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“Judaismo a tu manera”: What it Means to be Jewish in 21st Century Buenos Aires

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“Judaismo a tu manera”:
What it Means to be Jewish in 21st Century Buenos Aires

An Honors Thesis

Presented by
Gili Ben-Yosef

to

The Department of Sociology
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
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*For Safta
Your love gives me strength
And your strength inspires me.
I love you.*

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Abstract

In the summer of 2008 I set out to discover what it means to be Jewish in 21st century Buenos Aires. Through extensive field work, 22 formal interviews, visits to multiple Jewish organizations, and daily informal conversations, I gathered the information necessary to answer my question.

By focusing on three case studies of different Jewish institutions in Buenos Aires, this thesis aims to elucidate two points. First, that despite theories of sociologists such as Marx, Weber, and Durkheim who believed the importance of religion would fade with the onset of modernity and rational thought, religion has not yet disappeared. My research shows that religion remains a prominent factor in society, yet in changing forms, as different people react to modernity in distinctive fashions.

Second, many of the reactions to modernity have to do with the prevalence of choice, loss of central moral authority and anxieties associated with contemporary society. My research shows that some people return to orthodoxy in order to regain moral authority and not to have to deal with making choices, while others have claimed the right to choose how they wish to express their Jewishness, something that is innovative and characteristic of modernity.

To categorize my information and organize my findings, I have created a tripartite model of contemporary approaches to Judaism in Buenos Aires. The model distinguishes between three major groups: the “Retreaters” who reject modernity and retreat to a life based on the authority of traditional religious texts; the “Adjusters” who reflexively find a balance between traditional Judaism and their needs as modern individuals; and the “Creators” who fully embrace modernity and choose distinctive aspects (mostly non-traditional) of Judaism with which to signify their Jewish identity.

This thesis and its framework are based on my own original research. I am the first person to do such research specifically on how modernity has influenced the various segments of the Jewish community of Buenos Aires. The process of researching, compiling, analyzing, and organizing my information has proved to be the most intellectually challenging exercise of my college career.

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Preface: Method

I gathered information for this study in the summer of 2008 while living in Buenos Aires, Argentina for 9 weeks. I employed two main methods for researching the Jewish community. First, I was a participant observer. I became a part of Buenos Aires's Jewish community by attending services in synagogues, going to many events, visiting people's homes, and visiting over 30 Jewish institutions. I always made a point of engaging in casual conversation related to my thesis question with people that I met along the way. Second, I formally interviewed 22 individuals whom I chose because they each had a unique association with the community.

As a Jew myself, I was already knowledgeable about many of the customs and traditions that I observed, but I was curious to learn about them all from a different perspective. It is difficult for researchers to be objective since we bring our stories and perspectives with us to the field. Nonetheless, I believe that in my study I have managed to illuminate major trends and processes in the contemporary Jewish community of Buenos Aires.

I collected information while out in the field and then synthesized it into a model that categorizes Jews' three main religious reactions to modernity in Buenos Aires. By focusing on three case studies which I explored more in-depth, I created a theoretical framework that organizes the information. The voices of the people I interviewed along with my personal experiences serve as the foundation from which this thesis emanates.

Chapter 1: Introduction

On June 7th 2008 the Argentine-Jewish community was abuzz. Every front page story, every phone call, and every dinner conversation surrounded the most recent headline news: The new president of AMIA (Asociación Mutual Israelita Argentina), Guillermo Borger, said in an interview with one of Argentina's biggest newspapers that he will only represent "judíos genuinos," genuine Jews.¹ Borger explained that a "genuine Jew" is one who lives his or her life based on what is written in the *Torah* – the sacred books of the Jewish people.² (Traditional Judaism is based on *halakhah*, the Jewish law, which is a set of rules and practices found in the *Torah* and other exegetic texts).³

However, the *halakhic* definition of who is Jewish and what it means to be Jewish is being challenged as the nature of contemporary life makes living according to *halakhah* impractical for many.⁴ Today one can consider him or herself Jewish not solely

¹ AMIA, founded in 1894, is the "mother" organization of Argentina's Jewish community. Its mission is to promote the wellbeing of Argentine Jews and to fortify the community. AMIA provides social services, cultural and academic programs, supports Jewish youth groups and schools, and works to maintain a strong Jewish community.

² "En Medio De La Polémica Asume Hoy El Nuevo Titular De La AMIA," *Clarín* [Buenos Aires], 12 June 2008, 17 June 2008 <<http://www.clarin.com/diario/2008/06/12/sociedad/s-01692167.htm>>.

³ The word *halakhah* comes from the Hebrew root, הלך, meaning: "to walk or travel." *Halakhah* are the written rules of behavior for following a Jewish lifestyle. According to *halakhah*, the formal, religious, and traditional definition of who is a Jew (which dates back almost 2000 years) is that one is Jewish who is born to a Jewish mother or who has undergone a formal process of conversion to Judaism (Arnold Dashevsky, Bernard Lazerwitz and Ephraim Tabory, "A Journey of the 'Straight Way' or the 'Roundabout Path': Jewish Identity in the United States and Israel." *The Handbook of the Sociology of Religion*, ed. Michele Dillon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 240-60.)

⁴ The questioning of *halakhic* definitions of Judaism is not a new concept. Previous to the late 18th century, European Jews lived in tight communities interacting mostly with other Jews. They spoke their own language, *Yiddish*, ate special foods, and wore distinctive outfits. Religion legitimized the community and vice versa. Identity was a given, as was following *halakhah*. At the end of the 18th century Europe was swept with a wave of emancipation: of slaves, women, and Jews, among other minorities. At this time, Jews were granted citizenship rights which incorporated them into society to a certain extent. At the beginning of the 19th century, the boundaries of Jewish communities began to break down and the Jews integrated even more into the secular society at large and some Jews wanted to reform their religion to be more in tune with the society in which they lived. This movement eventually became known as Reform Judaism and still exists today. According to Staub, "Reform Judaism insisted that change in the religion,

based on the *halakhic* definition of descent (one is Jewish if born to a Jewish mother); rather one can self-identify as Jewish based on certain practices in one's life – religious or not, frequent or not. Some people express their Jewish identity through cultural means such as watching Israeli movies and listening to Hebrew music; while others express it through celebrating the holidays – be it all of them, or only the ones that they most identify with.⁵ For many people, being Jewish today is a subjective experience.⁶

Expressing sympathy with that position, Moises Korrim, the cultural director of AMIA stated, “I think that there is not only one way to create a Jewish identity. There are as many ways as there are Jewish people.”⁷

In response to Borger's original statement, Luis Grynwald, the outgoing President of AMIA, said, “Each person carries Judaism in his or her own way, and I carry it with pride and much honor, feeling that the State of Israel is the center of the Jewish life and an unshakeable and indestructible bond that has united us with our community throughout the years.”⁸ This exemplifies an opposite perspective to Borger's argument of what it means to be Jewish today – do it your own way, and know that no matter how you practice your Judaism, we are still all one community.

Judaism, in response to new challenges represented a valid continuation of that religion's long term capacity to evolve.” Reform Judaism allowed the Jews to adapt their lives to the culture of the country in which they lived. Jews who saw such reform as a break with Judaism's true form, reacted by creating the religious sect referred to as Orthodoxy. The movement of Reform Judaism in the 18th and 19th centuries was essentially the first Jewish response to modernity and is the movement that began the debate over who is and who is not Jewish (Jacob Staub, “Reform Judaism,” The Encyclopedia of Judaism, Vol. 3, ed. J. Neusner, A Avery-Peck, and W. Green (Boston, MA: Brill Academic Publishers, 2000) 1240-54.)

⁵ For example, the Argentine Jews do not tend to celebrate Chanukah. In the U.S. however, Jews identify very much with Chanukah, probably because it resembles Christmas that takes place around the same time.

⁶ Adrián Jmelniczky and Ezequiel Erdei, The Jewish Population in Buenos Aires: Sociodemographic Survey (Buenos Aires: AMIA, 2005) 58-64.

⁷ Moises Korrim. Personal Interview. 3 July 2008.

⁸ Jorge Rouillon, “Polémica en la AMIA por declaraciones del nuevo presidente,” La Nación [Buenos Aires], 23 Apr. 2008, 17 June 2008 <http://www.lanacion.com.ar/nota.asp?nota_id=1020534>.

And so, no wonder there was a massive uproar when Borger exclaimed he would only work to support the “genuine Jews.” Those who follow Borger’s definition of what it means to be Jewish constitute a minority of the Jews in Argentina; most Argentine Jews claim their rights to their own Jewish expressions. They believe in living in the present, a present in which most people no longer find it viable to follow *halakhah*.

Five days after Borger made his statement, he came out with another statement retracting his original comment on supporting only “genuine Jews.” He was now quoted as saying that “AMIA must be the genuine representative of all the Jewish people.”⁹ What Borger understood in those five days is what I learned during my time researching the Jewish community of Argentina: that Argentine Jewry is a continuum of choice. Many believe that there are Jews who fit on all parts of the spectrum and that each person has a right to self-identify as whatever kind of Jew she wants to be, given her personal relationship with religion in light of modernity. At a time when people have the authority to self-identify as they wish, many believe in a right to choose where to place themselves on the religious continuum.

The above anecdote substantiates my thesis question, “What does it mean to be Jewish in 21st century Argentina?” I describe the different ways Judaism can be expressed by individuals, and I focus on the institutions that support their needs. In general, I have found three paths Jews of Buenos Aires tend to choose from when deciding how to express their Judaism in contemporary society. The three paths are the “Retreaters”, the “Adjusters” and the “Creators.” The following chapters will describe the processes and dynamics involved in each one.

⁹ “En Medio De La Polémica,” 17 June 2008.

The “21st century” aspect of my question raises several implications with which I framed my research. In order to understand what it means to be Jewish in Buenos Aires today, it is important to examine the characteristics of society implied by modernity. And so, in chapter two, I relate the conditions and circumstances of modern society to some prominent themes in the sociology of religion. I will then proceed to outline the history of the Jewish people in Argentina in chapter three. Understanding the history of this community elucidates the structures we find in the community today. Next, I explain the tripartite model I developed to type the ways in which Jews in Buenos Aires respond to modernity. The three categories serve as “ideal types,” a key term of Max Weber’s methodology that refers to “the construction of certain elements of reality into a logically precise conception.”¹⁰ By use of ideal types, I attempt to generalize these phenomena in a most logical way for better understanding.¹¹

The first category of my model is that of the “Retreaters.” The Retreaters in my research are the Orthodox Jews who withdraw from modern society into the safe haven of tradition. The Retreaters shy away from modern life which they see as frightening and iniquitous (a society filled with decentralized authority, a multitude of options, and consequential “immoral” values), and turn towards a life they find reassuring and righteous due to its emanation from the traditional, religious texts. In chapter four, I focus on a case study of an orthodox institution in Buenos Aires that realizes this lifestyle ideal.

The next group are the “Adjusters.” They believe in the importance of institutional traditions in shaping Judaism, yet reflexively adjust the religious traditions

¹⁰ H.H. Gerth. and C. Wright-Mills, “Introduction: The Man and His Work,” From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology, ed. H.H. Gerth and C. Wright-Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946) 1-2.

¹¹ My model owes a debt to other sociologists, such as Peter Berger and Roy Wallis, who have previously come up with such models. I created my model to specifically involve the implications of my personal research, however I will discuss both Berger’s and Wallis’s models in the following chapter.

and reinterpret them to fit their current needs and desires. Rather than rejecting aspects of religious rituals that no longer fit their chosen lifestyles, they continue to follow Jewish practices and to affiliate with Jewish institutions, but in a way that is compatible with their modern habits. In this manner, individuals and religious institutions work together to reflect upon the modern situation and coordinate an appropriate way of life. In Chapter five, I describe a case study of a particular temple in Buenos Aires which, along with its affiliates, encompasses this part of my model.

The third group are the “Creators.” These individuals embrace the multiplicity of choice in modern society and have decided to live their Judaism in their unique ways. Their lifestyle allows them to construct their Jewish experience in any way they choose, with no limits, obligations, or institutional ideology to adhere to. The Creators usually do not belong to any sort of religious institution because they find them limiting of their Jewish expression. According to a population survey, a majority of Jews in Buenos Aires fit into this category.¹² In chapter six, I present a unique program created in Buenos Aires that centers its activities on this group and encourages each person’s unique relationship with Judaism.

By focusing on each of these categories and on the people I met as I immersed myself into the Jewish community, I hope to make clear how and why they create their identity in the way that they do, how they interpret and interact with religion and religious traditions, and how these interpretations relate to the circumstances of modernity. In the conclusion I present implications for further research that can emanate from this original study.

¹² Jmelnizky and Erdei, The Jewish Population, 42-43.

Chapter 2: Religion as a Sociological Concept

The Emergence of the Sociology of Religion

The first sociological theories that attempted to bridge the theoretical gap between sociology and religion came from Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim, and Max Weber. These three renowned sociologists are considered the forefathers of the sociology of religion, and their ideas serve as a background for my research, as well as that of contemporary theorists whose work applies to my research.¹

For Marx, religion cannot be distinguished from the context in which he viewed the rest of society, one based upon class struggles brought about by capitalism. He explained that religion maintains the status quo as it persuades the oppressed that their social position is natural and acceptable and that a higher force is subjecting them to their experience. It also leads them to hope for salvation in the afterlife. Marx called religion the “opiate of the people,” since he considered religious belief to be a “pain reliever” from the injustices suffered by the masses, placating their frustrations with their social status and its implications. However, like opium, religious beliefs do not put an end to suffering, and thus the class struggles are perpetuated and the status quo is legitimized.²

Durkheim defines religion as “a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things which are set apart and forbidden – beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community, called a Church, all those who

¹ Grace Davie, “The Evolution of the Sociology of Religion: Theme and Variations,” Handbook of the Sociology of Religion, ed. Michele Dillon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 61-75.

² Ibid., 62-62; Karl Marx, qtd. in Amanda Uddis-Kessler, “Marx and Weber on Religion,” Soc 295, 27 Aug. 2001, Grinnell College Sociology Department., 20 Dec. 2008 <http://web.grinnell.edu/courses/soc/f01/soc295-02/marx_weber.html>.

adhere to them.”³ Durkheim saw religion from a functionalist perspective. He explained that religion must have a purpose within society: to unify groups that share beliefs and values, i.e. to create society. He believed that, “Religion celebrates, and thereby reinforces, the fact that people can form societies.”⁴ Durkheim’s principle is that religious symbols evolve alongside the developing social order, thus creating sacred objects that serve a unifying function specific to societal needs. People separate these sacred religious symbols and objects from daily, profane, secular objects. These sacred objects are functional in binding people together within a particular place and time. The beliefs and practices associated with the sacred symbols and objects further enhance group unity.⁵

Weber saw religion as a subjective experience and a possible impetus of social change. Unlike Marx, Weber believed that religion is dependent on the time and place that is being examined and that individuals interact with it differently in different contexts. He argued that, “The relationship between religion and the world is contingent and variable; how a particular religion relates to the surrounding context will vary over time and in different places.”⁶ He further deemed that beliefs and ideas impact social activity and he was curious to figure out what the behavioral outcomes were for having different religious beliefs. In general, “he [was] concerned with the way that the content (or substance) of a particular religion, or more precisely a religious ethic, influences the way that people behave. In other words, different types of belief have different outcomes.”⁷ Of the three, Weber’s ideas are most closely related to those of

³ Durkheim, Emile, qtd. in Davie, “The Evolution,” 65.

⁴ Beckford, James, qtd in Davie, “The Evolution,” 64

⁵ Davie, “The Evolution,” 63-64.

⁶ Ibid., 63.

⁷ Ibid., 64.

contemporary sociologists of religion. However the work of all three account for the persisting presence of religious studies in the discipline of sociology.

When they came up with their theories, Marx, Durkheim, and Weber did not think religion would persist as a strong institution. With the introduction of rational thought, they believed that religion would become obsolete and unnecessary in maintaining society. They were convinced that relying on reason and certitude of knowledge would replace the dependence on customs and beliefs embedded in religious tradition.⁸ This mode of thought became known as Secularization Theory and was extremely popular until about the 1970s. Based on the writings of Henri Saint-Simon and Auguste Comte, Secularization Theory argues that “religion and modernity don’t mix.”⁹ Proponents of this thesis argued that as societies become more modern, i.e. more complex, rationalized, and individualistic, and are exposed to the social processes of modernization, i.e. urbanization and industrialization, religiosity and the influence of religious institutions would decline.¹⁰

Durkheim advocated that in modern society other societal institutions (i.e. education) will replace religion in importance. These institutions would separate themselves from the church, adding to religious institutions’ loss of social function.¹¹ Peter Berger also justifies Secularization Theory by explaining that with the countless choices presented to an individual in modern society, she can choose to believe in various faiths and can constantly alter her beliefs. Thus, the importance of one, prominent

⁸ Michele Dillon, “The Sociology of Religion in Late Modernity,” Handbook of the Sociology of Religion, ed. Michele Dillon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 3-15.; Anthony Giddens, Modernity and Self Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991) 21; *Ibid.*, 207.

⁹ Philip S. Gorski, “Historicizing the Secularization Debate: An Agenda for Research,” Handbook of the Sociology of Religion, ed. Michele Dillon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 111.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid* 110-112.

religion is undermined and the influence of religion in general declines. Berger continues to state that in the past, an entire society was held together by their belief in one particular religion, and thus religion was legitimized. With the advent of choice, each person individualizes his or her belief patterns and there is no longer a justification for any particular model of belief.¹²

Nowadays, there is no confirmation that the significance of religion is declining, or that the differences in religious observation among different societies are linked to variation in the process of modernization.¹³ Religion and religious belief remain strong despite the characteristics and social processes endemic to modern society. However, religion continues to exist as a changed institution. Anti-secularization theorists explain that people's ties to faith and the place of religion as a social institution in modern society has not, and can not, dissipate as it is an integral part of human nature.¹⁴

The Characteristics of Modern Society: Social Institutions and Individuals

It is important to begin this section by noting what exactly "modernity" refers to. Modernity can signal either a specific time period independent from location, i.e. the 21st century, or it can refer to certain characteristics that are embodied in specific societies, not necessarily applicable to the whole world at the same time. For the purposes of this paper, modernity will refer to the latter: those societies that are defined by certain characteristics linked to modernity. Anthony Giddens refers to modernity as "post-traditional," a term that fits the content of this research because it is portrayed as a set of

¹² Davidman, Tradition, 28-29.

¹³ Gorski, "Historicizing the Secularization Debate," 112.

¹⁴ Davidman, Tradition, 28-29.

characteristics that don't accord with the way that social activity was monitored and organized in the past.¹⁵

According to Giddens, a main characteristic that distinguishes modern social institutions is institutional reflexivity. Reflexivity is defined as the constant critical questioning and revision of thought and social activity upon the introduction of new information and knowledge.¹⁶ The frequency of exposure to new knowledge and information is a result of globalization.¹⁷ This term implies that we all live in one world; time, space, and national borders have lost their traditional importance in society as people and information bypass them and disperse around the globe.¹⁸ Virtually erased borders coupled with increased mass communication make people more prone to influences that would have never reached them otherwise. As Giddens states, "The prevalence of mediated experience undoubtedly also influences pluralism of choice...with the increasing globalization of the media, a multifarious number of milieu are, in principle, rendered visible to anyone who cares to glean the relevant information. The collage effect of television and newspapers gives specific form to the juxtaposition of settings and potential lifestyle choices."¹⁹ The exposure to so much information creates a background upon which societies, social institutions, and individuals become reflexive. They revise, question - even discard - traditional aspects of the social institutions that no longer fit their needs and desires due to novel and divergent views and ideas they are

¹⁵ Giddens, Modernity and Self Identity, 1-9.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 20-21.

¹⁷ There are various definitions of this word, but I have chosen the definition that best suits my purposes.

¹⁸ Anthony Giddens, Runaway World: How Globalization is Reshaping our Lives, (New York: Routledge, 1999) 6-19.

¹⁹ Giddens, Modernity and Self Identity, 84.

exposed to.²⁰ There is no longer one institution that governs a way of life, rather, institutions are multiplied and diversified and there are more lifestyle choices.²¹

As globalization and modernity result in pluralism of social institutions that are dynamic, reflexive, and disconnected from traditionally established practices, the individual becomes reflexive in creating his or her self identity as well. According to Giddens this is because,

Society is a dialectic phenomenon in that it is a human product, and nothing but a human product, that yet continuously acts back upon its producer. Society is a product of man. It has no other being except that which is bestowed upon it by human activity and consciousness. There can be no social reality apart from man. Yet it may also be stated that man is a product of society... what is more, it is within society, and as a result of social processes, that the individual becomes a person, that he attains and holds onto an identity, and that he carries out the various projects that constitute his life.²²

A new sense of self must be created reflexively to deal and interact with the dynamic nature of modern institutions. One's identity is no longer objective, based on where they are born and what institutions govern their family's traditional lives. Rather, the self is faced with options as to how it wants to live life, and as Giddens writes, the self must constantly revisit the questions "What to do? How to act? Who to be?"²³ Berger explains that the authority an individual has in constructing his or her own identity, as well as the uncertainty of how to create an identity, is characteristic of modernity.²⁴ This is different from the self that was a part of traditional society, when institutions were

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Peter L. Berger, The Heretical Imperative: Contemporary Possibilities of Religious Affirmation, (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1979) 15-16.

²² Peter L. Berger, The Sacred Canopy, (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1967) 3.

²³ Giddens, Modernity and Self Identity, 70.

²⁴ Peter L. Berger, "The Pluralistic Situation and the Coming Dialogue between the World Religions." Buddhist-Christian Journal. 1 (1981): 31-41.

marked with a particular certainty that determined how things should be done and who should play what role given one's social location (i.e. gender, social status).²⁵

In the molded identity roles of the past there was no room for individual choice – life was generally organized for the self. In modern society “lifestyle” appears. A lifestyle is a chosen path or approach to life which materializes the ways in which an individual wants to self-identify and to identify with given institutions. Lifestyle is chosen among myriad possibilities, and of course, is reflexive in the sense that it can constantly be revised.²⁶ Furthermore, a crucial aspect of lifestyle is the multiplicity of choice. Berger explains that as we progress from depending on fate to actively engaging in choice, we are faced with a variety of tools that we can choose from in order to build ourselves and pave the way to our future.²⁷ Giddens adds that in modern times, “Autonomy and freedom can replace the hidden power of tradition with more open discussion and dialogue.”²⁸ The authority lies in the hands of the individual and can constantly be critiqued and revised due to this same authority.²⁹ The individual has the power to analytically question the social institutions that have traditionally organized her life and has the authority to choose her own lifestyle.³⁰

It is important to note that with modernity, reflexivity, choice, and individual authority comes the issue of risk and its relationship to these characteristics. In pre-modern societies, tradition was one of the only authorities; and although it did not eliminate uncertainty, yielding to one authority helped individuals deal with influences

²⁵ Berger, Heretical Imperative 13.

²⁶ Giddens, Modernity and Self-Identity, 80-87.

²⁷ Berger, “Pluralistic Situation,” 34.

²⁸ Giddens, Runaway World, 46.

²⁹ Fred Kniss, “Mapping the Moral Order: Depicting the Terrain of Religious Conflict and Change,” Handbook of the Sociology of Religion, ed. Michele Dillon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 334.

³⁰ Giddens, Modernity and Self-Identity, 80-87.

that were beyond their control. The proliferation of choice during modern times results in an element of uncertainty. As a reflexive actor, the self becomes one of many authorities in determining his or her individual future. Figuring out which authorities to look to and how to make decisions results in the need to take risks; there is a large scope of possible action and the self must continuously choose between alternatives.³¹ As Giddens writes, “Risk is the mobilizing dynamic of a society bent on change that wants to determine its own future rather than leaving it to religion, tradition, or the vagaries of nature”.³² Uncertainty and change can be frightening and not everyone is able to embrace the challenge and take the risks. Those people usually retreat into the order and safety of tradition.

Giddens shows that the interaction and dialogue between the individual and institutions – something unique to the post-traditional order – constantly leads to change within society. The reflexivity of social institutions and of the self is the fundamental reason that religion as a social institution did not disappear with the onset of rational thought, as was predicted by Marx, Weber and Durkheim. Reflexivity challenges the authority of reason as society constantly revises itself based on new knowledge. Modern society is filled with doubt, uncertainty, and the ability for people to choose in who and what they want to believe. Accordingly, religion has re-emerged as a differentiated and reflexively created institution that adapts, evolves dynamically, and is distinct from its traditional image.³³

³¹ Ibid.

³² Giddens, Runaway World, 24.

³³ Giddens, Modernity and Self-Identity, 207; Davie, “The Evolution,” 61-75.

The Sociology of Religion in Modern Society

Due to the characteristics of modernity discussed above, religion and the way people interact with it, take on a new form in contemporary society that can no longer be approached as a simple question of religiosity versus secularity. Increased reflexivity in modern times and increased individual authority of life choices provide individuals with the ability to question religion, modify beliefs and religious institutions, and to have more of a choice in approaching religion in whatever way seems fit.³⁴ Choice is the key word in applying the characteristics of modern society to the contemporary study of religion.

Robert Bellah theorizes that the modern individual is responsible and capable of shaping his or her social and religious world. Bellah describes this modern individual as “a dynamic multi-dimensional self capable, within limits, of remaking the world, including the very symbolic forms with which he deals... [Man] is responsible for the choice of his symbolism.”³⁵ This goes to say that, "Each individual must work out his own ultimate solutions, and the most the church can do is provide him a favorable environment for doing so, without imposing on him a prefabricated set of answers."³⁶

Peter Berger adds to this by saying that not only is there a multiplicity of religions, but there is pluralism in how individuals think about and interact with one particular religion. He emphasizes the fact that religion today is seen as a “preference,” almost equivalent to a partiality for a certain good within the consumer market. Referring to religion as a preference implies that the religion you practice and how you practice it is rooted in choice. Berger calls all modern individuals heretics because they do not always

³⁴ Giddens, Runaway World, 45-46.

³⁵ Robert Bellah, qtd. in Yves Lambert, “Religion in Modernity as a New Axial Age: Secularization or New Religious Forms?” Sociology of Religion. 60.3 (1999): 309.

³⁶ Ibid.

accept the complete traditions, instead they pick out what suits them and apply these choices to their own lives. Berger explains that, “One finds people who put together an individualized religion, taking bits and pieces from different traditions, and coming up with a religious profile that does not fit easily into any of the organized denominations.”³⁷ He reminds us that completely sticking to the traditions within a particular religion – i.e. being orthodox – is a choice as well, and thus is not in contrast to the nature of the modern religious institution.³⁸

Robert Wuthnow characterizes this phenomenon as “Patchwork Religion”: each individual “pieces together their faith like a patchwork quilt. Spirituality has become a vastly complex quest in which each person seeks in his or her own way.”³⁹ Wuthnow argues that people’s relationship with the sacred changes, and instead of accepting it as is, they negotiate its various aspects.⁴⁰

Similar to my tripartite model, Roy Wallis and Peter Berger created their own models to conceptualize the different religious reactions to modernity. Both have a type that is similar to the “Retreaters” in my model. Wallis’s believers in “World-rejecting new religions” find contemporary social order as void of G-d’s plan and disconnected from spirituality. They call for a return to a traditional way of life in which religion leads the way. Berger’s “Deductive Option” of modern religion is to “deduce religious affirmations from [the religion] at least more or less as was the norm in pre-modern

³⁷ Peter L. Berger, “Reflections on the Sociology of Religion Today,” Sociology of Religion, 62.4 (2001): 443-454.

³⁸ Berger, Peter, “The Pluralistic Situation,” 34-35.

³⁹ Robert Wuthnow, After Heaven: Spirituality in American Since the 1950s, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998) 2.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

times.”⁴¹ This option provides an objective authority (G-d) to those who find a lack of authority in modern times.⁴²

Next, Wallis’s participants in “World-accommodating new religions” have a personal connection to religion, but it is disconnected from their social life; although religion is present in the participants’ life, in no way does it guide their lives. Berger’s “Reductive Option” involves reinterpreting the tradition based on the situation of modern society. Authority is split between the tradition and modern consciousness. Both these categories relate to my “Adjusters” in that the people in this group do not fully reject religion but do not allow it to take over their lives. They adapt the religion to fit their lifestyle.⁴³

Finally, Wallis’s believers in the “World-affirming new religions” leave behind most traditional aspects of religion and completely engage the new social order. This is distinct from the “Creators” since the Creators do not fully reject tradition, but rather they hold on to the aspects that appeal to them. On the other hand, Berger’s inductive option focuses on religion as a personal experience and removes the need of an authority in prescribing religious activity, which is similar to the processes of my “Creators.”⁴⁴

The first type mentioned in Wallis, Berger, and my own model touches upon an aspect of religious theory called Fundamentalism (what Wallis refers to as World-Rejection, Berger as the Deductive option, and I as the Retreaters). Originally, fundamentalism referred to a wave of conservative Protestantism that arose in the beginning of the 20th century. Today, it refers to a form of religiosity that upholds

⁴¹ Peter L Berger, The Heretical Imperative, 61.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 60-65; Roy Wallis, The Elementary Forms of the New Religious Life (London: Routledge & Keagan Paul, 1984) 9-39.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

tradition for the sake of tradition and is reactive to modernizing influences on religion and society in general.⁴⁵

Giddens explains that this resurgence of traditional authority occurs because of the anxiety created from living in a world with so many options. “Some individuals find it psychologically difficult or impossible to accept the existence of diverse, mutually conflicting authorities. They find that the freedom to choose is a burden and they seek solace in more overarching systems of authority,” he says.⁴⁶ Davidman calls fundamentalism a movement of “resistance.” She adds that it is a reaction of religious groups to the pluralism and differentiation modern society.⁴⁷ According to Marty and Appleby, modernity is a threat to fundamentalism because modernity is made up of three main elements: “a preference for secular rationality; the adoption of religious tolerance with accompanying tendencies toward relativism; and individualism.”⁴⁸ These three ideas are in direct opposition to what fundamentalists believe, and thus threaten what they understand to be the most appropriate way of life. Ammerman explains that, “Fundamentalism could not exist without modernity.”⁴⁹ Thus, as a reaction to modernity, it is an important characteristic of modernity itself.

Theoretical Application to Judaism

Most modern Judaic studies touch upon the individuality that distinguishes one’s religious identity. This individuality emerges from reflexive individuals analytically

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Giddens, Modernity and Self-Identity, 196.

⁴⁷ Davidman, Tradition, 32.

⁴⁸ Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby, “Introduction,” Fundamentalisms Observed, ed. Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991) vii-xvi.

⁴⁹ Ammerman, Nancy, qtd in Davidman, Tradition, 32.

questioning the nature of society and of modern social institutions. Judaism is no different in this sense from other religions. Dashefsky, Lazerwitz, and Tabory call this type of Judaism the “roundabout path.” They explain that in the past there was merely a “straight way,” which means following *halakhah*. This involved measuring Judaism through strict “objective” behavioral measures based on what a Jew is “supposed” to do. Today, in addition to the straight way (which is still a choice for some) there is the roundabout path. On this path, Judaism is measured subjectively. One’s Jewish identity breaks away from the traditional set of “mandated obligations” and becomes more of a “personal experience.”⁵⁰

Horowitz adds that, “Jewish identity is no longer to be tracked solely by a “canon” of normative religious behaviors and practices; rather the content of Jewish identity has expanded to include whatever is personally meaningful for each individual.”⁵¹ Her study of Jewish expression in the United States draws conclusions that are consonant with the modern study of the sociology of religion. She found that Judaism is not declining, rather it “persists and is reinvented,” and notes various levels of engagement not only between subjects, but within subjects over their life course. Horowitz refers to one’s Jewish identity as a “journey”.⁵² The search for identity within an individual, as well as his or her own identification with a particular form of religious expression, is a process of traveling in which one picks up different influences along the way and can decide whenever she wants to change course. Applying this term to Judaism

⁵⁰ Arnold, Dashevsky, Bernard Lazerwitz and Ephraim Tabory, “A Journey of the ‘Straight Way’ or the ‘Roundabout Path’: Jewish Identity in the United States and Israel,” The Handbook of the Sociology of Religion, ed. Michele Dillon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 240-60.

⁵¹ Bethamie Horowitz, Connections and Journeys: Assessing Critical Opportunities for Enhancing Jewish Identity (New York: UJA Federation, 2000) 183.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 184.

makes evident the subjectivity, individuality, and reflexivity involved in choosing one's ways of religious Judaic expression.

Chapter 3: The History of the Jews in Argentina

Early Spanish Influence on Jewish Migration to Argentina

In 1492, after many years of war, King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Spain set out to consolidate their empire. Under the laws of the Inquisition they enforced “programs of racial cleansing, homogenization of cultural diversity, and definition in Christian terms of what it would mean to be Spanish.”¹ Consequently, 1492 became the year that the Jews were expelled from Spain. The King and Queen informed all Jews that they must convert to Christianity or leave the country. They thought that the Jews would prefer to stay and convert to Catholicism rather than be exiled. They were wrong, however, in that the loyalty to Judaism prevailed and the majority of Spanish Jews left in search of a place that would take them in. Since Spain had control over much of Latin America and the laws of the Inquisition extended to any place over which Spain had territorial sovereignty, Jews could not search there for their new homes. Under Spanish control, hatred for Jews became deep-rooted in Latin America, and for the purposes of this historical summary, in Argentina in particular. It took almost 300 years for Argentina to disassociate from Spain and make headway towards abolishing the laws of the Inquisition.²

At the beginning of the 19th century, Spanish control in Argentina began to weaken and the Argentine government encouraged immigration to ensure the growth and development of the country. At the time, there were only about half a million people

¹ Frank Graziano, *The Millennial New World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) 26.

² Haim Avni, *Argentina and the Jews: A History of Jewish Immigration* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1991) 2-3.

living in the entire country. So, in 1810 the Argentine government sent out an invitation to recruit immigrants from any country that they were not at war with. By 1812 they extended full Argentine rights to anyone who wished to enter the country. Finally, in 1813, the Argentine government abolished the laws of the Inquisition, bringing Argentina one step further away from Spain and one step closer to its independence.³

Coincidentally, at the same time that the Argentine government promoted immigration, the worldwide Jewish population was growing rapidly. From 1800-1880 the number of Jews worldwide increased from 2.5 to 7.8 million.⁴ As the population grew, so did the hardships faced by the Jews in Europe. They were discriminated against and persecuted in their homelands of Eastern and Central Europe, on top of economic difficulties that most did not manage to overcome. Therefore, many began looking at emigration as a solution to escape the difficult situations they found themselves in.⁵

Argentina Populates and Develops

Beginning in 1816 when Argentina achieved complete independence from Spain, and throughout the 19th century, there were several treaties, laws, and governmental administrations that contributed to Argentina's relationship with foreigners.⁶

To begin with, in 1825 Argentina signed the Treaty of Friendship, Trade and Navigation with Great Britain, the leading world power at the time. One of the clauses stated that all British citizens living in Argentina would be allowed to freely practice whatever religion they choose without being troubled, persecuted, or harassed. This was

³ Avni, Argentina and the Jews, 3.

⁴ Ibid., 6.

⁵ Ibid., 1.

⁶ Avni, Argentina and the Jews, 3; Robert Weisbrot, The Jews of Argentina: From the Inquisition to Perón (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1979) 25.

the first document that granted non-Catholics the right to practice their religion.⁷ Since Argentina had always been a strict Catholic state while the British were mostly Protestants, this clause angered the governments of the Argentine provinces and they protested its implementation. However, out of fear of British attack or the loss of British trading rights, the Argentine government made a compromise and proclaimed that those living in Buenos Aires (where the government was located) could practice whatever religion they please.⁸ The religious tolerance that arose from this treaty – even if it was only in Buenos Aires and only for Protestants – was a stepping stone towards future acceptance.

Then, from 1829 to 1852, Argentina was governed by Juan Manuel de Rosas. The Rosas dictatorship was a period of harsh rule, aggression, and the violation of many laws. Rosas was against immigration and many people, especially liberal intellectuals, left the country to live in Chile, Paraguay, Uruguay and Bolivia while he was in power.⁹ In 1852 Rosas was defeated by Justo José de Urquiza who created a climate of acceptance and tolerance in the country. In 1853, the Urquiza administration began to draft Argentina's constitution. One of the men who spearheaded the project was Juan Bautista Alberdi. Alberdi thought that Argentina would be improved and made fit for democracy if the “superior” people of Europe were to inhabit its lands and “civilize” its people. His leading principle was “to govern means to populate,” and so, one of the main points of the constitution was that Argentina welcomes and grants civil liberties to “all people of

⁷ Boleslao Lewin, “Libertad de Cultos,” Congregación en Libertad: Revista de la Congregación Israelita de la República Argentina, Sept. 2000: 6.

⁸ Ibid.; Weisbrot, The Jews of Argentina, 27. .

⁹ Daniel K. Lewis, The History of Argentina (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2001) 43-49.

the world who wish to live on Argentine soil”.¹⁰ Additionally, Article 14 of the constitution specifically granted freedom of worship, association, and education to all.¹¹

The tolerant approach of the Urquiza administration gave the Jewish community a chance to form. Although there had been Jews living in Argentina before the 1860s (some who escaped the Spanish inquisition and other immigrants who arrived during colonial times), they were not part of an organized community.¹² However, with the new constitution and the right to freely practice religion, the Jewish community began to form much more substantially during this time. Evidence is found of the first Jewish wedding in 1860, and there is documentation of the first *minyan* in 1862.¹³ These two instances mark the first governmental acknowledgement of religious Jewish practice in Argentina.¹⁴

In 1876 President Nicolás Avellaneda passed the Immigration and Colonization law based on the belief that Argentina’s future depended on European immigration. Avellaneda created a Department of Immigration which sent agents to Europe to recruit and organize groups of immigrants. Once the immigrants reached Argentina, the department made sure that they were received well, that they were informed of all the opportunities that were available with regards to settling in colonies, that they found employment, and that they were informed of their civil liberties.¹⁵

¹⁰ Avni, Argentina and the Jews, 9.

¹¹ Eliahu Toker and Ana E. Weinstein, “La CIRA, Institución de Instituciones,” Congregación en Libertad: Revista de la Congregación Israelita de al República Argentina, Sept. 2000: 12-13.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ A minyan (□□□□□) is the coming together of at least 10 men in prayer. With less than 10 men, the prayer can not be done. “The Minyan.” Chabad.Org, 2009. Chabad-Lubavitch. 30 Jan. 2009 <http://www.chabad.org/search/keyword_cdo/kid/2478/jewish/Minyan.htm>.

¹⁴ Avni, Argentina and the Jews, 18.; Weisbrot, The Jews of Argentina, 33.

¹⁵ Avni, Argentina and the Jews, 12-14.

In the early 1880s, as Argentina continued to develop its immigration policies, Jews living in Russia faced increasing hardships. In 1881, Czar Alexander III created an environment that was progressively hostile to Jewish people. Anti-Semitism became more pervasive and the breadth of violence and pogroms increased. Under Alexander III Jews had no freedoms and were victims of crime and robbery; they sought emigration in order to deal with the hardships they faced.¹⁶ When President Julio Roca heard about the condition of the Jews he issued a decree that invited the Russian Jews to immigrate to Argentina, promoting their settlement in a land that was thirsty for people. He even assigned an agent – José María Bustos – to go to Russia and actively recruit Jewish settlers.

When Argentine locals heard of the government's recruitment plan, their anti-Semitic feelings surfaced and newspapers published articles condemning the project. For example, one editorial stated that, "We do not know what people would ever have the idea of sending an agent outside to gather noxious insects, powerful parasites; we do not fully understand a physician who having to treat a growing body which is in need of daily renewed blood, does not know better than to inject leeches instead."¹⁷

Regardless of anti-Semitism, Bustos set out to Russia to encourage Jewish settlement in Argentina. Unfortunately, there are no historical records detailing his mission or its impact in Russia. However, there is record of several Jews who immigrated to Argentina in the years shortly following his trip.¹⁸

¹⁶ Legado, Dir. Vivían Imar and Marcelo Trotta. La Fundación Internacional Raoul Wallenberg, 2005.

¹⁷ Weisbrot, The Jews of Argentina, 43.

¹⁸ Avni, Argentina and the Jews, 22-24.

The Institutionalization of Jewish Immigration: The Baron Hirsch Years

In 1886 Miguel Juárez Celman succeeded Roca as the president. He vigorously approached the issue of immigration and enacted a milestone policy announcing that the government would fund the travel of any potential immigrants who wished to come to Argentina.¹⁹ This news reached the Russian Jewish communities just in time. Many people were ready to leave their troubles behind and make a new life for themselves. And so, on August 14th, 1889, after two long years of travel, a group of 824 Russian Jews arrived on the shores of Argentina afloat the *SS Weser*, marking the first record of organized Jewish immigration to Argentina.²⁰ The immigrants had made arrangements prior to their arrival to receive land and supplies from a man named Pedro Palacios. When they arrived at the Palacios ranch, Palacios refused to sell them any of his land. Destitute, hopeless, and abandoned, the Russian Jews lived in a railroad embankment near the ranch. They had no food, no money, and didn't know the language of the country they were in.²¹

News of the Jews' situation echoed through the larger Argentine society and in 1890 reached Baron Maurice de Hirsch, a German-born Jew who came from a prominent family. He became a leading businessman through his work in international banking and the construction of a railroad from the Balkans to Constantinople.²² He is most well known, however, for his work in philanthropy and is possibly one of the greatest philanthropists of Jewish causes world wide.²³ When Hirsch heard about the conditions

¹⁹ Ibid., 25.

²⁰ Adrián Jmelnizky and Ezequiel Erdei, The Jewish Population in Buenos Aires: Sociodemographic Survey (Buenos Aires: AMIA, 2005) 14.

²¹ Weisbrot, The Jews of Argentina, 45.

²² "Maurice, baron de Hirsch". Britannica Online Encyclopedia. 6 Dec. 2008
<<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/266849/Maurice-baron-de-Hirsch>>.

²³ Legado.

of the Jews in Argentina, he immediately took measures to help them. He persuaded Pedro Palacios to sell him some of his land and founded the first Jewish colony in Argentina: Moisésville.²⁴

With visions of an assimilated and successful Jewish community in Argentina, Hirsch donated \$10 million to found the Jewish Colonization Association (JCA) in 1891. Through the JCA, Hirsch encouraged Jewish immigration and helped immigrants by securing travel and real estate costs (which they agreed to pay back once they made a living in Argentina). He mostly tried to recruit people with agricultural skills so that they would help in the cultivation of new land.²⁵ This is how Jewish farmers began to found their own agricultural colonies. Each family got approximately 75-100 acres of land and instructions on how to work it.²⁶ Although they faced much difficulty (sickness, poverty, etc.), the Jews established themselves within society and even formed close, friendly relationships with Argentine farmers, the Gauchos.²⁷ The success of the JCA was contagious – by 1896 there were 10,000 Jewish immigrants in Argentina.²⁸

The Situation of the Jews in the 20th Century

During the first half of the 20th century the Jews in Argentina were not spared economic hardships or anti-Semitic threats. Some of the economic difficulties within the community derived from the JCA's lack of absorption policies. The JCA was successful in recruiting immigrants, yet once the immigrants arrived in Argentina the JCA did not help ease their transition. The JCA's purpose was to bring manpower – farmers –to work

²⁴ Weisbrot, The Jews of Argentina, 45.

²⁵ Avni, Argentina and the Jews, 37-41.

²⁶ Nicole Kovalivker. Personal Communication. 12 June 2008.

²⁷ Legado.

²⁸ Adrián Jmelnizky and Ezequiel Erdei, The Jewish Population, 14.

the land - and that seemed to be the only place that they directed their efforts. Rabbi Halfon, a prominent leader in the Jewish community of the early 20th century was quoted saying, “There is no one to handle the Jewish immigrants here. No one takes an interest in them either financially or morally...our immigrants are thus abandoned and are forced to undergo difficulties and critical situations that could be saved with a little organization and goodwill.”²⁹ Nonetheless, 81,915 Jews entered the country between 1901 and 1914.³⁰

At this point many Argentines began to realize that, contrary to what Alberdi hoped, many of the immigrants to their country were no more “civil” and no “better” than the native Argentines. Also, the fact that many immigrants held on to their respective cultures was seen as an insult to the Argentines.³¹ According to Avni,³² the Jews specifically embodied three characteristics for popular resentment by Argentines: they exacerbated cultural heterogeneity, they actively practiced a non-Catholic religion, and they were a conspicuous presence in urban areas. Consequently, anti-Semitism began raising its head. One government official stated that Jews can continue practicing their religion if they blended in with the rest of society and didn’t exhibit their differences in public. Jewish schools were attacked for teaching irrelevant and non-nationalistic material; a group of nationalists attacked, vandalized, and burned a Jewish library and two Jewish proletarian clubs in Buenos Aires. One of the most terrible anti-Semitic events at the time was “La Semana Trágica” (The Tragic Week) during which a group of

²⁹ Avni, Argentina and the Jews, 73.

³⁰ Ibid., 78.

³¹ Ibid., 85.

³² Ibid., 91

nationalists walked through the streets of Jewish communities, beating and humiliating all those that appeared Jewish, and vandalizing any property that belonged to Jews.³³

Yet the Jews persevered and built their community and the organizations that would cradle their culture in Argentina in the years to come. They were becoming an enduring group within larger Argentine society and by this time, there were approximately 150,000 Jews in Argentina.³⁴ The Jewish community published newspapers, launched several social organizations and built religious institutions in the agricultural communities. They formed the Soprotimis Society (Israeli Immigrants Protecting Society) to advise potential Jewish immigrants,³⁵ they held a general Jewish congress with representatives from Buenos Aires and the provinces, and they set up the Jewish commercial society. They also created an education system and by 1910 there were 50 Jewish schools that provided the approximately 4,000 students with Jewish education.³⁶

World War II, Juan Perón, and the Dirty War

In the years leading up to World War II, the news of the fate of German and Eastern European Jews spread. The Argentine Jewish community bonded together to rally and advocate for the rights of their brethren. They also created several organizations, such as the Welfare Society for German Speaking Jews and the Committee against Anti-Semitism and Racism, in an effort to absorb some of the German-Jewish refugees. However, Argentina's immigration policies were too strict and most Jewish

³³ Ibid., 101.

³⁴ Adrián Jmelniczky and Ezequiel Erdei, The Jewish Population, 15.

³⁵ Ibid., 15.

³⁶ Avni, Argentina and the Jews, 94-98.

escapees looked to other locations for refuge. The JCA attempted to help European families who wanted to immigrate but their efforts proved unsuccessful and they were only able to recruit about 40 settlers. The Argentine-Jewish community felt a part of what was happening to the Jews in Europe and strongly advocated from afar. However, they understood that they could do nothing to ameliorate the restrictions on immigration and thus the community leaders were relatively passive due to local limitations.³⁷

During the holocaust, it was even more difficult for Jews to immigrate to Argentina.³⁸ When the fascist Juan Perón came to power his policies were discriminatory towards the Jews and sympathetic to the Nazis, encouraging them to seek shelter in Argentina after the war. During his time in power, Perón halted all Jewish immigration, seeking to populate Argentina with more desirable people, many of whom were Jew-haters.³⁹

From this time on, Jewish immigration slowed drastically and the Jewish population decreased due to emigration (to Israel and the U.S.), assimilation, and inter-marriage. Additionally, in 1976 Isabel Perón's government was overthrown and a military dictatorship reigned until 1983. At this time Argentina engaged in a "Dirty War" against subversives to the state and thousands of Argentines disappeared. Jews were a targeted group of "subversives" and many disappeared, were tortured in clandestine detention centers, were murdered, or exposed to other cruelties. It is said in some reports that Jewish prisoners received a more brutal treatment than others. Additionally, Jewish

³⁷ Ibid., 130-131.

³⁸ Ibid., 132.

³⁹ Rebecca Weiner, "The Virtual Jewish History Tour: Argentina," Jewish Virtual Library, 2009, The American-Israeli Cooperative Enterprise, 6 Dec. 2008 <<http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/vjw/Argentina.html>>.

representation in the torture camps was an estimated 5 to 12 times greater than their proportional representation in the Argentine population.⁴⁰

The Argentine-Jewish Community Today

A discussion of the Jewish community in Argentina today cannot begin without mention of the two terrorist attacks that targeted the community in 1992 and 1994. On March 17th, 1992 a suicide bomber exploded in a pick-up truck outside the Israeli Embassy in Buenos Aires, killing 29 people and injuring about 250. Then, on July 18th 1994, a van exploded in front of the AMIA Jewish community center killing 85 people and wounding over 300.⁴¹ The Argentine government has not been active in investigating the attacks, although it supposedly knows who the attackers were. It is also rumored that the Argentine government was actually involved in allowing the terrorists to enter the country.⁴² Every year since 1994, at 9:53 a.m. on July 18th, thousands of Argentine Jews fill the streets near the AMIA building to demand justice and for someone to listen to their pleas. They want to know who was involved in the attack, who killed and injured their loved ones, and who was in charge of this attempt to destroy the Argentine Jewish community.

⁴⁰ DAIA, [Informe sobre la situación de los detenidos-desaparecidos judíos durante el genocidio perpetrado en Argentina 1976-1983](#) (Buenos Aires: DAIA, 2007) 9.

⁴¹ "Atentado 18 de Julio de 1994," [AMIA: Comunidad Judía](#), Amia, 5 Dec. 2008 <http://www.amia.org.ar/content/article_detail.aspx?aid=79&sid=94&smoth=12&syar=2008>; "U.S. Jewish Groups to Lobby Interpol for Action on AMIA Bombing," [Haaretz](#), 3 Oct. 2007, 5 Dec. 2008 <<http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/909441.html>>; "Terrorist Bombings in Argentina," [Jewish Virtual Library](#), 2009, The American-Israeli Cooperative Enterprise, 5 Dec. 2008 <<http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsourc/Terrorism/argentina.html>>.

⁴² "Sixth AMIA Bombing Anniversary," [Action Alerts](#), 7 July 2000, The Jewish Council for Public Affairs, 5 Dec. 2008 <http://www.jewishpublicaffairs.org/action/recent/amia_7-7-00.htm>; Anthony Julius, Robert S. Rifkind, Jeffrey Weill and Felice D. Gaer. "Anti-Semitism: An Assault on Human Rights," [American Jewish Committee Global Jewish Advocacy](#), 20 May 2005, American Jewish Committee, 22 Feb. 2009 <<http://www.ajc.org/site/apps/nl/content2.asp?c=ijIT12PHKoG&b=838459&ct=875267>>.

The memories of these attacks remain poignant in the mind of the community and since the two bombings every Jewish institution has tight security.⁴³ Despite these attempts to demolish the community, in the aftermath of the attacks the community came closer together. The activity in and significance of the Argentine Jewish community increased as it asserted its strength and importance within the larger Argentine society. Argentina's Jewish community today is large and has abundant institutions and many options and activities for Jews to take part in, especially in Buenos Aires.⁴⁴

Three institutions are central to Buenos Aires's Jewish community today: AMIA (Asociación Mutual Israelita), DAIA (Delegación de Asociaciones Israelitas Argentinas), and OSA (Organización Sionista Argentina). AMIA's mission is to promote the well-being of Argentine Jews and build strong community ties through various programs and services.⁴⁵ According to the director of cultural affairs, AMIA aims to "attend to the necessities of the Jews of Buenos Aires and the surrounding area from the day one is born to the day one dies."⁴⁶ DAIA works to represent the Jews in Argentina and its principal objective is to protect the dignity and rights of the Jewish people. The organization focuses on the protection of human rights; garnering universal acknowledgment of the existence of the state of Israel; protecting diversity; informing society about anti-Semitism; and protecting minorities in general.⁴⁷ OSA, one of Argentina's major links with Israel is dedicated to public relations and the promotion of Israel's history and development through activities related to Israel and general public relations programs.⁴⁸

⁴³ At *Hebraica*, one of the Jewish sports clubs, I was not allowed in (even though I had a passport) because I hadn't made prior arrangements and they don't just let anybody in.

⁴⁴ Personal Communication. 13 June 2008.

⁴⁵ AMIA. 2009. Amia. 25 Apr. 2009 <<http://www.amia.org.ar/>>.

⁴⁶ Moises Korrim. Personal Interview. 3 July 2008.

⁴⁷ Marisa Braylan. Personal Interview. 24 July 2008.

⁴⁸ Benny Schneid. Personal Interview. 14 July 2008.

Additionally, Buenos Aires boasts 80 temples of various denominations.⁴⁹ There are also multiple cultural institutions, Zionist organizations, approximately 22 Jewish schools, and various youth movements.⁵⁰ There are several Jewish sports clubs (which are very popular), at least 6 Jewish newspapers, 7 Jewish cemeteries, at least 21 kosher restaurants, and many stores selling Judaica or providing Jewish services (e.g. a hair salon specializing in bat mitzvah preparations).⁵¹



Upper Left: A Judaic Book Store; Upper Right: A Kosher Butcher; Lower Center: A Kosher Supermarket called “Rotzim,” (“We Want,” in Hebrew).



In terms of population counts, the last census in Argentina that included a question about religion was in 1960 and reported 310,000 Jews living in the country. In 2005 the Joint Distribution Committee (one of the largest and most involved non-profit Jewish organizations in Argentina) conducted a new survey to bring the population figure up to date. The report listed that there are 244,000 Jews (80-85% of all Argentine Jews)

⁴⁹ Weiner, “The Virtual Jewish History Tour.”

⁵⁰ This number tends to change relatively often as some schools close due to lack of registration while others open due to a demand for a school pertaining to a particular denomination.

⁵¹ For more information, visit www.hebraica.org.ar; www.hacoaj.org.ar; macabi.com.ar; [Canyon](http://Canyon.com), 2005, Guía Canyon, 3 Feb. 2009 <www.guiacanyon.com>.

living in the greater Buenos Aires area today. The largest Jewish communities outside of Buenos Aires can be found in Córdoba, Mendoza, Bahía Blanca, Rosario, Santa Fe and Tucumán.⁵²

Conclusion

Today, Argentina hosts one of the largest Jewish populations in the world, and the largest Jewish population in Latin America.⁵³ The stories of Jewish immigration and community development in Argentina are both complex and unique. On the one hand, the Jews seemed destined to find a home in Argentina: the lenient immigration policies were implemented at a time when Jews were being persecuted in Europe and were looking for a new home. However, this relationship proved to be complex because Argentina's immigration policies made it possible for the Jews to immigrate, yet the country also held its doors open to anti-Semites: the Europeans with the mindset of the Inquisition during the 1800s, the Nazis after World War II, and Muslims in the late 20th century. Enduring, albeit under difficult conditions at times, a strong Jewish community evolved and is thriving in Buenos Aires today.

⁵² Jmelniczky and Erdei, The Jewish Population, 17.

⁵³ Weiner, "The Virtual Jewish History Tour."

Chapter 4: The Retreaters

I was sitting in the temple facing the Rabbi. His beard was so long and his outfit so traditional that one could not mistake him for anything other than a very orthodox Jew.¹ He was facing the worshippers: women on one side, men on the other, separated by the traditional *mehitzah* (full partition).² It was a Friday night and we had just finished reciting the prayers. As is customary, once the prayers were over the Rabbi took the stand and began to say a few words relating the week's *Torah* portion to our every day lives. As he began speaking in Spanish, I snapped back into reality and remembered that, in fact, I was in Argentina. I could have mistaken this service for one I had been to in my home town in Long Island or in Israel because the service and the traditional appearance and behaviors of the participants on this holy day, the Sabbath, were very similar to those found in any other orthodox Jewish service anywhere else in the world.

I was in the Buenos Aires *Chabad* Temple and Youth Center. *Chabad* is one of several orthodox Jewish sects that are all part of a larger Jewish movement called

¹ The *Torah* forbids the “destruction” of certain parts of the beard. In order to not come close to sinning by cutting off the forbidden parts of the beard, many orthodox Jewish men do not remove the beard at all. Menachem Posner, “Why Don’t Chassidic Men Shave Their Beards?” [Chabad.Org](http://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/494236/jewish/Why-dont-chassidic-men-shave.htm), 2009, Chabad-Lubavitch, 23 Feb. 2009 <http://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/494236/jewish/Why-dont-chassidic-men-shave.htm>; Traditionally, orthodox men wear a long black coat, black pants, and a black hat. The black color symbolizes their lack of concern for color or fashion. They believe that one should focus on the unique character and internal individuality of a person, not external particularities like a colored shirt. Aron Moss, “Why the Jacket and the Black Hat?” [Chabad.Org](http://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/160970/jewish/Why-the-Jacket-and-Black-Hat.htm), 2009, Chabad-Lubavitch, 23 Feb. 2009 <http://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/160970/jewish/Why-the-Jacket-and-Black-Hat.htm>; Yerachmiel Tilles, “Why the Long Black Coat?” [Chabad.Org](http://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/3186/jewish/Why-the-Long-Black-Coat.htm), 2009, Chabad-Lubavitch, 23 Feb. 2009 <http://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/3186/jewish/Why-the-Long-Black-Coat.htm>.

² The *Mehitzah* is a divider that divides the men and women in an Orthodox temple. Traditionally, men and women sat separately at the temple so that they could establish a unique relationship between the self and G-d without any distractions that a mixed sex setting could result in. In some temples, women sit in a balcony while the men are on the main floor, or as in this case, they sit on the same floor but are divided by the *Mehitzah*. “The Mechitzah – Partition,” [Chabad.Org](http://www.chabad.org/library/howto/wizard_cdo/aid/365936/jewish/The-Mechitzah-Partition.htm), 2009, Chabad, 23 Feb. 2009 <http://www.chabad.org/library/howto/wizard_cdo/aid/365936/jewish/The-Mechitzah-Partition.htm>.

Hasidut.³ The Hasidic sects differ from each other according to their European origin and the Rabbi which their ancestors followed. All the Hasidic groups strictly adhere to the religious laws laid out in the sacred *Torah*, although they differ slightly in their interpretations of these texts.⁴

“Your soul is a candle,” the Rabbi said in a loud, encouraging voice. “All our souls here tonight are candles. It is our obligation to light the souls of our neighbors, our friends, and our family members. However, my friends, lighting their soul is not enough. We must stay with them, soul to soul, until we are sure, one hundred percent, that their candle is lit. Only then can we let them go on their own, so they too can light another candle.” Knowing the proselytizing philosophy behind many of the Orthodox Jewish movements, especially *Chabad*, it did not take me long to figure out the metaphoric story the Rabbi was telling. According to *Chabad* followers, we must transmit our Judaism to those whose flame has not yet been ignited with the knowledge, understanding, and wholeness of the Jewish tradition. And once we teach them, once we have convinced them that traditional Judaism is the right way of life, we must make sure to stay with them a bit longer to assure that they are comfortable and able to carry the light and to transmit this Jewish knowledge to others. The *Chabad* movement believes that “it is the duty of the Jews to try to awaken the dormant sparks of light dwelling in the souls of every human being, as part of the process of restoring harmony to the universe.”⁵

The *Chabad* sect, centered in Brooklyn, New York, sends *shlichim* (emissaries) to all parts of the world to try and rekindle Jewish souls. According to the *shlichim*,

³ The name *Chabad* comes from the combination of three Jewish words: *Chochmah* (wisdom), *Binah* (comprehension) and *Da'at* (Knowledge). Sue Fishkoff, *The Rebbe's Army: Inside the World of Chabad-Lubavitch* (New York: Shoken Books, 2003) 18.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 17-18.

⁵ Fishkoff, *The Rebbe's Army*, 19.

Chabad's mission “is to teach other Jews about Judaism in the hopes that this will awaken their dormant Jewish consciousness and lead them naturally to start doing *mitzvahs* (Jewish behavior).”⁶ *Chabad* members see nothing of higher importance than their outreach and educational efforts. Their tremendous work in Buenos Aires is manifested in the growing Orthodox Jewish population of Buenos Aires as opposed to the rest of the Jewish population whose numbers are in decline.⁷ For example, as numerous Jewish schools in Buenos Aires are shutting down due to poor enrollment, more and more Orthodox schools are opening up due to increased demand.⁸

Chabad of Buenos Aires reaches out to Jews of varying levels of engagement and lures them into the *Chabad* family.⁹ Fishkoff writes that they are “an ultra-Orthodox Jewish movement that attracts mainly non-orthodox Jews.”¹⁰ Jani, the director of one of *Chabad's* institutions in Buenos Aires, says that, “[In Buenos Aires] the majority of the *Chabad* centers work to draw people without Jewish knowledge closer to Judaism, and then to help them in their growth as students of the Jewish faith.”¹¹ Proof of their dedication to their mission is reflected by the existence of *Chabad* centers in 74 countries around the world. I was spending that Friday night in one of Buenos Aires’s 30 *Chabad* centers.¹²

The Orthodox population in Buenos Aires is a fascinating one; little did I know, that night as I was listening to the Rabbi and becoming aware of the spark of Judaism in

⁶ Ibid., 31.

⁷ Adrián Jmelniczky and Ezequiel Erdei, The Jewish Population in Buenos Aires: Sociodemographic Survey (Buenos Aires: AMIA, 2005) 17.

⁸ Alejandro Wasserman, Las Organizaciones Comunitarias Judías 1990-2005: Continuidad, Discontinuidad y Desplazamiento Geográfico (Buenos Aires: Joint, 2006) 64-66.

⁹ Ana Bazzana. Personal Interview. 22 July 2008.

¹⁰ Fishkoff, The Rebbe's Army, 11.

¹¹ Jani. Personal Interview. 22 July 2008.

¹² “Centers,” Chabad.Org, 2009, Chabad-Lubavitch, 23 Feb. 2009
<http://www.chabad.org/centers/default_cdo/jewish/Centers.htm>.

my own soul, that I had found the door that would lead me to several incredible first hand experiences in the orthodox community. Although *Chabad* is not necessarily the most typical of all Orthodox groups world-wide, it is the most salient and outstanding group in Buenos Aires, and for that reason I focus on it in my research.

Overview of the Orthodox Jewish Community of Buenos Aires

In Buenos Aires there are essentially two *barrios* (neighborhoods) in which Orthodox Jews reside: *Belgrano* and *Once* (pronounced On-say). Belgrano is more residential and upscale, while Once is more of a commercial district. Jewish presence in Once is extensive.¹³ Walking down an Once street on any given day, one will quickly note the men casually walking around in traditional Jewish attire (black suits or long black coats with white shirts, black hats). On each side of the street there are various kosher food markets, hair dressers advertising that they style for *bat mitzvahs*, and general stores signs with Hebrew writing on them.¹⁴ In the Once mall there is even a kosher McDonald's (the only one outside of Israel!).¹⁵ Additionally, it is not unusual to hear someone speaking *Yiddish*, a vernacular mix of Hebrew and German spoken by Jews

¹³ "Neighborhoods in Brief," Frommer's, 2009, Wiley Publishing, 23 Feb. 2009
<<http://www.frommers.com/destinations/buenosaires/2299020048.html>>.

¹⁴ *Kosher* refers to the foods that are "fit" for consumption by Jews according to G-d as written in the holy books. Keeping kosher is a commandment and an important part of upholding Jewish law. "What is Kosher?" Chabad.Org, 2009, Chabad-Lubavitch, 23 Feb. 2009
<http://www.chabad.org/library/howto/wizard_cdo/aid/113425/jewish/What-is-Kosher.htm>; A *Bat Mitzvah* is the coming of age ceremony for a Jewish girl at age 12, which pronounces her responsible for her religious conduct. "Bat Mitzvah," Chabad.Org, 2009, Chabad-Lubavitch, 23 Feb. 2009
<http://www.chabad.org/search/keyword_cdo/kid/13509/jewish/Bat-Mitzvah.htm>.

¹⁵ "Kosher McDonald's," Frommer's, 2009, Wiley Publishing, 23 Feb. 2009
<<http://www.frommers.com/destinations/buenosaires/D55904.html>>.

who came from Eastern Europe (even in New York it's very difficult to find Yiddish speakers, except in Williamsburg, Brooklyn).¹⁶



An Once resident describes her neighborhood in the following way, “I live in a neighborhood where I walk outside and see many men with hats. In Once we have a kosher bar on each block. Right here you have the *Majón*; across the street you have a yeshiva and a Jewish community center.¹⁷ On the corner you have a kosher restaurant, and on that same street a Jewish high school; one block over you have a Jewish shop. The next block over has another Jewish high school. This whole zone is practically Jewish. It goes without saying that the people here are all Jewish.”¹⁸ In Once, the Orthodox Jewish community is visible and members take pride in their community.¹⁹

¹⁶ “Yiddish.” Merriam Webster Online Dictionary. 2009, Merriam-Webster Inc., 23 Feb. 2009 <<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/yiddish>>.

¹⁷ The *Majón* is a religious boarding school for young women; A *Yeshiva* is a Jewish school.

¹⁸ Ana Bazzana. Personal Interview. 22 July 2008.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*; Jani. Personal Interview. 22 July 2008.



A Street in Once

Majón Or Jaia

In Buenos Aires I had the opportunity to spend time with a young woman (25 years old) named Ana who is part of the *Chabad* community and a resident at *Majón Or Jaia*, a boarding school for young Jewish women. Through my interactions with Ana and my visits to the *Majón*, I came to understand more about what Judaism means to the Orthodox and why, in such modern times, the number of Orthodox followers is constantly increasing. Additionally, I learned about the function of an institution like the *Majón* in the lives of the Orthodox community.



I met Ana on the night I went to the *Chabad* Temple and Youth Center mentioned earlier. Within a few minutes of meeting her, she invited me to visit her at the *Majón*, and waited for me with open arms when I arrived a few days later. The *Majón* houses and provides Jewish education for women from age 18 until marriage. According to the brochure it is “an exclusive space for the young Jewish woman” and “a place to grow and

to discover yourself.” The focus of the *Majón* is on providing a space to help young women find their identity and discover for themselves a pathway within the traditions, customs, and values that have been a part of the Jewish community for eternity.²⁰ Ana raved about the *Majón* as she shared how much it has helped her grow, “The *Majón* is a place that offers a girl all the tools that she needs to begin studying *Torah* or doing *mitzvot*. The *Majón* does not only give you a Jewish education, but it gives you a context in which to grow in what you learn. Basically, the *Majón* gives you all that you need to become a Jewish woman.”²¹

The building itself is stylish, and has many amenities including several computers, excellent food, and a big screen TV. The elegant comfort of the institution allows the girls to have an inviting environment in which to live and learn, while going about their daily lives (going to the university, working, etc). While in residence the women are required to take daily Jewish studies classes including Jewish philosophy, customs and traditions, Hebrew language, and the Jewish Woman in the 21st Century. The *Majón* also takes the girls on trips during vacations and has overnight Saturday outings every other week.

The *Majón* leadership tends to extend an extra warm welcome to young women, like Ana, who do not necessarily come from religious families and who have not yet found their place in modern society. These young women are impressionable and their religious beliefs are still flexible. Like many of the girls, Ana feels that the *Majón* has helped her find her calling.²²

²⁰ *Majón Or Jaia*, Brochure.

²¹ Ana Bazzana. Personal Interview. 22 July 2008.

²² Personal Communication. 20 June 2008.

Ana grew up in Córdoba, a town in the interior of Argentina that boasts a relatively large Jewish population, but the level of religiosity among the population is low compared to that of Buenos Aires. Ana explains, “On a Judaic level, all those who are titled religious in Córdoba are really like the common (non-religious) Jews in Buenos Aires. In spirituality, customs, thoughts, and traditions, the level in the interior cities is really, really low.”²³ Thus, like many of her peers at the *Majón*, after moving to Buenos Aires and joining the *Chabad* community, Ana has become the most religious of her family. Her father is not even Jewish and for a very long time Ana felt very disconnected from Jewish life.²⁴

Ana became involved in *Chabad* unintentionally when she saw an offer for a free trip to Europe and Israel sponsored by *Chabad*. On this trip she found herself among a group of girls that she got along very well with, and was also exposed to Jewish teachings and behaviors. She suddenly became aware of a Jewish way of life that her parents had never introduced her to. Her curiosity about Orthodoxy was piqued.²⁵

When Ana came to study at the University of Buenos Aires, she decided to live in *Majón Or Jaia* and has since become very involved with the community and the institution. She said that *Chabad*, religious Judaism, and her involvement in the *Majón* have given her the tools she needs to face many aspects of life that she used to struggle with as she was trying “to find herself” and to cope with the fears and anxieties related to modernity. These anxieties cause many to look to a higher power for authority, certainty, and direction; Ana has learned to find such an authority in the *Torah*.

²³ Ana Bazzana. Personal Interview. 22 July 2008.

²⁴ Ana Bazzana. Personal Communication. 20 June 2008.

²⁵ Ana Bazzana. Personal Communication. 20 June 2008.

Chabad's philosophy of looking at religious scriptures for directions and answers is a type of Fundamentalism.²⁶ This philosophy resists “the modernizing trends evident within the major faiths...or, in others, the incursions of modernization from the outside,”²⁷ attempting to stabilize fears brought about by modern conditions through receiving guidance from a traditional religious authority.

This is the philosophy that Ana learns at the *Majón*. It gives her tools to build her self-confidence and connect with a community of believers in order to ward off the anxieties and uncertainties of life. “*Chabad* offers tools to live your life in a way that will lead to good results...They tell you that what is important is not money or wealth. That is what this society thinks; it’s all on the surface. But it’s not. I think that internal consciousness is one of the most important keys that *Chabad* has given me,” she explained to me. By teaching her to look and work internally, within her soul, and to rely on the *Torah* for guidance, the Jewish education has taught Ana to disassociate herself from aspects of modern society that she deems undesirable or adverse. She has realized the capacities she has within to live a more fulfilling life. From what she has learned, living a religious Jewish lifestyle is the obvious way to go for her.²⁸

Ana does not understand how someone would not want what Orthodoxy has to offer, which is values, morals, and codes of behavior that promote a “righteous” lifestyle (*tzadeket*).²⁹ “At the *Majón* I study things like to respect my mother and my family, and a

²⁶ For more information on Fundamentalism, see Chapter two.; Samuel C. Heilman and Menachem Friedman, “Religious Fundamentalism and Religious Jews: The Case of the Haredim,” *Fundamentalisms Observed*, ed. Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991) 197.

²⁷ Grace Davie, “The Evolution of the Sociology of Religion: Theme and Variations,” *Handbook of the Sociology of Religion*, ed. Michele Dillon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 73.

²⁸ Ana Bazzana. Personal Interview. 22 July 2008.

²⁹ Tzadeket means a righteous woman which is what a *Chabad* woman strives to be through Jewish education.

ton of values, that not only do they teach us in theory, but also in practice. Values that are positive in relation to the rest of the world.”³⁰

Ana’s rejection of modern values demonstrates Heilman and Friedman’s definition of fundamentalism, which is, “the opposition...to a particular kind of culture and its interpretation of life’s meaning and obligations. Fundamentalism advances alternative, and in its view superior, life options, but it advances them not simply by example, as the passive traditionalists do, but by attempting to remake society in such a way that even those who do not initially share its point of view will come to the conviction that the old-time religion is normative for all.”³¹ Likewise, *Chabad* ideology rejects modern culture and engages in proselytizing activities to try and get all Jews to conform to their way of life.

In addition to the values and rich substance that living at the *Majón* and integrating into the *Chabad* community has added to her life, Ana acknowledges that *Chabad* guides her life in a way that would otherwise be impossible given the multiplicity of options in modern society. She disclosed her confusion to me, “I don’t understand how people live their lives without having a manual to guide them. *Chabad* offers you a manual on how to do things...I encountered a very easy life.”³² Following *Halakhah* (Jewish law) provides Ana with a road map. As Giddens explains, “Religious fundamentalism...provides clear-cut answers as to what to do in an era which has abandoned final authorities: those final authorities can be conjured up again by appeal to

³⁰ Ana Bazzana. Personal Interview. 22 July 2008.

³¹ Heilman and Friedman, “Religious Fundamentalism and Religious Jews,” 215.

³² Ana Bazzana. Personal Interview. 22 July 2008.

the age-old formulae of religion.”³³ Living by set, religious rules provides an individual with a solution to the problem of how to live in a world without a “manual” and with so much choice. Following religious formulae eliminates the existence of “diverse, mutually conflicting authorities,” and thus placates the anxiety related to uncertainty related to making choices.³⁴

Alejandro, a young man who works in a community organization in Buenos Aires, explains,

I think that what we see here is an effect of post-modernity. Each person is whoever he wants to be; we diversify everything. Each person writes his own history and makes his own self; he creates an individual theme. The effect happens when the self rebounds. People are so open and so relative that they begin to lose sight of a truth. This is where the religious currents have the opportunity to offer a truth. People want to be told what to do; they want and need to be told the truth. I think that today’s youth need to find truths that are a little stronger than that of the previous generation.³⁵

In conjunction with feeling that she has an authority and a dogma that guide her through life, Ana benefits from *Chabad’s* focus on community and on the idea that everyone belongs and you no longer have to fear losing yourself in a daunting world. “When a baby is born, it doesn’t matter whose baby, but if the baby is part of *Chabad*, 1000 people run to bring flowers, to welcome the baby into the world. When a baby is born, or someone gets married, everyone says *Mazel Tov*.³⁶ We have a custom, that if for example the cousin of the director here at the *Majón* gets married, the director will call me to say congratulations. Here we are all a family, we all belong.”³⁷ In the five months that Ana has been apart of the community, she has been invited to 8 weddings, 6

³³ Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991) 142.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 196.

³⁵ Alejandro Wasserman. Personal Interview. 18 July 2008.

³⁶ The words for congratulations in Hebrew.

³⁷ Ana Bazzana. Personal Interview. 22 July 2008.

celebrations of births, and is always invited to eat dinner on Friday night at someone's home. Ana is empowered by knowing that she has a place in this world, a place where she belongs.³⁸

The anecdotes that Ana related to me originate in the language that *Chabad's* religious teachings are couched in. Stiver writes, "Religion gives us stories -- stories that need not be true -- that support the intention to live a certain moral way of life."³⁹ By opposing modern values and praising traditional ones, retreating from a life of choice and options to one of guidance and a single authority, and by belonging to a community in a world that is so hard to belong to, Ana has adopted the *Chabad* language and stories within which she has carved out a place for herself.

The girls at the *Majón* are ideal types of "Retreaters." They reject modernity and find salvation in retreating into tradition. Fundamentalism, as some may call it, is a progressively popular response to the onset of modern society and its ills.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Dan R. Stiver, *The Philosophy of Religious Language, Sign, Symbol and Story* (England: Blackwell Publishers, 1996) 72.

Chapter 5: The Adjusters

One afternoon, while in Buenos Aires, I received a phone call from my grandmother in Israel. She had discovered that a friend of hers had relatives in Buenos Aires who were very involved with the Jewish community. Up until last year, the friend's nephew, Eduardo, was President of the oldest congregation in the city, *Templo Libertad*. I immediately called Eduardo and was invited to come to his home for *Shabbat* dinner that Friday.¹

On Friday, I made sure to prepare myself very carefully. I was going to the house of a prominent figure in the Jewish community and I had to make sure I was dressed modestly and that I was ready to participate in a traditional *Shabbat* meal.² When I arrived at Eduardo's home I was greeted by a tall, blonde woman wearing snug jeans and a shirt that revealed her midriff. She introduced me to everyone in the house and I soon realized that this beautiful stylish woman was Nicole, Eduardo's wife. Also present were their son, Emanuel, daughter, Sonia, and Eduardo's 80-something year old mother. Sonia brought her Italian, non-Jewish boyfriend, and Emanuel was there with his girlfriend. After a slightly awkward meet and greet during which no one quite understood who I was and how I knew the family, Nicole led me to the living room where she had laid out a spread of appetizers. She asked me if I kept kosher, and I nervously said no because I did not want to offend her. Then I saw why she asked: on a plate in the middle of the table

¹ Shabbat dinner is the traditional Friday night family dinner, usually after the men come back from prayer services at the synagogue.

² According to Jewish tradition, women are to dress in a modest way to cover their body. The body is considered beautiful and precious, and, especially in an age when a woman's body has become an object to many, keeping the body covered emphasizes its sacredness. Aron Moss, "Do Women Have Something to Hide?" Chabad.org. 2009. Chabad-Lubavitch. 27 Feb. 2008 <http://www.chabad.org/theJewishWoman/article_cdo/aid/650631/jewish/Do-Women-Have-Something-to-Hide.htm>.

there was a full spread of cold cuts and cheeses.³ She explained that they don't keep kosher either, except for Emanuel who decided when he was young that he would abide by Jewish dietary laws. I was a little bewildered; was I not at the house of the previous president of a synagogue? Would not the leader of such a place be expected, and essentially desire, to practice religious behavior in the home as well?

My confusion continued as Nicole told me that today was *Shavuot*, the holiday celebrating the giving of the *Torah* at Mount Sinai.⁴ I nodded, and seeing that I was aware, she continued to ask me if I knew what this holiday was about. I searched the Jewish schema in my mind, yet could not remember the significance of this holiday. I was embarrassed; I had no idea. I quietly responded, "I know the holiday but I forgot its significance," and looked away so as not to see all their horrified stares. I was surprised, therefore, when Nicole responded, "We weren't sure either, and we were hoping that maybe you would know."

Wait. What? The pieces of the puzzle were not fitting together: meat and cheese; only one family member who keeps kosher; a daughter with a non-Jewish boyfriend; a lack of knowledge about a major Jewish holiday. I would have to dig deeper.

After asking many questions, I finally understood more about the specific case of Nicole and Eduardo. I learned that they belonged to *Templo Libertad*, the oldest temple in Buenos Aires. I figured that by looking into the distinct configuration of this prominent institution, I would better understand Nicole and Eduardo's "modern" Jewish way of life. In order to understand the nature of their Judaism, I was going to have to visit the temple.

³ According to Jewish dietary law, this is not allowed

⁴ For more information on Shavuot, see:
http://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/2150/jewish/What-is-Shavuot.htm.

And that is exactly what I did. But before I talk about that experience, I will present a brief overview of Buenos Aires's various Jewish institutions.



Eduardo, Nicole and I

Buenos Aires's Jewish Institutions

In the introduction to this thesis I highlighted the fact that the Jewish community of Buenos Aires is well known for its abundance of Jewish institutions. The consensus from Jewish people I interviewed for this study is that Buenos Aires has a lot to offer in terms of choice and variation. Adrian, a young man who works for the Joint Distribution Committee (JDC), a prominent institution in the community, said to me, “The truth is, I think that whoever wants to integrate themselves into a Jewish institution has a lot of choice...each institution has different features, there is everything out there.”⁵ Leonardo, a young man who works for Hagshama, another community organization, agreed and told me that, “In Buenos Aires, choosing what institution to go to is like going shopping. You have everything to choose from; there is a community for each distinct taste. You have secular, religious, a little more religious in this direction or in that direction. Each person has the opportunity to choose.”⁶

⁵ Adrian Krupnik. Personal Interview. 16 July 2008.

⁶ Leonardo Naidorf. Personal Interview. 10 July 2008.

Many say that the institutions in Buenos Aires are the heart of the Jewish community.⁷ Each institution serves a particular function, while as a whole, the Jewish institutions of Buenos Aires create a framework for the maintenance of Jewish values, practices, and traditions. Many also claim that such institutions are what allow one to support and create his or her Jewish identity. Some community members insist that if people did not receive a formal Jewish education, or are not members of a “club” or religious or cultural institution, they would lose an important aspect of their identity and not be able to continue to develop it. In order to keep constructing a Jewish identity and not lose it, Diego, the Director of Community Development at the Joint Distribution Committee (JDC), said to me that one must have “significant, pleasant, Jewish experiences in an environment where Judaism is strong and influential.”⁸

Diego’s perspective was shared by Adrian, who told me that, “If someone doesn’t belong to a Jewish school or a Jewish club they will have little of a Jewish identity. Without any contact with community organizations it is difficult to develop a Jewish identity. One can still identify as Jewish, but the identity will be different, it will be weaker. Those who belong to institutions will end up with much stronger personal Jewish identities.”⁹

The population study commissioned by the JDC in 2005 determined statistics of institutional membership among Jews in Buenos Aires and had some interesting conclusions and implications. Most importantly, it showed that community participation in institutions is in reality a lot lower than estimated by community members and professionals. Only 39% of self-identifying Jewish people in Buenos Aires are affiliated

⁷ Guido Cohen. Personal Interview. 31 July 2008.

⁸ Diego Freedman. Personal Interview. 28 July 2008.

⁹ Adrian Krupnik. Personal Interview. 16 July 2008.

with an organization. Moreover, 64% of people who affiliate with institutions are affiliated with the sports clubs.¹⁰

The decline in institutional participation is a result of the younger generations being uninterested in integrating into traditional institutions, and continues as these same people transmit this attitude to their children. This information has been brought to the attention of leaders and professionals of the community and some institutions have opted to change in order to open up and appeal to the disenfranchised among the Jewish community. *Templo Libertad* (to which Eduardo and Nicole belong) is an example of a synagogue whose leadership has decided that the institution must become reflexive and adapt itself to peoples' needs. The following case study will reflect how *Templo Libertad* embraced modernity, challenged traditionalism, and increased its membership by reflexively re-structuring its framework to fit the desires and needs of present day Jews.

Templo Libertad

Templo Libertad, originally referred to as CIRA (*Congregación Israelita de la República Argentina*), is the oldest Jewish institution in Buenos Aires. Its mythic history lies at the foundation of Argentina's Jewish community.¹¹ As the story goes, on the Day of Atonement in 1861 two men were sitting on benches near each other in Recoleta, a Buenos Aires neighborhood.¹² Both were looking for someone to pray with on this holiest

¹⁰ Adrián Jmelniczky and Ezequiel Erdei, *The Jewish Population in Buenos Aires: Sociodemographic Survey* (Buenos Aires: AMIA, 2005) 42-45.

¹¹ Eliahu Toker and Ana E. Weinstein, "De La Historia De La Congregación," *Congregación en Libertad: Revista de la Congregación Israelita de la República Argentina*, Sept. 2000: 9-10.

¹² The Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur, is the holiest holiday for the Jewish people. On this day, people are closest with G-d as they abstain from food and drink for 26 hours while they pray to G-d to forgive them of all their sins. "Yom Kippur in a Nutshell," *Chabad.org*, 2009, Chabad-Lubavitch, 26 Feb. 2009 <http://www.chabad.org/holidays/JewishNewYear/template_cdo/aid/177886/jewish/In-a-Nutshell.htm>.

Jewish holiday, and when they realized they were there for the same reason, they decided to look for more Jewish men to put together the city's first permanent *minyan*.¹³ By 1862 ten men were assembled and Buenos Aires's first congregation was formed.¹⁴ The congregation moved through several buildings as the number of participants increased. After the death of the great Baron Hirsch, his wife donated money to build a temple, and in 1897 the first stone of *Templo Libertad* was set in place.¹⁵ In 1932 it was remodeled to fit the growing number of members.¹⁶ By the beginning of the 20th century CIRA began to found new institutions to serve the increasing needs of the Jewish Community. From this congregation stemmed AMIA and DAIA, as well as many other organizations that serve the Jewish community today.¹⁷



Templo Libertad, Buenos Aires, Argentina

¹³ The minimum assembly of ten men needed for communal prayer. "The Minyan," [Chabad.Org](http://www.chabad.org/search/keyword_cdo/kid/2478/jewish/Minyan.htm), 2009. Chabad-Lubavitch, 30 Jan. 2009 <http://www.chabad.org/search/keyword_cdo/kid/2478/jewish/Minyan.htm>.

¹⁴ Toker and Weinstein, "De La Historia De La Congregación", 9-10.

¹⁵ Rabino Moguilevsky. Personal Interview. 7 July 2008.

¹⁶ Eliahu Toker and Ana E. Weinstein, "La CIRA, Institución de Instituciones," *Congregación en Libertad: Revista de la Congregación Israelita de al República Argentina*, Sept. 2000: 13.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 13.

Today the synagogue is embarking on its 112th year. It faces a population distinct from the one that founded it: the members of the congregation are ageing, the dedicated old-timers are beginning to die off, and there is a general trend of decline in membership.¹⁸ The directors believe that the shrinking membership has to do with the younger generations' lack of identification with traditional aspects of Jewish behavior and worship associated with a temple.¹⁹ To tackle these challenges and to reach out to a younger population, *Templo Libertad* recently took some bold steps towards adapting its traditional ways to better fit modern society

The leadership of *Templo Libertad* understood that the community they serve live in a world in which they have many lifestyle choices, specifically about expressing their Judaism. As Giddens writes, "The more post-traditional the setting in which an individual moves, the more lifestyle concerns the very core of self-identity, its making and remaking."²⁰ Not only can individuals choose from myriad institutions in Buenos Aires, but they can also choose not to be a member of any of them. Knowing that, the temple has implemented changes to identify with citizens of modern society, yet still maintain an institutionalized Judaism.

The first change was to hire a new, younger Rabbi to lead the congregation. His objective was to attract younger people and families to the temple. Rabbi Bergman, the new Rabbi, is a Universalist who advocates liberal religion, and a Humanist, who cares for the welfare of the Jewish community. He also promotes activities related to inter-religious dialogue, and many Friday nights one can find Muslims and Christians

¹⁸ Nicole Kovalivker. Personal Interview. 17 July 2008.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Giddens, *Modernity and Self Identity*, 81.

intermixed among the Jews in the services. His modern, humanistic, open, and accepting attitude has proven very attractive for many, and his outreach resulted in many young families joining the congregation .²¹

While Rabbi Bergman leads the services on Friday nights, Saturday mornings, and on the High Holidays (the days that many secular Jews attend services) there is still an option for those who want to continue engaging in a more conservative and traditional observance on a daily basis. The older Rabbi of the congregation, Rabbi Moguelevsky, continues to hold traditional *minyanim* (services) twice daily in a smaller chapel on the bottom floor of the temple.²² Each Rabbi appeals to a different group of people: the long-standing, older members congregate around Rabbi Moguelevsky's services, and the younger, newer members are attracted to Rabbi Bergman's services. The prospect of choice has strengthened the community.

Next, the Temple made a significant change in its seating arrangement. Since this used to be a traditional temple, there has always been a separation of seating for men and women: men are always in the front and center of the temple while women are relegated to the back because men have more ritual commitments in the synagogue while women are mostly responsible for bringing religion into the home. Many women today see this as demeaning, unfair and unnecessary (especially with the onset of Feminist movements).²³ In response to these feelings and the possibility that separation of the sexes turns people away from coming to temple, *Templo Libertad* decided to take a new liberal stance and allow men, women, and families to sit together. According to Nicole, who works at the

²¹ Guido Cohen. Personal Interview. 31 July 2008.

²² Ibid.

²³ Joelle Keene, "My Beloved Mechitzah," [Chabad.org](http://www.chabad.org), 2009, Chabad-Lubavitch, 1 Mar. 2009 <http://www.chabad.org/theJewishWoman/article_cdo/aid/395816/jewish/My-Beloved-Mechitzah.htm>.

temple, this has proven more sensible and practical since families, more often than not, come to temple to be with their loved ones and celebrate the holidays together.²⁴

In addition, there have been several changes in the actual prayer service. Traditionally the *sidur* (prayer book) is written in Hebrew. Since most Argentine Jews do not understand Hebrew they could not relate much to the text and the prayer. To address this, the Temple published a bilingual edition of the *sidur*: the prayer book is now written in Hebrew on one side and in Spanish on the other. The Rabbi also intertwines both languages into his recitation of the prayers. This way one has the option to follow along in Hebrew or in Spanish. With these options comes ample appeal as more people can relate to the content of the services.²⁵

Another step that has been taken to strengthen the appeal of the temple is that the services are now accompanied by music. Music is a universal way to unite people from different backgrounds and with different interests, so most of the prayers are sung to beautiful melodies and are thus transformed from a religious statement to a somewhat more cultural and “modern,” unifying experience. The musicians consist of a *chazan* (cantor), another singer, and an organ player. All three musicians are young and professional and contribute to the marvel of the service. It is actually rather significant that there is an organ in the temple, especially on a Friday night. This is because after the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 AD, instrumental music accompanying prayers was prohibited as an expression of mourning for the destruction of Jerusalem. Additionally, playing musical instruments is considered *melacha*, a forbidden form of

²⁴ Nicole Kovalivker. Personal Interview. 17 July 2008.

²⁵ Ibid.

work on the Sabbath.²⁶ The leadership of *Templo Libertad* decided that reaching out to people and uniting them through music is important for the continuity of the congregation, and the beautiful sounds that resonate from the temple every week have really added to its character and draw.

Finally, as was stated in the introduction, many Jews in Argentina today find themselves identifying with the cultural aspects of religion. The Temple took this into account and has added a series of cultural events to its agenda. The building houses an historical museum, and there are art exhibitions and concerts there as well.²⁷ Rabbi Bergman also established a foundation, *Fundación Judaica*, which he has integrated into the activity of the temple.²⁸ The objective of the foundation is “to promote a modern, understandable, and practical Jewish life based on the terms of our social and cultural reality...[it] work[s] with other organizations as well to create an inclusive and diverse Judaism.”²⁹ *Fundación Judaica* has created educational, cultural, social, and religious programs to appeal to people of all ages and of varying religious denominations. Understanding that Argentine Jews tend to relate to the more cultural and social aspects of the religion, *Templo Libertad* has made great strides to change itself and attract people on this new basis.

Nicole, whose house I went to that Friday night, explained that she really has seen a positive effect of these changes on the membership and distinguished reputation of the temple. She says that the institution “has created activities to cause more people to feel good,” and that she believes that the decision to include the young Rabbi Bergman, and

²⁶ “Temple,” *The Oxford Dictionary of the Jewish Religion*, 1997.

²⁷ Nicole Kovalivker. Personal Interview. 17 July 2008.

²⁸ For more info see: www.judaica.org.ar

²⁹ Guido Cohen. Personal Interview. 31 July 2008.

the decision to have men and women sit together, makes the atmosphere more relaxed. “I think that they have had a substantial achievement,” she told me.³⁰ The achievement is reflected in the 200 families - many of them young - that are part of the congregation today, and the many more that are a part of *Fundación Judaica*’s activities. This institution took a valiant step to embrace modernity as it imitated contemporary social trends, such as creating choice and alternatives, and extending boundaries of acceptance, all the while remaining within the limits of a Jewish Temple. It is a unique experience to sit in a service in the oldest temple in Buenos Aires, knowing that at the same time you are sitting in the most modern and innovative temple in the city.

In summary, the members as well as the leaders of *Templo Libertad* fit into the category of the “Adjusters.” They consider institutionalized religion important for maintaining their identity, yet they appreciate the reflexive nature of modernity. Thus, they have adjusted their religious behavior and the framework of the institution so that both align their values with those of modern society. Having the option to affiliate with an institution that is reflexive and acknowledges the changing times, offers the Adjusters the best of both worlds: they can choose to attend a religious institution that aligns itself with their needs and values as modern Jews.

³⁰ Nicole Kovalivker. Personal Interview. 17 July 2008.

Chapter 6: The Creators

In the summer of 2008 I spent nine weeks interning at the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee's Latin American office (JDCLA). The JDC is an international non-profit Jewish organization founded in 1914 with the objective of raising funds for Jews in need all around the world. Today it has offices in 59 countries and has expanded its mission to be, "Rescue of Jews at risk; Relief of Jews in need; Renewal of Jewish community life."¹ The JDC's Latin American office in Buenos Aires is responsible for all of the Jewish communities of Latin America and boasts many diverse programs which are implemented across the continent.² Each floor of the six story building in Buenos Aires is responsible for a different aspect of the Latin American Jewish community.

I interned at the Community Development department of Latin America, whose mission is to strengthen "the organizational capacities of the region's Jewish institutions and organizations so that they can respond themselves, in a professional and effective manner, to the problems and challenges that affect them."³ The office spearheads several projects including training conferences for Jewish community professional across Latin America, and consulting and technical assistance programs for Jewish organizations. Another project directed there is *Meidá* ("knowledge" in Hebrew), which is the JDCLA's center of studies and investigation. The *Meidá* team conducts research on the Jewish communities of Latin America and provides institutions and professionals in the field

¹ "Vision, Mission, Principles of Operation," American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, 2009, JDC, 2 Mar. 2009 <<http://www.jdc.org/about-jdc/mission-operating-principles.aspx>>.

² A handful of the programs that the JDC directs: Food, clothing, and medicine distribution; Emergency provisions for housing problems; Subsidies for school lunches; Social Service Programs for the elderly; Free legal assistance to beneficiaries who encounter problems with eviction, mortgages, etc.; The Baby Help program which provides financial and emotional assistance to babies and pregnant women; Subsidies for Bar and Bat Mitzvah Studies, etc. American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee. The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee: Departamento Internacional de Desarrollo Comunitario, Oficina Latinoamérica. (Buenos Aires: JDC).

³ *Ibid.*, 5.

with information that they can use towards planning, developing, and strengthening each of their Jewish community programs.⁴



In 2005, *Meidá* conducted the study of the Jewish population of Buenos Aires I referred to earlier. The goal of the study was to find “an approximate estimate of the total Jewish population in the AMBA [Metropolitan Area of Buenos Aires]”, and “to provide a large extent of information about community ties, as well as the practices, habits, customs, and values associated with Judaism.”⁵ The most significant information that came from this study was that, contrary to the belief of most community professionals, 61% of Buenos Aires’s Jews were not affiliated with any Jewish institution.⁶ This finding was initially questioned since many believe that you have to be affiliated with an institution to preserve your Jewish identity. Additionally, since Buenos Aires takes pride in having such a wide variety of institutions, it seemed logical that most Jews would be affiliated with at least one of them. The questions followed: Does this information suggest that the population is losing its Jewish identity? Why are so many people shying away from the array of available institutions? Do these people still consider themselves Jewish if they do not partake in any sort of structured Jewish life? Can they still maintain a Jewish life?

⁴ “Nuestros Proyectos,” *Meidá*, The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, 2 Mar. 2009 <<http://www.meida.org/proyectos.html>>.

⁵ Adrián Jmelniczky and Ezequiel Erdei. *The Jewish Population in Buenos Aires: Sociodemographic Survey*. (Buenos Aires: AMIA, 2005).

⁶ *Ibid.*; Adrian Krupnik. Personal Interview. 16 July 2008.; Alejandro Wasserman. Personal Interview. 18 July 2008.; Diego Freedman. Personal Interview. 28 July 2008.

The JDCLA was intrigued by the results of the study and eager to address its possible implications. Since Jewish community professionals believed that most people who consider themselves Jewish were connected to the institutions, they never concerned themselves with those who were unaffiliated. But as the *Meidá* survey showed, there are many, even a majority, of unaffiliated Jews in Buenos Aires, and the JDCLA felt they needed to address this large and important segment of the population.⁷

After much planning, the JDCLA created a new program that was fashioned to appeal uniquely to unaffiliated Jews. They call this program YOK (pronounced “shock”).⁸ When I arrived at the JDCLA, I was intrigued by the YOK program and requested to join the team. Through this experience I was able to conduct the research about the third group in my model which I refer to as the “Creators.”

Why the 61% Do Not Affiliate

The 61% of Jews who do not affiliate with any Jewish institution are about 150,000 people of the 240,000 Jews in greater Buenos Aires. Of this group, two thirds used to belong to a Jewish institution and now do not, and one third has never been affiliated with a Jewish institution.⁹ Regardless of past affiliation, all 150,000 tend to avoid Jewish institutions for similar reasons.

One reason many choose to not affiliate with Jewish institutions is because they do not find the institutions’ propositions attractive.¹⁰ Jérica, a young woman who works at the JDCLA, told me that she does not belong to any Jewish institution because she

⁷ Diego Freedman. Personal Interview. 28 July 2008.

⁸ Alejandro Wasserman. Personal Interview. 18 July 2008.

⁹ Jmelnizky and Erdei, *The Jewish Population*, 42.

¹⁰ Alejandro Wasserman. Personal Interview. 18 July 2008.

finds no institution that she would want to join based on her interests and the way she wishes to spend her free time.¹¹ Leonardo, a young man who works at another community organization supports J sica’s statement. He says that he and his colleagues were unable to attract young people to the youth engagement program that they run. They realized that the interests and needs of a young university student generally do not relate to what religious youth programs have to offer. At the university age, youth are looking for an intimate partner, a job, and to successfully finish their degree. Most do not have the time or desire to attend Jewish after-school programs, especially when the Jewish aspect of their identity represents only a fraction of who they are.¹²

A second reason many remain unaffiliated is that they feel that belonging to an institution requires not just any affiliation, but one that fits within the particular framework of that institution. Adrian explained to me that, “Each institution has its own world, and if that world isn’t exactly what your world is like, it is really hard to join.”¹³ For example, one youth group requires children to have a bar or bat mitzvah (a religious coming of age ceremony), and if you do not choose to do that, you do not fit in.¹⁴ Additionally, some Jews who may not have two Jewish parents or may have converted to Judaism may not feel welcome at any of the institutions because of this difference in their “blood line.” For example, Jonathan is the son of a Catholic mother and Jewish father. In his 20s he decided to connect to Judaism. However, he was apprehensive about approaching any institution for the fear of being rejected and discriminated against

¹¹ J sica Azar. Personal Interview, 16 July 2008.

¹² Leonardo Naidorf. Personal Interview. 10 July 2008.

¹³ Adrian Krupnik. Personal Interview. 16 July 2008.

¹⁴ Laura Shlafer. Personal Interview. 12 July 2008.

because he wasn't a "real Jew." As a consequence, it has been hard for him to find his place among the Jewish institutions.¹⁵

Also, as some people become more reflexive and construct and reconstruct their identity and lifestyle, they may find that they no longer fit the framework of a particular institution they are members of. This can be because the institution failed to undergo a similar reflexive process and its leadership did not wish to stray from the institution's traditional identity.¹⁶ Luba, a non-affiliated Jew, recalls that she and her family used to be highly involved in the Jewish community. She had originally sent her children to Jewish schools, but half way through her children's schooling, the school leadership changed and began requiring the students to eat kosher lunches and to recite certain prayers. This was not the lifestyle of Luba's family and they no longer felt comfortable. Because of such experiences, Luba and her family today have no connection to any of Buenos Aires's institutions.¹⁷

Diego, the director of community development at the JDC explains that although Buenos Aires has a large diversity of institutions, the diversity is focused on the wrong idea. It revolves around a variety of the same type of institutions: several sports clubs, many youth groups centered on similar ideas, various conservative and reform temples, etc. What is missing is variety in the models for Jewish expression in these institutions. For example, he says that the sports clubs (Hebraica, Macabi, and HaCoaj) generally have the same objective and offer the same activities, as do the youth groups which require weekly attendance, and the Jewish schools which assume students come from a household with a Jewish mother. What is missing is a diversity of programs that do not

¹⁵Jonathan Szencis. Personal Interview. 23 July 2008.

¹⁶Alejandro Wasserman. Personal Interview. 18 July 2008.

¹⁷Luba Lewin. Personal Interview. 19 July 2008.

require specific attendance, or that deal with touchy subjects like mixed marriages and conversions. Diego concludes that not everyone has a place among the Jewish institutions because of a lack of diverse models of engagement and expression which are necessary in contemporary society.¹⁸

Finally, many people simply do not think that they need an institution to practice Judaism or to assert their Jewish identity. The advent of modernity has created many different kinds of Jewish identities and many ways to maintain it. Nicole and Moises believe that it is possible to maintain a Jewish identity without belonging to an institution because Judaism is a feeling and a private decision; it is related to a lot more than just institutional affiliations.¹⁹

To conclude, as Diego understands it, the people rather than the institutions are important for the continuation of the Jewish community. Not only do the people maintain the institutions, but at the end of the day, the people are the ones who live and transmit Judaism to the next generations. Thus, the JDCLA created YOK to appeal to those individuals who want to express their Judaism in their own unique way, and to make sure that each individual Jewish expression is respected.²⁰

YOK: Judaísmo a tú manera (Judaism your way)

YOK began its activities in 2005 as an experimental program to offer the “61%” of unaffiliated Jews alternatives for expressing their Judaism. They ultimately hope that if

¹⁸Diego Freedman. Personal Interview. 28 July 2008.

¹⁹Nicole Kovalivker. Personal Interview. 17 July 2008.; Moises Korrim. Personal Interview. 8 July 2008.

²⁰Diego Freedman. Personal Interview. 28 July 2008.

the model of this program succeeds it will be replicated in other places.²¹ According to Alejandro, one of the directors of YOK, “It is a cultural project that makes it very easy for people to take possession of what Judaism means to them, without censure and without closure.”²²

YOK has activities throughout the week that are related to Judaism, yet these programs relate to cultural and peripheral aspects of the religion. These include lectures about famous Jewish philosophers, screenings of Jewish movies, and panels about secular Argentine current events led by Jewish hosts and panelists. The activities also revolve around certain controversial topics, such as mixed marriages, that are not usually brought up in other institutions but that YOK likes to focus on to promote their diversity. YOK’s biggest events are on Rosh Hashanah (the Jewish New Year), and Passover (A Jewish holiday celebrating spring time), when they organize huge street festivals in Buenos Aires’s biggest plazas and invite anyone and everyone to engage in a variety of activities related to the holidays.²³

The purpose of these activities is to allow each person to practice Judaism how he or she sees fit. No one can become a “member” of YOK; it is a pay as you go system, so that each person can choose which events to attend. The leadership usually tries to have the events at secular locations so that there is no trace of the stigma associated with the traditional Jewish organizations. For example, unlike any other Jewish institution in the city of Buenos Aires, there is no security at the door during YOK events. People of all ages are invited, and they can bring whomever they want along with them – Jewish or not.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ For more information, see <www.yoktime.com>.

YOK's catchy slogan "Judaísmo a tu manera" ("Judaism your way") is very appropriate to this purpose. The idea is that there is not one type of Judaism that is more valid than another; each individual essentially creates her own Judaism and no one can tell her how or how not to continue practicing it. On YOK's website these ideas are summarized:

YOK is a proposal to live your Judaism your own way. Without dogmas or censorship. With the certainty of being Jewish and the constant questioning of a live culture. YOK is liberalization and emotion. A cultural proposal that finds itself in intellectual and artistic manifestations, an incessant reflection of Judaism. YOK discovers, entertains and moves. It generates non-traditional spaces for Jewish life. YOK was born with the goal of contributing to the development of a pluralist community...it is an integral actor in a multicultural society.²⁴



YOK's marketing is very helpful in getting this point across. The modern logo and the unique graphics appeal to people looking for something unprecedented and contemporary. Additionally, at many events YOK sells merchandise such as t-shirts and playing cards that have funny references to cultural Jewish traditions.



Examples of images on YOK t-shirts²⁵

²⁴ "Acerca de YOK," *Yoktime*, 2005, YOK, 8 Mar. 2009 <<http://www.yoktime.com/acerca.php>>.

²⁵ From left to right: I Love Latkes. Latkes are a traditional Jewish food eaten on the holiday of Chanukah.; A saying in Yiddish that means "Oh No."; This refers to Guefilte Fish, a traditional Eastern European Jewish food.; The words read: Superman, Superovitch, Superberg, Superovsky. Man, Ovitch, Berg and Ovsky are very common endings to Jewish family names.; This is an image of Moses, a biblical character.; I Love Kipe. Kipe is the Spanish spelling of Kippa, the traditional head covering that religious men wear.; All images taken from <www.yoktime.com>.

The light-heartedness, acceptance, and diversity of the activities make the program very approachable, attracting many people of all ages who wish to express their Judaism.²⁶

Alejandro told me that the YOK model is celebrated by many people. He said, “I believe that many people identify with this idea of YOK as cultural Judaism, Judaism of diversity, Judaism of debates, of Jewish experiences, from the tastes, to the smells, to the dialogues. I think that many people can identify with this.”²⁷

The YOK model is different than that of other institutions for two main reasons. First, YOK is essentially created and molded by what the participants want. In other institutions, the people are molded and directed by what the institution is like or what it expects from its participants. Second, unlike in other places, YOK does not tell anyone how to practice his or her Judaism, nor does it prescribe a Jewish identity onto anyone; rather it provides people with a context in which they can practice however they wish. No one feels obligated to do certain things in order to be able to attend events, and each one is given the opportunity to create his or her own identity by choosing the aspects that best fit his or her lifestyle.²⁸

Peter Berger emphasizes that with the onset of modernity, human life and the activities it involves have evolved from a matter of fate to a matter of choice. The effect of this transition on peoples’ relationships with modern institutions is what he designates the “Heretical Imperative.” He writes that in the past the heretic was he who denied the guidance of traditional authority and produced his individual divergent opinions by picking and choosing aspects of the stated tradition. In pre-modern times, heresy was a relatively rare (and punishable) occasion. However, Berger explains that in modern

²⁶“Tienda,” *Yoktime*, 2005, YOK, 8 Mar. 2009 <<http://www.yoktime.com/tienda.php>>.

²⁷ Alejandro Wasserman. Personal Interview. 18 July 2008.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

society, heresy becomes universally institutionalized. He writes that, “Modernity creates a new situation in which picking and choosing becomes an imperative,” and thus heresy becomes a necessity.²⁹ This is exactly the context that YOK hopes to encourage as it promotes heresy and strives to connect to individuals by allowing them to have a voice in creating their own sense of Judaism.

Since its inception, YOK has encountered immense success. The first “Urban Passover” street festival held in 2006 boasted 12,000 participants; by 2007, the number of participants at the same event rose to 22,000. This success is most probably due to the program’s values which parallel those of modern society: it is diverse, dynamic, reflexive, full of choice, and prescribes authority onto the individual.

Horowitz’s work, cited in chapter two, has contributed the idea that one’s contemporary Jewish identity is linked to that individual’s Jewish experience over time, rather than how he or she specifically practices. In the past, Jewish identity was measured by one’s behavior and actions. These ways of expressing religiosity are no longer the only way to be Jewish. Today the focus is more internal and unique: each individual may find religious significance in their own manner, regardless of their degree of involvement in institutionalized religious practices.³⁰

YOK is an attempt to embrace the particular relationship that the “Creators” have with Judaism. This relationship bases itself on the existence of choice and individual authority in modern society. As Berger implies, the option of creating one’s own

²⁹ Peter L. Berger, The Heretical Imperative: Contemporary Possibilities of Religious Affirmation, (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1979) 28.

³⁰ Bethamie Horowitz, Connections and Journeys: Assessing Critical Opportunities for Enhancing Jewish Identity (New York: UJA Federation, 2000) 185-87.

religious identity is imperative to the continuation of any sort of relationship between the modern individual and religion.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

Every year on July 18th, thousands of Jewish people fill Pasteur Street in Buenos Aires. They gather for a political rally to commemorate the anniversary of the terrorist attack on the AMIA building and to demand justice. By now, it has been more than 14 years and the government has yet to investigate the 1994 attack; no one has any verification about who bombed the building and the community has no acknowledgement by the government about who killed their friends and family members. Every year on July 18th, at precisely 9:53 a.m. (the exact time of the attack), thousands of people fill Pasteur Street in Buenos Aires and identify as one Jewish community.

In the summer of 2008 I was also on Pasteur Street on July 18th. What struck me more than the powerful speeches and the touching songs was the fact that in that crowd were all kinds of Jews. There were religious Jews wearing the traditional garb, Jews that probably couldn't remember the last time they stepped foot inside a synagogue, groups of young children who came with their class from the Jewish elementary schools, Zionist youth groups, and the Rabbis of *Templo Libertad*, among many, many more. The people on Pasteur Street that morning were there because they were Jewish and united for a cause.



Pasteur Street on July 18th, 2008

What I witnessed that morning is integral to the answer of my thesis question, “What does it mean to be Jewish in 21st century Buenos Aires?” First, it implies that no matter the difference in someone’s Jewish identity and form of expression, each person is ultimately striving to achieve a similar goal: to be identified as a Jew and as a member of the Jewish people. Through the case studies in this thesis, I have shown that there are a variety of ways in which one can embrace and express his or her Jewish identity in contemporary society. People today have claimed the authority to place themselves at various points on the continuum of Jewishness, from “Retreaters” to “Adjusters” and all the way to “Creators.”

Second, it implies that religion is still an important feature of contemporary society. In chapter two I mentioned that Marx, Weber, and Durkheim were convinced that at the onset of modernity and the introduction of rational thought, the construct of religion would fade away. However, as my three case studies have shown, this has not proven to be the case. Rather, religion prevails, yet in different forms; each group in my case studies has distinctively adapted Judaism to modernity. The increasing number of “Retreaters” in Buenos Aires serves as an example of the idea that the importance of religion has not dissipated.

The Retreaters in my model, as exemplified through the case study of Ana and *Majón Or Jaia*, reject modernity because of its anxiety-causing characteristics, such as choice and a lack of a central moral authority. They retreat into a safe-haven of a guided life based on traditional religious scriptures. This provides them with authority, morality, and certainty in a world that the Orthodox community sees devoid of just those

components. Such religious Fundamentalism has risen as a direct response to modernity and is evident in other religions and in many different places around the world.¹

For example, there has been resurgence in Islamic Fundamentalism. According to Ahmad, Islamic Fundamentalist groups, “Seek to restore the original teachings of the Qur’an.”² They see their literal interpretation of traditional Islamist scriptures as outlining a way of life that relates all aspects of human activity to the will of G-d. They react to the modernizing, secular influences of the West that have created a secular way of life which is against their belief.³ “Retreaters” themselves, this group of people are similar to Orthodox Jews in Buenos Aires, and fundamentalist groups in other contexts, because they reject modernity and base their ideals and behaviors on the traditional religious texts.

And so, after extensive research, plenty of interviews, and thorough analysis, I conclude that to be Jewish in 21st century Buenos Aires means to have to wrestle reflexively with the possibilities of choice that come with modernity. This means to live your Judaism in your own way. It means to figure out what characteristics of modernity you want to incorporate into your life, and how you want to express your Jewish identity. It means choosing the kind of Jewish lifestyle that you want to lead. And most importantly, it means identifying with and stating your belonging to the Jewish nation, regardless of the way in which you express your Judaism.

Since I am the first person to have done such research linking modernity and religion, specifically focused on the Jewish population of Buenos Aires, many aspects of this study are open to further investigation. While this study has outlined the three major

¹ Anthony Giddens, Runaway World: How Globalization is Reshaping our Lives (New York: Routledge, 1999) 48.

² Mumtaz Ahmad, “Islamic Fundamentalism in South Asia,” Fundamentalisms Observed, ed. Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press) 1991. 462-63.

³ *Ibid.*; Giddens, Runaway World, 48-50.

types of modern reactions to religion in Buenos Aires, I believe it is important to expand upon each type and explore it more in depth. Particularly, I think that attention should be paid to the “Creators,” who have only recently been established as a group whose needs must be addressed. It should be interesting to see if more programs like YOK emerge to appeal specifically to this group.

Additionally, since I have come to the conclusion that religion in Buenos Aires is not on the decline, it would be exciting to explore how the demographics of the three groups change along time. Will more people become “Retreaters?” Will everyone find a balance like the “Adjusters?” Will the “Creators” abandon religion altogether? Or will a new group form with a unique reaction to modernity deserving of a researcher’s attention? Another prospect for comparative research would be to see if the responses to modernity of other religious groups in contemporary Buenos Aires fit into the same three types. The research possibilities are endless, and I myself hope to return to Buenos Aires one day and continue investigating this topic I find fascinating.

At the end of each of the interviews that I conducted, I asked the interviewee to reflect on what it means to be Jewish in 21st century Buenos Aires. I must say that there were as many answers to this question as there are ways of expressing Judaism. That is what I find unique about my research. However, I leave you here with an answer from Diego, the director of the JDC’s office of community development and my boss at my internship placement. I believe his answer to be very appropriate both as a conclusion to this study, as well as a thought-provoking idea for seeds of a new study.

For me, to be Jewish in the 21st century means to move with the current and against the current, like in a river. Have you ever gone rafting? Well, when you go rafting the raft generally follows the current in the direction that the river flows. But there are areas in the river where the current flows against the direction you

are moving in and you must take control of the raft to keep it moving. I believe that to be Jewish implies to live and to adapt to modernity, to the characteristics of the society in which we live. But, at the same time, to have values, traditions, and knowledge that go against the currents of modernity. For me, being Jewish in the 21st century means moving with the current, and at the same time against the current. Judaism is a part of each person's identity and I do not accept that others will say that there is only one way to be Jewish, or that there is one better way to be Jewish. I don't accept that because I know that Judaism gives people the possibility of choice.⁴

With this analogy, Diego highlights the importance of each individual's authority in reflexively monitoring his or her Judaism. Religion continues to be an important aspect in modern society, and so the choices that each person makes in his or her individual Jewish expression are paramount. With these choices, each person is enabled to create a unique Jewish identity.

⁴ Diego Freedman. Personal Interview, 28 July 2008.

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