

## What I Learned from Cuba's Jewish Community

### *Shabbat Lech L'cha 5785*

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A week ago tonight, I returned from five days and nights in Cuba with the Central Conference of American Rabbis.

Our journey began in Santa Clara, where we visited Congregation Am Shalom. The community is tiny, and the handful of members were there to greet us. The modest sanctuary features a holy ark, so we asked if there was a Torah and if it is regularly read. Yes, there is a Torah, but no, it had not been read in many years, since nobody there knows how. That congregation does not usually have a rabbi; but that day, it had over twenty. We quickly ended their Torah drought. We sang joyously, took the Torah from the ark, and chanted the opening verses of Genesis in unison. The president of the congregation, a tall, burly man of about seventy, began to cry. Soon, there was not a dry eye in the room.

Like the group in Santa Clara, the entire Jewish community is miniscule. After reaching a high of some twenty-five thousand at the end of World War II, fewer than one thousand Jews live in Cuba today.

They did not leave because of antisemitism, however.

Most of us know an infamous story about Cuba from the Nazi era. A steamship full of German Jews, the *St. Louis*, sailed from Hamburg to Havana, where the passengers had entry visas. By the time they arrived, those visas had been revoked. On the whole, though, Cuba saved some twelve thousand Jews from the hands of the Nazis, more in raw numbers than Canada and most other Latin American countries, and more per capita than the United States.

By 1959, on the eve of the revolution, over a third Cuba's postwar Jewish population had already left. Most saw Cuba as only a temporary refuge, and they made *aliyah* to Israel, went to the United States, and found greater opportunity elsewhere. Other Cuban Jews left the country in the wake of revolution, most of them heading to the United States or Israel. Though few Cuban Jews who immigrated to Israel stayed in the Jewish State, Israel is key to the story. Thanks to Israel's Law of Return, opening that country to all Jewish immigrants, Jewish Cubans had easier entry to the free world than non-Jewish Cubans, even if they merely passed through Israel on their way elsewhere. Still more Jews have left Cuba in the last thirty years, a time of greater religious freedom for everyone in Cuba, including Jews, but also a time of economic desperation, as Cuba's economy tanked after the fall of the Soviet Union.

In Havana, the communities are larger than the one we visited in Santa Clara. Sephardic and Ashkenazic Jews in Cuba—that is, Jews who trace their origins from Spain and Portugal, on the one hand, and Jews with roots in Central and Eastern Europe, on the other—have historically maintained separate congregations, and there is still one of each. Today, though, they worship together at the Ashkenazic synagogue, where the religious school of eighty students also meets. The Sephardic synagogue houses an active program for seniors.

At the Patronato, the main synagogue, the Torah is read regularly. Thanks to the Joint Distribution Committee or JDC, the community's basic needs are met. With donations from Jewish groups visiting from abroad—groups like ours, for example—the synagogue operates a pharmacy, administered by physicians, to provide sorely needed over-the-counter medicines and other medical provisions to Cubans in need, Jewish or otherwise. The Cuban healthcare system provides prescription medicine, but other medical necessities are in short supply.

Most notable about our visit to the Patronato was that we could just walk in—the gates were open, as were the doors. No security guard was present. None was needed. Antisemitism is a nonfactor in the lives of Cuban Jews today and has not significantly impacted the community throughout its history.

Less comforting were the nearly ubiquitous signs of opposition to Israel. That's not surprising for a poor country estranged from the U.S., but Cuba has a special reason for its antipathy toward Israel. Once a year, the United Nations General Assembly takes up a resolution to condemn the United States for its disastrous and ineffective economic boycott of Cuba. Only two countries vote against that U.N. resolution annually, the U.S. and Israel. Cuban Jews are Zionists, and they lament their nation's anti-Israel posture, but they do not suffer antisemitism because of it.

So here's what I learned from the Jewish community of Cuba, underlining lessons I already knew:

- Israel is key to the Jewish people's wellbeing. Even if most Jews who immigrated to Israel did not stay, their freedom to move to Israel under the Law of Return offered them opportunities that non-Jewish Cubans lacked.
- The Joint Distribution Committee, JDC, also known as "the Joint," is a gem of the Jewish world, and too few American Jews know about it. We may donate to it directly, and many Jewish Federations make an allocation to it. The Joint takes care of needy Jewish individuals and communities throughout the world.

- Wherever we live, Jews need, from time to time, to be able to “get up and go,” to find a new place to live freely and prosperously as Jews.

This week, we read from the Torah about Abraham and Sarah. Called by God, they *לך-לך*, “get up and go,” to the Land of God’s promise. That story is told in nine brief verses. In verse ten, a famine hits the Land, so Abraham and Sarah leave for Egypt. That sounds like a shocking repudiation of God’s blessing! How can they leave the place to which God has called them? Rashi, though, understands it as a test: Would Abraham and Sarah accept a command to leave the Promised Land as readily as the invitation to go there for blessing? In the commentator’s mind, our patriarch and matriarch pass the test.<sup>i</sup>

We often think of Jewish immigration as largely having been motivated by persecution throughout history. That was certainly true at the time of the Holocaust as at other terrible times in our history. More commonly, Jewish people have immigrated for the same reasons that others do: Beginning with Abraham and Sarah’s descent into Egypt, we have migrated primarily to find economic opportunity, sometimes to avoid starvation. That is the story of Jewish emigration from Cuba. Our people left, not to flee antisemitism but to escape poverty.

Thank God, America has been a land of freedom and opportunity for the Jewish people, with historically unprecedented consistency, however imperfect, from before this nation was founded to this very day. Still, Rabbi Dr. Jacob Rader Marcus, the late great dean of American Jewish history, remarked, “Every Jew should have a packed suitcase and a valid passport.” As for me, my passport is valid, but my suitcase is empty. My family was in this country two generations before my Jewish ancestor served in the New York Militia during the American Revolution. America is my home. And still I know, and I have always told my sons: We are Jews, just like the Jews of Cuba and the many thousands more who left that island nation. When we hear God call, *לך-לך*, *לכי-לך*, like Sarah and Abraham before us, we, too, must be ready to heed the call to the Land of God’s blessing.

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Rashi to Genesis 12:10.