

Latin American Jews- A Transnational Diaspora

In: *Transnationalism*

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The concept of transnationalism has acquired multiple meanings according to diverse theoretical approaches and their specific focus on the variables of space and time. Both the transcendence and transformation of borders as well as the temporal dimension have elicited a debate that seeks to clarify if the current expressions of transnationalism are related to new contemporary dynamics or/and if historical precedents or analogues can be traced. Transnationalism has thus become, as many contemporary social concepts, a contested one.

Aware of this concept's multidimensional nature, it is our aim to underscore its contributions both to the analysis of ongoing changes and as of yet uncertain developments, as well as to the understanding of past trends with a fresh perspective. The concept's concurrent relevance to the past and to the present can appear to be enhanced by our perception of bordered and bounded social and communal units as transnationally constituted spaces interacting with one another.

Transnationalism refers indeed to the new conditions derived from the changes brought about by the processes of globalization. Time and space seems to cease having the same influence on the way in which social relations, identities and institutions are structured (Waters, 1995; Scholte, 1998). It involves the de-territorialization of economic, social, cultural and political relations; they depend neither on distance nor on borders, and lack similar influence on the final shaping of institutions and social relations (Giddens, 1994). Social interaction may be organized and structured with the global dimension on the horizon. The role of countries and borders between States become diffuse, porous and permeable and global connections are intensified by virtue of the fact

that they are shared with great velocity in multiple places.

Amidst this multidimensional and multifaceted global arena, transnationalism stresses that flows of interactions and relationships continue to be developed notwithstanding the presence of international borders with all the laws, regulations and national narratives they represent. It points to new and complex patterns of interaction and network building; of social groups and collective identities, underscoring the complex dynamics of encounters and articulations that transcend national frontiers (Kahgram and Levitt, 2008).

While its essential connection with globalization processes has been stressed, one may also discover the fertility of the concept for new readings of past conditions and experiences, mainly associated to migratory flows of Diaspora communities. It is precisely this characteristic that has shaped the historical Jewish condition worldwide and specifically in Latin American, defining and redefining its contemporary profile. In this sense, and following Vertovec (1999), transnationalism may provide a conceptual tool that allows us to make use of its implications for social morphology as expressed in the changing character of social/communal formations. In the area significant historical changes have taken place. Thus, we must trace both the common and the singular, the shared and the specific of the different processes built through continuity and ruptures.

It is our contention that transnationalism may be seen both as a key concept for approaching the historical development of Latin American Jewish ethno-national Diasporas and their present changing condition. Jewish life in Latin America has been related, from its inception, to external centers and it is precisely this connection that has marked its character.

Following Sheffer (1986) and Safran (1991), one of the main characteristics of Diasporas as social formations is the triadic relationship between globally dispersed yet collectively self-identified ethnic groups; the present territorial States and contexts where such groups reside; and the homeland States and contexts their forebears arrived from. Homeland(s), in this case –and its interaction with exile both in its sociological and theological meaning- must be analyzed in the light of its changing referents. Contemporary Jewish history lies behind the unique dialectic between place/Home of origin and the spiritual and ideological elected place of residence /home. Taking these

factors into consideration, it can be asserted that Latin American Jews have been marked by the unique features of transnationalism.

While conditions in their place of origin marked the migratory flows to the region framed by an expanding and changing Jewish world of solidarity and support, for Latin American Jews the Zionist idea and the State of Israel would determine their organizational profile and inner dynamics both as an axis for institutional development and as an referent for identity. Its development as a Diaspora was historically associated simultaneously to a new transnational center as well as to parallel relations with the Jewish world which marked frontiers and fluxes of interactions and asymmetries.

Globalization processes today allow for new patterns of interaction. If we look at transnationalism as a current expression of ethnicity, ethnic diasporas -which Tololyan refers to as “exemplary communities of the transnational moment”- and specifically the Jewish Diaspora, become paradigmatic. The markers that define the latter’s transnational links have evolved, concurrently expressing and shaping the overlapping domains of Jewish life, its local, regional and global interactions and the plurality of collective realities

A transnational trajectory

Transnational conditions marked the experience of Latin American Jews from its very beginnings. The founding immigration and colonization waves as well as their future development were signed by a constant process of being attached to different shifting and overlapping external Jewish centers, both real and imaginary, concrete and symbolic. Latin American Jews shaped their communal life, built their associational and institutional profile and their collective consciousness as part of a broader feeling of peoplehood and a sense of belonging that expressed itself as well through global political interactions. A sustained yet changing transnational condition shows the singular dynamics of contemporary Jewish history in the region.

Initial relations with external centers of Jewish life were tinted by complex dynamics that marked simultaneously strong transnational solidarity connections and a dependent or peripheral character of new communities in the making (Senkman, 2008;

Bokser Liwerant, 2007, 2008). This twofold characteristic of transnational interaction was sustained through successive redefinitions and changing formulations.

Historical conditions of the late 19 and early 20 centuries compelled the organized Jewish world to look for new places of residence and thus both colonization and immigration led collective efforts to channel Jewish life into Latin America. The Argentine and Mexican cases epitomize initiatives that produced strong local communal life while remaining connected and interacting with the transnational space, understood as territory and as social domain. The Jewish Colonization Association (ICA) of the Baron Maurice Hirsch in Argentina and international Jewish organizations in combination with the North American Jewish community of Texas, in the Mexican case, acted as external centers that fostered and supported Jewish life in these two Latin American countries (Avni, 1991; Bokser, 1991). Moreover, in the Mexican case, even the diverse diagnostics suggesting limited migratory flows were the product of transnational Jewish organizations that were supporting and coordinating shared efforts to help channeling Jewish emigration from the Ottoman Empire's diverse areas at the turn of the 19 century and from Eastern Europe during the first decades of the 20 century.¹

While the Argentine reality was clearly shaped at this phase by rules externally defined, Mexican Jewish communal life followed its own contested patterns. Differences in perceptions and representations of the future of both communities were reflected both in communal structures as well as in the realm of education where the dynamics of integration and isolation were discussed.

In both cases by keeping the transnational moment at bay while at the same time interacting with it, local environments and societal surroundings were called to play a central role in defining the character of the new Jewish communities. Host societies offered different frameworks of normative search after homogeneity and tolerance towards ethnic minorities which influenced the processes of integration. While in Euro-America, multi-ethnic societies with a *de facto* tolerance towards minorities counterbalanced the primordial, territorial, and religiously homogeneous profile that the

¹ Since late 19 century Mexico has been explored recurrently by several world Jewish organizations as a place for colonization projects as well as for immigration. Both options were discarded and the latter became, as defined by the Texan rabbi Zielonka, a *fait accompli* in need of Jewish world support. Vid Bokser, 1999.

State aspired to achieve, in Indo-America, the conception of national identity was based on an ethnic-religious cultural model —*mestizaje*— defined by fusion, assimilation and the complete merging of Spanish-Catholic and indigenous populations. As a resource for identity-building and national integration, this model became a central criterion for evaluating the full incorporation of minorities.² Both Argentina's liberalism and Mexican *mestizaje* involved differing and common national homogeneous scenarios. Generally speaking, Latin America's distinctive search of national identities, amidst its inner differentiation, rejected diversity as a menace and a risk to its recurrent aspiration towards homogeneity, understood as synonym of national integration and thus interpreted as part of its essential and recurrent quest to enter Modernity. The way Jews perceived and internalize this goal became part of a complex interplay between narratives and reality, between self-adscription and their social representation.

Transnationalism meant for Jewish life in the region both external and internal conditions linked in the definition of a shared destiny of a people. Collective life was seen as a group enterprise oriented by diverse external centers and their divergent expectations regarding the models to be developed. Substantive ambivalences and tensions accompanied these relations, due mainly to objective conditions and behavioral consequences of a pattern of solidarity and cohesion built on unequal terms of exchange. (Shenkolevsky, 1988; Bokser Liwerant, 1991; Senkman, 2008)

In these as in later contested relations, one may underscore parallel processes regarding the connection of Latin America as a region to external centers. Its distinctively Modern character was built through a permanent connection, though contested and ambivalent, to Western centers. Through diverse historical phases and as part of the West, Modernity became a referent. The cultural program of Modernity, which entailed 'promissory notes' that sought to define in new terms the meaning of human agency and its role in building social and political orders, acted permanently as a critical orientation vis-à-vis the center(s) (Eisenstadt, 2000; Wittrock, 2000). Its principles of freedom,

² Significant differences exist between Indo-America, with countries such as Mexico, Peru, Ecuador and Bolivia, among others, where limited immigration emphasized the indigenous highly hierarchical composition of their populations, and Euro-America, with countries such as Argentina and Uruguay, that attracted mass immigration in the XIX and XX centuries. In both categories we may distinguish further differentiation between, for example, the homogeneous mestizo Chile and Colombia as opposed to Brazil, Cuba and some Caribbean areas where the complex multiracial societies have a pronounced Afro American element. (Eisenstadt, 1998; Avni, 1999)

equality and individual autonomy as substratum for association and community belongings; reflexivity as the basis for tolerance and pluralism and the centrality of public spaces for citizenship -building confronted Latin Americans with common and distinctive ways of becoming modern. Thus, the subsequent and alternative Western centers acted as a project to follow and to contest. Approaching it through the lens of Multiple Modernities may allow a better understanding of ambivalences, and conflicts (Eisenstadt, 2000). Shifting centers -and global foci of identity need to be recognized: Spain and Portugal in the foundational encounter defined by asymmetry; France and England, later, as the Imperial balance of power changed; the United States, and the still current tensions and ambivalences.

Latin American Jewish life followed as well ulterior patterns of autonomous development nourished by new relations with external centers. Thus, the Eastern European immigration of the first decades of the 20th century gave birth to the Jewish *kehilot* in the region as replicas of original experiences overseas. With diverse degrees of intensity, regions and countries of origin were the defining organizational criteria. While the Sephardic world in Latin America developed communities on the basis of different countries of origin, reflecting the fragmented character of this complex ethnic group that was textured by different sub-groups,³ Eastern European Jews as hegemonic community builders established the old/new communal structures. Contrary to what happened in the United States, the collective overshadowed the individual. In the United States the process of nation-building implied the incorporation of separate components into a collective higher order, while the right to self-fulfillment saw normative support as part of the national ethos. Tolerant of diversity, American society promoted individual gratification. (Sarna, 1997, 2004).

In Latin America, a highly differentiated evolutionary process of building communal structures both reflected and shaped collective Jewish life. This structural dimension acquired a significant centrality in terms of an institutional system that provided stability and a sense of continuity to the experience of social interaction.

³ Sephardim from Turkey and the Balkan countries, Middle Eastern Jews from Aleppo, Damascus, Lebanon and Palestine, North Africans from Morocco and Egypt and small groups of Sephardim from Italy and other countries in Europe (Bejarano, 2005).

Therefore, Jews found in communal endeavors spaces to be Jewish and to differentially integrate into their societies —to transmit, create, redefine, ‘imagine’ continuity and develop new traits. Founded by secularists, but seeking to answer communal and religious needs, communities were forged in the cast of European modern Diaspora nationalism emphasizing its inner ideological struggles, organized political parties and social and cultural movements (Bokser Liwerant, 1991). The dominant pattern was a continuous trend toward secularization and politicization inspired by a plural transnational cultural baggage. Varying ideological, cultural and political currents flowed energetically in the Jewish street: from communist to Zionist; from yiddishist to bundist; from liberal to assimilationist and from there to orthodoxy; also from highly structured organizational options to non-affiliated and individual definitions. This gave way to an imported and original rich ‘Jewish street’. As in the Old Home both prophecy and politics intertwined (Frankel, 1981).

The communal domain, while prompting continuity, became the basic framework for the permanent struggle between world visions, convictions, strategies and instrumental needs. World Jewish developments directly influenced and gradually turned the Zionist idea and the State of Israel into central axes around which communal life developed and identity was built.

This phase of transnational links and political interactions brought into the forefront both the feeling and objective reality of a renewed transnational shared mission and commitment to a new ideological, political and cultural-spiritual center. It also represented a new chapter in solidarity efforts as well as ambiguities surrounding the true meaning of this evolving relationship between an ideological, political and public center and Latin American Jewish communities. It expressed the inherent tension between the idea of a national project for renewing Jewish national life in a Jewish Homeland while acting as a spur to foster Jewish life in the new circumstances of the Diaspora. Historically, the wide range of problems Zionism sought to address deeply marked these inner tensions. Its global goals of generating an overall *aggiornamento* in Judaism led to the coexistence of both the denial of a Diasporic condition and the aspiration of renewal of Jewish life as a whole (Vital, 1981; Almog, 1982). No where Jews created a communal public space with a proto-state structure so diversified as in Latin America.

The links thus between the center and Jewish communities would develop distant from a one-fold uncontested dynamics. The emergence of a dominant interpretation for those links in terms of bonds that connected one-directionally a periphery to a center was acutely manifest inside the organized Zionist movement. While an overall disenchantment with the Diaspora condition was among the main causes for the emergence of Zionism in Europe, in the new communities Zionism committed itself both ideologically and institutionally to guarantee a new Jewish life. As any ideology in the process of being absorbed by other cultural and symbolic frames of reference, Zionism acquired novel sociological meanings without necessarily redefining or rephrasing its contents. Its organizational functionality was altered and, beyond its recognized goals, it fulfilled diverse new needs.

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

Moreover, Latin American distinctiveness and specificity were never fully understood by the center. The region was alternatively seen as an undefined and not a clearly visible part of the West or as part of peripheric regions (Goldstein, 1991; Bokser, 1991). Initially Latin American Jews were seen as a substitute for vanishing European Jewry and were therefore identified as a source for *aliyah*. Testimonies of the first Zionist *shlijim* to Latin America reflect a shared perception of a *sui generis* ethno-national Diaspora, temporary in its time span, called to play a central role in the changing Jewish dispersion, and as a bridge between a vanishing old world and the one to be built in Palestine. Latin America was also seen as a fruitful terrain for political activities, aimed to gain support for the Jewish State in the making. Zionist sectors invigorated the center with both the “national home” and “refuge” qualities that simultaneously nourished and reinforced their own Diaspora profile. *Vis-à-vis* the new community, the Zionist idea and

the state offered functionality as a necessary element for Jewish continuity in a new society, both home and exile. The discrepancies around the changing boundaries of Jewish dispersion coexisted with specific strategies aimed to recreate, to lead and even to strengthen life in the Diaspora, even without being explicitly recognized. For Zionism, hegemony building meant institutional insertion while incorporating non- and anti-Zionist contents. Limitations in some of its organizational endeavors were counterbalanced by its ability to head the central communal institutions which acted as channels for the development of links with the global Jewish world (Bokser Liwerant, 1991). Thus, by conquering the communities, this model extended throughout the organizational arch that linked Jewish life both to world Jewry and to the center. In Mexico as in Argentina central institutions played an active role in cultivating the spirit of peoplehood, of transnational links mediated and even tensely coordinated with the transnational Zionist world. (Senkman, 2008; Schenkolewski-Kroll, 1988; Schenkolewski-Kroll, 1993: 191-202; Goldstein, 1994; Bokser Liwerant, 1991).

Through its successive phases, Zionism found itself caught between two different perspectives: on one hand, Israel's expectations of massive immigration from the Diaspora were high, and on the other hand, by equating Zionist identity with Jewish continuity, its involvement in Jewish life in the Diaspora was validated. At this level an interesting paradox was revealed: the awareness of the centrality of the State of Israel did not cause the Zionist dream 'to come true', but in fact perpetuated activities and obligations in the life of the community. Per Gideon Shimoni's conceptual differentiation a 'substantive centrality' of Zionism and Israel developed in Latin America and in time became circumstantial (Shimoni, 1995). A secular Diaspora nationalism was conceived as the central dimension of Jewish identity, both regarding its contents as well as its institutional spaces and mechanisms.

For a transnational center aimed to set itself as a focus to legitimately influence Jewish life outside its borders and to become the domain through which the Latin American Jewish world would commit to developing a shared existential substratum, an interconnected transnational identity was essential. The educational domain would play a vital role in the diffusion of shared visions regarding the importance of a national home for Jewish life. Jewish educational networks developed as a replica of the different

ideological and political currents that were created overseas, thus acquiring the profile of a transnational cultural realm. Theoretical and practical struggles nourished the process of inner differentiation, which would express itself maturely when the material resources of the new communities enabled it. Thus, in the educational arena, Zionists found a privileged terrain on which to build continuity, as did other ideological and social currents. Moreover, due to the vitality that the diverse ideological streams reached, education became a central foundation determining their continuity,. It was the domain to transmit, create, and project a cultural profile and for displaying Jewish collective life while negotiating the challenges of incorporation and integration.

Seen from a historical perspective, the one center model went through different changes that affected the dependent and even peripheric perception of Latin American communities amidst the transnational scenario of Zionist interactions. An important change took place starting the late sixties, as a result of the Six Day War heralding in relations based on increased mutual links and legitimization. Through solidarity with Israel, Latin American Jewish communities expressed an implicit message regarding the legitimacy of their own existence. Solidarity meant responsibility and, consequently, the latter sought to legitimize the Diaspora's separate existence. The Jewish State, unwittingly, legitimized the Diaspora by attaching great importance to its support. The centrality of the State of Israel was evidently instrumental in legitimizing the Diaspora's sense of solidarity and concurrently the energy invested in reinforcing its member communities. (Bokser Liwerant, 2004)

However, insofar as the State of Israel continued to propose *aliyah* as the central criteria to evaluate the success and limitations of the Zionist movement after the war, it confronted Zionists with new venues for expressing their diverse goals. After 1967, *aliyah* offered both the possibility of converting the Jewish ferment into a permanent phenomenon and of returning its own specific profile to the Zionist idea. Paradoxically, for the organized movement, the absence of massive immigration demanded the reinforcement of its activities, thereby justifying its permanence as a polyvalent realm of transnationalism.

Congruent with the institutional differentiation and functional specialization in the transnational dimension, Latin American communities tended to reinforce the one center

model and to redefine the channels through which the links with Israel would be established. Thus, the predominant role of mediator that organized Zionism historically had played by involving other institutions in the communities' central relationship with Israel, was questioned.

Latin America Jewry indeed represents a paradigmatic case where the national circumstances and the international changing scenarios affected the dynamics between centrality, dependency and interdependency; between cooperation and autonomy, resources and weakness. Israel's modifying image in the international arena set new challenges concerning its role as a source of identity and legitimacy and simultaneously confronted the region with new tasks. The way in which these tasks were undertaken defined the alternating relevance of the public and the private spheres as terrains for expressing transnational ties and legitimacy of collective life. Indeed, progressively, Israel's international perception transited from hero to pariah. Within the Jewish communities of the region a growing concern developed regarding the ways in which the change in Israel's image could affect their own. Therefore, the need to engage in the building up of the former became not only a constant demand from the center, but also a common pressing concern. Limitations to create the appropriate institutional tools and divergent interests have been addressed time and time again. Contested visions as well as difficulties to find in the public sphere a domain for collective visibility of the transnational condition acted in complex ways. The impact of external constraints regarding the public manifestation of difference and the collective nature of Jewish life were certainly a strong deterrent.

The public sphere is the result of an encounter of discourses and interpretations, a space for hermeneutics, a mosaic of dominant and subordinate vocabularies. Consequently, the one-center model had to face its own public limitations. This development has been complex: while part of the Jewish world started to experience emerging legitimacy of ethnic assertiveness, reinforcing cultural terms of collective identities and minimizing Israel as a focus— Latin American Jewish communities were further exposed to the impact of changing conditions and international realignment of the State of Israel.

In the Mexican case, a watershed event was the official vote in favor of the equation Zionism=Racism. The attack on the legitimacy of Israel as well as the local Jewish community's limited margin of action emphasized the lack of legitimacy of the latter's transnational links to world Jewry. Intertwined with the conflictive bilateral relations between Mexico and its Northern neighbor, American Jewry represented and articulated the transnational nature of the Jewish world by leading a tourist boycott that resulted in the questioning of national loyalties. Ulterior efforts by the Mexican government to explain its vote to Israel and to the USA led to a further enhancement of the perception of a local Jewish community alienated from the national agenda and interests by virtue of the incompatibility of its external links.

It is worth to stress that while American Jews expressed solidarity and offered visibility to a local community unable to express its political demands, interactions between both communities were asymmetric, thus showing a central-periphery dynamics (Bokser Liwerant, 1997).

New transnational patterns in times of globalization

Oscillating between normative rejection and *de facto*-recognition of their external global Jewish ties among the diverse national claims to homogeneity –with either highly assimilationist contents or an enclave character- Jews developed their collective life attached to the Jewish world.

The legacy of the transnational dimension was called to play a further role amidst the changing scenarios of globalization. Globalization processes have brought new realities to the region. They have engendered economic, social political and cultural changes, as well as interdependence and influence between and among them. Globalization has also projected its contradictory character, as it expresses intentionality and reflexivity and simultaneously, an unintended path towards new developments. Thus, novel spatial interactions have modified their influence on the final shaping of institutions, social relations and identities (Giddens, 1994; Waters, 1995; Albrow, 1996; Held et al, 1999).

The presence and strength of transnational, supranational or global actors and institutions have radically transformed national states, their powers, functions, spaces and territories. It seems clear at this stage that, far from what some hurried estimates (Ohmae, 1990; Fukuyama, 1992), States not only do not disappear but continue to be actors with a decisive influence in many fields at both national and international levels. They are even considered among the most active forces either committed or actively resisting globalization. Nonetheless, their sovereign status weakens in various fields, among others, in their relations with communities and identities that go beyond national borders thus reestablishing links between the local, the national and the regional.

As a result of increasingly intense cross-border interaction, diverse groups, communities and/or classes adopt identities and loyalties over and above national sentiments. Such is the case with new social movements, members of the corporate elite, epistemic communities, and certainly migratory waves, Diasporas and ethnic groups. At the same time, globalization has encouraged and strengthened local, ethnic and indigenous identities. Global spaces give a new density to the close and specific, the characteristic and particular, and encourage the building of collective identities on institutional bases, spaces and frameworks that are radically different from those known by social theory. New identities have emerged and primordial ones gained renewed importance.

Amidst these changes, previous transnational interactions have acquired new visibility and new ones have emerged. For Latin American societies, globalization and transnationalism as well as local factors such as democratic pluralism and identity politics also have enhanced the apparent contradictory processes of assimilation of Diasporas and ethnicization (Appadurai, 1990). The region has witnessed the development and legitimate expression of a new transnational consciousness- a “Diaspora consciousness”- marked by multiple identifications as well as an awareness of decentralized attachments, and of Diaspora as a category of social practice, a project, a claim, a revision of home-identity-movement-return (Auge and Brah, 1996; Shohat, 2006; Clifford, 1997)

Amidst progressive processes of migration and “diasporization”, the assertiveness of ethno-national communities has been enhanced. Differing from the past - when the Latin American liberal credo or the *mestizaje* ideology of ethnic fusion aimed to integrate

the heterogeneous population on an individual basis and barred the expression of collective identities and transnational ties- nowadays, the prevailing concepts of national identity have been redefined to include multiple identities. Political changes have allowed cultural diversity to open an ongoing discussion on the very nexus between culture, society and politics from which minority groups have gained legitimacy and transnational ties have ceased to be seen as a threat to the idea of national integration. Thus, diverse expressions of identity politics and multiculturalism both shed light on the trans-frontier ties of the Jewish world and on the revitalization of Jewish life and its expression in the public (national and transnational) spheres.

Certainly, they are part of complex processes that are far from being linear. Thus in Mexico, while the discourse and myth of revolutionary nationalism has lost ground, cultural complexity has gained space. The idea of many cultures takes distance from the recurrent search for an essentialist “soul” or national character and may be seen rather in terms of configuring and reconfiguring the national as a legitimizing myth (Menendez Carrion, 2001; Lomnitz, 1992). However, one has to take into account that the claim for recognition coming from local or primordial identities may precisely borrow essentialism from its previous national level and reinforce its excluding message on different grounds.

In Mexico, the new regime that resulted from political alternation in the 2000 elections has promoted an open public relationship with the Jewish community, one which has been defined precisely in terms of religious affiliation and socio-economic profile rather than in terms of the previous broad understanding of ethno-national ethnicity. Simultaneously, the Jewish community is openly perceived as part of a Jewish transnational world whose networks and potential support were clearly recognized during the process of rapprochement with Mexico’s Northern neighbor. This process clearly came into being during the negotiation towards the Free Trade Agreement in the late 80’s and has intensified since then, thus overcoming the past cultural stigma of dual loyalty. It points to the growing trend diversification of centers of references among which Israel though still central, has to compete in new terms for influence.

In Argentina changes have also brought a shift in the paradigm of transnational identity: local Jewry is distancing itself from the one center-linked Diaspora “to a broader focus that encompasses emerging civic commonalities and transnational links as well.

Normatively, it has produced a shift from the automatic valorization of cultural and ethnic differences to a renewed concern with integration into civil society and the public sphere”. [Senkman, 2008:] However, one can’t dismiss the centrality that the bombing of the communal building AMIA in Buenos Aires brought to the forefront a mixture of old and new expressions of anti-Semitism. The attack may be well defined as a watershed, representing what both researchers and Jewish leaders have coined since 2000 “the new anti-Semitism”, implying the direct identification between Jewish communities, individuals and Israel, which are perceived as a single evil entity. Thus, anti-Semitism has become interchangeable with anti-Zionism and also the conflict of the Middle East transcended the territorial regionality and became global. The impact on the Argentine Jewish community became simultaneously an impact on the general society intertwining the claims for truth and justice as a shared demand against impunity.

The contradictory nature of these trends opened the region to new forms of material and symbolic transnationalism. Societies and communities underwent radical changes. Global trends have also a relevant influence on restructuring cultural life in the region in terms of a local, national and global dynamics. This has led, for example, to a gradual redefinition of the role played by national culture, which has stopped referring to symbolic processes that set the boundaries and hierarchies between the “inside” and the “outside” and has rather transformed into a wide horizon/market of shared cultural goods. The flow of technologically transmitted information and images, of postmodern ideas and globalization have recently dismantled the *delimitative function* of culture. Jewish cultural life too has been undergoing the general process of dismantling and transformation of what George Yudice defines as traditional “behavioral genres” that kept the social world “in its place” during the past few years. The new signs of Jewish cultural change show that, far from fulfilling a delimitative task vis-à-vis the more general culture, they instead push cultural expressions and identity towards integration with the general milieu. Such a process of proximity and coexistence sets itself as

opposed to what took place in previous years, when Jewish interaction with the general local culture's public spaces was feared to generate assimilation.⁴

While some communities maintain a more traditional profile, in countries such as Argentina and Brazil the new cultural dynamics are accompanying the experimentation of new modes of “Jewish Off- culture” in civil society, thus reproducing a global tendency. Thus, Buenos Aires has been the setting for new activities that attract crowds outside the communal institutional circuit. The YOK project, organized in a set of meetings, is the Argentinean version of the United States' JEWEL.⁵ Interesting also is the network building and transnational character of the North American JOINT team that designed these events with advertising techniques led by media professionals and technicians in order to create a cultural product branded as alternative Judaism, which is supposedly trying to get rid of labels that relate it to traditional Jewish religious and cultural communal institutions, in an operation that might be defined as “de-branding”. This initiative comprises a privatization of consumption of cultural goods' that parallels a “light” conception of identity: “being as Jewish as one wants to or feels to be” as expressed by its followers' posture of rejection of all kinds of Jewish norms and/or of any deepening of Judaism's religious and ethnic cultural heritage.

Moreover, in recent years new forms of Jewish cultural and religious social models, successfully fostered by Chabad among the young in centers such as Beit Chabad El Lazo, have emerged from this lay cultural trend; even when embodying a basically religious character, this initiative includes activities ranging from the concept of a “homey” space with its magic, to more common attractive consumption goods, designed in accordance with marketing principles targeted for young university students and related to Jewish traditions and religion. The success of the local adaptation in Argentina of the Lubavitch movement's Chabad Houses in the United States expresses a common demand for spiritual goods of the alternative young people's counter-culture as well as the transnational character of a substantive part of cultural alternatives that circulate in

⁴ This analysis is part of a report on cultural changes in Latin America prepared by the author for the Jewish People Public Policy Institute in Jerusalem in 2007. I thank Leonardo Senkman for his contribution on the new trends in Argentine.

⁵ More similar to a media happening than to a traditional Jewish cultural event, YOK gathers middle class adult Jews and professionals in a theatre located in the area called Caballito, where they listen to renowned local intellectuals speaking of non-controversial Jewish cultural topics.

the Jewish world. It equally represents an alternative option to the culture of drugs, to oriental philosophies and to the growing political character of university life since the most recent wave of democratization in Argentina and Brazil. The Lubavitch Chabad's "missionary" calling to conquer the streets in order to "go where Jews are, and not just wait for them to come", has generated novel Jewish symbolic cultural trends both in Argentina and Brazil.

Transnationalism comprises both radical symbolic and material changes. The recurrent failures of diverse modernization processes in Latin America that have been followed by economic crises, political instability, and high levels of insecurity have increasingly exposed the region to migration wave and to transnational experiences. The reality of shrinking Jewish communities reveals a general demographic profile that unveil ongoing regional trends. In the past 30 years, the number of Jews in Latin America dropped from 514.000 in the 1970's to the current 394.000 (DellaPergola, 2006; 2008). In Argentina, demographic decline became a central trend of the Jewish community. Following Della Pergola's studies already three decades ago, the estimate of the Jewish population was revised downward, from half a million to only 310 000. Towards the 80's, the Jewish population's shrinkage continued reaching 280.000 members. Today, the core population of Jews in Argentina numbers slightly over 180.000.

In Mexico, Jewish population has shown a more stable demographic profile, due to more traditional socio-demographic patterns and the influx of Jews from other parts of the continent. Mexican Jews number today 40.000 to 45.000.⁶

Amidst a new map of dispersion and reconfiguration of Jewish life worldwide, as part of the current global migration waves in the region, but adding their own experience and

⁶ In Brazil, DellaPergola estimated 96.200 in 2007. Its enlarged Jewish population (including non-Jewish members of Jewish households) was assessed at 132,191 in 1980 and 117,296 in 1991, assuming it could have exceeded 120,000 in 2000. In the last years, however, this trend has stabilized an even shows a slight increase. Uruguay and Venezuela experienced significant Jewish emigration in recent years. Based on recent studies, he considers the Jewish population estimate for Uruguay was downwardly revised to 17,900 in 2007. The estimate for Venezuela was reduced to 14,500, reflecting ongoing concerns in that community. El Salvador, Ecuador, Peru and Paraguay have also experienced a significant decrease in their Jewish population over this period of time.

perspective, Latin American Jews moved and are moving to different transnational locations. New centers of destination such as the United States, Canada and Europe, mostly Spain, compete and coexist with *alyiah* to Israel. Thus previously unknown individual, familiar and communal models have developed, reflecting those imported from home while giving birth to new expressions of Jewish life and Jewish identities. The migratory movements, directed to diverse places, both intra regional, at first, and gradually regional gave birth to a new migratory dynamics affecting mainly second and third generations thus widening the parameters of the original Diaspora triade.

The case of recently established Latin American communities in the United States points to migration intertwined with trans-local experiences characterized by the establishment and reconstitution of communal life according to previous original patterns but searching in turn for venues of incorporation into the adopted environments and/or of a constant commuting between the homeland and the elected new place of residence.

One has certainly to remember the original migration/ exile of close to 10 000 Cuban Jews to Miami. It was followed, decades later, by the emigration/exile of the Jewish communities of the Southern Cone as a result of the military dictatorships, the extended repression and anti-Semitism Argentine Jews have been among the most numerous to add the traumatic disruption of exile as well as the challenge of redefinition to their search of a new territorial-national identity.

Other communities as well, such as the Colombian or Venezuelan have faced in different ways and rhythms the experience of transnational migration associated to violence and political and economic upheavals with a clear tone of translocalism. Miami, Los Angeles, San Diego, but also New York and Washington became the scenario to a new transnational Latin American Jewish Diaspora.

If we focus our analysis on the Mexican case, though demographically stable, the Jewish community has shown a migratory pattern of recreating communal life in new milieus and the resulting translocalism represents new dimensions of transnationalism. In the familiar case of the both stable and fluid Mexico-San Diego connection, we discover different networks through which customs, identities and communal patterns are built,

transported and transformed (Basch, Wiltshire and Toney, 1990).⁷ We may thus widen the concept of commuting to a wider realm in which narratives, ideas and interpersonal spaces and roots are developed redefining the boundaries between homeland and place of residence. One may adventure the concept of secondary-Diaspora to point to the inter-generational differences and common traits

New waves and intra-Jewish encounters have given it diverse shapes as a result of the encounter between migratory movements and several micro-cosmos in the Jewish world itself: South African Jewish immigration; Russian, Iranian, Israeli or Canadian. Impacting these encounters is the new immigrant insertion and integration into the American Jewish community. The ongoing challenge to create a new identity reflecting not only the aspirations for integration with the host society but links as well to those fellow exiles who are also struggling to retain past patterns of identity defines a wide framework of transcultural and transnational encounters.

On one level, the newcomers seek to strengthen their relationship with the Jewish world; on the other, a significantly old-new dynamics has developed: the affirmation of their Mexican-Jewish belonging as part of the Latino world. Simultaneously, it opens the door to links to the US Latino world. Although the degree of sense of belonging to the latter varies from one Jewish Latin-American group to the other, in the case of Mexicans one has to take into account that immigrants of Mexican descent in the US comprise more than 60% of the Latino population as well as the geographical proximity between the US and Mexico..

At the same time, new interactions have resulted between ethnicity, religion and national belonging. For the San Diego Mexican Jewish community –which is constituted by different temporal waves- organizational patterns constitute a replica of their former setting; original models were transplanted and also recreated and rebuilt in the new context. Thus, the inner sectorial differences that historically marked the Mexican Jewish community tended to blurred. Being Ashkenazi, or Sepharadic or Mizrahi has been subsumed under a national Mexican/ Jewish identity. One may argue that the size of the

⁷ The current estimation for the Mexican Jewish community in San Diego approaches 600 families. Regarding the total population of Latin American Jews in the United States, which has a central pole of concentration in the Greater Miami area, the differing estimations point to 25.000 to 30.000 families.

new community has acted as a limitation to inner differentiation. However recently though and due mainly to religious motives, a separate Orthodox Oriental community-Beth Tora Bet Eliahu- has been founded, providing an alternative to the otherwise Conservative hegemony. This community brings together 80 families and is headed by an Argentine rabbi. It would seem that what previously was a transnational circuit of predominantly Conservative rabbis from Buenos Aires has now spread to Orthodoxy as well.⁸ The current offer of religious leadership and the importance of such leadership to religious development can't be underestimated.

Different identity-cultural and geographical-regional moments of the transnational world can be traced. In the 1960s the Conservative movement began its spread from North to South America. It provided the first model of a religious institution not brought over from Europe but 'imported' from the United States. As the Conservative movement adjusted to local conditions, the synagogue began to play a more prominent role both in community life and in society in general. The Conservative movement has mobilized thousands of otherwise non-affiliated Jews, bringing them to active participation in Jewish institutions and religious life. One proof of the relevance of religious leadership for the development of religious movements and streams may be found in the success of the Conservative Seminario Rabinico Lationamericano in Argentina in preparing rabbinical personnel that serves throughout Latin America and beyond.

In recent years, in tandem with changing trends in Jewish life around the world, orthodox groups have formed new religious congregations and supply rabbinical leadership. The spread of the *Chabad* movement today and the establishment of *Chabad* centers, both in the large, well-established communities as well as in smaller ones are striking. More than seventy rabbis are currently working in close to fifty institutions.⁹

⁸ It is worth to note that the actual Orthodox Argentine rabbi in San Diego was preceded by an Argentine Conservative one the headed the first migratory wave from Mexico to San Diego.

⁹ While in Mexico the presence of Chabad is marginal at best, there are more than fifty synagogues, study houses, *kollelim* and *yeshivot*, more than thirty of which were established in the last twenty five years. Fourteen of the twenty four existing *kollelim* belong to the Syrian *halabi* community. In Brazil — where the Jewish community was built mainly on pillars of liberal Judaism and secularity and influenced by Brazilian society with its syncretism components— fifteen orthodox synagogues, three *yeshivot*, two *kollelim*, and five religious schools were established in the last fifteen years (Topel, 2005).

There is a very important trend towards religious observance and *haredization*.¹⁰ The extreme religious factions and the strategies of self-segregation point to general processes and tendencies that are developing and shaping a diversified space of identities.

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

In Mexico, despite the fact that communal loyalties and the prevailing structural density and norms are still powerful in shaping identity, Orthodoxy and the *Shas* option seem to be a religious-ideological justification for the claim of a sustained enclave nature of Jewish life. Certainly these modes of interaction also refer to diverse external centers. Therefore there is place to question is such revival of religion is only directed from the local community, or is it better characterized as joining the local community with a transnational community of believers under one superior authority usually located in the U.S. or in Israel. Thus, while these new trends compete with the once-center model, one cannot disregard the way religion has gained a central place in Israeli society.

Transnationalism gains still a wider dimension both complex and problematic when seen from the non-symmetric nature of the trilogy of encounters and interactions. We are alluding to the relations of the new comers inside the Jewish world, as bearers of a peripheral identity *vis-a-vis* the central Jewish world, mainly the Anglo-Saxon. Phrased

¹⁰ In the last six years the 'very observant' grew from 4.3% to 7% while the observant grew from 6.7% to 17%, a growth of almost 300%. Traditionalists, who are still the majority of the Mexican Jewish population, dropped from 76.8% to 62%. These trends, when specifically analyzed among the population below 40 years of age, the figures for very observant grow from 7 to 12%; observant from 17 to 20% and traditionalist fall from 62% to 59% (CCIM; 2006).

by one of our interviewed: “I oscillate in my identification with Mexican Jews as if they were part of my own world, on one hand and my gardener’s world, on the other”.

The essential interplay between difference facing the Hispanic migratory world and Otherness vis-à-vis Jews as the central Other partly reflects previous experiences of Latin American Jews and partly marks new problematiques. The presence of a growing Hispanic population and its impact on questions of domestic identity and international relations present a challenge for the Jewish community. The Hispanic community in the United States is approaching a critical mass open to diverse and significant importance to the Jewish community “in regard to its relationship with the changing face of broader US society as well as how this new face of America relates to Jews, to Jewish community and to Israel”(JPPPI, 2006, p. 59). Hispanic communities constitute the largest minority group; they have increased 61% since 1990, numbering today more than 45 millions and it is estimated they will comprise 25 % of US population by the year 2020. This trend is even more significant when compared with the growth of the total US population and the shrinking of US Jewish population, both of whom are aging and the Jewish population has decreased 0.3 million in the decade 1990-2000 (ibid). The comparative population profile -levels of education, national presence and cultural and political patterns – points to a contrasting development that requires communal policies to build alliances underscoring convergences. Both Hispanic Americans and undocumented immigrants have increased their visibility and their capability of influencing particular/national agendas.

Thus, the developing view that Latin American Jews may play an important role in building transcultural connections in the framework of the Latino-Jewish-Americans trilogy must be analyzed in the light of socio-economic stratification. Latin American Jews are gradually starting to develop a not always explicit role as potential bridge builders. Diverse efforts and narratives have emerged emphasizing parallelisms between both Hispanics and Jews in general in terms of common past, common challenges, and common interests and shared commitments to values of inclusion and pluralism. Moreover, the sense of connectedness and responsibility that Latino immigrants retain towards their place of origin has been compared to the relationship that American Jews have developed towards Israel as their spiritual home (Siegel, 2006).

For Mexican Jewish immigrants, the complex awareness of convergences and divergences with the Jewish world, from one side, and with the Latino non Jewish world, from the other, has been recurrently referred to as part of a new transnational consciousness in a world where population movements and identification challenges cross diverse ethnic and national groups while material conditions, group bonds and motives play an important role. Both organizational and individual behaviors point to differences in the scope and meaning of crossing the border as well as to the central component of remittances in one case, vis-à-vis the channeling of support for the State of Israel, in the other. The interplay between the concepts of homeland still resembles and projects old-new meanings.

While for Jews the Northern Mexican border has acted as a facilitator for exploring conditions and analyzing opportunities even in time of crisis, for Hispanic workers and undocumented immigrants it has acted as a challenging barrier. Borders can create reasons to cross them, and may act both as barriers and opportunities. Kearny describes how *Mixtecs* from Oaxaca move to the North, looking after a higher standard of living, risking life and liberty when crossing illegally. The border area ambitiously becomes both a region where culture, society and different levels of development intersect, as well as a zone in which space, capital and meaning are disputed (Kearny, 1995:117; Glick Schiller et al, 1995) It certainly points to the dynamics of inequality and marginality that lays behind these new migratory movements and to the form in which transnational and translocal experiences may become a way to empowerment (Kennedy and Roudometof, 2002)

Thus, we need to take into account not only the symbolic but also the political and economic dimensions as recently analyzed in studies on US-Mexican borders, where the complex interactions between underdevelopment, globalization and transnationalism call into question the traditional equivalence between territorial bonds and sense of belonging shaped by transnationalism [Alvarez, 1995] .

Therefore the trilogy of the times of transnationalism we referred to carries strong discrepancies. An example is the struggle over language as a realm in which to build new hegemonies versus the integrative approach of the similar. The view of language as a tool to achieve a sense of self-worth among Hispanics has become the central focus in Gloria

Anzaldúa's well known *Borderlands/la frontera. The New Mestiza*. "Until I take pride in my language I cannot take pride in myself" (p. 59). Now, 63.7 % of Latinos and only 18.9% of Jews "strongly support" bilingual education. The importance of the Spanish language in the Diaspora as central tool for identity building and maintenance can be seen in the fact that 74.5% of all the Hispanics speak well Spanish and another 12% pretty well. [AJC, 2007]. But it is certainly important to underscore that these numbers mainly reflect first generations and there are still unknown developments concerning generational differences of integration.

Cultures are contested domains and intercultural encounters point to the always complex logic of inclusion/exclusion of the Other(s). Based on Sander Gilman's notion of Jewish frontiers, useful in understanding the components of transnational central alterity/ and peripheral–marginal alterity (Gilman, 2003) Senkman underscores that the transnational experience of Diaspora in southern Latin America together with the process of nationalization in Argentina brought about the construction of a *sui generis* collective identity for Jews made up of two somewhat incongruent components: On one hand, Jews developed a peripheral identity in the margins but on the other, they were perceived (by local Argentines) as 'overseas others' whose alterity derived from central European countries regardless of the fact that they arrived as poor immigrants from Russia, Rumania, Poland or elsewhere."

Drawing comparative insights on encounters in different times and spaces leads certainly to diversified scenarios. Transnationalism thus may extend its conceptual utility to historical changes. A conceptual full circle may be drawn when applying the concept of transnationalism to the analysis of the Latin American Jewish experience. Its capacity to differentially encompass past and present trends widens its explanatory potential. The original attachment of Jewish life in the region to external centers has been redefined and reshaped through diverse models of interaction while new types have emerged.

Thus, the Jewish world and Latin American as an integral part have always required an approach to communal life and society that is not automatically equated or reduced to the boundaries of a single nation-state. In this sense the current bibliography on migration and specifically on transnational migration has underestimated the originality-exceptionality- of the Jewish case (Levitt and Schiller, 2008).

The current questioning of the methodological nationalism that has constrained social theory thus limiting the study of social processes to national societies and states leads us to new outlooks both on current and emerging phenomena (Beck, 2000). The focus on the cross-national-frontier realm accounts for a world of multiple identities in which transnational social fields are constructed as places where to dwell and build varied senses of belonging. It sheds light on the permanent structural transnational interactions ethno-national Diaspora communities maintain and on the groups that migrate and the relationship they maintain with those who didn't move. The latter, as recently conceptualized, also underscores that immigrants' incorporation into a new state and the permanence and further cultivation of transnational attachments and commitments are not mutually exclusive (Moraswka, 2003).

As we direct our attention to the transnational border area it reflects diverse identity building processes. In the case of Mexican immigrants and undocumented workers, new cross identities emerge. While accepted in their new place as workers but still aliens, they simultaneously carry the rejection of permanent residence in their homeland due to economic necessity. Paradigmatic of this twofold situation, alien, migrants construct a new identity out of the *bricolage* of their transnational existence. As an ethnic awareness, which, as stated, is the supremely appropriate form for collective identity to take in the age of transnationalism, it arises as an alternative to nationalist consciousness and as a tool to anchor not space but collective identity in those borders areas- Anzalduas' Frontera, where political boundaries of territory and identity are ambiguous.

Jewish Mexican immigration to the North is evidently still in need of in depth research. The transnational character of these immigrants' their ethno-national Diaspora identity involves the pluralization of homeland(s) and complex dynamics among the original, the symbolic or ideological elected and the new place of residence the latter as fixed or part of translocality.¹¹ Ultimately, sources of national identity allow to alternatively negotiating the markers of this identity vis-à-vis the Jewish American and

¹¹ Guarnizo and Portes (2008) argue that the main difficulty with the conceptualization in the field of transnationalism as so far has developed lies in the fact that its empirical base relies almost exclusively on case studies.

the global world and the Latin American/Hispanic one. Porosity of borders –not only territorial- and primordial identity revivals draw diversified transnational scenarios.

The interplay between identities simultaneously at local, regional and global levels pose indeed deep challenges to the reconstitution of communal life partly still anchored on territorial bases and partly open to new options, searching for new arrangements required to provide a substratum for identity building related to the increased diversification of referents of collective identification..

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