KLAL YISRAEL AT THE FRONTIERS:  
THE TRANSNATIONAL JEWISH EXPERIENCE IN ARGENTINA

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How can Latin American Jews rethink the global perspective of Klal Yisrael from the local, and grasp the transnational dimension of their Jewish communities across national boundaries? Living in the far South American periphery of the world, how can they reassess the center, and cope with its post-modern dilemmas from societies that have not yet completed their modernity process? In a dominant multicultural outlook of the Western world, how can Jews living in mixed and mestizo cultures rethink new cultural expressions of the Jewish world from a Klal Yisrael perspective?

From its very inception, Latin American societies were connected to external centers and global foci of identity, which were primarily but not exclusively religious and cultural centers of the West. Latin America’s Jews were also part and parcel of the region’s shifting involvement in the global arena. At the same time, they adjusted themselves to the road of diverse forms of modernity in the Atlantic setting. Local elites in these societies prompted a continuous search for universal models of developments and institutions. Especially in the Rio de la Plata basin, they looked to core modern Western nations such France. As their cultural and political model, France provided philosophical and political ideas to both the right and liberal left circles, and influenced the secularization of society and the education system. A French republican and secular discourse was implemented by local elites when thinking about themselves and also when demanding assimilation in terms of the nationalization of immigrants and foreigners.

With the diverse paths to modernization, the countries of the Southern Cone—particularly Argentina and Uruguay—were able to think that they were on the way to disengaging themselves from the Hispanic Catholic tradition and approaching a European fate. The transnational dimension of modernity in Argentina was not restricted solely to its economic relations with European markets for beef and wheat, but
permeated all the internal institutional nation-building process, especially on such issues as citizenship and membership.

Since the post World War II era, the international links between U.S. government agencies and Argentina have increased. Together with the search for policy options in the international arena, Southern Cone countries have gained a variety of new transnational relations throughout the various stages of global distribution of power, from the multi-polar imperial state to the bi-polar Cold War stage, and presently to the uni-polar contemporary stage.

Historically, the Latin American path of becoming distinctively modern developed hand in hand with unequal patterns of underdevelopment, systemic political instability, strong nationalism against European superpowers and resisting US hegemonic penetration. Nonetheless, rulers of the area adopted the ideas for completing modernization and policies emanating from the Western model. Due to the particular modes of insertion into the global system and configuration of public spheres during the paths to a peripheral modernization, many of the unfulfilled expectations led to an increased sense of disappointment, disenchantment and lack of accomplishment. Yet such peripheral modernity—seen through the lenses of dependency, unequal terms of international exchange, and feeble democracies—did not prevent the people from experiencing the transnational dimension of becoming modern at the frontiers.

Rethinking Klal Yisrael in a Latin American post-modernity frame demands, first and foremost, a reassessment of the meta-narrative of center-Diaspora relations. This reassessment is important precisely because in a peripheral continent, people today tend to dispute the notion of Western modern narratives that underlie the theories of universalism, unity and homogeneity around one center. The modernist belief in a world people entity is now widely discredited in Latin America where the effects of the modernity project proved to be disappointing. For historical reasons, José Joaquín Brunner suggests that Latin America has experienced a sort of regional postmodernism avant la lettre (Brunner, 1987: 33).

This has several related dimension. There is the coexistence in Latin America of different levels of socioeconomic development, cultural hybridity and the dispersed and heterogeneous nature of multiple identities now so potent in the era of globalization. There is no longer any supposedly fixed centre, and no global answer—only partial truths in a periphery where the decline of meta-narratives of development,