

JUDAISM IN CUBA 1959 – 1999

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Moisés Asís

Introduction

Many years ago I reached the conclusion that Judaism is a singular paradigm of social consciousness and collective unconscious.¹⁻³ This definition has given me an understanding of the survival of the Jewish people throughout human history.

Judaism has been unique in history as a religion, a culture, and a civilization. *Juridical consciousness* is given by the abundant mosaic of rabbinical and *responsa* legislation, constituting the basis for most constitutions the world over, the juridical conscience of a great part of mankind, and the regulation of Jewish practical life. *Political consciousness* is expressed by the messianic ideal, the prophets, Zionism with all its trends, and the kibbutzim movement. *Moral consciousness* is present in all the biblical, deuterocanonical, rabbinical, *responsa*, and later literature as a universal example of ethical thought and practice. Judaism as a *religion* continues to be unique, with variants in its practical interpretation going from the orthodoxy of *Chasidim* and *Mitnagdim* to the conservative, reform, reconstruction, and *chavurot* movements, just as Jewish theology is the only theology based upon the interpretation and legal character of the Bible and the Talmud, as well as on everyday life. *The science of Judaism* includes a history in which everything has already happened and nothing new can happen without repeating a previous Jewish experience, due to the Jews' long existence and many other expressions given by the contributions of individuals such as Benedict de Spinoza, Albert Einstein, Sigmund Freud, and others. *Judaic art* includes the *nusaf* and liturgical poetry from ancient times, biblical poetry, the music and intonation of synagogue readings, the Jewish *rikudim*, the plastic arts, literature, and other expressions. *The philosophy of Judaism* encompasses the Bible, Moses Maimonides, Abraham Abulafia, Spinoza, Martin Buber, and many others.

In every Jew there is something of that unique paradigm of social consciousness, constantly interrelated with the cumulative knowledge from history, juridical and political ideas, art, moral philosophy, religion, and social psychology of the time and society the person lives in. In every Jew there is a social consciousness and a collective unconscious, even in those who hate themselves or who have other negative identities.

When Fidel Castro's Revolution came to power in 1959, a huge majority of Cubans hoped that his political movement would bring a better future to Cuba. Believing Fidel Castro's promises of democracy, social justice,

and individual freedom, most Cubans — including most of those who are now in exile in Miami and elsewhere — supported those dreams and hopes at that time.

However, it was a paradox that Jews, who historically have been involved in social reforms and revolutions because it is a part of Judaism to look forward to a world of justice and peace, took a different approach: 94 percent of the 15,000 Cuban Jews left the country in the first years of the Revolution and went to the United States, Israel, Venezuela, Panama, Costa Rica, and other countries. The history of the Jewish community of Cuba during the past 40 years is the history of the remaining 6 percent of a successful and proud community; it is the history of those who stayed and their children.^{2,3}

In 1959, I was 6 years old, and my parents were faithful believers in that Revolution. I hope that my personal account will help you to understand the lives of those Jews who decided to stay in Cuba and to continue to have a Jewish life, *lamrot hakol* (despite everything).

A Community Born with the Twentieth Century

The history of Jews in Cuba begins in 1492, when Christopher Columbus and his comrades arrived on the northeastern coast of the Cuban archipelago. The same day that Columbus and his men left Europe was the deadline for Jews to leave Spain. It was the date of the enforcement of the Catholic Kings' Order to expel the Spanish Jews who did not accept conversion (some hundreds of thousands, that is, most Jews), which was the reason for some converted Jews, such as Rodrigo de Triana and Luis de Torres, to embark on Columbus' (himself a crypt-Jew) expedition and eventually to arrive in Cuba. Later colonial history shows that from 1500 to the late 1800s, non-declared Jews participated directly in the sugarcane culture and industry and in illegal trade with Dutch and British ships. There were even Jewish corsairs and pirates arriving in Cuba.

The Jewish presence in Cuba is also known through the Inquisition courts, which processed some alleged crypt-Jews, although most of this documentation disappeared after two large fires in Cartagena de Indias' Inquisition headquarters. Perhaps the most famous of those crypt-Jews was Morell de Santa Cruz, Bishop of Havana during and after the British occupation of Havana in the 1760s.

In 1850, Venezuelan General Narciso López, attempting to annex Cuba to the United States, landed in Cárdenas, a port city east of Havana, and failed in this effort. His military chief was a Hungarian Jew, Louis Schlesinger, and many other Jews took part in the 95-percent foreign expedition, among them August Bondi, who later returned to the United States and became known during the Civil War on President Abraham Lincoln's side.

It is important to underline the links and sympathies of José Martí for

the Jews. In 1874, a former Hebrew language student in Madrid Central University's faculty of philosophy and literature, Martí was, until his death in 1895, closely linked to Jews in New York, Key West, Tampa, Caracas, and other cities. *La Edad de Oro* magazine, written by Martí for children, was edited by Dacosta, a Jew. Martí wrote dozens of articles about Jews, among them, "Hanukkah" (December 24, 1881); "New York Letter" (January 6, 1882); "On Judah P. Benjamin" (1884); "NY Condemns Prosecution of Jews" (February 1884); and "Carlyle, the Romans and the Sheep" (February 1884). In 1882, Martí publicly spoke at the Key West Israelite Colony, invited by brothers José, Max, and Eduardo Steinberg; the board of directors donated to Martí the funds from their social fund. Jews also constituted the "Isaac Abravanel" Club of the Partido Revolucionario Cubano.

Tampa, Key West, and Caracas Jews contributed effective help to Cuba's fight for independence. Some of the outstanding names are Lewis Fine, resident in Key West, who gave valuable help to Martí; Horatio Rubens, member of the Junta Revolucionaria organized in New York, who was Partido Revolucionario Cubano's attorney; Schwarz, General Calixto García's aid; General Carlos Roloff (aka Akiva Roland) of the War Treasury and director of the Veterans Archive, first Treasury of the Republic; and the Steinberg brothers, who fought in the war.

On the Jews, Martí wrote, "De su religión, los hebreos hacen patria. . . . [From their religion, the Jews make their homeland. . . .] Somos un tanto hebreos, un poco a fortuna, y esperamos siempre un mesías que nunca llega. Y no hay más que un modo de ver llegar al mesías, y es esculpirlo con nuestras propias manos."

In a letter, Ejército Libertador Cubano Colonel Fernando Figueredo wrote, "Los cubanos deben vivir reconocidos a los hebreos, por su simpatía y por la ayuda prestada a nuestra causa; por eso debemos bendecir sus nombres." [Cubans must live acknowledging Jews, for their sympathy and for their aid to our cause; for that we must bless their names.]

During the Spanish-American-Cuban War (1898), some 3,500 Jewish soldiers and officers from the United States volunteered to take part in the war, according to the preliminary list of Jewish soldiers and sailors participating in that war and published shortly after it.⁴

In 1906, U.S. Jews founded the first synagogue in Cuba, the United Hebrew Congregation (Reform), which was closed in the 1980s, and established the first Jewish cemetery in Guanabacoa, east Havana. In 1906, the Jewish population of Cuba was 1,000 people, and the entire Cuban population was 1.5 million people.

In 1914, the Chevet Ahim Sephardic Society was founded, at Inquisidor Street between Luz and Santa Clara Streets, in Old Havana, thanks to the affluence of thousands of Jewish immigrants from Turkey and the Balkan countries. They also founded a Sephardic cemetery not far from the United Hebrew Congregation's cemetery. In this society, my grandfather Moisés (I was named after him) was president of the Bikkur Holim society, a

beneficent organization for helping the sick and needy, and his cousin Mario Asís was president of the cemetery until he passed away in 1970. Chevet Ahim survived the Revolution.

By 1925, there were 8,000 Jews in Cuba (some 2,700 sephardic, 5,200 ashkenazic, and 100 Americans). Four ashkenazic Jews were in the small group that founded the first Communist Party of Cuba in 1925: Grimberg, Vasserman, Simjovich aka Grobart, and Gurbich. They opposed the religious and community life of the other Jews.

Later, other Jewish institutions were founded: the Centro Israelita de Cuba; Unión Sionista de Cuba (closed in June 1978 by the communist regime, and its offices were handed over to the Palestine Liberation Organization representation in Havana); the Asociación Femenina Hebrea de Cuba; and the Comité Protector de Tuberculosos y Enfermos Mentales. In 1935, an ORT vocational school was founded.

In 1935, the Jewish population of Cuba had grown to 20,000 and peaked during the World War II years. In 1941, the Comité Hebreo Antinazi and the Sociedad Israelita de Oriente (this later closed in the 1970s and reopened in the late 1990s) were created. The Centro Popular Hebreo carried out intense activity against Nazism.

B'nai B'rith Lodge (Maimonides 1516) was founded in 1943, and later the Adath Israel Religious Society, at the corner of Acosta and Picota Streets, Old Havana; both have survived to this day.

In 1952, there were 12,000 Jews in Cuba (of these, 7,200 were ashkenazic), as most of the war refugees had found their way to the United States. The 1950s coincide with the climax of the economic growth of Jews who had arrived in Cuba 10 to 30 years earlier. In 1955, the Patronato de la Casa de la Comunidad Hebrea de Cuba (mainly ashkenazic) was founded at I and 13th Streets, Vedado, Havana, and around that time the Centro Hebreo Sefaradí de Cuba was built at 17th and E Streets, Vedado, Havana. The government has allowed these two centers to function continuously.

Why Leave, Why Stay?

The Jewish community of Cuba began in 1898, when some of the 3,500 American-Jewish soldiers taking part in the Spanish-Cuban-American War decided to live in Cuba and established the first Jewish cemetery and temple there.⁴ After that, during the first 50 years of the twentieth century, thousands of Jews from Turkey, Poland, Russia, Latvia, and elsewhere came to Cuba, mainly with the hope of going on to the United States, but the result was that many stayed in Cuba and felt very happy to share their fate with the Cubans. By 1959, the Jews in Cuba had almost reached the climax of their economic and social development.

The answer to why 94 percent of the Jews in Cuba left the country during the first years of the Revolution can be summarized in the words of Max Nordau: "We are so old that in our history everything has happened and

nothing new can occur.” This explains why nearly all of the Jews did not believe in the beautiful speeches on democracy and social justice delivered by Castro and other Revolution leaders. Jews were professionals and businesspeople who had recently learned the lessons of totalitarian regimes in Europe. There is a Jewish saying: “When things don’t get better, don’t worry; they may get worse.”

In Cuba, the remaining 6 percent of the total Jewish population were the more assimilated and those who had a belief in the Revolution. Also, many older people who had no strength to begin a new life abroad preferred to stay.

From my childhood, I have memories of Passover celebrations at my grandparents’ home, the taste of *matzoh*, curiosity about the Hebrew language, the non-consumption of pork or lard in our home, and the *Brith Milah* or circumcision ceremonies.

In 1970, one incident changed my life. I tried to leave the country illegally with seven other people in two tiny boats from the Caibarién coast. The boats sank, and we returned home but were incarcerated by the political police, the Department of State Security. An illegal exit was a political offense called a “Crime Against National Security and Stability,” judged by a military court. I was judged and sentenced, even though I was a minor. The political police officer lied. The attorney assigned by the judge did not defend us. The trial was an offense to fair justice.

As a political prisoner at the age of 17, I was doing forced labor for one year in Lenin Park, South Havana, along with some volunteer workers. One of the volunteers, a very proud communist, was discussing *Granma*’s news about Israel. “The worst thing Hitler did was not to eliminate all the Jews.” I said nothing. After I had survived my minimum term of one year out of a sentence of four years, as soon as I was free I decided that I wanted to live a Jewish life with my community.

Indeed, I had a role in the preservation of the community by actively participating in its institutions, by improving its relations with other communities abroad and other religions at home, by writing and lecturing on Judaism everywhere, by improving contacts with Israel for a further massive *aliyah* (migration to Holy Land) of Cuban Jews, and by creating a school that served to plant the seeds of Jewish identity in the next generation. All of this was accomplished at a high cost. I survived the difficult times with the help of many Jews, in spite of the political hostility of some local Jewish leaders. Finally, in 1993, I decided to leave Cuba with my family.

The Community

The Jews of Cuba survived, despite their isolation for 40 years and their dramatic depletion; the dearth of rabbis, cantors (*chazanim*) and professional teachers; the poverty of the community and its institutions; their assimilation into the Cuban culture; and the restrictions (until 1991) on religious practice in Cuba.

The only source for a demographic study of Jews in Cuba has been the Passover census: the registry of people buying matzoth and other Passover products once a year. These products have been donated since 1959 by the Jewish Canadian community and since 1985 also by communities in Mexico, Panama, and other countries.

In 1989, according to my research,⁵⁻⁷ the community was integrated by 892 people or 305 families. Of these people, 635 were Jews born from a Jewish mother (70 percent) or from a Jewish father (30 percent).

Of a total of 194 couples, only in 14 were both partners Jewish, which shows a 93 percent exogamy. In respect to education, 22 percent of adult Jews had a university degree.

Although the above data are for 1989 (the last year I was permitted to access the census), the study shows the situation in the years prior to the “legalization” of religions in 1991. For the next 10 years, a process of intensive migration of hundreds of Cuban Jews to Israel, the United States, and other countries took place. Many non-Jewish partners and children in exogamic couples were converted to Judaism by rabbis sent to Cuba by the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee. Many “non-Jewish Jews” (Isaac Deutscher’s term for Jewish-born communists and other self-haters), 99 percent of them married to non-Jews, felt frustrated by the communist ideology and famine and approached the Jewish community after the Communist Party of Cuba stated in late 1991 that its members were permitted to visit religious institutions and even to profess religious beliefs. During the late 1990s, most of the activists and leaders in Jewish institutions were Jews who had abhorred Judaism and Israel a few years earlier. Considering that newcomers and the newborn are replacing Jews who die and those who leave the country every year, a number of 1,000 appears to be close to or surpassing the current actual demography. However, it is a fact that the only thing these newcomers require — from a religious point of view — is to have their spouses and children (and even themselves in many cases) converted to Judaism, as also occurred in Russia and the former Soviet Republics after the disintegration of the Soviet Union. This is also happening among the immigrants from the former Soviet Union to Israel.

Forty years of shrinkage, isolation, atheism, anti-Israel propaganda, and Marxist indoctrination have done considerable damage to the Cuban Jewish Community, demonstrated by the increase in a lack of Jewish identity and almost 100 percent exogamy.

After 1959, five synagogues in Havana and one in Santiago de Cuba continued to be places of worship for Jews, as well as a school and other institutions. In the 1970s, one of the synagogues (Santiago de Cuba’s), the school, and the Zionist Union of Cuba were closed to Jews (the synagogue was reopened in 1996), and another synagogue, the United Hebrew Congregation, was empty and abandoned in the 1980s. Jewish life continued, however, and religious services were never interrupted. The eldest members of the community, people in their seventies and eighties, were the community’s

true heroes and led the religious life for all the years of the Cuban Revolution, despite many difficulties and negative challenges, although there was always the fear of religious extinction because of the high rate of assimilation and the lack of religious education at home for the younger generations.

I realized the fact that children of communists and “non-Jewish Jews” were showing interest in their roots. Two things came to my mind: 1) Hanson’s law in sociology, “The third generation remembers that the second tries to forget,” and 2) the story of Rabbi Yohannan ben Zakkai, who, in the year 70 CE, when the Jews and the Second Temple were being destroyed by the Romans, understood that only education could preserve Judaism for future generations, so he created his famous school in Yavneh, which ensured the survival of Judaism to this day.

The Cuban version of Yavneh was the opening of “Tikkun Olam” Hebrew Sunday School in Havana in the early 1980s. In Hebrew, *tikkun olam* means “healing, amendment, repair, transformation of the world,” and it is our wish expressed in prayers and especially at Yom Kippur, to repair or mend the world to make it just and peaceful. At the beginning, I was the school’s principal and only teacher for a group of 12 children and a few adults. As time passed, the school grew, and we added more teachers for dozens of students at different levels of learning. The purpose of the school was to teach Jewish identity and values and to plant a seed of love for Judaism and its history through the study of the Hebrew language, liturgy, songs, dance, history, Israel, and comparative religion. I am very proud that some of those students who started out not knowing the meaning of being a Jew have continued their studies in rabbinical seminaries in Argentina and the United States, and others have immigrated (made *aliyah*) to Israel or continued to teach other Jews in Cuba. The lessons were accompanied by discussions, lectures, and films.

While we observed our religious life and traditions, we also kept alive social organizations like B’nai B’rith, Bikur Holim, and young men’s and women’s groups. Beginning in the 1980s, thanks to personal contacts, we cooperated with the Ecumenical Council of Cuba, the Catholic Church, and Protestant churches.

Politics and Religion

Cubans never were anti-Semitic people, and Jews in Cuba received the same treatment as other immigrants. A nation that persecutes Jews cannot last long. The Revolution was very respectful to Jews as a community, although its negative attitude toward religion, Zionism, and Israel affected the Jewish community very much.

As religious people, we experienced exactly the same degree of discrimination and problems with access to jobs and universities as Christians and all other religious people in Cuba. As Jews, we noticed that there was always a cloud of suspicion over us because of our support of Israel and Jews in other countries. While we experienced discrimination, there was no anti-

Semitism.

In fact, Castro's Revolution had an ambiguous relationship with the Jews. On the positive side, it permitted freedom of expression, even the import of food donations for Passover and New Years and the domestic purchase of other products, as well as the distribution of kosher meat to the Jews instead of other meat and poultry through the ration cards. The Cuban criminal code protects citizens from the manifestations of national, religious, and racial hate.

On the negative side, for years Cuba trained thousands of Palestinian terrorists, even those of Abu Nidal and George Habash. The government published a lot of anti-Zionist, anti-Israel propaganda, showing Jewish literature and art and even the Holocaust as Zionist propaganda. Cubans could never read books by Anne Frank, Isaac Bashevis Singer, Eli Wiesel, Shmuel Yosef Agnon, or Bernard Malamud, for example. Cuba has been Israel's worst enemy at the United Nations and took the initiative to advocate embargoes, sanctions, and isolation against Israel, even the infamous resolution "Zionism = Racism," which was so unfair and noxious for Israel and the Jewish people worldwide. I attended the session of the General Assembly of the United Nations in late December 1991, when the infamous resolution "Zionism = Racism" was overwhelmingly canceled, and I will always remember the nonsensical arguments by the Cuban delegate justifying his anti-Zionist vote.

Finally, Cuban Jews have shared the same fate as Cuban Christians in being discriminated against in jobs and universities. Some were sent to the Unidades Militares de Ayuda a la Producción — forced labor camps for young political dissenters, religious people, gays, and exit applicants — in the late 1960s. All Jewish activists were under close surveillance all the time. And those "non-Jewish Jews" who reached positions of responsibility in the armed forces, Communist Party, and bureaucratic structures of power and professional relevance had to work twice as hard and show much more institutional loyalty than others in order to reach and keep their status.

Although the Jewish community was permitted certain privileges, such as keeping the management of its kosher butchery shop and receiving supplies of ritual products, the Cuban government maintained some degree of harassment against those Jews who were not sympathetic with the communist system, especially if they had any leadership position in the Jewish community. Thus, they provoked and forced Moisés Baldas, an old Zionist (1906, Lvov, Poland – 1994, Tel Aviv) who assumed the leadership of the Jewish community when most Jews left, to resign. He was replaced by an unscrupulous anti-Zionist, anti-religious Jew, José Miller, who had made most of his career as a dentist and a high-ranking officer in Castro's army and had shown considerable admiration for Castro himself and communism. In 1978, Miller took control of the community, and since then he has ruled it according to the government's interests. Widely regarded as a very corrupt, nepotistic, and authoritarian person, he has served as the internal police of the Jewish community and the external lobbyist for Castro in exchange for impunity for

his actions. In addition to his personal appropriation of cash and resources donated by foreign Jewish communities, Miller facilitated the *aliyah* (immigration) to Israel mainly for those who would constitute a burden on the state of Israel. In 1978, he kept secret from the Cuban Jewish community Castro's promise to Miami negotiator Bernardo Benes that the Cuban leader would grant exit permits to all Cuban Jews wishing to leave the country. The Jewish community never knew about this.

Although anti-Semitism was never practiced by the Cuban government, most of the population, or the Catholic Church, during the first three decades of the Cuban Revolution, some anti-Zionist books with strong anti-Semitic elements were published and distributed by the Cuban government, the sole owner of all publishing houses in the country. Some examples were *Sionismo: El fascismo de la estrella de David* (Zionism: The Fascism of the Star of David) by Prensa Latina journalist José Antonio (Tony) Fernández Pérez (La Habana: Editora Política, 1979), which is an offense to the Jewish people's history and religion. The Grupo de Estudios e Información sobre el Sionismo (GEIS), Group for Zionism Studies and Information, published in 1983 the papers of a symposium held in Havana on the "Zionist penetration in Latin America," whose actual concern was the Jewish presence in this continent. One of the authors, paradoxically, was an assimilated Cuban half-Jew, Rafael Pinto, whose grandfather acted his whole life as a rabbi for the sephardic community in Havana. Nabil Khalil Khalil, Prensa Latina Palestinian journalist, in his book *Propagandistas del terror* (La Habana: Ciencias Sociales, 1987) calls films such as "L'Affaire Dreyfuss" (France, 1898, "the first Zionist film"); "Samson and Delilah" (1908); "Moses" (1910); "The Great Dictator" (1940); "The Diary of Anne Frank" (1960); "Funny Girl" (1968); and others "Zionist propaganda," as well as works by writers Agnon and Malamud. Khalil denies the reality of the Holocaust and repeats falsehoods from other sources with no interference from the strict Cuban censors. Mahmud Abbas (Abbu Mazzen)'s book, *La otra cara: la verdad de las relaciones secretas entre el nazismo y el sionismo* (La Habana: PLO Embassy, 1987), states, among other things, that the Nazis killed some hundreds of thousands of Jews (six million cipher is "an invention by Zionists") but that the Nazis did not intend to do it — they were forced to do it by the Zionists, as this was convenient for them. The author also justifies the existence of Nazi crematoria.

These books plus others and many articles in newspapers and magazines had no impact on the Cuban population and even went unnoticed by most of the Jewish community. In publishing these books, the publishers were seduced by the political content of the titles and apparently were unaware of their fallacies and anti-Semitism. This also explains the frequent mistakes in names, dates, quotations, and other information appearing in all of the above-mentioned publications.

Legal Protection and Relations with the State

Some articles will be mentioned from the *Código Penal* (1988), the Cuban criminal code, that grant protection to the Cuban population, including the Jews, against discrimination, attacks, and limitations to the development of religious, cultural, or community life. Some ministerial legislation forbidding religious people from working in certain activities or studying in universities was deleted in the 1990s after the change of policy by the Communist Party of Cuba. However, from a historical point of view, I must state that for many years the access of religious people to the Academy of Sciences (today's Ministry of Science, Technology and Environment); the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Interior, Armed Forces, Foreign Trade, and Foreign Collaboration; the political and "non-governmental" organizations (are there any in Cuba?); and other bodies was explicitly forbidden, as well as their access to "ideological" professions in universities, such as psychology, education, law, sociology, diplomacy, journalism, medicine, and others.

The following are some of the articles in the 1988 *Criminal Code* that protect the practice of Judaism and all religions in Cuba:

Art. 116. Genocide.

Art. 120. Crime of apartheid.

Art. 291. Crime against the free expression of thought.

Art. 292. Crime against the rights of meeting, manifestation, association, complaint, and petition.

Art. 294. Crime against the freedom of cults.

Art. 295. Crime against the right of equality.

Although the Cuban Constitution and the codes have many articles that are not respected in practice, at least in theory a group of laws protects any group against abuses, but the general rule that covers all Cuban legislation appears to be "what is good for the state and communism is good and will be protected."

Any complaint by the Jewish community, or from any religious body, is presented to the Office for Religious Affairs, a department of the Communist Party Central Committee that has had a strong authority since 1985 to grant protection and to serve petitions to all religions acting within politically established limits.

Actually, in the 1990s there was a marked improvement between the Jewish community (as well as all other religions) and the Cuban government. This improvement came about through mutual concessions.

Life in the 1990s

In 1991, the Communist Party of Cuba changed its policy of opposition to religion and opened its doors to believers of all religions. In practical terms, this meant that thousands of communists began to attend churches and

synagogues. And maybe a few religious communists were accepted as members of the Party. This change of policy and the disastrous economic situation in Cuba after the disappearance of the Soviet Union as the main supplier of economic aid to Cuba brought many “non-Jewish Jews” to the community. The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 was for Cuba the failure of ideology and the beginning of hard times of hunger and despair.

Cuba’s rates of malnutrition, suicide, poverty, unemployment, diseases, prostitution, and uncertainty are worse now than they have ever been for the past 50 years.

All those who are entering Cuba’s Jewish community are welcome, no matter who they are or how much they have cursed or ignored their Jewish roots. In Hebrew, *teshuvah* means “return,” and it is the word for repentance. It is never too late for *teshuvah*, to come back to the right way.

Beginning in 1992, the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee started to give special attention to Cuban Jews: rabbis and specialists are regularly sent to help the community to organize; improve the education; perform conversions, circumcisions, and weddings; and supply the spiritual and physical needs of the community. Other organizations and communities have increased their support by donating school supplies, medicines, religious books and articles, food, clothing, and so on. A large amount of money has been donated to build a synagogue in Camagüey city and to repair the synagogues in Havana. In 1996, the synagogue of Santiago de Cuba was returned to the community and reopened, a women’s organization was created, and a Hadassah chapter was started, with the participation of Cuban Jewish doctors who distribute medicines to people who are ill.

The increased respect and tolerance shown by the Cuban authorities toward Cuban Jews, as well as toward people of all religions in Cuba (including the long-time prosecuted and incarcerated Jehovah’s Witnesses and fundamentalist Christians), has encouraged an increased response from abroad in the amount of food, medicines, and other supplies donated to Cuban institutions. Foreigners have also increased lobbying efforts against the United States’ trade embargo of Cuba.

Many Cuban Jews have expressed their desire to live in Israel since 1992, and more than 200 people have made *aliyah* to Israel in small groups of families. In the 1990s, other Cuban Jews emigrated to Europe, the United States, and Latin America. Nonetheless, Jewish life continues in Cuba — the community replaces itself with newcomers, young people emigrate, and older people pass away.

The Future of Judaism in Cuba

The Talmud Yerushalmi (Berakoth 9.1) says, “As long as a man breathes he should not lose hope.”

The worst times for Cuban Jews are over. The community has survived periods of isolation, religious restrictions, and the sudden loss of 94 percent of

its population. Assimilation and an anti-Israel policy have had their effects.

Cuba will always have a Jewish community. When Cubans reach their democratic goals, many Jews from other countries will want to take advantage of business opportunities in Cuba, and others will decide to live there. The present Jewish community in Cuba will lose some members by reunification with their families who live in the United States and Israel, while most Cuban Jews will not return to Cuba from these countries unless for retirement. However, many Jews in Argentina, Mexico, Venezuela, Canada, Europe, and the United States will find it very attractive to invest or practice their professions in Cuba.

These outsiders will form the next community in Cuba and will find synagogues where Jews of different generations worshipped every day and where every *shabbat* for 40 years was celebrated under the most difficult conditions.

“Jewish history is a history of martyrdom and learning,” as historian Heinrich Graetz said, but it is also a history of faith and hope.

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Dr. Moisés Asís, D.J., has a B.Sc. in Information/Library Science from the University of Havana; a Ph.D. *Honoris Causa* in Experimental Hypnosis, and an M.D. in Alternative Medicine from the Open International University for Complementary Medicines. He was a student at the Latin American Rabbinical Seminary in Buenos Aires, thanks to a Joint Distribution Committee Fellowship, and is the author of 15 books and over 100 articles on scientific and social subjects, including Judaism. For 25 years, he was an activist in the Jewish community of Cuba; the vice-president of B'nai B'rith Maimonides; and the founder, principal, and teacher of the "Tikkun Olam" Hebrew Sunday School in Havana. In Cuba, he was a researcher and therapist. In late 1993, he immigrated to the United States. At present, he works as a protective investigator at the Florida Department of Children and Families, Miami, and is a member of Temple Judea in Coral Gables.

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