

THE IMPACT OF COVID 19 ON ELDERLY JEWS: THE CASES OF RIO DE JANEIRO AND BUENOS AIRES

MARGALIT BEJARANO

Resumen

El artículo analiza el impacto del covid 19 sobre la vida individual de judíos mayores de 65 años en Río de Janeiro y Buenos Aires en base a 24 entrevistas. Asimismo se refiere a las actividades de organizaciones comunitarias frente a nuevas necesidades, tal como la inseguridad de personas que viven solas, el aumento de judíos pobres y empobrecidos que dependen del apoyo institucional, y la necesidad de cambiar el contacto personal por servicios en línea. Entrevistados en ambas ciudades criticaron la política de sus gobiernos, señalando la precaria situación del sistema de salud debido a la corrupción, y el abuso de la crisis para limitar la democracia.

Palabras clave: Covid 19, Buenos Aires, Río de Janeiro, servicios comunitarios, congregaciones religiosas

Keywords: Covid 19, Buenos Aires, Rio de Janeiro, community services, religious congregations

Introduction

In March 2020 the Coronavirus was recognized as a global pandemic that threatened the lives and health of people all over the world, hitting mainly elderly persons, who were classified as a population at risk. Confined to their homes under official instructions, under caring relatives,

or under their own initiative, seniors had to cope with a new situation of insecurity. Jewish communal organizations had to adapt their services to the new necessities of their members. People aged over 65, who comprise a considerable part of the members of Jewish communities, were more vulnerable not only to the disease, but also to the psychological effects of solitude and were less familiar with the technological devices that substituted religious practices and social activities in person. The pandemic had a profound impact not only on their lives, but also on the way they interpreted and perceived them.

The Oral History Division of the Avraham Harman Research Institute of Contemporary Jewry together with the Israel Oral History Association conducted a series of more than 100 zoom interviews with Jewish seniors in ten different communities around the world.¹ Most of them were conducted during lockdown, in May and June 2020, in order to capture the atmosphere of crisis in real time and to collect a corpus of oral histories that will serve as primary sources for further research.²

Today, more than four years after the outbreak of the pandemic, individuals and states have learnt how to cope with the coronavirus using vaccines, new medical treatment and adapting social behavior to the fluctuations of the disease, offering new perspectives for research. In the case of the Jewish world, the atrocities of October 7, 2023 in the south of Israel in the territories around the Gaza Strip and the war between Israel and Hamas that ensued created a new perspective on individual and collective perceptions confronting existential threats. Nevertheless the experience under the Coronavirus - as expressed in real time - offers an insight into different approaches that range between helplessness and empowerment of individuals and communal institutions facing danger and uncertainty.

Based on the corpus of oral histories of elderly Jews in ten different

1 In Amsterdam, Berlin, Buenos Aires, Frankfurt, London, Milan, New York, Paris, Rio de Janeiro, St. Petersburg, and in Israel.

2 Sharon Livne & Margalit Bejarano, “‘It’s Important to hear a Human Voice,’ Jews under COVID 19: An Oral History Project”, *Contemporary Jewry*, April 2021, <<https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s12397-021-09374-2>> (accessed: January 21, 2024).

cities, this paper focuses on the two Latin American communities - Rio de Janeiro and Buenos Aires - as comparative case studies, with the objective of analyzing the reaction of individuals and their institutions to an emerging crisis. The sources for this study are 24 interviews, conducted via zoom during the latter stages of the lockdown, weekly programs on youtube of the FIERJ (Federação Israelita do Estado do Rio de Janeiro) and AMIA (Asociación Mutual Israelita Argentina), as well as articles and other online information published between March and December 2020.³

The impact of Covid 19 on Argentina and Brazil

Argentina's government imposed one of the longest lockdowns in the world. In the city of Buenos Aires, the *Aislamiento Social Preventivo Obligatorio* lasted more than seven months.⁴ After two weeks of total confinement, people were permitted to go out only to buy food and medicines. Most working places were closed, resulting in a severe economic crisis: between March and August 2020 the peso devaluated from 63 for a dollar to 120. Some restrictions were gradually loosened, but others were extended until November 2020. Only essential workers could use public transportation, and buses ran practically empty.⁵

- 3 All the interviews used for this paper were conducted by the author and are not open to the general public. Scholars interested to obtain access to the oral histories are requested to contact the Oral History Division at the Harman Research Institute of Contemporary Jewry (ohd@savion.huji.ac.il). The author extends her thanks to David Albagli Gorodich for his assistance in locating interviewees in Rio de Janeiro, to Florinda Goldberg and Efraim Zadoff for helping to locate interviewees in Buenos Aires, and to Daniel Pomerantz for providing reports of AMIA during the pandemic.
- 4 Ignacio Llovet, Graciela Dinardi, Esteban Damiani y María Obdulia González Fernández, "El pájaro en la jaula: Una exploración longitudinal de opiniones, emociones y sentimientos de adultos mayores en la Ciudad de Buenos Aires, Argentina, durante el aislamiento social preventivo y obligatorio (COVID-19)", *Espacio Abierto* 30/2 (abril-junio 2021): 24-43, <<https://dialnet.unirioja.es/servlet/articulo?codigo=7974453>> (accessed December 26, 2023).
- 5 "How is the Buenos Aires Jewish community coping with COVID-19?", *The Jerusalem Post*, August 22, 2020, <<https://www.jpost.com/diaspora/how-is-the-buenos-aires->

Despite the severe sanitary restrictions, the government was unable to defend the population from the growing number of casualties.⁶ Interviewees, however, state that despite the long lockdown the population of Buenos Aires remained relatively obedient:

Buenos Aires Ciudad [.....] fue el primer lugar con altísimo grado y donde realmente se cerró todo, absolutamente todo. Los primeros quince días fueron realmente de cierre total, lo que vino bien pero no bajaba el nivel de pandemia. [...] la Ciudad de Buenos Aires lo acató que yo te diría en un 90%, 95%. No veías nadie sin barbijo, nadie por la calle [...]

En Buenos Aires sí, la gente es muy obediente. Siguen el protocolo, siguen, digamos: el barbijo, la máscara, la distancia social principalmente y alcohol en gel, muchísimo. Inclusive a veces yo estoy en una cola de súper y alguien reclama “ey, no estás a dos metros”. [...] En provincia no. No siguen el protocolo en la mayoría de los municipios.⁷

According to the statistics of the World Health Organization, by September 27, 2020 the number of cumulative cases in Argentina – with a population of around 46 millions – was 691,235, with 15,208 deaths. In Brazil – with a population of 213 millions – the number of cumulative cases was 4,689,613 with 140,537 deaths.⁸ While in Argentina the rate of deaths per one million people was 336, in Brazil it was almost double – 661 deaths per one million.⁹

Brazil’s president, Jair Bolsonaro, underrated the danger of the coronavirus, and argued that “a weakened economy could kill more than the

jewish-community-coping-with-covid-19-639526> (accessed June 10, 2024).

6 Natalia Plazas, “Argentina supera los 10.000 muertos por Covid-19, tras 6 meses de restricciones”, September 7, 2020, <<https://www.france24.com/es/20200907-india-casos-coronavirus-bolivia-argentina-7-septiembre>> (accessed February 6, 2024).

7 Patricia Finzi in interview with Patricia Finzi and Paul Warszawski, Buenos Aires, November 22, 2020. See also interview with Graciela Tevah de Ryba, Bs. As., November 23, 2020.

8 <<https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/situation-reports/20200928-weekly-epi-update.pdf>> (accessed February 14, 2021); see table 2 (pp. 13-15): Number of COVID-19 confirmed cases and deaths reported in the last seven days by countries, territories and areas, as of September 27 2020.

9 Ibid.

virus”.¹⁰ The State and the city of Rio de Janeiro, however, imposed strict regulations to prevent the spread of the pandemic. Interviewees referred to the different approach of the Federal, State and municipal authorities:

Access to the beach is still forbidden. [...] if you go to Copacabana, [...] lots of people in the street now, [...] the mayor says we should open, the governor says we should open only half, and the Court of Justice says no! And of course the president is another thing, and I won’t speak about that [...], everybody knows.¹¹

Since cariocas were less obedient than the porteños and the control by the authorities looser, the population was more exposed to contagion. According to Dr. Marcos Musafir, the coronavirus was introduced to Brazil by people of high and middle class, who after returning from China or Italy infected their maids, and thus caused the spread of the pandemic among the poor classes.¹² Interviewees remarked that buses of people going to work during lockdown were crowded, serving as hothouses for the spread of the disease, pointing out the vulnerability of the lower socio-economic classes to the pandemic, being forced to go out to work, suffering from malnutrition and having limited access to health services.¹³

In Rio de Janeiro, with a population exceeding six millions out of which 22% are living in favelas, there is a significant inequality. A study on the impact of the pandemic on different neighborhoods in Rio de Janeiro demonstrates the lethality of the coronavirus in the favelas, that are

10 Marcus M. Gilban, “Rio de Janeiro’s Jews adapt as virus wreaks havoc on Brazil, infects president”, *The Times of Israel*, July 8, 2020, <<https://www.timesofisrael.com/rio-de-janeiros-jews-adapt-as-virus-wreaks-havoc-on-brazil-infects-president/>> (accessed June 10, 2024).

11 Interview with Ricardo Musafir, RJ, June 9, 2020; see also interviews with Heliete Vaitsman, RJ, June 7, 2020, and David Albagli Gorodich, RJ, May 20, 2020.

12 Interview with Dr. Marcos Musafir, RJ, June 21, 2020. Dr. Musafir is an orthopedic surgeon and traumatologist, who was appointed as director of the Hospital of the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro and coordinator of its Covid 19 Cabinet of Crisis. See also: interviews with Eliane Piszcol, RJ, June 7, 2020, and David Albagli Gorodich, RJ, May 20, 2020.

13 Interviews with Ricardo Musafir, RJ, June 9, 2020; Stella Yani Garber, RJ, June 28, 2020; Eliane Piszcol, RJ, June 7, 2020.

“characterized by precarious living conditions, high population density, and reduced access to essential public services and health care” as well as by little access to food.¹⁴ By contrast, the study demonstrates the low Case Fatality Rate (CFR) among the inhabitants of the ten top social developed neighborhoods, that include Ipanema and Leblon – two centers of Jewish population. Ipanema, however, has the highest CFR (7.09%) among the developed neighborhoods, the lowest being Jardim Botânico (2.94%).¹⁵

Similar results were presented to the author by Roberto Lobel, who following the data published by Instituto Pereira Pasos, analyzed with details the distribution of coronavirus new cases and mortality according to Rio’s neighborhoods. Considering that the majority of Jews live in the Southern part of the city, in neighborhoods such as Copacabana, Ipanema, Leblon and Barra de Tijuca, he estimated that they were not located among the polarized cases, but rather “in the middle”, reflecting their concentration in the middle and high middle class.¹⁶

Studies on the impact of the pandemic in Buenos Aires point at a connection between morbidity and poverty. A comparative analysis of socio-economic and health indicators in the different *comunas* of Buenos Aires shows a correlation between inequities and the rate of Covid 19 mortality.¹⁷ Assuming that morbidity and mortality among the Jews is similar to that of the rest of the population in a similar socio-economic status, we may use the study of Adrián Jmelintzky and Ezekiel Erdei on the Jewish population of Buenos Aires as an indicator of the status of the

14 Yago Bernardo, Denes do Rosario and Carlos Conte-Junior, “Covid-19 Pandemic in Rio de Janeiro, Brasil: A Social Inequality Report”, *Neducuba* (Kaunas) 57/6 (June 10, 2021): 596, <<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8229071/>> (accessed February 14, 2020).

15 Ibid.

16 Interview with Roberto Lobel and Lucia Lopeo, RJ, July 7, 2020, and adjacent charts prepared by Roberto Lobel. See also: interview with Ricardo Musafir, RJ, June 9, 2020.

17 Agustina M. Marconi, Carlos Castillo Salgado, Elena Beatriz Sarrouf *et al.*, “Socioeconomic Inequities in Covid-19 Mortality in Vulnerable Comunas of the City of Buenos Aires”, *Scientific Reports* 13/13642 (2023), <<https://www.nature.com/articles/s41598-023-40911-1>> (accessed February 14, 2024).

Jews. According to the study - that was conducted in 2005 - 36% of the Jewish population was centered in the lower class, 34% in the middle class and 34% in the higher strata – in a better status than that of the general population.¹⁸ Most interviewees, in Buenos Aires as well as in Rio de Janeiro, stated that they benefit from a private health insurance, pointing out their privileged position. We have to consider, however, that the interviews on the pandemic do not pretend to be a representative sample.

The impact of Covid on individual lives

While the statistics of the WHO portray the extent of morbidity and mortality, personal interviews conducted under lockdown reflect the fears, feelings and thoughts of the interviewees and the interpretation they gave to the impact of the pandemic on their personal lives.

As part of a population at risk, interviewees were conscious of the importance of observing the new regulations, in order to protect their life and health. Doctors had to follow strictly the sanitary protocols, “living the new normal life”.¹⁹ Some interviewees continued to work from their home, while others have retired and spent much of their time in front of the television.

Interviewees followed the news on the pandemic from different sources, relying on European, American or Israeli channels with little confidence in the local media. While in Buenos Aires restrictions were imposed and controlled by the authorities, in Rio de Janeiro they were often self-imposed: interviewees took the advice of their personal doctor, or of relatives and friends abroad, not waiting for the authorities’ instructions.²⁰ Shopping was

18 Adrián Jmelniczky y Ezequiel Erdei, *La población judía de Buenos Aires: Estudio sociodemográfico*, Buenos Aires, 2005, pp. 41-42.

19 Interviews with Marcos Musafir, RJ, June 9, 2020; Raquel Tenenbaum, Bs. As., December 1, 2020.

20 Interviews with Heliete Vaitsman, RJ, June 7, .2020; Marylink Kupfeurberg, RJ, June 14, 2020; Eliane Piszcol, RJ, June 7, 2020; Stella Garber, RJ, June 28, 2020; Emmy Dana, Bs. As., December 10. 2020; Clara Aizenberg and Manuel Cywin, Bs. As., November 21, 2020; David Albagli Gorodich, RJ, May 20, 2020; Alfredo Goldstejn,

done mostly online and delivered to the main entrance of the buildings, or by young family members who placed the products on the threshold of the closed doors. In the case of Buenos Aires, the municipality organized a network of volunteers who helped senior citizens in the purchase of food and medicines:

El gobierno de la ciudad de Buenos Aires proveyó a todos los adultos mayores que lo necesitaban de voluntarios, que venían, que hacían las compras, que nos ayudaron muchísimo. [...] tuvimos mucha suerte. En general todos los voluntarios del gobierno de la ciudad fueron excelentes, mis amigas que lo tuvieron que utilizar estaban muy agradecidas.²¹

Housemaids were not allowed to come to work, but their employers had to continue paying their salaries. In rare cases, the maids remained in the home of their employers throughout the lockdown, but in most cases interviewees had to cope with the cleaning of their homes, sharing the chores between husband and wife or purchasing a robot. Some admitted that living without a housemaid was one of their major difficulties:

Entonces con la mucama, después de cuatro meses, cuando mis manos empezó realmente las articulaciones (sic), [...] fui al traumatólogo y él me dijo: “Patricia, vos necesitás una *shikse terapia*”.²²

Staying at home during the long lockdown was more difficult for persons living alone, but for almost everyone it meant to give up their regular activities, such as swimming, gymnastic, participation in cultural events, going out to the theater or to eat in a restaurant as well as to encounter

Bs.As., December 10, 2020; Paul Warszawski, Bs. As., November 22, 2020.

21 Interview with Elena Masri de Cohen Imach, Bs. As., January 11, 2021. See also interview with Graciela Romer, Bs.As., 13, 2020.

22 Patricia Finzi in interview with Patricia Finzi and Paul Warszawski, November 22, 2020; see also: Marylink Kupfeurberg, RJ, June 7, 2020; Eliane Piszcol, RJ, June 7, 2020; Ricardo Musafir, RJ, June 9, 2020, Clara Aizenberg and Manuel Cywin, Bs. As., November 21, 2020; Elena Masri de Cohen Imach, Bs. As., January 11, 2021; Alfredo Goldstejn, Bs. As., December 10, 2020; Graciela Romer, Bs.As., December 12, 2020; Raquel Tenenbaum, December 1, 2020.

family and friends.²³ Most interviewees stated that the main difficulty was not being able to meet their children nor to hug grandchildren.

Some interviewees admitted that they felt depressed, and were unable to concentrate on former activities, such as creative writing.²⁴

Cada uno se cuidaba a sí mismo; no nos saludamos, ni abrazos, ni besos. Viste cómo somos los argentinos, los porteños: mucho abrazo, mucho beso y entonces estábamos todos así a distancia.

[...] El ánimo, sí, depresión, ni ganas de cambiarme ni de peinarme. Recién me corté el pelo hace un mes, porque no iba a la peluquería, no me cambiaba, no me compré ropa, nada. Todas esas cosas que hacía habitualmente, todo eso quedó suspendido. No tenía ni interés, ni voluntad.²⁵

While women were more open in disclosing their solitude, depression and fears, an anonymous interviewee from Rio de Janeiro said that under the impact of Covid he started to fear of death and decided to make arrangements for his family. Another interviewee defined 13 different moods of depression:

Your life is in suspension, feeling that you are losing time in life, loss of bonding, everything is relative, anxiety, vulnerability and fear, missing the meaning of life, uselessness, not following up with modernity. A weight in the heart, uneasiness, lack of concentration, loneliness, feeling that my work is crumbling, boredom.²⁶

Most interviewees, however, found ways to overcome the imposed seclusion using new ways of communication. Phone conversations substituted physical encounters, and geographical distances lost their relevance, enabling the renewal of social contacts with relatives and friends in other countries. The use of electronic devices opened new

23 Interviews with Ricardo Musafir, RJ, June 9, 2020; Stella Garber, RJ, June 28, 2020; anonymous, RJ, June 4, 2020; Emmy Dana, Bs. As., December 12, 2020.

24 Interview with Ana María Shua on TV Program *Shalom AMIA*, 74, April 12, 2020; interview with Elena Masri de Cohen Imach Bs. As., January 11, 2021.

25 Interview with María Cherro de Azar, Bs. As., December 2, 2020.

26 Interview with Renato José Mayer, RJ, June 8, 2020.

ways of interaction, and facilitated work from home. Two Buenos Aires psychologists and a Rio psychiatrist treated their patients virtually. The latter explained: “We have to get accustomed to being close without being close”.²⁷

Several interviewees described their participation in zoom activities as a means of empowerment: they volunteered in social organizations or participated in virtual courses and lectures and exercised gymnastics.²⁸ A CIDICSEF activist in Buenos Aires admits that she felt lonely during the early stages of the lockdown, but as she was speaking about her engagement in the organization of cultural events her voice reflects her enthusiasm: she refers to the hundreds of persons from Latin America, the United States, Spain and Israel who participated in the zoom lectures on Sephardic culture, and the circulation of her articles via whatsapp and e.mail.²⁹ The virtual networks opened new means of contact, as expressed in the annual report of AMIA: “Acortamos distancias estando cerca de quienes más lo necesitan”.³⁰

The Response of the Jewish Organizations: Religion

The response of the Jewish communal organizations to the crisis was manifested in two major ways: transformation of religious services and social assistance to the needy.

The closing of the religious institutions had a profound impact on religious practices. Orthodox synagogues are restricted by halachic

27 Interviews with Marylink Kupfeurberg, RJ, June 7, 2020; Elena Masri de Cohen Imach, Bs. As., January 11, 2021; Emmy Dana, Bs. As., December 10, 2020. See also Graciela Romer, Bs.As.,13, 2020.

28 Interviews with Emmy Dana, Bs. As., December 10, 2020; Heliete Vaitsman, RJ, June 7, 2020.

29 Interview with Graciela Tevah de Ryba, Bs. As., November 23, 2020, CIDICSEF - Centro de Investigación y Difusión de la Cultura Sefaradí. See also: Elena Masri de Cohen Imach Bs. As., January 11, 2021; María Cherro de Azar, Bs. As., December 2, 2020.

30 AMIA, Reporte anual 2020, p. 5, <<https://amia.org.ar/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Amia-Reporte-Anual-2020-Anexos.pdf>> (accessed July 2022).

precepts, and could not conduct Shabat services on zoom. They instructed their members to transfer the sanctity of their synagogue to their homes, but were slow in adopting zoom services during weekdays. A member of the Damascene community in Buenos Aires described the rupture she experienced with the closing of the synagogue:

El jueves antes de que declararan el confinamiento en Agudat Dodim fueron todos a buscar los *talit* y las corachas y los libros, porque por primera vez en ciento diez años, el templo iba a cerrar [...] Así que fue muy doloroso. Todos los hombres se quedaron hasta las 11, 12 de la noche en el templo, llorando, retirando sus cosas [...] para mí ese fue el punto de quiebre, y el hecho de que mi esposo así a nivel familiar no pueda ir todos los días a rezar a la mañana también fue el primer cambio en la familia.³¹

In Rio de Janeiro, the Jewish religious institutions were slower in adopting the new restrictions. The community's youtube of March 15 does not mention the Covid, and describes the merry Purim celebration. A member of the Rio community who returned from New York was astonished at the indifference of the religious leadership:

I was in a *Kabalat Shabat* in a Lubavitch [synagogue], because I had a meeting before, [...] I was amazed by the way they were getting crowded, the *kidush* was in a very small room, with a lot of people, and I spoke to the rabbi, and I asked him 'are you not worried?' [...] 'God will protect the Jews, the Jews were protected under the black pest, God will protect again' [...] and there was another rabbi [who said] don't be worried, [God protects them] if they go for *mitzvot*. Unfortunately he was not correct.³²

In March, FIERJ recommended to close all the Jewish institutions, allowing each synagogue to decide for itself, as long as it kept the government's instructions.³³ In April, however, all the syagogues had to close down.

Conservative and Reform synagogues conducted their Shabat and holiday services on zoom, offering new possibilities for distant

31 Interview with María Cherro de Azar, Bs. As., December 2, 2020.

32 Interview with Robert Lobel, RJ, July 7, 2020.

33 FIERJ, youtube, March 22, 2020 (accessed July 2022).

participation, as expressed by Rabbi Margulies of ARI: “respondemos isolamento social com proximidade espiritual”.³⁴ The online religious services attracted many persons who prior to the pandemic did not participate. Orthodox synagogues could not conduct shabat and holidays services virtually, but some of them organized an early *Kabalat Shabat* on zoom, and prior to Rosh Hashana conducted *selichot* on zoom. Most of the interviewees for this study, both in Buenos Aires and Rio de Janeiro, are not religious, but many of them admitted that under Covid they joined the online services of Conservatives or Reforms synagogues. The number of participants in *Kabalat Shabat* in ARI (Associação Religiosa Israelita) was estimated around 500, much more than before the pandemic.³⁵

The AMIA rabbinate established new protocols in order to adapt religious ritual to the new restrictions. The weekly youtube included interviews with rabbis that instructed the audience how to celebrate Pessach during lockdown.³⁶ Interviewees admitted that the *Seder* during lockdown was a depressing experience, although some participated in zoom *Seders* with relatives, or even sent traditional food to their children; others gave up the traditional celebration that had no meaning without the participation of their family.³⁷

Religious institutions had to adapt Jewish burial laws to the official instructions of the sanitary authorities, that in both cities prohibited the washing of the dead (*tahara*) and required their burial in sealed coffins. AMIA also provided halachic guidance to other communities in Argentina and abroad.³⁸ Only very few persons were allowed to participate in funerals,

34 FIERJ, Youtube, April 5, 2020.

35 Interviews with Heliete Vaitsman, RJ, June 7, 2020; Ricardo Musafir, RJ, June 9, 2020; Graciela Romer, Bs.As., 13, 2020; Patricia Finzi, Bs. As., November 22, 2020; María Cherro de Azar, Bs. As., December 2, 2020; Gilban, *The Times of Israel* (see note 10).

36 AMIA, *Reporte anual* 2020, p. 27; interview with Rabbi Yehoshua Goldman, RJ, June 15, 2020.

37 Interviews with Heliete Vaitsman, RJ, June 7, 2020; Eliane Piszcol, RJ June 7, 2020; Ricardo Musafir, RJ, June 9, 2020; Graciela Tevah de Ryba, Bs. As., November 23, 2020; Elena Masri de Cohen Imach, Bs. As., January 11, 2021.

38 AMIA, *Reporte anual* 2020, p. 6; interview with Rabbi Yehoshua Goldman, RJ, June

leaving a painful scar on their relatives' heart. The contradiction between isolation and mourning traditions was painful: "Mi esposo perdió a dos hermanas y sin poder ir a saludar, ni hacer *kadish*. Nada, nada, eso fue muy duro. [...] mi esposo de verdad no hizo la *shivá* por su hermana [...] Eso se hace en comunión con toda la familia".³⁹

Many synagogues found ways to accompany the mourners in their difficult hours, organizing online services for the deceased persons or for commemorating *a yorzeit*:

In the difficult moments, very difficult because last year I lost a son, [...] two weeks ago it was one year that he died [...] at that moment it was very good to be Jewish and to have the proximity of rabbi Margulies and the progressive synagogue [ARI], and it was very good to have the prayers and the ritual [...] We made it online: the rabbi made a very beautiful ceremony, he was at the synagogue alone, we made a zoom and everybody came [...] and at the end of the ceremony those who wanted to say something spoke [...] it was very very touching [...] very comforting.⁴⁰

According to a Chabad rabbi in Rio: "The Shiva we do on zoom, even though we don't say *kadish*, you can't say *kadish* on zoom, but we get the people together, we say *dvar Torah*, we comfort them". Aware of the growing demand for spiritual assistance in a period of uncertainty and fear, his synagogue gave hundreds of religious classes to different audiences.⁴¹ Similar activities were conducted by Sephardi Orthodox synagogues. AMIA's online program included religious instruction on the observation of Pessach during the pandemic together with classes on the preparation of traditional food, such as *kneidlach*.⁴²

15, 2020.

39 Interview with María Cherro de Azar, Bs. As., December 2, 2020. See also interviews with Emmy Dana, Bs. As., December 12, 2020; Graciela Tevah de Ryba, Bs. As., November 23, 2020.

40 Interview with Marylink Kupfeurberg, RJ, June 7, 2020; see also: AMIA, *Reporte anual* 2020, pp. 27, 45; interview with Ricardo Musafir, RJ, June 9, 2020.

41 Interview with Rabbi Yehoshua Goldman, RJ, June 15, 2020.

42 *Shalom AMIA*, Youtube, April 5, 2020 & April 12, 2020, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mPIEim2bG6M>> (accessed July 2022). Interview with Ricardo Musafir, RJ,

The local Jewish communities' media emphasized the strict maintenance of the Covid protocols by all the Jewish religious institutions, but some interviewees in Buenos Aires criticized the irresponsible behavior of Ultra-Orthodox Jews for opening synagogues and *yeshivot* or not using masks: "porque ignoran el peligro del virus". They mentioned that members of the Ultra-Orthodox community were arrested for trying to operate a *Mikve* and for inviting too many guests to two weddings, but added that the Jewish community tried not to give publicity to that information.⁴³ On the other hand, a Buenos Aires dentist, with wealthy Ultra-Orthodox among her patients, praises their generosity towards the needy and the importance of their contributions to maintain the social assistance distributed by the Jewish community.⁴⁴

The Response of the Jewish Organizations: Social Assistance

The Jewish communal institutions had to adapt their social services to the new situation. The FIERJ – the roof organization of the 60 Jewish institutions in the state of Rio de Janeiro – established in March a *Comité de Crise*, in order to coordinate social assistance. Chabad Lubavitch continued to be responsible for the *Lar de esperança* – the soup kitchen in Tijuca – but food had to be sent to the homes of the needy, whose numbers increased considerably during the pandemic. The number of monthly meals provided by Chabad increased from 2,000 to 3,000. Volunteers distributed food, medicines and money to persons in need.⁴⁵ According to Arnon Velmowitzky, then president of FIERJ, the Jewish community succeeded in protecting the lives of the residents of the three

June 9, 2020;

43 *The Jerusalem Post*, August 22, 2020. Interviews with Graciela Tevah de Ryba, Bs. As., November 23, 2020; Patricia Finzi, Bs. As., November 22, 2020; Emmy Dana, Bs. As., December 12, 2020.

44 Interview with Raquel Tenenbaum, December 1, 2020.

45 FIERJ, Youtube, March 22, 2020, April 5, 2020 (accessed July 2022); Gilban, *The Times of Israel* (see note 10); Interviews with Rabbi Yehoshua Goldman, RJ, June 15, 2020; Arnon Velmowitzky, RJ, July 2, 2020.

old age homes, maintaining strict isolation. Young members of Hillel tried to alleviate the solitude of their residents, communicating with them over the phone. Volunteers conducted phone calls also with members of the soup kitchen, that prior to the pandemic served as a meeting place for the persons who came to eat. The Crisis Committee thus provided some psychological assistance, trying to alleviate solitude and depression.⁴⁶

The FIERJ weekly program on youtube included interviews with medical doctors, social activists and other experts who instructed the spectators how to protect themselves against the coronavirus, and how to assist the elderly, considered the most vulnerable. They offered the help of the communal institutions, but also called for volunteers and donations.

In Buenos Aires most of the social work has been carried out by AMIA, in collaboration with Fundación Tzedaká, Chabad Lubavitch, and the old age home Ledor Vador. This coordinated assistance included mainly AMIA members and persons who turned to its assistance.⁴⁷

Like in Rio, AMIA's soup kitchen delivered food and medicines to the homes of the persons who used to eat in the *comedor* on Uriburu street, and whose number increased considerably during the pandemic. In May, four organizations - AMIA, Tzedaka, JDC (American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee) and Acción Social de Jabad established a joint network, in order to coordinate the social assistance in the Jewish community during the pandemic. In their report they point out the economic consequences of the coronavirus, that pushed to poverty families that until then worked and maintained their families:

Se trata de población que no era atendida por los servicios sociales de la comunidad judía con anterioridad a la pandemia [...] En la mayor parte de los casos, son personas y familias con un nivel de gastos comparativamente más elevado al de la población que ya estaba siendo atendida por la Red de Protección Social de la Comunidad Judía, por

46 Interview with Arnon Velmovitzky, RJ, July 2, 2020; FIERJ, Youtube, April 5, 2020 (accessed July 2022); interviews with David Albagli Gorodich, RJ, May 20, 2020, and Marcos Musafir, June 21, 2020.

47 Interviews with María Cherro de Azar, Bs. As., December 2, 2020; Graciela Tevah de Ryba, Bs. As., November 23, 2020.

lo que no reúnen los criterios de admisión para programas de ayuda del Estado, pero que vieron drásticamente reducidos sus ingresos y enfrentan esta situación con un alto nivel de endeudamiento y sin ahorros.⁴⁸

Many of the interviewees, although they are not necessarily members of the communal organizations, said that they contribute for Jewish social causes both in Buenos Aires and Rio.⁴⁹

AMIA's annual report for 2020 refers to the new necessities created by the pandemic and the response of the organization. The most urgent needs are food, health and housing, but in addition elderly persons living alone and with no access to internet needed help in daily tasks such as shopping, but they also had psychological necessities, such as coping with loneliness and fear. Networks of volunteers communicated by phone with persons living alone, trying to alleviate their solitude. The *Centro Integral de Adultos Mayores* provided a variety of virtual activities such as sport, yoga, dancing, theater and literature. The weekly program *Shalom AMIA*, like its counterpart in Rio, provided useful information, but also manifested good mood and optimism to raise the morale of their audience.⁵⁰

In both cities religious, social and cultural organizations increased the offer of online activities, such as lectures, courses and online social meetings. In Rio WIZO continued its activities on behalf of Israel, but also provided a network of communication and activities for women locked in their homes. In Buenos Aires AMIA organized virtual workshops for yoga, tai-chí, gymnastics, dancing, theater and literature. Hebraica and Hacoaj

48 "Respuesta de la comunidad judía argentina en tiempos de pandemia: Atención a las familias vulnerables y sectores medios empobrecidos". Report received from Daniel Pomerantz, Executive Director of AMIA, September 2021 ; uploaded in: <<https://tzedaka.org.ar/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/informe-respuesta-de-la-comunidad-judia-argentina-en-tiempos-de-pandemia.pdf>> (accessed November 2024).

49 See for example interviews with Elena Masri de Cohen Imach, Bs. As., January 11, 2021; Raquel Tenenbaum, December 1, 2020; Graciela Romer, Bs. As., 13, 2020; Eliane Pizcol, June 7, 2020.

50 AMIA, *Reporte anual 2020*, pp. 7-8, 43-44, <<https://amia.org.ar/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Amia-Reporte-Anual-2020-Anexos.pdf>> (accessed July 2022); interview with Graciela Tevah de Ryba, Bs. As., November 23, 2020.

provided online activities.⁵¹ According to one interviewee: “Yo me sentí orgullosísima de estar en una comunidad que se ocupó tanto de acompañar a quienes estábamos en casa”.⁵²

Social assistance to the general society

As part of the general population, the Jewish communal organizations participated in the national activities and individual Jews contributed to alleviate the situation in favelas or *villas miserias*. In Buenos Aires, Hebraica offered its premises in its country club in Pilar to establish a *Centro para la Convalecencia* with 230 beds.⁵³ AMIA coordinated food distribution with the Ministry of Social Development, and participated in the campaign *Seamos Uno*, a network of social religious and business organizations, that distributed food and hygiene products in the city and province of Buenos Aires.⁵⁴

In Rio de Janeiro Jewish organizations, such as Jews for Democracy participated in NGOs that distributed food and other products in favelas and have been supporting public hospitals. Jews for Democracy, for example, contributed for the purchase of the *Cesta Basica* for families in favelas.⁵⁵

Interviewees in both cities, especially those that are not active in Jewish organizations, expressed their solidarity with the general society, and stated that they were donating money to various causes related to the pandemic. Others volunteered in the framework of their profession, such as giving psychological assistance to medical staff treating Covid patients.⁵⁶

51 AMIA, *Reporte anual* 2020, pp. 24-25. Interview with Stella Garber, RJ, June 28, 2020. “How is the Buenos Aires Jewish community coping with COVID-19?”, *The Jerusalem Post*, August 22, 2020.

52 Interview with Elena Masri de Cohen Imach, Bs. As., January 11, 2021.

53 <<https://hebraica.org.ar/informacion-importante-centro-de-convalecencia-en-la-isla-de-pilar/>> (accessed July 2022).

54 AMIA, *Reporte anual* 2020, pp. 7-8.

55 Interviews with Heliete Vaitsman, RJ, June 7, 2020; Arnon Velmovitsky, RJ, July 2, 2020.

56 Interviews with Marylink Kupfeurberg, RJ, June 7, 2020; Marcos Musafir, June 21,

Critical views on the governments

Interviewees criticized the government of Argentina for imposing a rigid lockdown on the whole population, without making tests that could prove the impact of the coronavirus on different sectors, thus causing an economic disaster without securing protection against the disease. As long as the lockdown seemed effective the population of Buenos Aires was obedient, but with the increase in the rate of morbidity and mortality, people lost confidence in the government's policy.⁵⁷

Interviewees in Buenos Aires complained that while millions of unemployed received government subsidies without having to work, their pension did not cover the cost of their basic expenses: "No se puede acompañar la inflación".⁵⁸ They pointed out other contradictions, such as the fact that banks served clients only online, but the casinos were open, and that the government was violating its own laws:

[el gobierno es] un desastre, un desastre. ... porque habían contradicciones entre lo que decían y lo que hacían. O sea, vos tenés que tener barbijo y no tenés que encontrar con alguien muy cerca y ellos se abrazaban sin barbijo, comían asado, salían las fotos de las grandes mesas de los gobernadores.⁵⁹

Interviewees expressed their indignation with the government's behavior after the passing away of Diego Mardona. Tens of thousands of fans, many of them without a mask, crowded around the coffin:

Se organizó un velorio en la Casa Rosada. [...] fue una locura [...] y una falta de respeto para la otra gente que tiene un muerto y no te dejan acompañarlo [...] está hecho por razones políticas, porque el gobierno es

2020; Emmy Dana, Bs. As., December 12, 2020; Eliane Piszcol, June 7, 2020.

57 Interviews with Alfredo Goldstajn, Bs. As., December 10, 2020; Graciela Romer, Bs. As., 13, 2020.

58 Interview with Emmy Dana, Bs. As., December 12, 2020; Graciela Tevah de Ryba, Bs. As., November 23, 2020; Frida Benyaminovich, December 15, 2020.

59 Interview with María Cherro de Azar, Bs. As., December 2, 2020.

un gobierno populista que trata de quedar bien con la gente.⁶⁰

Interviewees interpreted the lockdown also as a political instrument used by the Fernández-Kirchner government to pass reforms in the judicial system and restrict human rights, increasing inequality and posing a threat to the democratic system:

Allí hay un espacio de merma de la convicción democrática, por las urgencias de sobrevivencia de la vida cotidiana, que da espacio para la emergencia de líderes populistas. [...]

Sobre todo han aumentado los niveles de asimetría y desigualdad social, y estos niveles de desigualdad hacen que mucha gente, frente a las necesidades, a las demandas de sobrevivencia por el impacto que el Covid ha tenido sobre la mayoría de los sistemas económicos, busquen salidas más tangibles como son liderazgos fuertes, de tipo autoritario, [...] para enfrentar situaciones de riesgo, dejando de lado el compromiso de los sistemas democráticos.⁶¹

In Rio de Janeiro the Jewish community was divided between the supporters of Bolsonaro and his opponents, though many of the former had serious reservations with respect to the president's controversial attitude to the coronavirus. Some interviewees explained that they voted for Bolsonaro as a reaction to the former governments of the PT (Partido dos Trabalhadores). Others were extremely critical of the president, pointing out the neo-Nazi discourse of the circles around him that stimulated antisemitism. A daughter of Shoah survivors expressed her concern about the threat to democracy: "They are flirting with Fascism, they are flirting with Nazism, with totalitarianism: for me it's terrible".⁶²

60 Interviews with Raquel Tenenbaum, December 1, 2020; Emmy Dana, Bs. As., December 12, 2020.

61 Interview with Graciela Romer, Bs.As.,13, 2020. See also: Clara Aizenberg and Manuel Cywin, Bs. As., November 21, 2020; Elena Masri de Cohen Imach, Bs. As., January 11, 2021.

62 Interviews with Marylink Kupfeurberg, RJ, June 7, 2020; Heliete Vaitsman, RJ, June 7, 2020; David Albagli Gorodich, RJ, May 20, 2020; Arnon Velmovitzky, RJ, July 2, 2020.

Almost all the Rio interviewees mentioned the presence of the Israeli flag in the pro-Bolsonaro anti-lockdown demonstrations. According to an article in *Haaretz*:

Bolsonaro doesn't just support anti-lockdown demonstrations by tweet, he *attends* them, accompanied always by a standard bearer carrying three national flags: those of Brazil, the United States and, yes, Israel. [...] The rallies are led by far-right supporters calling for shuttering the Supreme Court and a return to a military dictatorship.⁶³

Quoting human rights activist Sergio Storch, the article explains the meaning of the Israeli flag in the President's demonstrations:

Insistence on using symbols such as the Israeli flag are oriented more toward the fundamentalist Christians. Jewish votes aren't relevant at all. There are only 100,000 Brazilian Jews, but the fundamentalists' votes are in the tens of millions.⁶⁴

Though raised by Evangelicals, the Israeli flag created a wrong visual image of Israel's supporting Bolsonaro, and Jews manifested their fear that it could damage the community's reputation in the future. The friendly relations between Netanyahu and Bolsonaro arose criticism against the Israeli Prime Minister, a criticism shared also by some of the Buenos Aires interviewees. In both communities interviewees referred to the abuse of the pandemic for corruption and political power.⁶⁵

63 Daniel Gouri de Lima, "As Coronavirus Rages in Brazil, Bolsonaro's Embrace of Israel Puts Jews at Risk", *Haaretz*, June 4, 2020, <<https://www.haaretz.com/world-news/2020-06-04/ty-article-opinion/.premium/as-coronavirus-rages-in-brazil-bolsonaros-embrace-of-israel-puts-jews-at-risk/0000017f-e03a-d3a5-af7f-f2be3bd50000>> (accessed March 3, 2024).

64 Ibid.

65 Interviews with Guita Bukaresky, RJ, May 8, 2020; Heliete Vaitsman, RJ, June 7, 2020; Eliane Pizol, RJ, June 7, 2020; David Albagli Gorodich, RJ, May 20, 2020; Renato José Mayer, RJ, June 8, 2020.

Conclusion

The two cases analyzed in this paper were similar in the individual approach to the pandemic, but differed from each other in their country's context. While Argentina's government tried to erect defensive walls against the penetration of the Covid, regardless of the economic price, the federal government of Brazil gave priority to economy over health. On the provincial and municipal level their policies were similar, but while in Buenos Aires the police was more severe and the population more obedient, in Rio de Janeiro the lockdown among the Jews was often self-imposed.

Interviewees in both cities criticized the policy of their respective government, manifesting their former political convictions that were strengthened under the impact of the pandemic. They referred to the different policies of the federal and municipal governments, the poor situation of the health system due to corruption, and the abuse of the emergency situation to restrict democracy. While in Buenos Aires the arguments against the authorities were focused on the political, economic and social situation in the country, interviewees in Rio were also concerned about the implications on the Jews, particularly the relations between Bolsonaro's milieu and Neo-Nazism and the use of the Israeli flag.

The socio-economic differences between the two Jewish communities need further study, but the interviews – that do not pretend to be a representative sample – give the impression that the Jewish population in Buenos Aires was struck harder by the pandemic, though in both cities the situation of the Jews seemed relatively better than that of the general population.

The Jewish communal institutions were faced by a crisis situation that brought to the surface new necessities. The need to protect elderly Jews against contagion was involved in a strict maintenance of their social distance, through the provision of food and medicines to their home and the transformation of personal contact to electronic devices. Reform and Conservative congregations were more alert to the need of online services, being less restricted by religious precepts and more open to innovations.

The lockdown increased the communities' awareness to the psychological needs of people living alone, especially in a period of insecurity in which they were disconnected from a physical contact with their families. In addition, it increased the circle of the poor and impoverished Jews that depend on the communities' support.

In both cities the situation of crisis was a trigger for coordination of social services, but while the community of Rio is centralized under the FIERJ, the coordinated activities of AMIA, Tzedaká and Habad, did not include the whole organized community, leaving out Sephardim and liberal congregations.