

JEWS IN LATIN AMERICA: THE CONTEMPORARY JEWISH DIMENSION

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We are now graced with a second anthology wholly devoted to the research of Latin American Jewry. Like its predecessor, *The Jewish Presence in Latin America*,¹ which was an outgrowth of the papers presented at a convention of the Latin American Jewish Studies Association (LAJSA) at the University of New Mexico, the current volume is a collection of papers delivered by members of the same Association at the Ninth World Congress of Jewish Studies in Jerusalem. The two anthologies contain a total of 36 articles, and the number of public presentations at these forums was even higher.

This plethora of scholarship follows the publication of several monographs in Spanish, Hebrew and English over the past decade,² reflecting both a growing interest in Latin American Jewry and the emergence of a new generation of researchers. Is there justification for such broad, intensive research in one branch of contemporary Jewish life? Does Latin American Jewry indeed merit such interest?

Professor Gilbert Merx, in his introduction to the first volume, tries to answer this question from the vantage point of the Latin Americanist. He considers the role of the Jews as actors in the ongoing process of economic, social and political change in Latin America and meditates on the character of Latin American society as revealed by the experience of the Jewish minority. We will address the subject from the Jewish standpoint and observe Latin American Jewry from two seemingly opposing perspectives: the uniqueness of the community and its parallels with other Jewish societies in the Diaspora.

The first distinctive feature of the Jewish communities in Latin America lies in their very establishment. Until the beginning of the nineteenth century, this subcontinent was virtually closed to Jews, as were the mother countries in the Iberian Peninsula. If any Jews made their way into Latin America, they were breaking the law and could not live openly as Jews, not to mention as a community. The exceptions to the rule only accentuate this fact. For example, the brief period of Dutch rule in the northeast of Brazil between 1625 and 1654 and the colonial holdings of Protestant countries such as Holland, England and, to a lesser extent, Denmark, in the Caribbean islands.

The Iberian world was not the only region from which Jews were barred. Until the last quarter of the eighteenth century, Czarist Russia did all it

could to remain "Judenrein". When a large, exceedingly important Jewish community emerged in Russia in modern times, it was because territories with a long-Jewish presence had been annexed and not because the doors were opened to Jewish immigrants, as in Latin America. However, the policy allowing Jews into the newly independent Latin American countries during the nineteenth century was unlike the immigration policies of the United States, Canada, South Africa or Australia. The status of the Jews in a country like the United States, founded entirely by immigrants, or in a colony ruled by a Protestant power such as Britain, differed from that of the Jews in Catholic Latin America. Despite the civil equality granted the Jews during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, acceptance of the Jewish community as a separate entity striving to remain so has been a problem to this very day. Then, as now, the question has been whether Jewish existence can be reconciled with the self-image, national identity and capacity for accepting others of a non-Jewish majority.

This issue – *the legitimacy of Jewish existence in the eyes of the majority* – is one of the basic problems of Latin American Jewry. It is made even keener by the second factor which distinguishes the Jews in this part of the globe. Whereas all the other Jews of the Diaspora (excluding those of the Moslem world) live in "developed countries", whether capitalist or communist, the Jews of Latin America belong to the "Third World". Most of the community is centered in the more progressive republics, i.e. Argentina and Brazil, and in their more prestigious districts. Even in the less developed countries, the Jews are part of those sectors closest to development and financial well-being. However, acute social polarization is the norm in Latin America. People live under the shadow of the anti-colonial struggle, and the deep national feelings they harbor leave little room for other kinds of identification. The legitimacy of Jewish life in Latin America thus becomes even more perplexing.

This problem is not unique to the Jews of Latin America; it exists both manifest and implicit in other parts of the Diaspora. For this reason, the subject of dual loyalties comes up so often. Moreover, there are few countries where Jews can call themselves an entity fully accepted by the majority, since such entity itself is made up of sub-groups that require acceptance and not just tolerance. The experience of Latin American Jewry can thus serve as a yardstick in establishing the nature and implications of the problem of legitimacy also in other corners of the globe.

Another distinguishing feature of the Jewish communities in Latin America is their internal make-up. In contrast to the United States, where almost all of the Jewish immigrants came from Central or Eastern Europe, Latin America was a refuge for Jews from all parts of the Old World. The

Ashkenazim from Eastern Europe were still in the majority, being the largest Jewish group until the Holocaust and in urgent need of a new home beginning in the 1880s. However, they were preceded in Brazil, Venezuela and Buenos Aires by Jewish immigrants from North Africa. Before and after World War I, many Jews from Damascus and Aleppo, two major Jewish centers in Syria, settled in Argentina and Mexico. Jewish diversity of this kind could be found no where else in the new diasporas and only rarely – like in the case of France – in the Old World. Hence studies of Latin American Jewry can shed considerable light on past and present relations between Jewish ethnic groups, as well as on the tensions, alliances and attempts to preserve unique traditions. Here again, we have a local phenomenon that leads to greater understanding of the Jewish people.

Yet another special feature of Latin American Jewry is the way Jewish life was preserved. Communal models were brought over from the Old World and transferred to new soil, although that soil was different. The largest Ashkenazi community on the continent, the Ashkenazi community of Buenos Aires, tried to create an exact replica of Polish Jewish society. In Poland, however, state laws had given the Jewish leadership authority to collect taxes. In Argentina, Jewish organization was a matter of free will and its only legal framework was a voluntary mutual aid society intended to provide its members with certain services. Hence it was renamed the *Asociacion Mutual Israelita Argentina (AMIA)*.

Aside from basic communal organization and provision of indispensable social services, the Jews of Latin America also experienced changes that corresponded with their economic situation. As masses of Jews moved up the social ladder from the working class to the middle class, cultural and leisure organizations emerged to meet their changing needs and strengthen their Jewish affiliation. A clear example of this trend was the establishment of a broad, comprehensive educational system, particularly after the Holocaust, in Jewish communities all over Latin America. Again, Jewish survival was a primary concern. Until a generation ago, Zionist and non-Zionist frameworks reinforced this school of thought, and the total commitment to Zionism in many Latin American Jewish communities stemmed from the political clout of the Zionist parties and the World Zionist movement.

This is a phenomenon uncommon in most other parts of the Jewish world where, despite almost universal support for the State of Israel, the Zionist Organization and its political parties have remained outside the local government. A study of this phenomenon in Latin America will provide a real-life glimpse of the “conquest of the communities” Theodor Herzl spoke about as a desirable goal. It will also enable us to observe the dynamics of

the Zionist establishment in local frameworks at a time when mass immigration to Israel and elimination of the Diaspora continue to be the official ideology.

Despite efforts to foster Jewish culture in its traditional Yiddish and Hebrew forms, young Jews born in Latin America are inevitably exposed to Spanish culture. This has created a difficult challenge for the parental home and Old World values. It has been necessary to maintain Jewish uniqueness in the face of a new set of cultural circumstances – though the situation itself is hardly new. In fact, by the renewal of physical contact with a region steeped in Iberian culture, a Jewish historical cycle comes full circle. Just as the early Jewish colonists asked themselves if the “land of the Inquisition” was a proper destination for them, their descendants have been experiencing, consciously or unconsciously, a reconnection with a language and culture from which the Jewish people have been cut off for five hundred years. This is yet another aspect that sets the Jews of Latin America apart from world Jewry while echoing a broader Jewish experience.

Thus the volume at hand brings us closer to Latin American Jewry while at the same time illuminating our view of the greater Jewish world. The publication of these collected works is entirely due to the initiative of the members of AMILAT, all of whom are graduates of the Institute of Contemporary Jewry at the Hebrew University. It is a welcome work that brings special pleasure to the Institute.

NOTES

1. Judith Laikin Elkin and Gilbert W. Merkx (editors), *The Jewish Presence in Latin America*, Allen and Unwin, Boston 1987.
2. Haim Avni, “North American Books on Latin American Jewry,” *Studies in Contemporary Jewry*, vol. II (ed. Peter Medding and published for the Institute of Contemporary Jewry by Indiana University Press) (Bloomington, Ill., 1986), pp. 285–289, review on: Judith Laikin Elkin, *Jews of the Latin American Republics* (Chapel Hill, 1980); Eugene Sofer, *From Pale to Pampa: A Social History of the Jews of Buenos Aires* (New York, 1982); Robert Weisbrot, *The Jews in Argentina from the Inquisition to Peron* (Philadelphia, 1979). See also: Schifter Sikora, Jacobo, Gudmundson, Lowell and Solera Castro, Mario, *El Judío en Costa Rica* (San Jose, 1979); Trahtemberg Siederer, Leon, *La Inmigración Judía al Perú, 1848–1948* (Lima, 1987); Senkman, Leonardo, *La Identidad Judía en la Literatura Argentina* (Buenos Aires, 1983); Haim Avni, *Argentina y la Historia de la Inmigración Judía* (Jerusalem and Buenos Aires, 1983); and *Emantzipatzia ve-hinukh yehudi* (Emancipation and Jewish Education – A Century of Argentinian Jewry’s Experience, 1884–1984) (Hebrew) (Jerusalem, 1986); Böhm, Günter, *Judíos en el Perú Durante el Siglo XIX* (Santiago, 1985).