wide pro-Israeli attitude surpassed and even came to be equated with Zionism. So, as a result of the massive and spontaneous expressions of support during the conflict, Zionism's organizational boundaries and specificity became diffused. Thus, while the organized movement had to confront new ideological and organizational definitions regarding its

validity as well as its specificity and self-definition, identification patterns themselves took on new directions.

From the perspective of the one center model, an important change took place: the war certainly demonstrated that the ties that bound the Mexican Jewish community with Israel were of increased mutual links and legitimization. Through solidarity with Israel, the community expressed an implicit message regarding the legitimacy of its own existence.² Solidarity meant responsibility and, consequently, the latter sought to legitimate the Diaspora's separate existence. For its part, the Jewish State, unwittingly, legitimated the Diaspora by attaching great importance to its support. In this sense, the Diaspora's solidarity legitimized its place and the channeling of energy into reinforcing its communities, mediated by the centrality of the State of Israel.

However, insofar as the State of Israel proposed *aliyah* as the central criteria to evaluate the success and limitations of the Zionist movement after the war, it confronted Zionists with new modalities of expression of their diverse goals. After 1967, *aliyah* offered both the possibility of converting the Jewish ferment into a permanent phenomenon and of returning its own specific profile to the Zionist idea. Paradoxically, for the organized movement, the absence of a massive immigration demanded the reinforcement of its activities, thereby justifying its permanence. On the one hand, Israel's expectations of massive immigration were higher; on the other hand, while Zionist identity appeared as synonymous with Jewish continuity, involvement in Jewish life in the Diaspora was further validated.

As a result of both the 1967 experience and the institutional differentiation and functional specialization prevailing, the community tended to reinforce the center model and to redefine the channels through which the links with Israel would be established. Thus, it questioned the predominant role of mediator that organized Zionism historically had held by bringing other existing institutions to play an increasing role in the community's relationship with Israel. Even as ideologically, Israel became a focus of identity for growing circles within the community, Zionism experienced a profound contradiction regarding the

² In the words of diverse community leaders, the events of 1967 showed the unity of the Jewish world by changing the vision of those who claimed that every Jew must live in Israel: "Jews in the Diaspora and Jews in Israel are all members of a single and mutually dependent people."

challenge to join efforts with other organizations without giving up its own specificity.³ The Zionist leadership was unaware of the structural changes that were taking place; they could not come to terms with the fact that Israel's centrality would not be reflected through its traditional institutional framework.

The organizational dynamics of Jewish life which provides the main substratum for identity building also underwent significant changes. The scope of action of Zionist activities was widened to non-Ashkenazi sectors. Whereas the Sephardic community had established close bonds with Zionism in the past, 1967 attracted other communities to the cause, like the Arabic-speaking communities of Alianza Monte Sinaí and Maguen David. Their rapprochement with Israel was complex. The growing identification with the State was interwoven with a process of secularization which also included a generational clash. Israel offered the new generations the opportunity to move away from religion as the only focus of identity and to stress political sovereignty as a complement of ethnicity.

It is essential to point out that as a result of the war, Israel also went through transformations which, in turn, modified how it related to the Diaspora. Looking at it from a wide perspective, Israel's ideological and political spectrum was redefined. Left and right were gradually emptied of their ideological contents and would concentrate almost exclusively on topics such as the occupied territories and the Palestinian question (Eisenstadt, 1993). This political trend would remove the subject of its links with the Diaspora from the center of the Israeli agenda. Thus, it reduced and weakened the Zionist dimension of the political parties in Israel and made them less relevant in the Diaspora precisely when the Six Day War brought Israel to the center of the community's agenda.

However, since social and political life cannot develop marginally to acknowledgments and rationalizations, discourse had a central role to

³ This may be seen in different attempts which, while offering organized Zionism the possibility of widening its range of action, brought to the fore its dilemma regarding the dilution of its limits. Such was the case, among others, of the attempt to establish an *aliyah Committee* formed by representatives of different institutions in the community immediately after the war. This experiment in collaboration between Zionist and community leaders preceded other attempts both at the local and worldwide levels. A paradigmatic example of the latter would be the reorganization of the Jewish Agency that maintained a trend inaugurated by the war by bringing together Zionist and community leaders. See Elazar, 1989: 6.

play as a realm where mutual recognition and legitimacy are shaped and nourished. Israel's post-war modifying image set new challenges concerning its role as a source of identity and legitimacy for Mexican Jews and simultaneously confronted the community with new tasks. The way in which these tasks were undertaken defined the alternating relevance of the public and the private spheres as terrains for identity building and legitimacy of collective life.

The changes in Israel's international position and an emerging post-war negative image were built in the years to come. The questioning of Israel and Zionism would gradually focus on the division between good and bad Jews, between the committed progressive and anti-fascists of yesterday and the imperialists and militarists of present day. Progressively, Israel's portrait modified the meaning of the hero's role in history as it went from hero to pariah (Horowitz, 1976).

Within the Mexican Jewish community, as in many other communities all over Latin America, there was a growing concern that the change in Israel's image could affect its own. Therefore, the need to engage in the building up of the former became not only a constant demand from the center, but also a common pressing concern. However, paralysis as well as confusion characterized this Diaspora's failure to create the appropriate institutional tools and to develop a discourse oriented to satisfy the community's inner needs and to surpass its boundaries. This condition implied serious risks regarding the subject of legitimacy. Even though communal institutions were conscious of the need to modify the existing dialogical structures, the task was never successfully undertaken. The inability to find in the public sphere a domain for collective visibility and its expression reinforced previous patterns of expression of collective identity. The identification with the State of Israel stopped at the threshold of Mexican society. The impact of the external constraints regarding the public manifestation of differences and the collective nature of Jewish life lie behind this situation.

The public sphere is the result of an encounter of discourses and interpretations, a space for hermeneutics, a mosaic of dominant and subordinate vocabularies. Consequently, the one-center model had to face its own public limits. The development has been complex: while part of the Jewish world started to experience emerging legitimacy of ethnic assertiveness, which reinforced cultural terms of collective identities—minimizing Israel as a focus—from the other side, Latin American Jewish communities were further exposed to the impact of the equation Zionism=Racism and the consequential de-legitimacy of Zionism and the State of Israel.

Mexico represents a paradigmatic case where the national circumstances and the international changing scenarios affected the dynamics between centrality, dependency and interdependency; between cooperation and autonomy, resources and weakness. In light of the changes that started to take place in realms and modes of identity building and expression, the anti-Zionist governmental discourse strongly reinforced the political marginality of the Jewish community. The limits to citizenship strengthened the ethnic national character of Jewish identity.

The voting pattern of the Mexican government as well as the limited margin of action of the Jewish community, and later its conflictive links with the North American Jewish community, raised once again doubts regarding the nature of these identities and loyalties. Thus, *vis-à-vis* the tourist boycott headed by the American Jewish community—in the framework of the official governmental policy and its aftermath (which included efforts by the government to clarify and justify its vote to the Israeli and the American official circles)—Jews in Mexico faced the ominous argumentative chain that related Zionism, Racism, Imperialism, Expansionism and Militarism to the State of Israel and the accusation of lack of loyalty, permanent strangeness and absence of commitment with Mexico (Bokser Liwerant, 1997). The interplay between adscription and self-adscription, while reinforcing the collective identification with the State, reduced its expression to the communal space, so that Israel's centrality was reaffirmed and simultaneously endogenously constrained.

During this episode and its long lasting consequences, basic traits of the interaction between the Mexican and American Jewish communities were defined. While the former expected and asked for support, the latter was not acquainted with the local political behavior. The prevailing of extremely personalized and privatized patterns of linkage with the government among Mexican Jews was confronted by the opposed openly public mechanism among their American counterparts. Both communities were certainly aware of the historical weight that the conflictive bilateral relations between the respective countries had and which run deeper than their changing needs. However, the power asymmetry that lied behind the discursive autonomy, always highlighted by a confrontational rhetoric, explains the uneasy relations between both communities.

From a complementary perspective, the permanent and yet complex way in which ideologies and symbolic representations interact with political conflicts have a direct impact on the process of construc-

tion of collective identities and their public expression. Despite the fact that political, national and international conditions had a radical transformation, during the late 1980's and early 1990's, discursive and symbolic violence were strengthened, as expressed in during the 1991 Gulf War. Mediated by the Lebanon invasion, Sabra and Shatila, and the ups and downs of the Middle East conflict, the binomial coupling of Zionism-Racism further acted as a subtext of antagonist and hostile expressions thus limiting the participatory citizenship dimension of being Jew in the public sphere.

Identity Challenges in Times of Globalization

The historical role played by Israel in Jewish identity building and communal life in Mexico and more generally, in Latin America, faces new challenges on the light of globalization processes. Elective bonds coexist with the resurgence of primordial identities linking individuals and communities in diverse and even opposed ways, further exposing Jewish identification and interactions with the surrounding society to new realities.

Globalization processes are not uniform, as they take place in a differentiated manner in time and place, with territorial and sector inequalities, and they present a multifaceted and contradictory nature (Bokser Liwerant, 2003). Time and space cease to have the same influence on the way social relations and institutions are structured, implying de-territorialization of economic, social and political arrangements, in as far as they depend neither on distance nor on borders. They also do not have the same influence on the final shaping of institutions and social relations (Waters, 1995; Robertson, 1992).

Whereas on the one hand, territorial borders lose importance and for the first time, identities and communities can be built irrespective of national feelings, on the other hand, the natural and primordial referents that shape collective identities emerge with unexpected vigor, in a tense fluctuation between the moment of the universal and that of the particular. Globalization processes have given rise to new identities with a different level of aggregation and have given renewed importance to primordial identities. The latter stand out with unpredicted drive, while global spaces become domains of collective reflection used, occupied and—to a lesser or greater extent—structured and controlled by supranational actors, such as international agencies and organizations,

international non-governmental organizations and epistemic communities (Haas, 1992; Giddens, 1994; Bokser Liwerant, 2003).

Thus, referents and symbolic meanings are subject to change and diversify the varied communal nature of Jewish identities. In this respect, it combines realities where collective structured life maintains its boundaries while changing patterns of interaction and processes of intensive individualization loosen it. These changes may be explored in different realms.

Globalization and democratization processes have brought to Jews a new visibility in the national arenas. The prevailing concepts of national identity have been redefined to expand receptivity to multiple identities. Cultural diversity opened an ongoing discussion on the nexus between culture, society and politics from which minorities groups gained legitimacy. It also implied the elaboration of institutional arrangements and settings in order to build new codes in which plural identities are not seen as a threat to the idea of civil society. However, the question of how to enhance procedural democracy where the interaction between groups-values still includes actors who represent alternative moral vision to society as a whole is certainly a shared preoccupation for the Jewish communities.

Thus, in Mexico, while the myth of revolutionary nationalism lost ground, cultural complexity gained space. The idea of many cultures takes distance from the recurrent search for an essentialist 'soul' or national character and may be seen rather in terms of configuring and reconfiguring the national as a legitimating myth (Menéndez Carrión, 2001; Lomnitz, 1992). However, one has to take into account that the claim for recognition coming from local or primordial identities may precisely borrow essentialism from its previous national level and reinforce its excluding message on different grounds.

Nevertheless, several changes reinforce the legitimacy of diversity. On the national level, the axis conformed by the bourgeois, the middle classes and the Church, that used to inhabit the private space, dwell today in the public realm. The legal recognition of Church(es) since 1991 resulted in new modes of interaction between liberalization and modernization processes. Historically the Jewish community benefited from the anti-clerical stand of the revolutionary regimes as a counter-vailing element to the excluding impact of ethnic-nationalism. Today, facing the unexpected changes, it seeks to benefit from its new legal status in terms of public self-affiliation as a religious minority, and therefore religion in the public sphere becomes an additional source

and referent of legitimacy (Bokser Liwerant, 2006). Certainly, while the nationalist post-revolutionary discourse acted as an obstacle to the public expression of ethnicity, the subtle understanding of the links between the community and the State of Israel minimized its impact.

The new regime that resulted from political alternation in the 2000 elections has promoted an open public relationship with the community, one which has been defined precisely in terms of religious affiliation and socio-economic criteria rather than in terms of the previous broad understanding of cultural-national-ethnicity. This interaction has been also sought by the communal representation in civilian organizations and agencies during the political transition.

Simultaneously, the Jewish community, related in the national imaginary mainly to Israel, was growingly perceived as part of a Jewish transnational world whose networks and potential support were clearly recognized during the process of rapprochement with the Northern neighbor. It clearly started during the negotiation towards the Free Trade Agreement in the late 1980's and intensified since then, thus overcoming the cultural code of alien loyalty that expressed itself and was further reinforced by the 1975 episode.

The recognition of multiple identities seems to have gained additional legitimacy after the unprecedented claims of indigenous identity recognition led by the Zapatist insurgence in the early 1990's. Precisely both individualization processes as well as the reemergence of collective identities were part of the new interacting dimensions of globalization which also extended their influence towards the North, into the Mexican Diaspora in the United States. The hefty Mexican migration to the latter has been gradually conceived as a Diaspora sustaining close loyalty and support relationships with its national center. It has *de facto* shed a new light on the operational inadequacy of visions that conceptualize national identity in homogeneous terms. It certainly contributes to open new ways of connecting ethnicity and citizenship at the global level, surpassing the confinement in national boundaries.

Undoubtedly, economic upheavals, cyclical crises and lack of security have increased migratory flows and transnational experiences. The exposure of the region to migration waves informs on the weakening of the links between territory and membership as an exclusive base for identity building and the enhancement of identities based on primordial foci or other more fluent, un-rooted and mobile cultural forms (Bokser Liwerant, 2003). In the framework of Latin American societies, it informs on the coexistence of different historical times that

define modern and post-modern patterns of the social texture while still maintaining pre-modern ones.

Amidst these trends, still new types of migrations have developed that also find a clear exponent among Latin American Jews. On the one hand, it developed a kind of constant commuting between the home venue and an elected new residence, i.e., Bogotá or Caracas and Miami or between Mexico City and San Diego. On the other hand, new communities have been established as a result of individual displacements that ended reconstituting a collective life according to previous original patterns. In turn, they have adopted new models combining them with the first ones, thus giving birth to new expressions of hyphenated identities. Such is certainly the case of recently established Latin American communities in the United States.

While Argentine Jews have been among the first to add to their national belonging the traumatic disruption caused by the abandoning of their homeland, confronting the need to redefine referents, among others, the territorial-national ones, other communities faced in different ways and rhythms the experience of transmigration, of living in between, of trans-nationalism. Whilst voluntary motivation differs from imposed exiles, it doesn't prevent the emergence of unprecedented identity dilemmas.

These processes testify the contradictory effect of globalization which might be seen in other aspects of Jewish life. The Jewish communities of the continent have certainly felt the impact of the crisis. Its scope and intensity varied 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 resulting in a previously unknown "new poverty" (Kliksberg, 2002). It certainly had a far reaching impact on communal life, weakening its institutional order which is slowly recovering since 2002.

In Mexico, while in 2000, 73.7% of Jews belonged to the upper and upper middle class, in 2006 it went down to 71.3%; the middle class went from 13.6% to 15%; lower middle class went from 7.8% to 8.6% and the lower class from 4.9 to 5.1%. However, when looked at it from the point of view of Jewish needs (such as private education; communal membership and private health, among others), the inner socio-economic situation presents a different panorama: more than 40%

belong to the lower middle class; 50% middle and upper middle class and only 4% belongs to the highest economic category; 8% remain in a structural poverty condition (Comité Central Israelita de México (CCIM), 2006).

The current differential and common traits among Latin American Jewish communities are also reflected in the cultural domain of collective life. The educational system has been changing dramatically both expressing general religious and cultural developments while acting as an arena where they are shaped. The historical, political and ideological currents that gave birth to the original differentiation of schools have been replaced by more defining criteria, mainly communitarian and religious. In Mexico, close to 93 percent of Jewish children attend Jewish schools with a constant student population from kindergarten through high school. A strong organizational structure of seventeen day schools has developed; one school for each 2,500 Jews in Mexico City. The student population has grown 16.5% in the last eight years as compared to 6% Jewish population growth prior. Educational policies, as expressed in a significant system of scholarships, brought those families back to the Jewish schools which they had previously abandoned. Close to 25% of the student population benefits from scholarships, while more than 40% does so in the *haredi* schools. The latter, serving 26% of the student population, show the highest population growth: 55% in the last eight years (CCIM, 2006). The Ashkenazi schools show the greatest percentage of decrease, 28%, and the Maguen David (*halebi*) schools show the highest growth rate, with 46% of the total student population. Of this group, 40% attend *haredi* schools. The increase in the number of attendants of religious schools reflect both the demographic changes in the composition of the community, the arrival of educators coming from intensively orthodox communities from South America as well as the overall trend in education.

Paralleling these trends that widen the spectrum of external and internal identification referents, Israel continues to act as a central promoter of Jewish education which is still strongly linked to Israeli organizations and programs. Mexico City has the highest concentration of *shlijim*; they number 40. Thus, a country that represents 0.5% of the world's Jewish population gathers 18% of them.

An additional expression of changing scenarios may be seen in the weakening of the educational and ideological role played by the Zionist youth movements. In Mexico, the participation descended from 43% among parents to 37% among their kids, and only 30% of the former

declared they would have liked their sons and daughters to participate (CCIM, 2006).

A comparative look at Argentina, once the leader of Jewish education in the continent, sheds light on severe expressions of institutional weakness and changes. Still, joint efforts of the Jewish Agency for Israel and Israeli universities and local actors have become strong stimuli to revitalize the field (Vaad Hajinuj, 2005).⁴ In the last decade a total of sixteen schools closed while only six were able to pass through rational institutional restructuring. The thirty-four day schools and six supplementary schools now serve a population of 17,864 students. While this figure shows a systematic recovery of population compared to previous years (only 17,075 in 2002, against 19,274 in 1999), it points to a total coverage of 43 percent of Jewish school-age children. The highest rate of population growth takes also place at the ten religious schools. Therefore, in both cases it is necessary to underscore the changing profile of education.

While acknowledging the fact that this raise of religious education is a product of the incidence of social policies on communal cultural profiles—as expressed in the massive support offered through scholarship by religious schools—it also must be noted that this process reflects an increase in religiosity and observance which constitutes part of the meaningful current changes in Latin American Jewish life.

Historically, religion played a minor role in what were basically secular communities. This trend was reinforced by the scarcity of religious functionaries, dating back to the earliest days of Latin American Jewry (Elazar, 1989). Thus one may affirm that important changes have taken place that point both to identity formation processes and to patterns of organized community life. They may be also seen as part of the general public relevance religion has gained as a result of its claims to a new interaction between private and public morality, in a sort of so-called 'de-privatization' (Casanova, 1994).

⁴ This educational development should be seen in 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 there were 60,000 pupils in day schools in 1962, that by 1982–83 there were some 104,000 students (10 percent of the Jewish school-age population), and in 2000, approximately 200,000, nearly one quarter of all Jewish school-age children attended day school.

In the 1960s the Conservative movement began its spread to South America. It provided the first model of a religious institution not brought over 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 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 religious life.⁵

In recent years, in tandem with changing trends in world Jewish life, orthodox groups have formed new religious congregations. Today, the spread of the Chabad movement and the establishment of Chabad centers, both in the large, well-established communities as well as in the smaller ones, is striking. More than seventy rabbis are currently working in close to fifty institutions.

While in Mexico the presence of Chabad is marginal at best, there are more than fifty synagogues, study houses, *kollelim* and *yeshivot*, more than thirty of which were established in the last twenty five years. Fourteen of the twenty four existing *kollelim* belong to the Syrian *halabi* community.⁶ There is a very important trend towards religious observance and 'haredization'. In the last six years the 'very observant' grew from 4.3% to 7% while the observant grew from 6.7% to 17%, a growth of almost 300%. Traditionalists, who are still the majority of the Mexican Jewish population, dropped from 76.8% to 62%. These trends, when specifically analyzed among the population below 40 years of age, the figures for very observant grow from 7 to 12%; observant from 17 to 20% and traditionalist fall from 62% to 59% (CCIM; 2006). The extreme religious factions and the strategies of self-segregation are still marginal to the whole of Jewish life on the continent; however, their growing presence point to general processes and tendencies that are developing and shaping the space of identities.

⁵ One proof of the deep the lack of religious leadership to which Elazar refers and the importance of such leadership to religious development is found in the success of Rabbi Marshall Meyer. Rabbi Meyer took upon himself the task of preparing a new rabbinical leadership, establishing the Seminario Rabínico Latinoamericano in Argentina. Today its graduates serve throughout Latin America and beyond. Their presence in communities in the United States is not only due to the lack of opportunities in local communities, but also reflects the new phenomenon of regional migration.

⁶ In Brazil - where the Jewish community was built mainly on pillars of liberal Judaism and secularity and influenced by Brazilian society with its syncretism components—fifteen orthodox synagogues, three *yeshivot*, two *kollelim*, and five religious schools were established in the last fifteen years (Topel, 2005).

The interplay between the historical ethnic components of identity and the new religious flows show a differential behavior throughout the region. Thus, South American communities paradigmatically epitomize how Chabad grew out of the socio-economic and cultural changing conditions. Religious developments responded both to the need for reconstitution of the social fabric and to the aforementioned cultural and spiritual transformation. Religion identification displays as an anchor for belonging and social order and as a moral code expressing the quest for unresolved expectations by the prevailing patterns of organized communal life. New terrains of intimate and private spheres, as expressed in code of spirituality, are interacting with the public dimension.

In Mexico, in spite the fact communal loyalties and the prevailing structural density and norms are still powerful in shaping identity, the search for new bridges between individual intimate realms and communal terrains are showing a growing relevance. Certainly these fluxes of interaction refer to diverse external centers and compete with the prevailing one-center model. However, simultaneously, one cannot disregard the way religion has gained a central place in Israeli society.

There are still other new cultural referents that act as foci of identity, among which the *Shoah* has become increasingly relevant. As an axis of identification points to a global trend in the Jewish, and non-Jewish world, which may be read in terms of a new dynamics connected to a reevaluation of the Diaspora as a fundamental value and element in the formation of Jewish history and memory. *Vis-à-vis* the Israeli centered identification pattern, one may wonder if current narratives in which the present is subdued by the moment of destruction express an 'unexplainable uneasiness' with State power while being more consonant with patterns of postmodern times (Bokser Liwerant, 2005).

Holocaust memory is not only the ghost that inhabits fortresses—following Zygmunt Bauman's postmodern discourse—but also a bet for overture and integration, a singular and specific memory that aspires to establish itself, in those who bear it, as a code of inclusion and not of exclusion, of membership and not foreignness, as a sign of a stronger seek for integration in national spaces, a binding historical experience of genocides, of impunity (Bokser Liwerant, 2005a; Goldstein, 2005). Such development may be seen among Argentine Jewry who suffered the tragedy of a double attack, in 1992 on the Israeli Embassy and in 1994 on the AMIA—Asociación Mutual Israelita Argentina—buildings. Jews still live in the shadow of these traumatic events. However, amidst the processes of democratization, their public political action saw the

fight against anti-Semitism intertwined with the fight against impunity of the former military regime. Thus, particular Jewish values such as mourning and memory essentially connected to the *Shoah* experience are displayed to a society confronted with impunity.

In Mexico, the memory of the Holocaust has permeated wide sectors of the community, ranking from the traditional keepers of this memory, the Ashkenazi community, to the Sephardic groups, reflecting partly a world Jewish trend and partly specific local peculiarities. As part of the group collective memory, certainly it interplays with the transnational dimension involved in cosmopolitan memory, as forms of trans-group identification, or des-rooted memory stretching towards new remembrance forms associated to identity expressions in global times (Levy and Sznajder, 2002). Responding to the local tendencies, however, one may look specifically after the overall changing profile of the different communities of Mexican Jews. Corresponding to the diminishing figures of Ashkenazi community and its resulting expression on the institutional level, past history also becomes a terrain of disputed legacy.⁷ The claim of universality thus crosses also the inner sectors of the community and wishes to transcend rests of a diversified past. In both cases, however, while the strength of the memory axis for identity may be seen as a competing referent to the Israel centered model, one has to recognize that the former also has gained an unprecedented centrality in the Israeli scene, thus blurring the differentiated or alternative roles played by both axes.

In today's Latin America, the goals of building citizenship and strengthening civil society have projected Jewish communities as vanguards spaces of communal autonomous practices. Renewed values of group solidarity, mutual cohesion and support become legitimate role models to expanding sectors of society. While in Argentina Jewish interaction with non-governmental organizations and diverse sectors of society has defined a new agenda in which citizenship-building converge with the struggle for democratization and the defense of human rights, in the Mexican case the interest points to the increasing individual and collective willingness to overcome dominant perceptions of the community as isolated and uncommitted to the national causes (Moiguer and Karol, 2006; Tribuna Israelita, 1996 and 2006).

⁷ The Ashkenazi community constitutes today slightly more than 25% of the community as compared to close to 47% of *halabi* and *sham* Jews (CCJM, 2006).

In both social settings, while the trend toward interaction is gaining momentum, potential challenges arise from the fact that civil society has given birth not only to autonomous self-organizing sectors, but also reinforced dependent anomic groups susceptible to clientelistic cooptation. The latter is still a terrain of highly unpredicted collective action (Waisman, 2002).

The multifaceted interplay between globalization and multiculturalism allows the public manifestation particularism, and, simultaneously, it widens the exposure to new forms of identification that seriously compete with the Jewish identity. The pluralizing of referents does not operate in a linear or substitutive form; it rather presents an intricate pattern which points to new conceptions and practices. Globalization processes provide dense cultural resources and networks to particular identities. Indeed, we may affirm that the region is confronting a singular convergence of transitions to democracy and transnationalism that confer legitimacy to the links with external centers, be it the State of Israel or other centers, such as North American Jewry. The latter, as seen, has gained relevance among the Jewish communities extending its political concern to the region as well as its economic and philanthropic help. Paralleling political efforts aimed to advance the fight against anti-Semitism, the support for Israel and the progress of democracy, North American support has been channeled to communities in distress through a variety of institutions that have taken an increased role where historically Israel used to be the almost exclusive actor.

In more than one way and in different realms of social and cultural life, the analyzed changes have a determinant impact on the centrality of Israel. It can be reformulated both in terms of the changing meanings of its centrality as well as an expression of decentralization and the pluralizing of centers. Certainly, Israel's actual place is not necessarily mediated by the classical Zionist paradigm(s) while, it must be stressed, there is a search for new types of interactions that have totally overcame the mediation organized Zionism used to offer.

On a different level, Israel's changing role and meaning may also be seen in the importance attributed to it by different age groups. Thus, while among members of the Mexican Jewish community above 70 years, 97% declared that Israel is of utmost importance, among the age group between 18 and 29 years old only 77% feel this way. These figures are still much higher compared to other communities in the region, such as Argentina, where this percentage stays at 57% (Jmelnizky and Erdci, 2005).

For Latin American Jews, besides its condition of sovereign and creative cultural center, Israel also has appeared historically as a vital space for those who are in need. Necessity and ideology interact now as they have done since the origins of the State. Migration waves and their chosen destination point to this dynamics. For Argentine Jews Israel became a central spot; however today, when asked about country of preference in case of emigration, while 27% declared Spain, only 24% opted for Israel, followed by 14% that pointed to USA. The emigration trend among Mexican Jews in terms of preferences shows a reduction of Israel's importance, even though 84% have visited it least once (CCJM, 2006).

Amidst the context of restructuring the normative, cultural, and organizational axes of Jewish life, the redefinition of a Jewish ecology reflects the changing bonds between individual and community and the complex oscillation between social integration and the search for a meaningful Jewish life. As we analyzed structures, interactions and frontiers define collective identities whose referents derive from a wide social and cultural spectrum that provides new domains and dynamics where they are built, internalized, created and transformed.

The current space of Latin American Jewish identities that emerges from our analysis focused on the Mexican case, shows a permanent pluralization of identification and of interactions with the surrounding world and amidst the Jewish world itself. New trends have put into action both individualization processes and public collective affirmation which confront Jewish life with unprecedented options. The emergence of new models of relations between communities and the center(s) and even new processes of decentralization shed light onto common trends in the Jewish world and singular developments in Mexican and Latin American Jewish communities.