

Don't Cry for Me Argentina

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As president of the Rabbinic Cabinet of JFNA, I have had the privilege of traveling with colleagues from across the US and from all denominations to visit Jewish communities in Budapest, Hungary, Kiev and Tblisi, Georgia. So my advice to any young people who like to travel and who want to see the world is – you should think about becoming a rabbi.

This year instead of visiting communities devastated by the double whammy of the Holocaust, followed by the efforts of atheistic communist regimes that sought to complete the job of wiping out Judaism, we visited a community that was not devastated by the Holocaust or World War II. I returned yesterday from a visit to Argentina, a community that unlike the other places we visited, was self-sufficient, sophisticated, solidly middle class, and that is as developed and integrated into overall society as is ours in North America. There are both similarities to our experience and differences as well.

Our visit was co-sponsored, as were our previous ones by the Joint Distribution Committee and the Jewish Agency, which are the overseas arms of the American Jewish community, and with our partner, the JFNA, the Jewish Federations of North America.

I had the feeling that we were visiting a complex country which is an enigma covered by layers of subterfuge, clouded by decades of corruption that has been ruled by governments that have exploited its people. A land of contradictions, Jews and Nazis both took refuge in Argentina after World War II. The Peron presence is still felt today, as politicians on both the left and the right try to appeal to the public by claiming to be the true heirs of the Peron brand of populism. It was hard to walk the streets and not constantly hear in my head the refrain from the play and movie, “Evita.”

The sense of mystery and contrasts was evident at a Shabbat morning service I attended last week at the Libertaad synagogue in Buenos Aires. We were in the main sanctuary where a young woman led the davening, not from the bema, but sitting in the front row for the group of 20 or so casually dressed individuals in the large sanctuary. I heard other voices praying and followed the sound downstairs where I discovered another service taking place in a beautifully refurbished chapel. This service, which was called the “traditional minyan” had a mehtiza and separate seating for men and women. But unlike the service upstairs, this “traditional minyan” had a microphone and an organ. And this was the “traditional minyan!”

Among the traumas experienced by the nation of Argentina in recent decades and which have had a devastating impact on the Jewish community, was the military junta of 1976 – 1983, the period when thousands of people were kidnapped and taken away by the government. Referred to as the “disappeared,” a disproportionate number of those who were seized and killed, about 2,000 were Jewish. In 1992, the Embassy of Israel was bombed, killing 28 people, an act that was followed two years later in 1994 by the bombing of the Jewish community center and headquarters, AMIA, where 84 people were killed.

Although ample evidence points to operatives working under directive from Hezbollah on orders from Iran, these two terror attacks have still not been solved, which is what the prosecutor Alberto Nisman was trying to investigate before he was murdered a few months ago, the day before he was to present

his report, creating yet another unsolved crime. The charges of cover-up and complicity Nisman was set to bring were all dropped a couple of weeks ago by a judge who found there was insufficient evidence to pursue the case against the government. There is a sense of frustration that because of the corruption of the judicial system and for political reasons, none of these crimes will be solved, that the perpetrators will not be brought to justice, and that the truth will not be revealed.

We visited the sites of the two bombings where we said kaddish, chanted Eyl Malei Rahamim, and remembered those who were killed in the attacks. We met with leaders of the Jewish community and heard their frustration with the government and the lack of justice. The Jewish Foreign Minister, Hector Timmerman, submitted his formal letter of resignation from the Jewish community a few minutes before we arrived to meet the leaders. The president of the country, Christina Kirschner, had just issued a rambling statement a few days earlier accusing international Jewish sources of directing financial attacks to destabilize her country and government. This was the first time in history that a democratic government issued what amounts to an officially anti Semitic declaration. Despite this blatantly offensive act, it was difficult to get a consistent answer about the degree of anti-Semitism in the country, as each person we asked had a different response. While some felt it is a problem, I couldn't help but notice how often I saw people walking unharassed, walking freely on the streets wearing a keepah.

But the story I want to tell you this morning is about how despite all of these complex layers, the Jewish community of Argentina is both different and very similar to our community, and about how our two communities are linked together. They are more concerned about assimilation than overt anti-Semitism. Although 30 years ago there were 400,000 – 500,000 Jews in Argentina and today there are about 250,000 Jews there, making it the largest Jewish community in Latin America, it is still a vibrant and dynamic and active community. It boasts many fine kosher restaurants, including the only kosher McDonald's outside of Israel. Although assimilation is a major concern, 60% of Argentinian Jewish kids attend one of the day schools, where Hebrew and Zionism are emphasized.

Upon our arrival we attended the Jewish community's celebration of Yom HaAtzmaut, Israel's Independence Day, and saw the vitality of the community and its Zionist orientation. We met rabbis, visited several synagogues, and spoke with students at the Hillel house, toured the Rabbinico Seminario which trains rabbis and educators who serve throughout Latin America, met residents living in a sparkling, beautiful new home for the elderly, and saw several day schools. The Jewish Agency helps to sponsor educational programs throughout the community to deepen the ties to Judaism and to strengthen Jewish identity.

The Jewish community, like the rest of the country, was dealt a devastating blow by the economic crisis of 2001 when the economy tanked. Overnight, people lost almost all of their savings and net worth. Economists compare the crisis to wartime devastation and estimate it was four times worse than the crash of 1929. It had a disastrous impact on Jewish people and on organizations which suddenly were overstretched, as they were forced to respond to overwhelming demand with significantly decreased capacity to do so. Families had to make tough economic choices, as more than a third of those considered to be a part of Argentina's middle class became poor. The caseload of those receiving assistance from Jewish organizations climbed from 4,000 cases to between 36,000 – 40,000. Many wondered if they could afford to continue the luxury of providing a Jewish education for their children.

During and after the economic crisis of 2001 – 2004, the Jewish community from North America went to work with partners in Argentina. Guided by the principle that we are responsible for each other and that

therefore no Jew should suffer from hunger, the JDC worked to address the needs of the community by partnering and creating networks with local organizations to be sure that no Jew went hungry and that every family who wanted their child to continue to receive a day school education would be able to do so. Subsidies were provided so families could have a bar or bat mitzvah. Communal dinners were held on Rosh Hashana and Pesah attended by all – rich and poor.

JDC put in motion a three-pronged strategy of social welfare programs, providing basics and necessities such as food, medicines, and medical care, as well as housing aid along with job training and placement, and loans for entrepreneurship. Additionally it helped to reorganize the local institutions to ensure the continuity of Jewish life in the community. In many ways, the community is now more self-sufficient than it was before, and is raising funds to support the communal institutions. I found it especially interesting to learn that non-Jewish agencies and organizations in Argentina as well as in other countries turned to the Jewish community and the Joint in particular to learn how to raise funds and how to organize and distribute the aid. They sought advice on how to care for the needy and indigent and how to distribute aid.

We can and should be extremely proud of how we helped our fellow Jews during a time of severe crisis. It is what we do for each other. It is what it means to be a part of a people who cares for each other, who takes responsibility for the plight of our fellow Jews, and it is our contributions to Federation which allow us to do this important work.

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