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Jewish-Latino Interactions in the United States Interview with Steven Windmueller

- According to the latest National Jewish Population Survey, there are 5.5 million Jews in the
 United States. The estimated forty-five million Latinos-of whom up to a quarter are illegal
 immigrants-are now the largest minority in the United States, accounting for about 15.1 percent of
 the total population. Whereas Latinos have a median age of 18-20 that of American Jews is the
 late 40s
- From the Jewish standpoint, the relevance of Latinos is their growing importance in the United States. Latinos are increasingly playing a role in local and national politics. In the economy they also interact increasingly with the rest of society, which means with Jews as well.
- Key to improving Jewish-Latino intercommunal relations is shared values. Both have a great love
 for family and are strongly committed to their children's education. Yet another issue that has
 common aspects concerns diaspora relations. Jews are to a certain extent allies of the Latino
 community in being positively disposed to immigration even if positions on this issue are not
 identical.
- One important goal for the Jewish community is to identify young Latinos who are emerging as leaders in their communities. Jews should develop strategies to introduce the next generation of Latino officials to Jewish leaders and to Israel, and to nurture such connections in general.

"According to the latest National Jewish Population Survey, there are 5.5 million Jews in the United States. The estimated forty-five million Latinos-of whom up to a quarter are illegal immigrants-are now the largest minority in the United States. They account, according to the 2006 Pew Survey of Hispanics, for about 15.1 percent of the total population."[1]

Dr. Steven Windmueller is dean of the Los Angeles campus of Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion. Before his twelve-year tenure at the College-Institute, he served for ten years as director of the Jewish Community Relations Committee of the Los Angeles Jewish Federation and as director of the Greater Albany Jewish Federation.

"There is a false image that Latinos primarily reside in the southwestern United States. In reality they are significantly present in many communities across the country. Although Mexicans are the largest Latino subcommunity, the term Latinos is used for people from many countries across Central and South America.[2]

Latino Subcommunities in the United States as Percentage of the Total Latino Community

community		Subcommunity Population total		al (in thousands)	% of total
	Mexican		28,396	64.1	
	Puerto Rican		3,985	9.0	

Cuban	1,517	3.4
Salvadoran	1,364	3.1
Dominican	1,217	2.7
Guatemalan	897	2.0
Colombian	794	1.8
Honduran	486	1.1
Ecuadorian	479	1.1
Peruvian	430	1.0
Spaniard	373	0.8
Nicaraguan	299	0.7
Venezuelan	176	0.4
Argentinean	176	0.4
Panamanian	124	0.3
Costa Rican	112	0.3
Chilean	93	0.2
Bolivian	86	0.2
Uruguayan	47	0.1

[&]quot;There are thus multiple Latino communities comprised of several levels of generations, of a variety of nationalities, and of diverse social customs and political interests. The configuration of Latinos varies by community. Although they share the same language, their cultural and national roots significantly differ."

The Latinos' Increasing Importance

Windmueller observes, "From the Jewish standpoint, the relevance of Latinos is their growing importance in the United States. In 2004, seven and a half million Latinos voted in the presidential elections. They are an emerging community. Latinos have great aspirations to achieve the American dream. By their sheer numbers they are becoming significant players, part of the fabric of this society. Latinos are increasingly active in local and national politics. In the economy they interact significantly with the rest of society.

"Latinos are rapidly becoming homeowners. Increasing numbers are studying at colleges and universities. Every day fifty thousand U.S. Latinos turn 18. The youthfulness of this cohort means they will become an even more significant part of American society. Their ability to integrate will increasingly affect the nation's culture, politics, and economy.

The Coalescence of Communities

[&]quot;Whereas Latinos have a median age of 18-20 that of American Jews is the late 40s"

"Latinos are in an earlier phase of their cultural and social integration into America than Jews. As this community seeks to acculturate it is experiencing various social challenges, including conflict among its various nationality groups. This pattern also occurred among Jewish immigrant groups during their initial entry into American society.

"Each community needs time to coalesce and build a communal infrastructure so as to articulate its messages. The American Jewish community took several generations to achieve this outcome. I am not certain that adopting Jewish community organizing structures will necessarily work for the Latino community. According to our cultural and historical norms, we organized to deliver social and human services, created fundraising designed to meet the community's needs, and formed a body of advocacy groups to represent Jewish interests. These kinds of activities may ultimately come into being for Latinos, but will need to take into account their unique cultural norms and social patterns.

"Some existing organizations, however, are clearly modeled on Jewish institutions. In Los Angeles there are several such agencies within the Latino community. These include the *Landsmanschaft*-type institutions providing social services to neighborhoods and communities. Similar to the Israel-based institutions, Latinos have established fundraising structures that are linked to native villages in Mexico and Central America, involving the support of specific projects in the 'homeland' country.

"Locally, Latinos drawing on the model of the Jewish Federation's United Jewish Fund have attempted to form a communitywide fundraising structure. The United Latino Fund is designed to underwrite community service projects. Some Latino groups use names such as Mexican-American Legal Defense Fund (MALDEF) that identify according to national origin. This social-justice and civil rights entity reflects similar organizing patterns in the Jewish community for advancing political interests.

"In many other areas Latinos have cross-cultural and cross-national organizations. In the longer term we will probably see even more organizations working for the total interests of the community rather than being identified with specific ethnic concerns. Yet if there is a high concentration of Central Americans in one area or neighborhood, the local institutions tend to reflect that specific community and its cultural origins."

Shared Values

Windmueller points out that improving relations requires first looking to shared values. "Both communities have a great love for family and are strongly committed to their children's education. Common cultural norms include family, character, spirituality, and collectivism. Religious values and institutions have shaped both the Jewish and Latino communities' policies and practices.

"Both communities take an interest in diaspora relations. Many first and second-generation Latinos continue to send much of the money they earn as day laborers, home caregivers, or employees in businesses to their home communities and villages. This has become an important income stream for some economies, particularly agricultural regions and small village communities in Central America. Many Latinos are also beginning the process of figuring out how they identify with their former homelands, and how these connections relate to their American participation. This reflects being both an immigrant culture with its own language and a diaspora community with significant social ties to their home regions.

"This resembles the history of Jews who helped their brethren settle within the United States, move to Israel, or sustain their lives within their home communities. The early communal infrastructures created by American Jewry were in some ways similar to the organizational models being established today by Latinos.

"For Jews it is worth taking into account that Latino values, in particular, also include a deeply embedded work ethic that they consider important in building society as well as families' responsibilities to contribute to society."[3]

Immigration

"Jews are to a certain extent allies of the Latino community in being proponents of legal immigration. The Jewish community supports such immigration in defined numbers as well as clear arrangements for bringing people into the economy and society at large. Jewish public policy positions note the need for controlled borders and for commitment to the values of American democracy by those who are admitted. The organized Jewish community does not embrace open-ended immigration.

"Numerous Jewish organizations have formulated public policy statements on the complex issues of immigration. The Jewish Council for Public Affairs, an umbrella agency representing major national agencies and local Jewish community relations agencies, has regularly addressed aspects of these issues. The 2007 policy statement seeks to capture the essence of the Jewish position on immigration:

Our American-Jewish values necessitate confronting difficult immigration challenges facing our country and our community. At present, one of the most critical issues is the problem of undocumented migration to the United States. The JCPA believes that the United States should maintain support for fair and generous legal immigration policies as an expression of our country's core values of refugee protection. family reunification and economic opportunity. Unlike in previous cases where the United States government tried to curb the flow of undocumented migrants coming to the United States to find work, a Comprehensive Immigration Reform program, accompanied by a commitment to enforcement, has a great chance of being effective. Efforts to respond to the problem of undocumented migration must recognize the economic realities that underlie this flow of migrant workers, and the United States' security needs that necessitate differentiation between individuals arriving for economic opportunities and those who seek entry to threaten American lives as dangerous criminals or terrorists. Comprehensive Immigration Reform proposals should respond to this challenge in a manner that respects the human dignity and human rights of those who wish to enter. Such efforts should include programs that will simultaneously recognize economic realities and apply the labor rights and legal remedies to documented and undocumented individuals. They should also create opportunities for undocumented workers to earn legal status while providing needed labor in the United States. New legislation should aim to actually penalize the employers who knowingly hire undocumented workers, rather than the current situation in which the greatest impact is jeopardizing the status of those workers.[4]

"The idea that the United States should be young and based on new waves of immigrants, however, still resonates with American Jewry. The Jewish community's position on immigration remains aligned with the American immigrant communities.

"In some measure Israel serves as a model for other communities and cultures when dealing with the critical issues of immigration and refugee resettlement. If Israel's security and wellbeing are central to the political agenda of the Jewish community, then the immigration issue must be seen as primary to Latinos within the United States."

Religion

"Most immigrating Latinos have identified as Roman Catholics because of the nature of the countries they come from. Yet the Catholic Church within the United States has struggled to some degree in serving the Latin community. Given its size, Latinos are demographically important to the Church yet lack the economic and political clout to shape its policies and practices. Correspondingly the Church's influence, while waning, remains a galvanizing force within this community.

"If we look at the Catholic priesthood in southern California-and the same is probably true nationally-it turns out that very few Latinos serve their own constituencies. Inside the Catholic Church there is a disconnect between the officialdom of the Church and the masses who are part of a diocese. Because of the influx of Hispanics the Los Angeles Diocese is now the nation's largest. The church there is not, however, well equipped to deal with this immigrant population's language, social, and cultural problems.

"There is major growth of evangelical churches serving Latinos. Storefront churches, community-based groups, and social projects are organized and driven by the evangelical community, which has been very successful in its outreach to the Latino community.

"According to the aforementioned Pew survey, nearly one in six U.S. Hispanics (15 percent) identify themselves as evangelicals, making them the second largest religious group in the Latino community after Roman Catholics who account for 68 percent."[5]

Neighborhoods, Jobs, Access to Political Power

"It would be a mistake to compare Latino-Jewish interactions to the much older intergroup ties between Jews and African Americans. Unlike the relationship with blacks, there is no longstanding history between Jews and Latinos. Similarly, these two communities usually do not live in the same neighborhoods and hence do not readily intersect.

"There is, however, a struggle between Latinos and African Americans regarding neighborhoods, jobs, and access to political power. Such tensions are driven by language and culture, issues of power and control, race and ethnicity, and economics, in addition to stereotyping and bias.[6] Such intergroup conflict can be found in parts of Texas and other communities in the Southwest, Los Angeles, Newark, and several other metropolitan centers. Ethnic or racial tensions can have a negative impact on the larger society as public officials, businesses, and civic groups have to take these into account in navigating their relations. There are serious implications for the Jewish community as well, and such frictions can also play out in schools and other public arenas.

"Latinos will increasingly interact with Jews in the fields of politics, culture, and business. That is a major reason why Jews should engage with them through consolidated patterns. The efforts currently underway by the Jewish community, mainly via local groups, are at the stage of reaching out to Latino leadership, identifying areas of shared interest, and working toward common goals. At present such connections involve shared concerns in such areas as education and immigration policies, but also can be expected to encompass the welfare of neighborhoods and job opportunities, among other matters."

Cultivating Latino Leaders

"Research shows that, contrary to the Jewish community, Latinos see their politicians as their community spokesmen and community representatives.[7] This is very different from the way Jews have related to their politicians.

"Whereas the politicians have established themselves as leaders in the community, there is also a very strong corps of Latinos who have emerged as leaders within the union movement. But these labor leaders tend not to assume political roles within the larger community."

Windmueller remarks that political and community outreach is most often initiated by the Jewish community. "This has historically been a pattern. It derives partially from the fact that the Jewish community is well organized whereas many other ethnic communities have very limited and undeveloped infrastructures.

"Jews' entry into America's cities was linked to the challenge of understanding how the intricacies of power and influence would unfold in this society and serve to benefit them as a group. Coalitions were the basis for Jewish political participation. These enabled them to access power and to understand the social and demographic realities. Coalition politics require interpersonal relationships, shared political interests, and institutional connections. Coalitions emerge when constituencies see the benefits, even if their participation is based at times on very different rationales. Jews have understood that unless other key groups in a society are empowered, the status and interests of Jews could be imperiled.

"But beyond their engagement with the other communities, for some Jews this very process of encountering 'the other' contributed to their own sense of being a Jew or becoming Jewish. Some

researchers have suggested that this desire to engage the other is also linked to a fear of anti-Semitism, which prompted investing energy outside of one's own community to counteract this possibility.

"The Jewish community intersects preferably via communal organizations, which are its most significant bodies for representation and political engagement. There are, however, only a few such organizations. Latinos expect their political elites to launch these types of connections. There is a significant difference in structure, leadership, and attitudes associated with minority status between the two communities.

"Cultivating the leadership of the Latino community requires aligning their politicians with some of the interests of the Jewish community. For instance, the Los Angeles mayor Antonio Vallaraigosa recently visited Israel together with a group of Jewish leaders. He is very conscious of the Jewish community; active in reaching out to Jews, having appointed Jews to positions in city government; and remains sensitive to Jewish interests.

"There are also individuals who move more easily between communities. They interpret information and provide opportunities for interaction. Some of these are Jews from Latin America who can serve as valuable liaisons between these cultures. Other such 'connectors' are those individuals who have established strong intergroup credentials as both lay leaders and community professionals.

"Sephardic culture may represent a gateway into the Latino community. Concerts and exhibits that reflect Jewish ties to the world of Spanish and Portuguese language and culture offer a point of connection."

Political Contrasts

In 1998, Windmueller wrote:

The potential political connections between these two constituencies are at best uncertain. Alliances are created when communities can find and hold common ground, but this base of agreement can give way to conflict when one or both groups feel threatened or challenged by the other and where intergroup tension and the test of group power assumes an over-riding significance.[8]

He says this is still true. "The possibility for conflict is mainly in the political arena, when candidates from the two groups run against each other. The *Los Angeles Times* described the 1998 state senatorial contest between Richard Alacon and Richard Katz as 'ugly ethnic politicking.'[9] But this need not be the scenario. In contrast, the 2005 New York mayoral contest between Republican incumbent Michael Bloomberg and Democratic challenger Fernando Ferrer did not demonstrate such ethnic tension.

"Some Latino leaders and intellectuals do not see Jews as a 'community of color'; hence, in their eyes, Jews lack authentic political credentials. Such Latinos regard Jews as an assimilated nonminority, as economically privileged, as part of the white majority, as members of a religious community, and as a community whose oppression is not necessarily understood or even recognized.

"There is also a trend to encourage ethnic groups to focus exclusively on self-empowerment to the exclusion of any engagement with other potential political partners. Some Latino leaders have in the past sought to control their constituents by isolating them linguistically and culturally. This process of disempowerment allows these elite clusters to assume control over a constituency that is politically and socially passive.

"There are, furthermore, differences in attitudes toward immigration among Jews. Although Jewish agencies favor a comprehensive immigration policy, the Jewish community has opposed illegal immigration. Moreover, the social and economic ties between Latinos and Jews generally remain uneven as Jews employ Latinos more than vice versa."

Anti-Semitism

Windmueller deduces: "Although there is no potential tension or conflict over control of neighborhoods, there is also, in part for that reason, a lack of familiarity." He adds: "Research has shown that those individuals and groups who have experienced prior interracial and interethnic connections in schools and neighborhoods are more likely to seek out more racially diverse social groups, and in turn more opportunities in other settings to engage one another. The current boundaries of 'space and place' between many Jewish and Latino communities reflect the absence of such interactions.

"Often these two communities have limited access or direct connection with one another. This reality increases the prospects for anti-Semitism and racism, and for distrust.

"The only significant study on Latino anti-Semitism was done by the Anti-Defamation League.[10] It showed a much higher rate of anti-Semitic attitudes among non-native born Latinos than in the general population. More than 30 percent of these expressed negative or unfavorable views about Jews. One study may not, however, be enough for generalizations.

"Immigrants who have grown up in Catholic churches in Latin American countries will have perceptions connected to church theology. They rarely have met Jews in their countries of origin. The Catholic Church in Latin America is not nearly as progressive or engaged in the theology of reconciliation as that in the United States.

"When such people come to the United States they do not alter their perceptions of Jews. There is, moreover, little interaction between the two communities, as noted. If you work for a Jewish business owner or are being told that the television and movie industries to which you are being exposed are controlled by Jews, you are unlikely to change your attitudes. The same goes for media stories reinforcing notions of Jewish wealth and political power.

"The Jewish community thus has a major challenge to try and overcome such attitudes in the Latino community. At the same time, we have to realize that Latinos born in the United States demonstrate significantly less anti-Semitism."

Jewish Initiatives

"On the Jewish side there are a variety of initiatives. On a national basis the American Jewish Committee, through its Latino and Latin American Institute, and the Anti-Defamation League are reaching out to the Latino community. Communities relate to each other on two levels, by forming political coalitions and by promoting intergroup relations. A variety of eastern, midwestern, and southwestern Jewish communities have begun to create specific community outreach programs engaging local Latino organizations and leaders.

"An array of local and national programs have been created to promote greater understanding; these involve intergroup relations activities, Israel missions, and shared holiday celebrations. Although we don't have a particularly significant track record in community relations, there are some symbolic activities. For instance, there are local 'Freedom Seders' around Passover where Latinos and other groups are invited to share common themes about the notion of freedom.

"Forty-seven Jewish communities have opted to work with kids in inner-city schools in the framework of a literacy project.[11] This can involve simple one-on-one tutoring as a way for Jews to connect with Latinos or other minority students.

"In Los Angeles, for instance-with its overwhelming percentage of Latino pupils-there are many one-on-one partnerships between Jewish adults and Latino children. These are bottom-up efforts to create connections between the two communities. Mayor Villaraigosa mentions that one of the prime personalities in his life was a Jewish high school teacher who encouraged him to pursue his education."

Windmueller concludes: "One important goal for the Jewish community is to identify young Latinos who are emerging as civic, political, and business leaders in their communities. It should develop ways to expose these key personalities to Jewish organizations and their leaders, as well as to the state of Israel.

There should be opportunities to create connections to Jewish institutions with which these Latino leaders will have relationships in the course of their careers. Fortunately there is now much more Jewish interest in bringing future key leaders to Israel than in recent years."

Interview by Manfred Gerstenfeld

Notes

- [1] http://pewhispanic.org/reports/report.php?ReportID=68.
- [2] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hispanics_in_the_United_States.
- [3] See Steven Windmueller, "Through the Lens of Latino-Jewish Relations," in Ava Kahn and Marc Dollinger, eds., *California Jews* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2003).
- [4] http://tools.isovera.com/organizations/org/PolicyCompendium2007.9.06.07EOSJ-1.pdf.
- [5] http://pewresearch.org/pubs/501/evangelicos.
- [6] www.fairimmigration.org/learn/black-brown--beyond/bbb-five-dimensions-of-the-black.html.
- [7] Steven Windmueller, "Latino-Jewish Relations: Prospects for Building a New Los Angeles Coalition for the 21stCentury," unpublished monograph prepared for the John Randolph Haynes and Dora Haynes Foundation, 1998, 12.
- [8] Ibid., 30-31
- [9] Los Angeles Times, 18 June 1998 and Xavier Flores's letter to the editor in the Valley Edition of the Los Angeles Times, 5 July 1998.
- [10] www.jewishsf.com/content/2-0-/module/displaystory/story_id/18428/edition_id/369/format/html/displaystory.html.
- [11] www.njcl.net/history.asp.

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