
Jewish Life in Cuba Today

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During five trips we made to Cuba between 2005 and 2007, we asked Cuban Jews in Havana and Santa Clara to tell us how they live their Jewish lives and what being Jewish means to them. The result was a series of rich personal narratives depicting the many ways Jewish life is experienced in Cuba today.

We first went to Cuba in 2005 as part of a larger group of investigators from the Wurzweiler School of Social Work and the Department of Family and Social Medicine of Yeshiva University to gather information about Cuba's unique and highly respected community health care system. We conducted exploratory research on medical assistance to Cuba's Jewish community from international Jewish organizations as part of this investigation into Cuba's community health care system (see Strug, Sweifach, & LaPorte, 2009).

This initial investigation motivated us to carry out further research on how Cuba's small Jewish community defines itself in relation to the much wider non-Jewish society. We wanted to learn about Jewish family life and customs, about how the Jewish community organizes itself, about its values, and about its survival strategies. We wondered how Cuba's Jewish population defines itself and whether it does so primarily as Cuban, as Jewish, or equally as Cubans and Jews.

We posed these questions to guide us in gathering basic information about the Jewish community. We believe that answers to these questions are important because they provide insight into the changing nature of the Jewish community and the likelihood of its survival. The future of the Jewish community in Cuba is of considerable importance to Jews both in Cuba and the United States, especially in light of current political realities in both countries and given the recently initiated easing of travel restrictions by the Obama administration (McGreal, 2009). The question of the survival of Cuba's Jewish community also has relevance for the Jewish community globally, which is eminently concerned with strengthening Jewish cultural identity throughout the world.

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

To understand the subjective experience of Jews living in Cuba today, it is necessary to understand how the community has evolved over the course of the 20th century. The first Jews to come to Cuba were Americans who arrived in 1898 as part of a U.S. expeditionary force during the Cuban War of Independence. Their cultural background was Ashkenazic; that is, of Jews who migrated from Eastern Europe. They identified exclusively with North American Jewish culture, formed

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an ethnic enclave, and remained culturally aloof from the subsequent wave of Sephardic Jews from Turkey and Greece who came to Cuba beginning in 1914. The Sephardim became laborers, primarily street peddlers. In their dark skin color and their language, the Sephardim were similar to the Cubans on the island and so fit into Cuban society better than both earlier and subsequent waves of Ashkenazim. In fact, a segment of the Sephardic community identified with socialism, and some participated in Communist activities while still maintaining their Jewish identity. They, along with some members of the Ashkenazi community, were among the original founders of the Cuban Communist Party (Kaplan, 2001b).

The next wave of Jewish immigrants came during the 1920s after the United States sharply restricted immigration to its borders with the passage of the Emergency Quota Act of 1921. Jewish emigrés from Eastern Europe came to Cuba and other Latin American countries as an alternate way of gaining entry into the United States. The largest Jewish community was found in Havana, although smaller Jewish communities began to form in other provinces such as Santiago de Cuba, Camaguey, Santa Clara, Matanzas, Guantanamo, Cienfuegos, Caibarien, and Sancti Spiritus.

The final wave of Jewish immigration to Cuba occurred in the late 1930s, as Jews fled persecution from the Nazis. About 500 German-speaking Jews came to Cuba every month during 1938 and 1939, and several thousand more came during the next several years (Levinson, 2006). Most of these German Jews never became integrated into the Jewish community and left for the United States when World War II ended.

In 1949, the Jewish population of Havana was approximately 8,500, and 10,000–12,000 in all of Cuba (Levinson, 2006). Many were not religiously observant and only attended synagogue as a cultural or social expression. A sizable number began to prosper in business and the professions (Behar, 2007) and increasingly identified as Cuban Jews rather than as Jews living in Cuba. As in the United States, the Jewish community in Havana built synagogues in suburban neighborhoods in the 1950s.

The Cuban Revolution in 1959 resulted in a drastic reduction in the number of Jews living on the island. The closing of private enterprises in 1960 and the nationalization of large industrial concerns affected Cuba's Jewish businesspeople and professionals, most of whom left with their families by 1963. By late 1965, only about 2,300 Jews remained overall, with about 1,900 in Havana (Levine, 1993). Those who did not leave were disproportionately older, poorer, and Sephardic. The Cuban Jewish community languished as a result of this exodus. Ashkenazi and Sephardic customs became conflated as the Jewish community dwindled in size, and intermarriage with non-Jewish Cubans accelerated.

The Communist government shunned religion; members of religious groups were not allowed to be part of the Communist Party and were denied jobs in government and academia. Cuban Jews, like other religious groups, were reluctant to openly express their religious beliefs (Levine, 1993). Of note however, is that under Fidel Castro, religious groups were protected and were not victims of violence.

LITERATURE ON CUBA'S JEWISH POPULATION

Scholarly research on the Jews of Cuba is surprisingly absent, and most of what has been written about Cuban Jews is anecdotal. Other than articles by Dana Kaplan (2001a, 2001b, 2005) and by Margalit Bejarano (1990, 1991, 2002),

peer-reviewed manuscripts on the subject are virtually nonexistent. Kaplan (2001a) provides an analysis of the current Jewish community in Cuba and a platform for discussion about its future; in another article Kaplan (2005) describes the mass exodus of Jews from Cuba after the revolution. Each of these documentaries/docudramas provides unique conceptualizations of life within the Jewish Cuban community. Bejarano authored a monograph in Spanish that provides a glimpse, using personal narratives from Jews who left Cuba, of life in Cuba for Jews (Bejarano, 1996). She also wrote about the Sephardic Jewish community of Cuba and about pre-revolution anti-Semitism (Bejarano, 1990, 1991). A number of articles have appeared in popular Jewish magazines and periodicals, such as *Hadassah Magazine*, *Jerusalem Report*, and the *Forward* (Farber, 2007; Frank, 2005; Guttman, 2007).

There are a number of recent books on the subject, including *An Island Called Home* (Behar, 2007), a pictorial memoir, and *Bridges to Cuba* (Behar, 1998), an anthology. Both were written by Ruth Behar who is a professor at the University of Michigan, and both include scholarly and creative commentary. Levinson's (2006) *Jewish Community of Cuba: The Golden Age, 1906–1958*, documents key pre-revolutionary events in the growth of the Jewish community. Levine's (1993) authoritative *Tropical Diaspora: The Jewish Experience in Cuba* uses historical information to tell a story. Corrales (2005), who resides in Cuba, wrote *The Chosen Island: Jews in Cuba*, using interviews and archival materials to offer an account of Jewish life in Cuba over the last four decades.

Three films documenting Jewish life in Cuba are of note: *Havana Nagila: The Jews in Cuba*, *Abraham and Eugenia: Stories from Jewish Cuba*, and *Adio Kerida*.

In general, commentators caution that personal testimonies about life in Cuba, on which much of the literature is based, are very emotionally charged and may be subject to subtle manipulation—deliberate or not—to promote a particular worldview (DeRuyter & Evans, 2006; Hagopian, 2000; Levine, 1997).

METHODOLOGY

We used a qualitative methodology to explore the way respondents subjectively experience life as a Cuban Jew. We interviewed 29 individuals either in their homes or in small groups ranging in size from as few as three to as many as eight people in public places, including a hotel lobby, synagogue office, and a restaurant. We were deliberate in our attempts to avoid manipulation of personal testimonies as we listened to their stories and asked probing questions. Linhorst (2002) argues that group interviewing is particularly useful in gaining insight into belief systems, attitudes, and motivations of individuals who share a particular experience. In addition to Jewish-related topics, respondents were asked to share pre- and post-revolution memories of Cuba.

Members of the research team met several times to code the transcripts. At an initial meeting, they derived possible categories of themes, and each member then coded the interview transcripts separately. After a follow-up meeting to discuss individually derived themes, team members recoded the transcripts using the agreed-on consolidated themes, focusing on theoretical constructs and logical groupings of categories. This process was repeated three times before a final meeting in which the team met to create families of codes and to examine the interrelationships among the categories.

The overall goal of this method was to identify common core meanings across all respondents. It is important to note that several dialogue excerpts were coded in multiple categories, as they had more than one layer of meaning. Demographic data about participants are provided to give a sense of the sample and are not intended to imply generalizability. Data were analyzed using ATLAS TI, a software program designed specifically for the analysis and presentation of qualitative data (Muhr, 1997).

Description of the Sample

The 29 respondents were fairly evenly split with regard to gender; 52% ($N = 15$) of the respondents were female, and 48% were male. Participants ranged in age from 10 to 80. Forty percent were older than 60. The three youngest respondents (one 10-year-old and two 13-year-olds) were interviewed with their parents.

Although 40% of the respondents were retired, current and former occupations included accountant, architect, butcher, economist, engineer, English professor, gastroenterologist, librarian, neurologist, oral surgeon, pharmacist, statistician for the government, information scientist, and television producer. Most were Jewish (84%, $N = 24$), and of those, approximately one-third ($N = 8$) had converted to Judaism. Six respondents indicated that at least one of their children had converted to Judaism or was intending to do so. Close to two-thirds indicated that they had family living outside of Cuba.

Limitations of the Study

This study has several limitations. First, the individuals we spoke with were well-known leaders within the community, and their experiences may not be representative or typical. We were unable to identify Jewish individuals who were not identified or known to the community, and we had no opportunity to speak with individuals who chose to remain outside the formal and informal organizations within the Jewish community. In addition, we were not aware of individuals who may have been approached to speak with us but refused. The size of the sample is also very small. Finally, many of our conversations were conducted in Spanish with the assistance of an interpreter. Two of the researchers were not fluent in Spanish, which may have affected the follow-up questions asked.

FINDINGS

Community Demography and Institutions

Findings from observations and interviews within Cuba and with experts outside of Cuba indicate that the Jewish community is well organized with a centralized leadership and governance. A detailed census of all known Jewish individuals is kept in the library at the Patronato community center/synagogue in Havana. The census list appears to have a variety of purposes, including a gatekeeping function and a mechanism for recruiting individuals for activities and ensuring that members of the community have the resources and support needed to carry out Jewish traditions and observances. For example, respondents indicated that a primary use of the census is to distribute matzah and other provisions for celebrating Passover (the Canadian Jewish Congress has been supplying Passover supplies to Cuba since 1961; Mexico, Panama, and other countries send items as well). This list is maintained by the president of the community, Adela Dworin.

Adela is perhaps one of the most knowledgeable people on the Island about the Jewish community. She became president in 2006 after the death of Dr. Jose Miller Fredman, who presided over the community for 25 years. During his tenure, she was vice president, and she has also served as the librarian of the Patronato since 1970.

The exact number of Jews living in Cuba is uncertain, given that some have not made themselves known to community leaders and are not counted in the census. International Jewish agencies such as the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC), and United Jewish Communities (UJC) estimate the number of Jews to be approximately 1,800, of whom 1,500 live in Havana. A number of respondents indicated that the community's leadership is very careful about the accuracy of the census. An individual who is not listed in the census but proclaims that he or she is Jewish must prove Jewish lineage: "He has to demonstrate with papers... maybe he says his grandmother was Jewish or that he is a Jew but doesn't have papers—if they want to be part, they must prove it." Another respondent stated, "Someone once appeared wearing a yarmulke for Shabbat services, with a prayerbook in hand. I didn't believe he was Jewish; I later discovered that he had gone to different towns trying to become known as a member of the Jewish community." Another explained that the Cuban government allows Jews to emigrate to Israel and entrusts the community's leadership with identifying who is Jewish and who is not. A respondent said, "There are people who have wanted to pass themselves off as Jews because they want to go to Israel, but we are not a travel agency, and this country respects us and we respect the laws of this country."

Religion

Respondents indicated that, from the 1960s to the 1990s, the practice of religion was discouraged and practically disappeared. One respondent stated, "My father was a revolutionary and died as a real Fidelista. In those days, being Jewish was a taboo. When looking for a job, if you indicated Jewish or Catholic, forget about it. So, they forgot about it (laughter)." Another respondent echoed this sentiment, explaining, "It was not anti-Semitism, because the same happened to Catholics and to those of other faiths."

With regard to being persecuted for practicing one's religion, a respondent explained, "Religious persecution never existed, but some kind of discrimination did. It was inconceivable that someone could be religious and a member of the Communist Party." Another respondent stated, "I remember that once a friend of mine, his mother died—and his brothers decided to go to the church to have a Mass; one brother didn't go inside because he was a member of the Communist Party. This now seems so ridiculous."

Indeed, after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989, Cuba eased government controls in a number of areas including religion. In 1992, Cuba modified its constitution to reflect that the country was secular rather than atheist, and it recognized, respected, and guaranteed freedom of religion. After these changes there was a resurgence of interest in Judaism.

One respondent shared his impressions about how this resurgence came about, suggesting that it was a response not only to government changes but also to internal developments within the Jewish community: "This was something

that was changing, and when the decree arrived, everyone was already there. The decree only legalized what had already begun.” Yet, as one respondent explained, “In the beginning it was difficult; there were only about 10 Sunday school students. Some people didn’t even know they were Jewish; it was very hard to tell people: ‘You’re Jewish, join the community.’” In general, however, respondents were in agreement that a Jewish resurgence has taken place. One respondent summed it up this way: “People had practically abandoned religion—and now there has been a rebirth.”

In the 1990s, the president of the Cuban Jewish community, Jose Miller, approached JDC and other Jewish philanthropic organizations outside of Cuba, with the approval of the Cuban government, to provide assistance and support. During this time, religious conversions increased, Bar Mitzvahs and Jewish weddings were held, a *mikvah* (ritual bath) was restored, and synagogues were repaired. JDC brought in rabbis to lead conversion classes and conduct life-cycle events. It also funded a professional to work with the Jewish community and its youth at the Patronato.

Respondents reported that Pope John Paul II’s visit to Cuba in 1998 resulted in further support for religion in Cuba. During that same year, Fidel Castro attended the Patronato’s Hanukkah celebration. He subsequently permitted Cuban Jews to emigrate to Israel. The government also allowed newspaper, radio, and television coverage of Jewish holidays to a degree that was out of proportion to the size of the community (Levine, 1993).

The Chief Rabbi of Cuba, who currently lives in Santiago, Chile, travels to Cuba several times each year to officiate at Jewish life-cycle events, circumcisions, and conversions.

Family Life

In general, Cuban families appear to follow many of the traditional family patterns found in other Latin American countries. For example, the family is the most important institution in Cuban society. Families are characterized by loyalty and unity. Extended families, including children, parents, and grandparents, typically live together, especially given the lack of available housing (Álvarez, et al., 1996).

Respondents in this study exemplified these values of Cuban families, as well as values more particular to Jews around the globe. For example, the literature on Jewish family life in the United States finds that Jewish parents tend to focus on such values as preserving family ties, nurturing children, encouraging independence, and teaching responsibility toward others (Semans & Fish, 2000). These values were often expressed by our respondents.

A number of respondents explained that when one family member became more involved in Jewish activities, institutions, and rituals, other family members followed suit. Although this was not the case in every family, we did note this as a trend. One mother stated, “My brother gave my daughter a book about Judaism—here it is—and she took an interest and began asking questions so we began attending synagogue. After that, she went to Sunday school; then I began studying Hebrew.” Another respondent (a Jew by choice) stated, “Right before my Jewish mother-in-law died, she told me to make sure my two boys should know about their heritage. I was not Jewish at the time, and my husband who

was Jewish passed away... The boys began to ask questions, so I began taking them to the synagogue—little by little things happened for us.”

Respondents also noted that there are few Jews in Cuba with any significant extended family, and as a result, many respondents said that the community has become their extended family. One respondent stated, “In Cuba, I don’t have family. My parents went, my brother and sister are gone; it is just us three and the people in the community.”

Organizations

Respondents indicated that Jewish fraternal organizations like B’nai B’rith and Hadassah are popular venues for socialization and volunteerism; these types of groups offer a way to connect in a Jewish way for those who are not religious minded. One respondent remarked, “I met an old friend and after exchanging greetings, he said, ‘I now go to synagogue.’ Then he said ‘I also attend B’nai B’rith’—and I said, I think I would like that. I knew that I wanted a Jewish connection, but didn’t know how to begin. I was not very interested in the synagogue, although I frequently attend now—and that’s how it began for me.”

Respondents spoke about a number of Jewish organizations and agencies, all which play an important role in the lives of Cuban Jews. A high proportion of respondents spoke about B’nai B’rith, ORT, and the JDC, detailing the roles that each of these organizations play. One respondent stated, “We have many organizations. We have the youth organization, the women’s organization, we have Hadassah, Geshet (ages 30–55), the Simcha group for seniors. Besides that, there are those who regularly attend religious services in one of our five synagogues in Cuba.” Another respondent stated, “Here in Cuba each institution has its place—the JDC deals with religion; then there is ORT for education, B’nai B’rith and Hadassah are fraternal, and others.”

Respondents explained that once the environment became more conducive to the outward expression of religion, the international Jewish community began to provide financial and spiritual support to Cuban Jewish institutions. One respondent stated that “the JDC played a big role, helping with Sabbath services, and with various activities. B’nai B’rith helped out with older adults and with emergencies. A lot of hands have been outstretched to us.” Another respondent echoed this perception, stating that “the JDC managed to revive the Jewish community, especially because of their focus on young people. They support the community, but primarily with activities. It’s not like they hand out things, like a toothbrush—I mean, I don’t go home with a pair of shoes from the JDC—they feed the soul.”

Ethic of Caring

In general, respondents noted that the Cuban Jewish community follows the lead of Jewish communities worldwide in taking care of other Jews. A sizable proportion of respondents made reference to an “ethic of caring” that has been passed down from generation to generation. The following quote is representative of sentiments held by many respondents: “As a child we were taught that one could feel satisfaction by caring for others. This is our heritage, to want to help; it’s what has been passed down, generation to generation.”

Continuity

Respondents indicated that the continuity of the Cuban Jewish community is a looming concern given the realities of Jews emigrating out of Cuba and no Jewish in-migration; approximately 600 Jews have emigrated from Cuba to Israel since 1990. In many ways, conversion has been embraced as a creative continuity strategy. Respondents explained that, whereas intermarriage within the greater Jewish world is viewed as a threat, in Cuba intermarriage is the norm, primarily for practical reasons; one respondent noted, “The supply of available marriage partners is limited.” In general, the large majority of our respondents expressed that “most of those who intermarry choose to convert and identify as Jews.” Even though the majority of non-Jewish spouses select Judaism, respondents indicated that the conversion process is rigorous, complying with strict *halakha* (Jewish law). One respondent stated, “If she is not Jewish, and wants to convert she has to pass a seminar of 7 or 8 months, then she has to pass the tribunal (*Beit Din*) of three rabbis, then, since we don’t have a *mikvah*, they go to the beach, and they are converted to Judaism.” Another noted, “If it is a he, it is more painful because he has to be circumcised; we do have many he’s who have chosen to convert. Last week we had a bar mitzvah of a boy who lost his Jewish father in an accident. He is being raised by his mother, a convert—she has become very active in the Jewish community.”

When respondents were asked why they chose to affiliate with the Jewish community, many explained that a “spark within” was an initial motivator, but the quality of the experience kept them coming. Respondents explained that, as they became more connected, they brought traditions home to their families. One respondent explained, “People did not want to come to the synagogue. A whole generation of Jews was lost; now youngsters learn and transmit that knowledge to their parents.” A 67-year-old respondent stated that he has never gone to the synagogue on his own: “First I was taken by my parents, and now I am taken by my children.”

Collective Judaism

Respondents indicated that Judaism in Cuba has been influenced by the island’s collectivist socialist tradition. One respondent explained that “in Cuba, unlike other countries, people don’t usually celebrate Jewish holidays at home; it is communal, we celebrate together in the synagogue. If someone wants to do it at home, they do know how, but most choose to celebrate together as a community.” Another stated, “In the rest of the world Jews support their synagogue; in Cuba, the synagogue supports the Jews.”

Youth Involvement

Respondents indicated that individuals who grew up after the revolution had little knowledge or exposure to Jewish customs, traditions, or religion. Recognizing this, consultants from the JDC and Jewish leadership within Cuba chose to target recruitment efforts at youth born after 1992, in the hope that this strategy might yield significant long-term outcomes. Innovative social, recreational, cultural, and educational activities, including youth groups, trips, including trips to Israel, and camp, have been offered. One adolescent respondent exuberantly described the array of activities that fill her week, stating that she gets together

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with youth group friends at least once a week and almost every weekend: “We play dominos and dance, maybe play volleyball. There are activities after Friday services, I participate in Havdalah, and there’s Kiddush, and then at 2:00 pm on Saturday after services, there’s singing with the chorus, and on Sunday we have Sunday School, and I help out in the library, and there are art lessons...”

Respondents indicated that, although activities exist for preschool through older adults, it is through youth that the community’s survival can be realized. One respondent stated, “The youth lead services on Friday night and Saturday, they lead the community seder, young people organize holiday celebrations.” Another said, “It is very important for the youth to play this kind of role and not the adults, because *they* are the future.”

Respondents, especially the youth interviewed, described having rigorous school schedules and other extracurricular activities, just like their counterparts in the United States. However, Cuban Jewish youth are drawn toward the Jewish community and put a priority on engaging in Jewish activities. One adult respondent stated, “Here in Cuba, the kids want to come—they feel good here. They wait all week for Friday, Saturday, and Sunday to come to the Patronato.” Another stated, “When Americans visit, they can’t believe their eyes. They say, ‘I have to push my children and my grandchildren to go to the synagogue.’ I reply, ‘So if you want your children to be better Jews, send them to Cuba.’”

When asked about friends, adolescent respondents explained that they have both Jewish and non-Jewish friends. When a 10-year-old respondent was asked if he speaks about his Jewish activities with his non-Jewish friends, he replied, “I tell them I love going to Hebrew school and participating in programs and that one day I want to be a rabbi. My friends say, ‘Cuba needs a rabbi, so maybe it will be you.’”

The Future

Respondents exhibited both concern and hope about the future. One respondent stated, “Here people are Jews because they want to be; they are very proud and wear it on their sleeve. People visit Cuba from all over, and see the pride we have for our heritage and what we’ve accomplished. Although small, we are recognized all over the world.”

Yet, another respondent stated, “There is a vitality here that didn’t exist before, but what will happen if young Jews leave Cuba?” This appeared to be a widespread concern: another respondent stated, “If the youth leave, we fear that it is the end of the Jewish community in Cuba.” Some respondents were optimistic, believing that youth feel a sense of ownership for the community. One respondent stated, “When I was young, the community belonged to old, rich people. Now it belongs to the young.”

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

In general, we found clear evidence of a dynamic Jewish community that, although faced with significant challenges (e.g., economic, emigration but no immigration) is actively engaged in efforts to ensure its continued vitality. The community receives support from organizations, synagogues, and individuals around the world; without this support, the community would have difficulty sustaining its steady pace.

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We found a community where Judaism is passed up from children to parents, which appears to run counter to the way that Judaism is transmitted between generations in other parts of the world. In the United States, for example, parents bring children to synagogue, to Hebrew school, to holiday celebrations, and to Jewish cultural activities; in Cuba, children bring their parents. Our respondents indicated that the Jewish community has a lot to offer youth—social, recreational, and cultural activities; networks of friends; camp; trips; and communal celebrations. Efforts by Jewish leadership to maintain constant contact with youth and offer a consistent program of activities appear to have paid off as exemplified by the priority and attention that Jewish youth place on their participation in Jewish life.

We also found that intermarriage, which is viewed by many Jews as a threat, is welcomed and even encouraged in Cuba, as long as the non-Jewish spouse is converted according to *halakha*. Respondents explained that, if it were not for conversion, the continuity of the community would be at risk.

Respondents indicated that Judaism is generally practiced in a communal context. As a communally oriented society, Cubans are used to the societal norms of collectivism and pooling of resources. Cubans celebrate holidays, Shabbat, and life-cycle events as a community, mirroring the communal attributes of socialism/Communism.

Finally, our respondents indicated that being Jewish transcends ethnicity, nationalism, and religion. When we asked respondents, “Are you a Cuban Jew or a Jewish Cuban?” our respondents had no need for such distinctions. One stated, “Being Cuban and being Jewish are two different things that are felt and intense. I would say that I’m a Cuban first, but a Jew deepest.”

CURRENT POLITICAL REALITIES

The exodus of 90% of Cuba’s Jews nearly destroyed the Jewish community 50 years ago. In recent years, there has been a resurgence in Cuban Jewish life. However, many of those nurtured as leaders in recent years have left for Israel, given the harsh economic and political difficulties of life in Cuba. We believe that current political realities in Cuba and in the United States may play a role in shaping the future of the Jewish community in Cuba.

Our research was conducted prior to February 2008 when Raúl Castro took over as president from his ailing brother Fidel. Since then, Raúl has proposed a series of changes in Cuba following from his interpretation of socialism, including encouraging limited private market activities (Castro, 2008). He also has cautiously signaled a desire “to dialogue” with the Obama administration, which has loosened a half-century-long trade embargo on Cuba, including removing all restrictions on visits and remittances to the island by Cuban Americans (The Economist, 2009). The Obama administration has also proposed a resumption of talks on legal immigration of Cubans to the United States, which were suspended by former President George W. Bush (Associated Press, 2009).

There is no doubt that the changes noted above will have an impact on the Jewish community, but the nature of the impact is unpredictable. If Jews find it easier to travel to the United States, will more of them want to leave? Will the likely easing of travel restrictions in the near future for all Americans contribute to an increase in tourism-related revenue for Cuba and to an improvement of

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the living conditions of ordinary Cubans? If so, will an improvement in living conditions for Cuba's Jews increase the likelihood that they will want to remain in Cuba? No one knows the answers to these questions.

William Miller, the vice president of the Patronato's House of the Hebrew Community Center, has expressed an interest in receiving more U.S. visitors; however, he has indicated ambivalence about a possible thaw in U.S.-Cuba ties. Miller is concerned that the number of North American Jews who now visit the Jewish community under the auspices of a licensed religious organization and for religious purposes may decrease if Jews from the United States no longer have to visit Cuba with a licensed religious organization. He worries these North American Jews may head straight to Cuba's famed beautiful beaches and skip a visit to the Jewish community (Arbiser, 2009).

Silvia Wilhelm, a noted advocate for changing U.S. policy toward Cuba and who frequently leads groups of North Americans to visit the Jewish community, believes there is no telling what change may occur in the power structure of Cuba in the future and, if there is a change, what impact it may have on the Jewish community (personal communication, July 8, 2009). The only thing that is certain is that Cuban Jewish identity will very likely be affected by future U.S.-Cuban relations and by the increased contact that Cuban Jews and American Jews are likely to have with one another in the future.

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