chapter 8

Ethnicity and Transnationalism: Latino Jews in Miami

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Introduction

The city of Aventura, in the northeastern part of Dade County—the metropolitan area of Miami—has become a microcosm of Latin American Jewry. Jews from Venezuela, Colombia, Argentina, Mexico, Chile, Uruguay and other countries live in the large condominiums of the suburb, and lead an active social life conducted in Spanish. They take part in the services of local synagogues, such as Turnberry, Safra, and Beth Torah, they send their children to the Jewish day schools of the area, and they are members of “Hebraica” at the Michael-Ann Russell Jewish Community Center, where they try to reconstruct their former social activities.

The Cuban American Jews are hardly represented in the geographical center of the Latino-Jewish transnational diaspora. Many of them live in North Miami Beach, while their synagogues have remained in their historical location, too distant from their present residence—especially the Ashkenazi Cuban Hebrew Congregation in South Beach. Fifty years after their migration, they have become Americanized in the Miami style. They speak Spanglish, read El Nuevo Herald and dine in the Cuban restaurants of Calle Ocho. At the same time, they identify themselves as “Jewbans”—a term that combines their two identities, but also marks the boundaries that separate them from gentile Cubans and from Anglo (English-speaking) Jews.

In the 1960s, when thousands of Jewish refugees from Cuba settled in Miami Beach, their presence was practically ignored by the local Jews. Miami Beach, that at the time was 80% Jewish, was a center for Jewish pensioners who preferred to retire in a tropical climate—some of them “snowbirds” who came down only for the winter season. Their history was studied by Deborah Dash Moore in her book: To the Golden Cities: Pursuing the American Jewish Dream in Miami and L.A. (1994). Dash Moore tells the story of Jewish entrepreneurs, tourists, and elderly people from New York and Chicago, who made Miami their home. Her study covers the period up to 1970, but fails to mention the arrival of the Jewish refugees from Cuba. A perusal of the Jewish Floridian of
the early 1960s reflects the fact that the plight of Cuban Jews escaping the Castro revolution, aroused very little interest among their Anglo coreligionists. For the English-speaking American Jews, the recognition of “Hispanics” as part of their ethnic group would be a long and complex process.

Gradually, however, the Jewish institutions acknowledged the presence of Cuban Jews, as did scholarly works (Liebman, 1969; Bettinger-López, 2000, among others). The growth of the Cuban (gentile) population in the 1960s and 1970s, converted Miami into a “tri-ethnic community of Anglos (including Jews), African-Americans and Hispanics” (Green, 1995: 129–131). In 1980 the two minorities increased to more than half of the population, motivating the “white flight” to Broward County and Palm Beach. The demographic decline of the Anglo Jews changed their attitude towards their Spanish-speaking coreligionists.

Since the 1970s, Jews from Central and South America had turned to Miami at periods of economic crises and political upheavals. The circumstances that motivated their emigration were totally different from those of the Cuban exodus. They didn’t burn the bridges that tied them to their former homeland and to their former Jewish communities. Some of them started as temporary residents, others returned home or moved to other places. Their migration was bi- or multi-directional, creating a new transnational diaspora in constant transition, that I will call “Latino Jews.” The historical and social background of the Latino Jews was similar to that of the Cubans. Many of them studied in Jewish schools and participated in Zionist youth movements. They were members of Jewish social clubs rather than of synagogues, and in many cases they lived in protective frameworks in closely knit communities.

Nevertheless, Cuban and Latino Jews came to constitute two groups apart. The Cubans preceded the Latinos by one generation, and both groups have experienced the impact of Jewish global movements in different location and circumstances. The objective of this chapter is to analyze the consolidation of the Jewban and Latino Jewish transnational diasporas, and their interaction with the Anglo Jews in a comparative dimension. It will focus on the experience of ethnic and gender problems, and on changing attitudes towards religion, Zionism, and Israel.

### The Changing Ethnic Profile of Miami

During the past 50 years, Miami’s population has undergone a process of Latinization. While the proportion of Afro-Americans remained more or less stable, that of white English-speakers declined from 80% to 15%, while that of