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Jewish Traditions in Latin American Context – The Creation of an Intercultural Diaspora in Argentina: from the Notion of "Melting Pot" to Contemporary Identity Politics

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This article explores sociocultural and political changes in Argentina that empowered the passage from the practice of Jewish rituals in private to the display of traditional expressive forms in public. Focusing on personal narratives of Jewish immigrants' children in Argentina about their childhood experiences in the 1930s and 40s and on festival celebrations performed currently in the streets of Buenos Aires, I analyze the implications of the contextualization of traditional practices, originally performed within the collective's boundaries to their open exhibition to society at large.

I begin by presenting some of the narratives about the WWII prewar and war period in Argentina, that I collected in the 1990s. Then, I examine street performance events that began to be staged at the same time by Jewish organizations in conjunction with celebrations derived from the identity politics that started to be in place in those years. I thus contrast the narratives about the public expression of Jewish identity in the first half of the 20th century with the contemporary discursive expressions through which Jewish culture is explicitly put on display. The concept of "performance" provides the analytical framework, and the analysis focuses on the social and political implications of such staging for the shaping of new expressive forms related both to a precedent diasporic Jewish culture and to the intercultural dialogues accomplished in contemporary Argentine society.

Keywords: identity politics, Argentine Jews, Jewish-Argentine folklore, diversity, performance.

Introduction

In the 1990s, when I began my research on Jewish-Argentine folklore, I was struck by recurrent stories about early fears of displaying Jewishness in

public.[1] I collected accounts in which the narrated events, dated in the 1930s and 1940s and located in working class neighborhoods of Buenos Aires where immigrants had settled, revolved around situations in which children of Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe were either harassed by their neighbors and classmates or afraid of being attacked by street mobs. Those stories also described the deployment of strategies in order not to be singled out in their everyday lives at a time in which Nazism at its peak in Europe seemed to expand in ways the scope of which could not be anticipated. The narratives spoke about Jews that knew that they were on the 'safe' side of the ocean, but that also made apparent a lingering anxiety tied to the Argentine context. The government's nationalist leanings in the 1930s and 40s, the antisemitic organizations that vandalized Jewish buildings and cemeteries in the 1960s and 1970s, and the right-wing military dictatorship that ran the country from 1976 to 1983 were some of the milestones and events that contextualized the stories.

By the turn of the century, almost two decades after the recovery of democratic rule, the early fears had been transformed and those narratives were for the most part tied to a distant past, relatively disconnected from present situations, although not completely. Furthermore, already by the year 2015 substantive changes in the sociopolitical arena were evident. A Reform rabbi became a cabinet member as Minister of the Environment and Sustainable Development, and a former executive director of DAIA (Delegación de Asociaciones Israelitas de la Argentina), an organization that has historically advocated for Jewish institutions and presents itself as "representative of the Jewish community", had become a prominent member of the national administration (Secretary of Human Rights and Cultural Pluralism). The anti-Jewish sentiments mentioned in the stories seemed to have reversed to a large extent together with ideological changes both within the Jewish collective and in society at large that had subjective implications as well.

Accounting for such relevant changes and concomitant implications requires a thorough examination of Argentina's social, political and intercultural processes, particularly those that took place from the last quarter of the twentieth century onwards. I will thus analyze fieldwork materials collected in two separate moments: the 1990s and the 2010s, to explain those developments through the examination of expressive forms – specifically personal experience narratives, as well as festivals and performance events carried out in public spaces.

[1] The research this article is based on is part of my current project for CONICET "Linguistic ideologies and verbal art in the Jewish Argentine collective (2015– present). The issues discussed here allow to hint at the significant ideological developments within the Jewish Argentine collective that took shape since the 1990s and that became undeniably apparent in the period that starts in 2015.

I will begin by presenting some of the narratives about prewar and war years in Argentina that I collected in the 1990s. At the time I interviewed Argentine children of Central and Eastern European Jewish immigrants born in the interwar period, who had received formal education in the public school system and were affiliated with Jewish community organizations.[2] They took part in social, educational, cultural and/or sport institutions. I took that participation as an *a priori* indicator of some degree of identification with Judaism or with Jewish culture. Some of the narratives were told in long, semi-structured interviews and others were recorded in informal conversations.

Secondly, I will examine street performance events that began to be staged in those same years by Jewish organizations in conjunction with ethnic celebrations derived from the identity politics that started to be applied in those years. I recorded those events from 2011 to 2015, when they were already well-established as celebrations. The reason for the focusing on such events is that they express the emergence of sociocultural and political changes and the forging of new ones that involve the explicit resignification of Argentine, Jewish, and hence, Jewish-Argentine identity in interactive contexts. I focused on the expressive forms staged in each of them and interviewed their organizers in their offices. I polled attendees on site during the celebrations to get their opinions and reflections about what they were experiencing, which allowed me to contrast the narratives recorded earlier about the public expression of Jewish identity in the 1930s and 40s with the contemporary situation in which Jewish culture was explicitly put on display in performance settings (Bauman 1977, 1992).

Stories of Fear in Two Contexts

In the context of the fieldwork that I carried out in the 1990s, the offspring of Jewish immigrants would tell me that when they were growing up in the 1930s and 1940s, their elders warned them once and again not to let "others" know that they were Jewish.

> (...) Acá te decían cuando ibas por la calle o subías a un tranvía te decían "*red nit af idish*" ("no hables en idish") porque tenían miedo (...), mi papá dominaba el castellano pero no tanto, por la calle [baja la voz] se trataba de no llamar la atención (NS).[3]

[2] The major influx of Jews from Central and Eastern Europe to Argentina started in the 1880s and continued, with fluctuations, until the outbreak of World War II (Avni 1991; Mirelman 1988). By the beginning of the twenty-first century, Argentine Jews numbered 200.000 (Della Pergola in Jmelnizky and Erdei 2005).

[3] In order to preserve the identity of the respondents, they are identified by initials.

> [(...) Here they would tell you when you were going down the streets or got on a tram, they would tell you "*red nit af ídish*" ("don't speak Yiddish"), because they were afraid (...), my father spoke Spanish, but not so much, in the street [she lowers her voice] it was about not calling attention (NS).[4]]

Yiddish being the language spoken by most of the Jewish immigrants, it was the most prominent distinctive feature to be avoided in order not to be singled out. At school, Jewish issues were discussed *sotto voce*:

> (...) Y tenía una compañera, una chica del colegio primario, que una vez así hablando le pregunto "¿vos sos idishe?" [bajando la voz] "callate, callate, no digas nada, no digas nada", tenía mucho miedo de decir que era judía, era algo (...) (EB).
>
> [(...) And I had a classmate, a girl from elementary school, that once we were talking and I asked her: "Are you Yiddishe?", [lowering the voice] "Be quiet, be quiet, don't say anything, don't say anything", she was afraid of saying that she was Jewish, it was something (...) (EB).]

Concealing the Jewish identity by trying to "pass" by expressing proficiency in Spanish, not talking about certain issues, or not showing the performance of Jewish rituals and religious traditions had been a common practice for immigrants in those years.

> Los viejos llevaban el *talit* (shawl) al *shul* (sinagoga) envuelto en papel de diario para que nadie supiera lo que llevaban (MB).
>
> [The elders took their prayer shawls to *shul* [synagogue] wrapped in the newspaper so that nobody would know what they were carrying (MB).]

When asked about the reason for such practices that seemed to have been so common in their childhood, respondents repeatedly explained to me that the fear that immigrants had brought from Europe made them act always with their heart in their mouths.

The weight of past experiences in their hometowns of Eastern Europe in the early twentieth century, the threat that was hanging over the Old World in the 1930s or the anxious watchfulness concerning what was actually going on with their families during World War II, which is apparent in the repeated mention of the fervent looking forward to news from the relatives left be-

[4] The interviews were held in Spanish. The citations were translated by the author.

hind, makes evident the big toll of the European background both on the immigrants' perceptions of the receiving society and on their interaction with other local actors.

The national context, into which they had been recently established, sent ambiguous messages to Jews. They felt they were secure when they pondered the news they were getting from Eastern Europe in two ways: via letters from their relatives – until they stopped receiving them – and through radio broadcasts and newspapers (Kahan and Lvovich 2016), but were not fully aware of how safe they were. On the one hand, the Argentine nation had been constructed on fierce processes of exclusion that were silenced at the time, but that were the backdrop against which the overseas immigration that populated the country particularly from 1880 to 1930 arrived. The ideologues of modern Argentina had decided decades before that the nation was to become a *crisol de razas*, a "melting pot" for people of European descent. By the end of the nineteenth century, indigenous peoples and Afrodescendants had already been excluded from that pot in processes charged with violence (Delrio 2005; Frigerio 2000; Geler 2016; Lenton 2014; Reid Andrews 1980), and a few decades later the dominant ideology was that of an ethnically and culturally homogeneous nation. On the other hand, in those same years, there were some specific events that sent warning signals like the prevalence of nationalist-Catholic ideology revalent after the 1943 military coup (Lvovich 2003), that children experienced in their everyday lives in public schools when they had either to attend classes of religion or, alternatively, take classes of "Moral", as a recurrent narrative plot tells.

> (...) Porque en esa época Religión y Moral eran dos materias separadas. Todos las judías estudiabamos Moral y después teníamos que quedarnos paradas en la puerta esperando que termine la clase de religión, muy divertido (EB).
>
> [(...) Because at that time Religion and Moral were two separate classes. All the Jewish girls studied Moral and then we had to stand at the door waiting for the Religion class to be over, very funny (EB).]

As far as the European immigrants in general were concerned, Argentina was definitely open to them as long as they left their cultural particularities aboard the steamships for the sake of the unified identity in a marginal modernity (Devoto 2003; Schneider 1996).

Jews, like the rest of newcomers, did what was expected of them. If melting involved learning to speak Spanish, to hail the national symbols, and to comply with the work ethics of an economy that needed hard and cheap

labor, they did so quite successfully. In the early 20th century, some Jewish intellectuals had carried out a focused work in order to make Jews fit in. In 1910, at the peak of the country's prosperous years and of the immigration period, writer Alberto Gerchunoff published a collection of short stories about Jewish life in the countryside that he called *Los gauchos judíos* (*The Jewish Gauchos*), to highlight their successful integration to national life. Having been the *gaucho*, a hero constructed by the *criollista* movement based on folk traditions to symbolize Argentine identity (Adamovsky 2019; Prieto 1988), turning Jews into "gauchos", was a cultural intervention to make an argument for their integration to national society.[5]

Indeed, besides literary elaborations, Jews were rewarded with the upward social mobility that most European immigrants attained. In general terms, a Jewish name was no hurdle for a career in business, politics, or in any other undertaking. The only requirement for full success in some of those venues was the indication that attachment to religious or specific cultural practices was part of the past. That indication had to be explicit on occasions, but most of the times it happened as an implicit accommodation to the dominant ideologies that promoted the blurring of ethnic distinctive features for European immigrants.

Jews found it harder to comply in later years when Catholic religion was required in order to blend in the "pot". That is, when in the 1940s, after the aforementioned 1943 coup, the growing influence of the Church in the government with a right-wing nationalist leaning accomplished an equalization of national identity with Catholicism (Rein 2005). The pre-conciliar accusation that Jews had killed Jesus, which Jews growing up in the 1940s heard often from their friends in school or playing in the street – a narrative either brought from Europe or learned in the local churches, or both – did not help much in terms of opening up the Jewish cultural sphere to the wider society. The following narrative adequately depicts the situation:

> EB: (...) La nena que vivía al lado decía "y", dice "Uds. toman la sangre de Cristo", y a mí me hacía reventar, me reventaba (...) después este sentíamos mucho la cuestión del antisemitismo, te voy a decir cuando, por ejemplo los días que eran los de Semana Santa y que yo que era chica yo quería que pasen rápido esos días porque era el día en que yo había matado a Cristo, yo maté a Cristo tenía que pasar rápido porque me lo hacían notar, no, "uds. mataron".
>
> FF: ¿Decían eso?

[5] There is a vast array of critical works on Gerchunoff's *Los gauchos judíos* and his subsequent writings that deal with his stance *vis a vis* Jews' integration into the national society (Feierstein 2000; Feierstein 2008; Senkman 1983, 2000; Szurmuk; Viñas 2005; Zayas de Lima 2005).

ER: Sí, era terrible, "Uds. comen carne porque comen la carne de Cristo", yo tenía una amiga polaca que era dos años mayor que yo, yo debía tener 8, 9, 10 años no más, y me escorchaba tanto con la cuestión esta que yo soy judía, () y todas esas cosas que una vez le dije "ay, Irma acabála con toda esta historia, porque al final Cristo fue judío", era lo único que yo sabía, porque en mi casa de religión no se hablaba, pero yo sabía que Cristo fue judío entonces los cachetes de ella se pusieron rojos así de la bronca y me dijo "no te pego porque sos más chica que yo" porque yo le dije que Cristo era judío no sabía que Cristo era judío, antisemita hasta acá, entonces yo la agarré y le dije "te vas de mi casa y no volvés nunca jamás" y la eché y nunca más.

[ER: (...) The girl who lived next door said: "And", she says, "you drink the blood of Christ", and it made me burst, it shattered me (...). We felt the issue of anti-Semitism a lot, I›ll tell you when, for example, on Easter Week, I was a young girl, I wanted those days to pass quickly because those were the days when I had killed Christ, I killed Christ, it had to pass quickly because they made me feel it, "you killed".

FF: They said that?

ER: Yes, it was terrible, "you do eat meat because you eat Christ's meat". I had a Polish friend who was two years older than me, I must have been 8, 9, 10 years old, no more, and she was so annoying with that issue, that I am Jewish, and all those things that once I told her: "Oh, Irma put an end to this whole story, because in the end Christ was a Jew", it was the only thing I knew, because there was no talk about religion at home, but I knew that Christ was a Jew, then her cheeks turned red and she said to me: "I won't hit you only because you're younger than me", because I told her that Christ was a Jew, I knew that Christ was Jewish, (she was) anti-Semitic up to here [she points to her forehead with her hand], so I grabbed her and told her: "You leave my home and never come back", and I kicked her out and she never came back.][6]

Jews were allowed to integrate as citizens with full rights at the expense of leaving their cultural identity traits at home, stretching the divide between the public and the private spheres and recreating symbolically in

[6] The same situation was corroborated by another respondent who provided the full name of a Catholic priest, who happened to be the director of a Catholic school, whom he heard express the same ideas.

local terms what my respondents repeatedly termed as the "ghetto mentality", that is, Jewish life lived behind closed doors. Both the earlier layers of liberal discourse that had been the foundation of modern Argentina in the late 1800s – the idea of "melting", and the later equalization of a "true" Argentine identity with Catholic religion of the 1930s and 1940s, did much in fostering Jewish public invisibility.[7]

From "Multiculturalism" to "Interculturalism" and the Making of a Jewish-Argentine Identity

An extensive bibliography shows that the "multicultural" model of society that gained acceptance in the 1990s, while promoting general recognition of national citizenship and the right to difference, loses sight of inequality and conflict, constituents of social relations (Gutierrez Martinez 2006; McLaren 1994; Wieviorka 2006). Likewise, the prevailing conception of diversity in public policies was, and continues to be, based on a notion of essentialist and crystallized culture that only seeks to emphasize and highlight what is not conflictive in social interaction (Grimson 2011; Lacarrieu 2001; Segato 2007).

In Argentina, the valorization of plurality at the public discourse level took place simultaneously with the continuation of discriminatory practices towards certain collectives, anchored in national history. The confinement of social groups as 'communities' in the rhetoric of identity politics, all formally equal, regardless of their particular histories, their demographic composition and the specific issues that each of them deals with, expresses the vision of an abstract and static "diversity", alien to the dynamic character of social life. The still conception in terms of 'communities' defined and formed at fixed moments prevents the perception of processes that involve rearrangements within them and the possible emergence of new groups that express new forms of bonding. Studies have also shown that grounding attitude on an ethnic perspective only, makes one to lose sight of diversity within and between group as well as the scope and multiplicity of relationships possible among migrants on different locations around the world (Glick Shiller, Çağlar and Guldbransen 2006; Glick Schiller and Çağlar 2009).

From those days in which Jewishness was covered – because of a real or imagined threat or because in the public sphere everyone had to look the

[7] The issue of public invisibility in Argentine society pertains not only to Jews. Other collectives have also been subject to processes of invisibilization albeit on different grounds. A case in point is that of Afrodescendants, a collective formed in colonial times that began to be visible after the struggles carried out by activist groups in conjunction with the identity politics of the 90s (Frigerio and Lamborghini 2011; Lamborghini 2019; Lamborghini and Kleidermacher 2019).

same – to the present, much has passed, besides decades in terms of sociocultural and political processes. I will thus address recent and contemporary social and political events that intertwined with the public deployment of traditional expressions that brought about transformations in the way Jewishness and Jewish-Argentineness is experienced.

From the Inside Out

The use of public space for rallies and demonstrations has been a constant in 20th century Buenos Aires owing to the different historical moments to a greater or lesser extent. These demonstrations have served particularly to channel demands from different social agents and various ideological positions: workers, political organizations, human rights organizations, Catholic nationalist groups, farmers (Lobato 2011).

In 1983, with the restoration of a democratic rule after a seven-year military regime, government organizations began to carry out events that pursued the recovery of public space for the construction of citizenship. After a period of terror, in which all people – not only Jews – were forced to stay home, they were encouraged out. Cultural policies implemented by national and subnational administrations took the form of concerts in the open air, fairs and street markets as spaces to rebuild social ties. Those were massive meetings organized by state institutions with the explicit goal of gathering people in public locations and stimulating festive atmosphere. Artistic performance events multiplied in open venues aiming at recovery of art's role in establishing interpersonal networks. Those events later expanded their scope to embrace the honoring of multiculturalism, evidencing a turn from an ideology of national homogeneity to one of pluralism that attempted to reverse the historical neglect of the nation's diversity and which went hand in hand with the expansion of globalization and neoliberalism (Segato 2007). Such events usually resorted to folk expressions (music, dance, food, costumes) associated with different social groups, particularly but not limited to those of migrant origin, with the explicit goal of making visible and enhancing the constitutive plurality of national society (Bialogorski y Fischman 2013; Fischman 2011).

The Jewish community is one of the groups that has been usually invited to participate in those celebrations of diversity, and its institutions usually comply with the exhibition of "typical" forms, as expected.[8] Together with

[8] Interestingly, the accomplishment of these expressions of identity politics entails the conflation of groups according to criteria not necessarily shared by the collectives portrayed. A case in point is that of Afrodescendants and African migrants "celebrated" together disregarding basic and sensitive issues, like the fact that the former are Argentine citizens and have been subjected to processes of invisibilization in Argentine history (for

the encouragement to come out and partake in these celebrations as a legitimate constituent of national society, a singular incident pushed the Jewish collective out, this time not to celebrate, but rather to demand. In 1994, AMIA (Asociación Mutual Israelita Argentina)[9] was the target of a terrorist attack that left 85 dead. The AMIA bombing is considered to have been the biggest anti-Semitic attack since WW II. The attack, which has remained unsolved, has had wider implications related to geopolitical issues lasting to this very day. It signaled a moment of high visibility and the discussion of Jewish singularity, which was accomplished in a great way through performances in the public space which were, for obvious reasons, not festive. However, Jewish prominence in public discourse had for some time, as a counterpart, a retreat into the community based on security concerns. This time the fear materialized in talks in which fright was based on real attacks, but also exogenous in that the alleged origin came from afar. Not Europe, but the Middle East.

The performances related to the commemoration of the bombing and the demands for justice that followed, drew both from traditional Jewish symbols as well as from references ingrained in Argentine history. Commemorative ceremonies that were also demonstrations against the inability or unwillingness of the Justice system to find the perpetrators, blended a symbolic repertoire associated with Jewish Argentine culture and belonging. Following processes of divergence between community organizations and some of the relatives of the deceased in the attack, new forms of public demand arose, all of them in the public space and resorting to Jewish traditions and symbols like the playing of the *shofar*[10], and the utterance of Biblical phrases in Hebrew. One of the groups that promoted collective action independently from Jewish community organizations, Memoria Activa, blended Jewish expressive forms with ways of social protest rooted in the Argentine national political culture (Fischman and Pelacoff 2015).

But even before the events that took place in 1994 and detached from any kind of explicit political demand, the Argentine branch of the Hassidic movement Chabad Lubavitch based in Brooklyn[11] began to hold a *Hanukkah*[12]

a thorough analysis see Lamborghini and Kleidermacher 2019) and the latter are rather recent arrivals to the country.

[9] Argentine Jewish Mutual Aid Association.

[10] *Shofar*: the horn of a ruminant animal, usually a ram, blown as a trumpet by the ancient Hebrews in battle and during religious observances, and used in modern Judaism especially during *Rosh Hashanah* and at the end of *Yom Kippur* (Merriam Webster n.d.).

[11] On the Chabad Lubavitch movement (Jabad Lubavitch in Argentina) see Setton 2009.

[12] *Hanukkah* (Hebrew: "Dedication"), also spelled Ḥanukka, Chanukah, or Chanukkah, also called Feast of Dedication, Festival of Lights, or Feast of the Maccabees, Jewish festival that begins on Kislev 25 (in December, according to the Gregorian calendar) and is celebrated for eight days. Hanukkah reaffirms the ideals of Judaism and commemorates in particular the rededication of the Second Temple of Jerusalem by the lighting of candles on each

celebration in one of the city's main parks to which high government officials were invited as early as 1985, a practice that has continued and expanded until today. The ritual consisted in the lighting of a candelabrum on eight consecutive nights followed by music and dances. It thus began to put on stage events in open, principally to Jews and non-Jews alike, practices previously reserved for the family and community institutional sphere (in the cases of those that observed them). By doing so, it transferred to the public purview customs previously limited to the members of the community. It was a contextualization of traditional Jewish practices (of the Hassidic way of carrying them out) for new audiences, with the concomitant transformations. More than three decades later, this organization spreads *hanukkiot*[13] all over town for the season. An official from a secular Jewish organization said to me in an ironic tone: "They put a *hanukkia* in a park the same way you would put a plant pot on your terrace", meaning that they have unrestricted access to the public realm to fulfill their goals. It is a significant remark in the context of the ideological struggles within the collective taking place at present because it refers both to the unrepressed practice that allows this group to express boldly their Jewishness (according to their understanding) and also to the open access to governmental permissions to set up non-Catholic religious symbols in public locations in a country that, as mentioned earlier, had strong ideological influences of the Catholic Church.

Two decades after the Chabad Lubavitch street celebrations started, the JDC (Jewish Joint Distribution Committee), an organization based in the United States as Chabad Lubavitch albeit not identified with any of the Jewish religious currents, started to carry out street events through a program termed YOK[14] which, with some changes, still perform to this very day. They do so from an opposed standpoint, that is, instead of focusing on a religious way of understanding Jewishness based on the prescription of strict observant ways, they stress diversity.[15] They not only focus on diversity as a relevant trait of Argentine society, but also as a core feature of Judaism. As a rejoinder to Chabad's alleged literal attachment to the Sacred Texts and active proselytism of their uniform way of understanding Judaism, their motto

day of the festival. Although not mentioned in the Hebrew Scriptures, Hanukkah came to be widely celebrated and remains one of the most popular Jewish religious observances (Britannica 2020).

[13] *Hannukiot* is the plural of *hanukkia*, the nine-branch candelabrum lit during the Hanukkah holiday.

[14] According to a JDC staff member, the term 'YOK' was related to the Spanish term 'yo' ('I') and 'OK' and it was not geared at having any specific meaning. It was a kind of marketing finding, a result of giving the program a name that didn't sound too Jewish, but that at the same time sounded strange, that it was easy, short, not necessarily identified with any Jewish organization, and that it didn't have the logo of any of them.

15 On contemporary diversity within the Jewish Argentine community see Bargman 2017.

is "Judaism, your way".[16] At their peak, they covered the entire ritual calendar, but the biggest events were *Pesaj Urbano* and *Rosh Hashana Urbano* (*Urban Pesach* and *Rosh Hashana*). These celebrations consisted of multiple street activities deployed on several settings simultaneously. Various performances ranging from Klezmer[17] music to stand up shows and to debates between religious authorities and secular intellectuals on topics related to the holiday celebrated were held. There was even room for tango, an artistic expression considered to be the utmost representation of Buenos Aires culture. On the layout of a trade fair a wide variety of goods were sold: food (Eastern European – knishes, and Middle Eastern –falafel), crafts and products related to ritual life and culture defined in a broad sense (candelabra, mantels, books). There were also spaces where young instructors carried out pedagogical activities on topics related to the festival and explanatory displays. It was definitely a fair that offered what seemed to be a commodified idea of "Jewishness" based on the notion that each person can choose what to put in it, free from any kind of binding ties.[18] The program that was devised by a professional team in Argentina, was exported by way of the JDC to other countries, like Hungary and Poland.[19] The chair of the program explained it this way:

[16] "YOK is an initiative of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee. It is a proposal to live Judaism your way. Without dogmas or censorship. With the certainty of being Jewish and the questioning of a living culture. It is a cultural proposal that seeks in the intellectual and artistic manifestations, an incessant reflection on the things Jewish. YOK was born with the purpose of contributing to the development of a pluralistic community by re-signifying Jewish values directed to the whole society. YOK is conformed as an integrating factor of a multicultural society from its Jewish specificity. It is an invitation to pluralism, to be Jews in this new century, understanding that traditions constitute a mark to elaborate. The project, linked to the enrichment of social and cultural life, integrates a plan of activities that will take place throughout the year: events, special activities, festivals, exhibitions, meetings in new alternative spaces. Its programming seeks to inspire the personal journey and with others towards the connection with the Jewish culture and one's own identity. The project focuses on highlighting how Jewish culture crosses Argentines and its contribution to the strengthening of social ties. YOK is in charge of a multidisciplinary team and aims to integrate people of multiple identities through cultural, artistic or social activities in an open space". (Accessed on Linkedin on 2/10/21).

[17] Klezmer music, genre of music derived from and built upon eastern European music in the Jewish tradition. The common usage of the term developed about 1980; historically, a *klezmer* (plural: *klezmorim* or *klezmers*) was a male professional instrumental musician, usually Jewish, who played in a band hired for special occasions in eastern European communities. In the 21st century, klezmer music can be heard wherever Jews have settled (Slobin 2020).

[18] I provided detailed descriptions of the events in Fischman 2013.

[19] Information about the JDC's activities was generously provided by staff members of the JDC that were interviewed at the time in which the activities described were held. The description of the celebrations was based on fieldwork participant observation done by the author on several consecutive occasions.

> "This is intended to be a sample of the much broader and more diverse Jewish culture, which is also a way of showing that it is not only the religious practices that are shown in the streets."

This simultaneous flowering of Jewish cultural expressions that was interestingly promoted by international organizations with different ideological agendas was also echoed by Jewish-Argentine institutions. The aforementioned AMIA, an organization that was founded and based in Argentina that is, rooted in national history and society, held a *Purim*[20] festival from 2005 to 2015, in the center of one of the most characteristic Jewish neighborhoods in town (although Jewish demography was dwindling).[21] The creator of this event put its rationale this way:

> "The reason for choosing the place has to do precisely with not being inside, that is, being able to open it, that it is inclusive, that it has to do with being able to tell our story, to welcome people in this diversity, in this Argentina where the Jewish community is so ingrained and not doing an endogamous thing, we, for ourselves in the ghetto, but an absolutely open thing that goes to the street, that goes to the neighbours."[22]

This public Purim festival followed a similar structured ordering since the first edition in 2004. It comprised a regular number of artistic performances that staged traditional expressions – *Klezmer* music, Israeli folk dances, and parades of children in costumes. It thus sought to reissue the carnivalesque tone of the celebration, more in terms of an illustration of the traditional carnival mood than in any sort of reversal of the established order (Jewish or otherwise). The word by word reading of the Scroll of Esther – one of the ritual prescriptions for the festival – was replaced by an oral version in which the plot was kept, but filled in successive renderings with allusions to national and international political issues (Fischman 2013). Intertwined with the performance of Eastern European and Israeli folk aesthetic expressions, speeches by the president of AMIA, its Director of Culture and the Israeli ambassador elaborated verbal art forms that brought the Purim narrative from Persia to the streets of Buenos Aires with a stop in the contemporary State of

[20] Purim (Hebrew: "Lots"), English Feast of Lots, a joyous Jewish festival commemorating the survival of the Jews who, in the 5th century BCE, were marked for death by their Persian rulers. The story is related in the biblical Book of Esther (Britannica 2021).

[21] In 2015, in what is the last recorded event, the celebration was moved to the northern sector of the city, closer to where Chabad Lubavitch began to hold its celebrations in the 1980s.

[22] GW, interviewed on 8/9/11.

Israel by way of the organization's Zionist ideology. Evil Haman, the minister of King Ahasuerus who plotted against the Jews in the Scroll of Esther, could be alternatively Saddam Hussein or the Iranian president. The city of Shushan, where the events told in the Purim story was once equated to Teheran. And, enacting the same notion, the festival was used to voice the official Jewish community rejection of Argentine diplomatic ties with Iran and the government's proposed agreement with that nation and state whose diplomats were accused of taking part in the attack on the Jewish institution, in ways that anticipated a tough stance against the national government administration at the time (the one that finished its term in 2015) and the subsequent association with the administration that followed.

By the turn of the century*, Pesach*, *Rosh Hashana*, *Hanukkah*, *Purim*, all the Jewish festivals usually observed with varying degrees of compliance at home and in congregations, began to have some sort of equivalent correlate in parks, plazas and streets of Buenos Aires and there were other organizations, besides the Hassidic one mentioned, involved in the staging of the events. Some of the celebrations have had a steady permanence in time, and have even evolved to encompass a growing number of locations. Some others had been performing for some time and waned later. At first glance, these festivals were akin to the current celebrations of "diversity" and "multiculturalism" set up by government organizations. However, they were – and are – more than that. They are based not only on the celebration of a diverse society predicated on more or less substantive terms as is usually the case in the official celebrations in which there is a selection of expressive modes (e.g. music, dance, food), which are explicitly tied to a social collective.[23] They have been built on complex preceding cultural frameworks – among them folk traditions – that in the present openness to diversity in general and to Jewishness in particular find the context to be put on display, and to generate new dialogues within and outside the collective.

In the following section I delve into the implications of such appraisal of cultural pluralism for the Jewish-Argentine population in terms of their visibility in the public sphere.

From the Private to the Public and Back

All these celebratory events express and perform particularism in relation to the national society that now not only tolerates cultural diversity but also promotes it as a positive value. However, if that was the only goal of the Jewish organizations, partaking of the innumerable official celebrations of "multiculturalism", like *Día del Inmigrante* (Immigrant's Day), *Feria*

[23] On official celebrations organized by government see Bialogorski and Fischman 2013.

de las Colectividades (Communities Fair), *Teatro por la diversidad* (Theatre for diversity), to name just a few at national and subnational levels, would be enough. But that is not the case, since coupled with those events the Jewish collective stages other events that have some aesthetic similarities in principle, but that prove to address different issues.

Public sites have become the locus of a discursive struggle for establishing the parameters of Jewishness and Jewish-Argentine identity. Variability within the collective always existed. Ideological differences have always been part of Jewish history. In modern times, Zionists vs. Bundists, Yiddishists vs. Hebrewists, Zionists vs. the promoters of *doikayt* (hereness, that is, that Jewish life had to be rooted in the places where Jews lived) have been some of the pairs of opposing positions that, on different grounds, have expressed the groups' pluralism. In Argentina, ideological conflicts within the collective have been part of the process of Jewish-Argentine becoming and they have materialized in abundance of institutions: schools, recreational clubs, and libraries with their specific orientations.[24] What is new is the location where that internal diversity is enacted now, and the expressive forms selected to be displayed. Some of the street events that were staged in the first decade of the century lasted a number of years and later vanished; at the same time, others merged to become a different expression, while some others are extant today, albeit they may have changed their format. Paraphrasing the respondent's metaphor cited above, the terrace seems to have expanded to the streets, and it holds , a jungle full of competing trees rather than a plant pot. Instead of a crystallized, static vision of the culture represented, as is the case in the official celebrations of "diversity", all these Jewish Argentine festivals and demonstrations express the religious, political and cultural tensions of the Jewish-Argentine community. Public space appears as locus where internal differentiations based on various conceptions of "Jewishness" and the ideologies that shape them acquire new expression. Various community institutions use shared public space to voice conflicting views about religious beliefs and cultural practices to an audience that is usually absent in those contexts, or as in the terminology used by Jewish institutions, are "unaffiliated". Thus, public sites become both loci for the affirmation of Jewishness as an expression of diversity in a multicultural society, and a place for the modeling of a plural Jewish identity. One of the staff members of the JDC put it this way:

> "There are three different criteria, first, Jewishness in the public space to lower the level of prejudice, second, Jewishness in

[24] Some of these ideological issues and their consequences in terms of the institutional shaping of the Jewish Argentine collective have been discussed in many works, among others in Avni 1991; Feierstein 1999; Kalczewiak 2020; Mirelman 1988.

> the street together with the civic culture in general, and third, an attempt to tell the (Jewish local) institutions that there is no point in being afraid of bringing the Jewish into the public space."

Once the diversity and some of the internal conflicts within the Jewish Argentine community that found expression in the way traditional practices were performed for the public eye has been accounted for, it is productive to focus on the similarities among the different endeavors. What were the common ideas that made all of them attempt to reach out for new audiences in public spaces? For all the differences performed in public that express the internal diversity of the community, a cultural core, which is by no means essential but historical, guides all their present undertakings. It is the notion of *continuity* and, coupled with it, the development of strategies to accomplish it.

None of the celebrations held in public are intended to replace the rituals prescribed for each holiday by Jewish law that may or may not be carried out within the community boundaries since, as already said, the Jewish collective has always been quite diverse in the form religious practices have been carried out. However, individually, they have different effects. In the ones performed by Chabad Lubavitch, to this very day, the prescribed ritual is actually *fulfilled*. It has efficacy and the precept is considered to have been observed by attending the lighting of the *Hanukkah* candle in a park, even if a non-Jewish politician light it, as it was always the case when local authorities and members of Congress were invited to take part. In the festival that AMIA staged for nearly ten years, the religious ritual was *represented*. The guiding idea was to *show* with a pedagogical end. The performance of the celebration had the explicit goal of constructing memory through repetition, which is at the core of ritual practices and which was made explicit once and again during the celebrations. "We have to keep telling the story", the speaker said once on the stage and she repeated it on other occasions. The Scroll of Esther, which is traditionally read aloud as part of the prescribed celebration of the holiday was hence relayed in an orally recreated version that kept up with the written storyline. Some of the components that have historically shaped the celebration like costumes and music – not the drinking – were incorporated to the event. Following the discursive line that AMIA held in the 1910s, an open political statement against the treaty that the national government was promoting in order to put on trial the purported perpetrators of the 1994 terrorist attack, was also part of the events. A stage, even one set up for a celebration, was used to make a case against the national government, allegedly on behalf of all the community.

In the events staged by the JDC, in contrast with the festivals set up by Chabad, the ritual is *alluded to*. The focus is neither on the performance of the rituals, nor on the displaying of *one* way to perform them, but rather

on the presentation of different and alternative ways of "how to" celebrate a festival that one is not obliged to observe in private life but rather entitled to celebrate in public because times have changed and now cultural particularity is no longer something to hide. In that respect, the JDC´s celebrations have a pedagogic goal too. As one of the organizers told me, "Some don't know because they didn't see it in their homes, or because they are children of mixed marriages". The street festival is presented thus as a guide, but open to the mingling of Jewish traditions with other cultural expressions. The format itself – a fair with numerous stands as opposed to a ceremony or a ritual in which there is a clear divide between the stage and the audience – addresses and enacts the concept of diversity.

As one of the organizers says: "(...) The 'Jewish' is transformed into something open, because the 'Jewish' and the 'public' were relationships that were not well developed" (DF). This statement corroborates a common idea, shared by the attendees to the celebrations, that Jews have always been a closed, self-isolated group. When asked about the reason why they thought it relevant to carry out these street celebrations, some of the answers I got were the following: "A gathering in the open air is better than something closed. And apart from that, gentiles can see it too, so that they know what we do"; "So that they don't hate us as much"; "Because Jews are very closed, we close ourselves a lot…"; "But the problem is: it is not just anti-Semitism, the problem is the closedness of the community itself to the outside." In these statements, anti-Semitism, which is acknowledged as an existing fact, does not come from the outer world, but it is rather the consequence of Jewish reluctance to interact with gentiles.

Conclusions

The results of the recent decades' going out to the public sphere seem to have had unexpected consequences for the Jewish collective. The different modalities of the expressions performed: fulfillment, representation and allusion, have allowed for the creative deployment of Jewish identity traits in public, in sharp contrast to the experience of past generations. They have also opened new venues for the practice of religious rituals and associated traditions, as well as for the reflecting upon them. They have thus contributed to the explicit goal of Jewish organizations – to establish a cultural continuity by setting up ties to past practices – and they have allowed for a comprehensive expression of the collective's diversity. However, facilitated by the openness for the possibility to express Jewishness in public since the 1980s has provided, the open siding of the largest Jewish Argentine community organizations with the administration that run the country from 2015 to 2019,

which was apparent in multiple ways, from public official statements to the passage of staff members to governmental positions, to name only a couple of examples, has opened new rifts within the collective. Although brought to the public light, the sociocultural and political diversity within the community, which found expression in the performances in open venues, was overlooked at the time of aligning the Jewish community institutions with the administration that ran the nation in those years. Therefore, internal conflicts are now not only grounded on religious issues (differences in the way rituals are to be performed, for instance), but rather on ideological and political ones. Consequently, a need has arisen for the expression of forms of being "Jewish-Argentine", unvoiced in any of the public performances analyzed. The consequences of the overlooking of the plural social, cultural and political persuasions within the collective have brought about the founding of other organizations that also claim to embody a continuity with a Jewish past and to represent the collective. They draw upon other traditions and symbols, like the reappraising of Yiddish language as opposed to the neglect it had endured in earlier years (Fischman 2011), or from the same ones but with other readings of them, following the interpretations anticipated in the celebrations performed in open venues. They too display or voice them in public, far from the days in which Jewishness was concealed from the gentiles' eyes. They thus expand already institutionally established and unquestioned ways of being Jewish-Argentine, a process that anticipates further developments in the years to come.

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Tradiciones judías en un contexto latinoamericano. La producción de una diáspora intercultural en Argentina: desde la noción de "crisol" hasta las políticas de identidad contemporáneas

Fernando Fischman

Resumen

Este artículo explora los cambios socioculturales y políticos en Argentina que permitieron el paso de la práctica de rituales judíos en privado a la exhibición de formas expresivas tradicionales en público. Centrándome en las narrativas personales de los hijos de inmigrantes judíos a Argentina, referidas a sus experiencias de infancia en los años 30 y 40 y en las celebraciones de festivales que se realizan actualmente en las calles de Buenos Aires, analizo las implicaciones de la contextualización de las prácticas tradicionales, originalmente realizadas dentro de los límites del colectivo, a su exposición abierta a la sociedad en general.

En primer lugar, presento algunas de las manifestaciones narrativas sobre los períodos anteriores y contemporáneos a la Segunda Guerra Mundial en Argentina que recopilé en la década de 1990. Luego, examino los eventos de performance callejera que comenzaron a ser escenificados en las últimas décadas del siglo XX por organizaciones judías, en conjunto con celebraciones derivadas de las políticas de identidad que comenzaron a implementarse en esos años. Contrasto así las narrativas sobre la expresión pública de la identidad judía en la primera mitad del siglo XX con las expresiones discursivas contemporáneas, a través de las cuales se expone explícitamente la cultura judía. La noción de *performance* proporciona el marco conceptual, y el análisis se centra en las implicaciones sociales y políticas de dicha puesta en escena para la conformación de nuevas formas expresivas, relacionadas tanto con una cultura judía diaspórica precedente como con los diálogos interculturales realizados en la sociedad argentina contemporánea.

Palabras-clave: políticas de la identidad, judíos argentinos, folklore judeo-argentino, diversidad, *performance*.

Јеврејске традиције у латиноамеричком контексту – стварање интеркултурне дијаспоре у Аргентини: од појма 'котла за претапање' ('melting pot') до савремених политика идентитета

Фернандо Фишман

Резиме

У раду се истражују социокултурне и политичке промене у Аргентини које су омогућиле прелазак с практиковања јеврејских ритуала у приватности на јавно представљање традиционалних облика изражавања. Усредсредивши се на личне приче деце јеврејских усељеника у Аргентину о њиховим искуствима из детињства током тридесетих и четрдесетих година 20. века, и на прославе свечаности које се сада изводе на улицама Буенос Ајреса, анализирам последице контекстуализације традиционалних пракси, које су првобитно извођене у склопу граница колектива да би се отвориле према друштву у целини.

Започињем представљањем неких прича о збивањима у Аргентини у периоду пре и за време Другог светског рата, које сам сакупио током деведесетих година 20. века. Потом, испитујем приредбе извођене на улици које су истовремено почеле да на сцену постављају јеврејске организације, у спрези с прославама изведеним из политика идентитета које су биле установљене тих година. Стога упоређујем приче о изражавању јеврејског идентитета у јавности у првој половини 20. века, и савремене дискурзивне експресије посредством којих је јеврејска култура изричито учињена видљивом. Појам 'перформанса' даје аналитички оквир, и анализа је усмерена на то какве су друштвене и политичке последице таквог инсценирања за обликовање нових изражајних форми, повезаних како с ранијом јеврејском културом у дијаспори, тако и с интеркултурним дијалозима оствареним у савременом аргентинском друштву.

Кључне речи: политике идентитета, аргентински Јевреји, јеврејско-аргентински фолклор, различитост, извођење.

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