

Commentaries

Transformations in Latin American Judaism

By *Damián Setton*; Translated by *Alisa Newman*

Latin American Judaism has experienced a series of transformations since the 1980s that have significantly altered its makeup and given rise to new social actors and conflicts.

As in other parts of the world, Judaism in Latin America in the early twentieth century was built on a foundation of secular matrixes that reflected Jewish aspirations to become part of the nation, with the religious dimension relegated to the background. It is this religious dimension, however, that came to monopolize the attention of both Jewish communities and social scientists by the early 1980s.

Again, as in other parts of the world, Latin American Judaism is currently experiencing a revitalization of Orthodox sentiments. Many Jews are practicing what in Hebrew is known as *teshuva*, a word that can be translated as “return,” and which in sociological terms implies a process of religious conversion. Typically, Jews socialized in non-Orthodox environments adopt lifestyles emphasizing strict observance of Jewish law. This trend reflects the transformation of the dynamic between religion and modernity that has affected other religions, including Christianity, Islam and “Oriental” religions. Some scholars, among them Susana Brauner and Renato Ortiz, have argued that the gap left by Zionism as a factor in Jewish identity has been filled by religious movements

at the same time that the process of globalization and the consequent weakening of national referents have opened a space for the construction of transnational identities. While Conservative Judaism tried to create

a movement that could express the national realities of different countries, as Leonardo Senkman notes, Orthodox congregations have little use for national considerations in the construction of their identities. In



The Mikve Israel Synagogue on the Dutch island of Curaçao is the oldest Jewish house of worship still in use in the Americas.

Argentina, for example, followers of the Chabad Lubavitch movement identify themselves as Lubavitchers, not as Argentine Jews. In definitions of identity, the transnational community takes pride of place over the national. This doesn't mean, however, that we should ignore local particularities when analyzing the teshuva movement in its different contexts.

The Chabad movement has altered the physiognomy of Latin American Judaism through its practice of sending emissaries to countries where Orthodox Judaism lacks a strong presence. Their goal is to create spaces for socialization that have a markedly Orthodox stamp. Other *baalei teshuva* (returnees) look for cities that offer the type of community infrastructure that was not available in their countries of origin; for example, many Uruguayan *baalei teshuva* emigrate to other countries because Uruguay does not have the infrastructure they need to practice their desired lifestyle.

Several factors are important to consider when discussing these trends, above all the political transformations involved in Jews' emergence into the public arena. In Argentina, the return to democracy in 1983 opened spaces for the expression of different religions. Argentine society stopped thinking of itself as a monolithic whole and began to recognize and legitimate its own plurality. And in Mexico, the end of the PRI's monopoly over politics brought to power the National Action Party (PAN), whose tradition of conservative Catholicism lent new legitimacy to religion in public life.

Another trend developing on the fringes of Orthodoxy is the emergence of a heterogeneous collective that defines itself as "pluralistic Judaism" and comprises such sectors such as the Meretz party, the ICUF (Federation of Yiddish Cultures), Conservative rabbis and various

intellectuals. The Pole for Pluralistic Judaism, which was created in Argentina in 2008, defines Judaism from a perspective that acknowledges the many different ways of being a Jew and the individualization of definitions of identity.

Finally, for many Jews, Judaism itself is an arena for free circulation and fluid borders. They construct their own Jewishness from a patchwork of different influences without affiliating themselves with any single one. They build their own Judaism out of multiple sources of meaning that incorporate diverse Jewish and non-Jewish influences and, within Judaism itself, different religious expressions.

As a result, we are witnessing a moment when two apparently conflicting trends are intensifying simultaneously: on the one hand, the creation of communities with well-defined borders, and on the other, individuals for whom these borders do not represent an insurmountable barrier. Orthodox Judaism benefits from both of these movements. ■

Damián Setton is a researcher at the Center for Labor Research and Studies and the Program in Economic Research on Technology, Labor and Employment (CEIL-PIETTE) at the National Council for Scientific and Technical Research (CONICET) in Buenos Aires, Argentina.



Latin American Jewry Series
Exploring the Jewish Experience in the Americas

School of International and Public Affairs
Latin American and Caribbean Center | Judaic Studies Program



A collaborative project between the Latin American and Caribbean Center and the Judaic Studies Program, the Latin American Jewry Series explores the Jewish experience throughout the Americas from a multidisciplinary perspective. Through lectures, workshops, and symposia, the series increases awareness about the diverse global interests of the South Florida community and promotes greater participation of our community members in international dialogue and scholarly exchange.

For more information, contact:
Latin American and Caribbean Center | 305-348-2894 | lacc@fiu.edu
Judaic Studies Program | 305-348-7266 | judaic@fiu.edu

FIU | **Arts & Sciences**
FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY