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Jewish communal life today is founded on a sophisticated organizational system. The link of the Jew as an individual to communal organizations depends both on the individual’s sense of belonging and on the services this system offers which could satisfy the individual’s needs—be they educational, cultural, or social welfare. How are communal institutions facing these needs in a postmodern world? How can it be assured that the interweaving of the different communal institutions gives way to the establishment of an organized community and, as such, justifies the use of the concept *kehila* (voluntary community)? How can this system confront the new tendencies of an individualized and atomized world, on the one hand, and a globalized world on the other hand? Is it possible to preserve a communal framework without having a collective identity that is vibrant and relevant? These are some of the questions that ought to guide us when trying to analyze Jewish communal life in the 21st century. The key to advancement in this direction is not only to reformulate the concept of *kehila* in a globalized world, but also to accelerate the development of comparative research among Jewish communities and institutions within cities and countries, regions and continents (Davis, 1963; Goldstein, 2005).

The wide and comprehensive field of research that has grown in the past few years in Jewish communal life in the United States allows us to raise some comparative questions. One important question in this respect is whether the Jewish North American model serves as an archetype for understanding the community structure of the Jews in a globalized and multi-cultural world. The position expressed here is that we have to advance the development of comparative research in order to better understand the elements of Jewish communal life in the 21st century, taking into consideration the relevant contributions of Jewish North American researchers as well as Israeli researchers in this field.
The Comparative Approach within the Research of Latin American Jewry

Even though the comparative approach has been central in interdisciplinary research revolving around the field of contemporary Jewry, much of the existing research on South America has not adopted this approach.

The pioneering work of Moshe Davis in Jerusalem during the 1950s and the 1960s established the foundation for comparative study among Jewish communities, applying North American Jewry as the archetype or comparison model. Davis was the first researcher to include this comparison in studying Argentine Jewry by analyzing three Jewish centers in the Western Hemisphere: the United States, Canada and Argentina. Davis’ goal was to “outline, by means of comparison, some disparate and common elements in the three main Jewish centers in the Western Hemisphere,” emphasizing the organizational aspects as well as the study of representative institutions (Davis, 1963: 4–26).

Another center of comparative research of Latin American Jewry was developed at the University of Tel Aviv during the seventies, as manifested in the research of Schers and Singer (1977). This work was carried out at the Horowitz Institute within the framework of a research project on Jewish communities in Latin America, spearheaded by Schers. In this research, both external and internal factors that influenced the Jewish communities were studied, including their interaction and impact on the preservation of a particular collective identity within the context of nationalistic as well as assimilationist settings.


1 The original English version of this pioneering work was presented in the “Third World Congress of Jewish Studies” which took place at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in 1961.

2 See also Schers’ (1987) article, the result of his lecture at the LAJSA (Latin American Jewish Studies Association) congress which took place in Albuquerque, New Mexico, in March, 1984.