CHAPTER ONE

ETHNICITY AND DIASPORA IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY
LATIN AMERICA: THE JEWISH CASE

Ethnicity in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Latin America is a popular topic for historians. Among the most frequent themes are the black-white continuum in places such as Brazil, the Caribbean and Venezuela; the indigenous-white continuum in Mexico, Central America and the Andes; and the hegemony of white Catholic Europeans over a number of subaltern groups in the Southern Cone.\(^1\) Academic production on ethnicity, however, has rarely focused on Latin Americans who trace their ancestry to the Middle East, Asia, or Eastern Europe, or those whose ancestors were characterized as Middle Eastern, Asian, or European non-Catholics. Today, people in these categories comprise at least ten million Latin Americans.

Jews are one group that has inspired a notable increase in scholarly interest (as distinct from community-based production). Most of this academic research was conducted by scholars in the United States and Israel and categorized as ‘Jewish studies,’ as it is in those few Latin American universities with programs in the field.\(^2\) This attitude continues in much of the scholarship and teaching outside of the United States where students learn about Latin America without hearing about the Jewish (or Middle Eastern or Asian) presence. By contrast, in the United States the study of Jews has begun to be integrated into Latin American studies, even though, ironically, Jewish Latin Americans continue to be marginalized or ignored as a sector of Jewish studies.

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\(^2\) Most research on Brazilian Jewry, for example, emerges from the Centro de Estudos Judaicos at the Universidade de São Paulo and the Programa de Estudos Judaicos at the Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro.
Descriptive language is critical to scholarship on ethnic groups, which are defined most broadly as “a self-conscious collection of people united, or closely related, by shared experiences.”3 In many cases scholars use definitional language that is quite different from that used either by the group they study or by majority national populations. This is certainly the case for ‘Latin American Jewry.’ The term, frequently used in the academic literature, suggests a broad hemispheric identity, but the subjects define themselves in three competing ways: as Jews, without reference to nation; as nationals, without reference to Jewish ethnicity; and as hyphenated Jewish- (fill in the nation here). These self-definations stand in marked contrast to the academic category of ‘Latin American Jewry’ which derives from two different sources. One is transnational Jewish social and political organizations, usually based in the United States and Israel, which categorize Jews in regional rather than national ways.4 The second source is scholars, mainly based outside Latin America, whose Diasporic perspectives often lead them to presume similarity based on language (e.g. Spanish) and minority status (e.g. Jews living in predominantly Catholic societies).5

The term ‘Latin American Jewry,’ however, is neither neutral nor descriptive. Indeed, it imposes an answer to what should be an important research question: “What is the relationship of minority group members to the national state and the Diasporic homeland?” This question is critical for understanding the multi-layered and fluid identities, individually and collectively, of Jews, Asians, Middle Easterners, and those of

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4 See, for example, the annual volumes of The American Jewish Year Book, edited by David Singer and Lawrence Grossman, and published in New York by the American Jewish Committee. The American Jewish Committee also produced Comunidades Judías de Latinoamérica.