

SOUTH AMERICAN CONSERVATIVE RABBIS IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

Exploring the origins of a particular style

Are there any common characteristics inherent to their immigrant condition?

Is there a commonality among them?

Is that particular style that we know stemming from their training in South America?

Or is it more of a cultural trait?

What remained of their South American rabbinate and what was acquired?

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Introduction

It was a Friday night in March 1984: the first Friday night service after the arrival of the new young and dynamic Rabbi Daniel A. Kripper. There was a lot of anticipation. The sanctuary of the one-thousand-families' only Conservative synagogue in town (NCI, *Nueva Congregacion Israelita*) was at its full capacity. I was there because Rabbi Kripper had requested that a young member of the choir join Hazzan Felipe Curiel in leading services. It was just a couple of years since I joined that choir. Usually I was with my family at the Sephardic Synagogue '*Comunidad Israelita Sefaradi del Uruguay*' synagogue founded mostly by Jews of Turkish ascent like my paternal grandfather. I celebrated my Bar Mitzvah there but shortly after, a friend from my high school's choir recruited me to this other synagogue choir. During the two years prior to the arrival of Kripper, Dr. Fritz Winter, a German-born rabbi, served this synagogue (NCI), which was created by Jews of German origin. The German Jews who managed to escape and come to Montevideo brought with them a love for the western European culture and art along with the traditional *Liberale*¹ approach to Judaism that had been widespread in Germany since the mid-1800's when modernity and tradition met classical music and pluralism. Although the organ wasn't yet a fixture in the NCI, like in the German synagogues, the melodies we usually sang were mostly classical German compositions by Sulzer² and Lewandowski.³

¹ *Liberale*: German Term used in reference to the European tradition that adapted Jewish tradition to the modern open democratic values and later gave place to the reform and conservative traditions.

² Salomon Sulzer, born Salomon Levi, 1804- 1890. Austrian Jewish cantor, considered one of the most important European composers of synagogue music in the 19th century.

³ Louis Lewandowski, 1821- 1894, Berlin. Jewish cantor, choral conductor, and composer of synagogue music.

When Rabbi Kripper arrived, not only did some melodies change. The synagogue aesthetics underwent a major overhaul. The Torah reading table was turned 180 degrees to face the congregation. An electric organ was incorporated. The choir was brought from the choir mezzanine (where it was hidden) to be integrated into the new worship landscape. The cantor started facing the congregation instead of facing the ark with the exception of the Torah Service and the *Amidah*.

The process that had begun in the sixties with the arrival of Rabbi Marshall Meyer to Argentina (and which will be covered in-depth in this paper) wasn't foreign to the Leadership of the NCI. These leaders were aware of the changes that had been operating in its sister Argentinian synagogues and the important role that the Seminario's newly ordained rabbis were having in engaging the new generations. Rabbi Winter (at a retirement age in 1984) was involved himself with the foundation of the Seminario Rabinico Latinoamericano⁴. The time had arrived for the NCI to follow that path.

As usually happens in largely conservative Uruguayan society, 'revolutionary' changes like this didn't go uncriticized and unresisted. Although I was part of the process, I only noticed the relevance of the historical moment several years later. My whole Jewish experience and identity was so much shaped by this new paradigm that it heavily influenced who I am as a Jew and as a cantor and future rabbi. As a young individual who broke away from the predominant Orthodox approach, I had my doubts. I kept being told that this is not 'real Judaism,' that Kripper is not a rabbi, that the NCI looks like a church. The irony is that most of my friends

⁴ Seminario Rabinico Latinoamericano: Latin-American Rabbinic Seminar, founded by Marshal T. Meyer and a group of lay leaders of diverse extraction in 1962 in Buenos Aires Argentina.

who made critical comments didn't even minimally practice any Judaism and didn't attend synagogue except the classic three times a year.

In 2003 I was hired to serve as a cantor in a synagogue in the US and, with the American experience, I began to learn about the reputation of the Latin American rabbis and cantors and how they were perceived by the different American Jewish communities. Like a painter who takes some steps back to observe the painting he has been working on, with some geographic and temporal distance I began to understand more deeply what had transpired in the first years of my career as a Hazzan in Uruguay. I also started to learn about positive conceptions that Americans Jews have about South American clergy.

The landscape of American Judaism has been changing dramatically over the years. The way Jews practice their Judaism includes multiple approaches. There is a constant evolution and adaptation to the needs of the new generations that seek spirituality in unconventional ways and non-traditional places. The quest for belonging does not necessarily go through the synagogue model as we knew it. This new generation of Jews is loyal to brands or products, but has a hard time affiliating with Jewish organizations. In this landscape we find a small group of South American Conservative Rabbis who brought with them a particular way of doing things and who, without even realizing it, became the source of inspiration for thousands of congregants and aroused curiosity among their local colleagues.

Is there a commonality among them? Does that particular style we know stem from their training in South America? Or is it more of a cultural trait? Are there any common characteristics that are inherent to their immigrant condition? What remained of their South

American rabbinate and what was acquired? These are the main questions that I intend to explore.

I divided this work into three core sections: one on the historical background, a second on the influence of Marshall Meyer, Abraham Joshua Heschel and Martin Buber, and, finally, findings from interviews I conducted with South American Conservative Rabbis.

From a total population of about 18 South American Conservative rabbis in the U.S, I interviewed 10. Some of them arrived in the United States over 30 years ago and some as recently as 2014. They were asked a series of questions and their answers were analyzed in order to draw possible conclusions.

The arrival of rabbis from South America to the US is part of a more complex process that started in the sixties in the US and in Argentina and by extension the rest of South America. In the section about the historical background I describe some events that, in my opinion, influenced the identity and the work of the group that was studied. Placing the findings in a socio-historical context led to interesting discoveries regarding immigration and its impact on their rabbinate. The social instability and the arrival of military dictatorships across South America conditioned the type of rabbis that were being trained during the 70's and the 80's. It also created a need for synagogues to become communal safe havens for people to freely express themselves as Jews and as individuals, leaving the censorship and repression at the doors. There was a need for community, for connection, for a search for meaning in post-Holocaust Latin America's first generation. The context in which this new Judaism was being created was instrumental in defining the characteristics that these rabbis have in common.

In order to understand most Latin American rabbis working in the U.S., it is necessary to appreciate the impact and looming shadow left by R. Marshall Meyer in the Seminario Rabinico Latinoamericano and the Argentinian Jewish community. Whether directly or indirectly, all Seminario graduates were influenced by the thought and actions of Marshall Meyer, who was also influenced by his own teachers: Heschel and Buber.

Although there was nothing previously written about this particular group of rabbis, there are a few works and articles that expound the influences that Rabbi Marshall T. Meyer had on his disciples and his disciples' students. Simultaneously, the same way Meyer was a powerful influence for these new rabbis, we find in his own sermons, teachings and actions the evidence of a powerful influence exerted by his teacher Abraham Joshua Heschel, as well as Martin Buber. We will explore these influences to provide a theoretical framework to some of those characteristics and philosophical approaches that the rabbis of our study present.

Being a clergyman and a South American immigrant in the U.S. provided me with the insight that there is something to being an immigrant and a member of the clergy provides a unique perspective, not only because of the cultural differences due to distinct places of origin but also due to the "immigrant mentality".

Rabbi Alejandro Bloch, who succeeded Rabbi Kripper at the NCI and currently serves in Chile, told me back in 2004 that once you leave your country you are always leaving. This sense is reflected in Facundo Cabral's⁵ song "*No Soy de Aqui Ni Soy de Alla*" ("*I am not from here nor from there*"). Cabral wrote this song in 1968 in Punta del Este, Uruguay to reflect the way he and his friend, folkloric Argentinian singer Jorge Cafrune, felt after leaving their

⁵ Facundo Cabral: 1937-2011. Argentine singer-songwriter, poet, writer and philosopher.

homeland in Argentina. The song became famous by 1970 and was recorded by several different singers. That phrase that made the composer and its song internationally famous expresses how most immigrants feel about leaving their countries. On the one hand there is a longing for the old country, and on the other hand a sense of hope that comes not without challenges but with the certainty of being able to overcome them. That sense of belonging to two cultures provided me and my colleagues - as the reader will be able to see further in this work - the ability to “*come in and come out*”, to be both inside and outside of a society, which enables us to look at both societies from the outside. Because of my personal experience with this perspective, combined with cultural influences, and matched up with the necessary dose of resilience that immigrants ought to have in order to overcome their challenges, led to the initial realization that the rabbinical style developed by the South American Conservative rabbis in the US is the result of a “*Journey of the Ideas*”⁶ that was initiated by Heschel and other immigrant teachers. Marshall Meyer continued this trend with his own immigration experience when he arrived to Argentina to develop a new way of practicing Judaism.

That new American Judaism was reformulated, adapted and transformed throughout the years in Argentina and the rest of South America by Marshall Meyer himself and his entire cadre of disciples, graduates of the Seminario Rabinico Latinoamericano. It was again taken on a journey back to the U.S. when Meyer, together with his student Rolando Matalon, arrived to the New York-based B’nai Jeshurun Congregation. Shortly after, other newly arrived Latin American rabbis took different pulpits throughout the United States, particularly on the East Coast.

⁶ I use this expression to explain how ideas travelled with the different Rabbi-Immigrants.

In the next pages I intend to illustrate how the socio-cultural influences of the diverse countries where that *“Journey of the Ideas”* took place influenced the way these Latin American Conservative Rabbis practice their profession. In the core of the analysis is the immigrant mentality they all possess and the singular background that permanently contrasts with their surrounding socio-cultural realities.

It would be an omission if I didn't mention my dear cantorial colleagues who, like myself, immigrated to the United States during the same period of time. They certainly represent a significant group worth interviewing and studying. For methodological reasons, I have chosen not to address them in this particular work. It seemed more appropriate and feasible to limit the scope of this study to rabbis. The inclusion of the South American Conservative Cantors and their responses would bring other perspectives and probably also confirm some of the assumptions to a future work on this topic.

Historical background

In 1957 under the leadership of Rabbi Louis Finkelstein, Chancellor of JTS, a recently graduated rabbi was offered a choice to serve in Israel or in Argentina. Rabbi Marshall T. Meyer, the individual chosen for this mission, decided to go to Argentina.

Latin America in general (and Argentina in particular) in the post-war era, and ever since the beginning of the large Jewish emigration waves from the mid-1800's, have been a place where Jews seeking legitimation and social insertion looked to mimic the way other groups of immigrants defined their own identities. They had to endure antisemitism and pogroms like in almost every other country in the world but, at the same time, became part of the social fabric.

In Argentina until the mid-1900's there were no conservative-liberal synagogues. Some '*Liberale*' communities were established in the beginning of the 50's around South America. Rabbi Hans Harf of German origin and a disciple of Leo Baeck founded the first liberal congregation in Argentina. At the same time, also in Brazil, Chile, Bolivia and Uruguay, congregations of a similar nature were created.

According to Rabbi Uriel Romano, the environment that preceded Rabbi Marshall Meyer's arrival was defined by a lack of professional religious leaders and a "fragile synagogue structure".⁷

⁷ (Romano, n.d.)

By the second half of the nineteenth century we can find Jewish migration waves to Latin America that parallel the Jewish immigration processes in the United States, because of its origins in Eastern Europe and demographic characteristics.

South America, unlike the United States, organized itself around Zionism, sports, and culture. Manifestations of cultural origin or ethnicity/nationality in an open and diverse society were more welcomed than religious diversity. We must stress the difference with the U.S. where religious liberty was one of the foundational principles and which led to the development of a wide range of spiritual practices. In the U.S. one way for Jews to assimilate during the mid-1900's was to adapt their own practices to socially accepted standards. If their Protestant neighbors attended church on Sundays, it was socially accepted (even expected) that the Jewish neighbor attended synagogue on Saturdays. In Argentina, where the official religion of the country is Roman Apostolic Catholicism, an immigrant or even an Argentinian-born Jewish individual had the following options: either to preserve a "closed to the society" orthodox approach, to be a secular Zionist, or to assimilate. The legitimation of a Jewish existence in the midst of the Euro-American countries⁸ from the general society perspective was based on the fact that the Jews were part of the numerous and diverse waves of immigrants that created a multi-ethnic, multi-linguistic reality. In this context the basis for their legitimation was Zionism and the Yiddish language rather than their particular religious expression.⁹ We must note in this description that the "*turcos*" (Turks), as the Argentinian society referred to the Sephardic Jews and to other Jewish immigrants from the Arab countries, weren't considered in the same category as their Ashkenazic brethren. According to Adriana Brodsky, the Argentinian

⁸ American (South and Central) countries with a historical majority of European population.

⁹ (Avni, et al., 2011) p. 93

Sephardic community wasn't as noticed as the Ashkenazic. For the non-Jewish society, the Ashkenazic Jews were referred to as "*Rusos*" (Russians), even though they were from different parts of Eastern Europe, and were perceived to be more foreign than the Sephardim. Brodsky wrote:

"In this context of impending revolution and the need to defend the nation, the term rusos, in particular, came to be synonymous with "maximalists" (those who took up the extreme socialist position advocated by Russian Bolsheviks), "statelessness," and "Jews."10

This vision contrasts with the perception of the Sephardim carried by the non-Jew in Argentina. They were practically ignored because of their Jewishness. They were just "*turcos*". The common element that both "*turcos*" (Sephardim) and "*rusos*" (Ashkenazim) shared was their passionate love for Israel and Zionism, even before the creation of the State of Israel. Here is Brodsky on this topic:

"For Sephardim, it [the community] is an assortment of people from various different origins with nothing in common. In fact, when a Sephardi Jew speaks of the community [colectividad], he thinks about the community he is from, and forgets that in this city there are many Sephardi sectors and many community organizations. There are more than twenty Sephardi temples.... some ten schools, a relatively important number of philanthropic organizations, and more than ten social and sports clubs... [Yet despite the differences that exist today] there once was one "Sephardi world." This world was, in a sense, a reality, and it had a capital: the holy city of Jerusalem....

¹⁰ (Brodsky, 2016) p.1

And it is the ideal Jerusalem, Zionism, which today serves as a link among the different Sephardi sectors.”¹¹

That is why the centrality of the national and cultural identity became the best means of insertion and acceptance into the Argentine society, which resented the religious difference more than the ethnic or cultural differences. That socio-cultural environment didn't propitiate the development of any religious movements other than orthodoxy and was the natural ground for the growth of a strong Zionist secular adherence for those who didn't identify with the Jewish religious approaches offered at that time. Daniel Eleazar¹² argues that Zionism was, to some extent, the substitute of religion in these countries. The religious practices in the different Argentinian Jewish Communities were reserved for the privacy of the Jewish buildings, and were kept between their walls in order to avoid rejection. The strong presence of the State of Israel through the Jewish Agency and the World Zionist Organization's affiliated youth movements conditioned the post-Israel diaspora in Latin America. Schools had Israeli directors and teachers. Hebrew was taught as a second language to the extent that Jewish day high school students who, after graduating, would spend a year in Israel (myself included) needed little to no Hebrew lessons to begin their studies in Israel, usually at the “*Machon L'Madrichim*”¹³ or other Zionist secular programs of study offered by the Kibbutzim seminars.]

¹¹ (Brodsky, 2016) p.113

¹² Professor Daniel J. Elazar (1934-1999) was a leading political scientist and specialist in the study of federalism, political culture, the Jewish political tradition, Israel and the world Jewish community. As founder and President of the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, he headed the major independent Jewish "think tank" concerned with analyzing and solving the key problems facing Israel and world Jewry.

¹³ Machon L'Madrichi Chutz La'Aretz (Hebrew: מכון למדריכי חוץ לארץ) "Institute for Youth Leaders from Abroad" Created by the Jewish Agency and located in Jerusalem has been training youth leaders from different Zionist youth movements (Tnu'ot Noar) since 1946.

The arrival of Rabbi Marshall T. Meyer to Argentina in 1958 gave the existent Jewish Liberal Community founded by Rabbi Dr. Hans Harf (Leo Baeck's disciple) in the early 50's a new dimension. Meyer didn't join Harf but, instead, a couple of years after his arrival founded Bet El, a flagship Conservative synagogue until today. At the beginning, Beth El fulfilled the role of a "laboratory synagogue" for a small group of followers and pre-rabbinical students.¹⁴ With its success, the synagogue leadership foresaw the need of new and locally trained rabbis who understood the culture and the language of Latin American Jews. The community leaders started by sending local rabbinical students to JTS but some of them decided to remain in the U.S. and that defeated their purpose. They then created the Seminario Rabinico Latinoamericano, supported by JTS and the North American Conservative organizations. As Rabbi Richard Freund¹⁵ in his article "Why Rabbi Meyer Matters 25 Years After His Passing" chronicles it:

"Guillermo Schlesinger, the Rabbi of the Congregacion Israelita de la República Argentina (CIRA) in Buenos Aires, one of the first Jewish congregations in Argentina (and perhaps the first one in the country), and one of the earliest of its kind in the region as well, was involved in a negotiation to create a rabbinical seminary in Buenos Aires. In August, 1958, an historic meeting called the "First Consultative Convention of Latin American Synagogues" was held in Buenos Aires. Professor Abraham Joshua Heschel and Ernst Simon as well as Mr. Charles Rosengarten and other representatives and observers from the U.S. were in attendance. At that convention attended Eastern and Western Europeans, as well as Sephardic lay leaders and rabbis

¹⁴ (Freund, 2019)

¹⁵ Rabbi Dr. Professor Richard A. Freund is the Maurice Greenberg Professor of Jewish History and Director at the Maurice Greenberg Center for Judaic Studies at the University of Hartford. (Freund, 2019)

of Argentina, Brazil, Bolivia, Chile, Peru, Panama, Ecuador, and Uruguay. There were two final recommendations for further discussion that were made. They were: 1) The importance of the problems of Latin American Jewish Youth; 2) a rabbinical seminary.”¹⁶

At the beginning of the 1960’s, several socio-economic changes affected Latin America. Some impacted Jewish communities in particular and others affected the entire society. According to a study about the situation of religious life in Argentina done in 1960¹⁷, there were over one hundred different synagogues of diverse origins and ideologies although several were struggling for survival and were mostly empty. Argentina’s Jews concentrated mostly around large urban areas while a minority lived in the countryside. Their lack of religiosity was evident due to the small number of Jewish inhabitants in their towns and interfaith marriages. At the beginning of the 60’s and due to the prosperity of the post-war Argentina and to the influx of new immigrants, Buenos Aires became the second largest Jewish-themed book publisher in the world, second only to New York. Nevertheless, there was still a need for religious renewal, mainly among the youth who would be a key factor for the development of the Conservative Movement. The new Latin American generation found itself in need of a new identity that would enable them to combine religious practice and modernity. It needed an authentic Jewish identity that would allow them to openly belong to the general society while expressing themselves as Latin American Jews. One of the crucial factors that determined the quick adaptation of the new immigrants to South America since the mid-1800’s was the lack of restrictive laws aimed at Jews or other minorities such as those they had experienced in their

¹⁶ (Freund, 2019)

¹⁷ (Avni, et al., 2011) p.38

countries of origin. That enabled them to continue their identification towards labor movements, Zionist affiliation and Yiddish culture among others. As Meyer himself wrote:

“When, in 1959, Marshall Meyer and his wife, Naomi, decided to head to Argentina for two years, they had no idea that they would spend the next twenty-five years there. Encountering a Jewish community in Buenos Aires that was thriving but lacking religious and spiritual vitality, they founded a new synagogue, a Jewish summer camp modeled on Camp Ramah in America, and a Rabbinical Seminary. These institutions transformed Latin American Jewry, as did the publishing company founded in order to create a liturgy in Spanish. The books published under his leadership, the synagogue, the seminary, and the summer camp continue. But the most dramatic and life-changing events in Argentina began when the Junta (the military dictatorship) took over and waged the dirty war on the people of their country. Marshall heard the call, and he emerged as a singularly articulate and effective human rights activist during that period. He preached against the Junta, he visited prisons weekly, and he welcomed the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo into his synagogue. Marshall and his family were constantly threatened by the government. He was frightened, and warned by many people to desist, and Naomi was advised to go back to America with the three children. But they persisted, and Marshall’s legacy of human rights activity remains alive in Argentina and in Israel. These passages speak to the lessons of those years of protest and danger. Today they startle us with their relevance.”¹⁸

¹⁸ (Meyer, 2014., p. 140)

The founders of the “Templo of the Congregacion Israelita Argentina”, the synagogue which brought Marshall Meyer to Argentina, had previously invited relevant figures of Jewish liberalism such as Solomon Schechter, Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig. There was a younger leadership group who, although involved in the synagogue’s life, was kept on the margins of the synagogue’s institutional leadership. This small group found it hard to identify with the rigidity and formality of the current religious practices. One of the key players of the group who invited Rabbi Meyer affirms in an interview:

“There was a different sensation and we felt we had to do something in order to prevent the death of Judaism. It was necessary to provide options to the Jew in a time when the world was changing”¹⁹

This much-needed change didn’t come without opposition. There was suspicion and resentment. Naomi Meyer²⁰ wrote the following in an article for the “The American Jewish Year Book, 1968” published by the American Jewish Committee:

“In the Ramah camp of Bet El (Conservative) in Cordoba, a Catholic marriage of two employees was celebrated by the local priest in the presence of all campers. No Catholic symbols were used, and the instructors and directors, Rabbis Marshall Meyer and Jeffrey Wohlberg, led a choir in Hebrew and English hymns. The Jewish press violently reacted to what it called this “Judeo-Christian promiscuity,” and a public statement by the Buenos Aires Orthodox rabbis maintained that the wedding

¹⁹ Goldman in (Avni, et al., 2011, p. 644)

²⁰ Marshall and Naomi Friedman Meyer were married in 1965. They met at Camp Ramah in the Poconos.

"weakened the faith and beliefs of Judaism, and could only lead to the separation of the youth from the true faith and make them lose respect for those bearing the title 'Rabbi.' " Others concluded that this was a direct step towards assimilation, while the general and Catholic press called this unprecedented ceremony in Argentina a "ceremony of faith and human respect." 21

Against the backdrop of these important changes there was also social instability due to a violent wave of Communist Revolutionary groups. The reaction to this violence was the advent of a military regime that persecuted, incarcerated and executed without trial anyone deemed to be an enemy of the country. This upheaval and repression created a new Jewish ethos and, with it, a new way of defining Jewish identity. It was the birth of a *NEW* way of being Jewish, Zionist and Latin American. The need to oppose the human rights violations was supported by the ethics of a new approach to *Jewish Spirituality* that could be summarized by the phrase used by Rabbi Meyer *"a rabbi needs to hold the Torah in one hand and a newspaper in the other"*.²² This phenomenon that began in the 60's had its peak during the mid-70's when the military regime was the absolute tyrannical power that ruled over Argentina. Basic rights like free speech and assembly were denied and it was in this context that synagogues, Beth El in particular, became the "oasis of free expression and democracy" for many Jews. The times required answers to the needs of the Jewish community and the society in general and Meyer and his disciples were there to respond in a satisfactory way. The reality changed during the years but the legacy remains. For some of the rabbis it is reflected in their interfaith work. For some other it is still the activism for human rights like the needs of the immigrants, women,

²¹ (Meyer, 1968)

²² (Avni, et al., 2011, p. 654)

LGTQB, etc. In all cases they have taken Judaism to the outside world not only as a ritual practice but as an ethical imperative.

It was not only the philosophical or ethical approach that changed to address those needs. The services also acquired a whole new aesthetic through which the new universalistic and prophetic views were translated. The music was a reflection of a deliberate attempt for participation and engagement. The pulpits became a place to expound the ideals of freedom and democracy. The support to the State of Israel was and still is unconditional and, at times, Israel was seen as a refuge for those young Jews who were persecuted for adhering to “*subversive ideas*”.

Heschel, Buber and Meyer: an influence for Latin American Rabbis

In Judaism we can find various expressions and philosophical approaches, in many cases divergent, as to how to interpret and live the Torah, its values and its message. It is within this context that we must place the influence of Marshall Meyer and its public trajectory in Argentina and the United States. For many, his controversial character was the typical case of a charismatic, innovative, iconoclastic religious leader who had both an incredible ability to reach people and who also left an indelible mark on contemporary Judaism. But his influence went beyond just his ideas and was magnified as a result of his unique background. Like Abraham J. Heschel, Marshall T. Meyer was an immigrant who brought his view of Judaism to a different culture. The immigrant experience enabled them to see things from a different perspective. At some point this perspective derived from prior experience with certain episodes in society and other times because of their perch as the “bird’s eye” observer that can see the forest while the rest of the population is dealing with the trees. That “outsider view”, characteristic of the immigrant condition, is not only appreciated by others but also is an important tool for change. The immigrant condition will also translate into other traits in the case of the Latin American rabbis as we will see in the next chapters.

Upon arriving in the United States, Heschel found a different social situation than the one he left behind in Germany. German society had already disappointed him by its refusal to integrate the Jews within the parameters of emancipation. By contrast, here in the US, the Jews

were welcome to assimilate to capitalism, liberalism and secular values, and Jews largely chose to mimic the Protestants and to emulate their traditions. Protestantism was arguably the religion of the U.S. in the first decades of the 20th century, and it served the purpose of creating a middle class in this capitalist society. Like the churches at that time, the synagogues served to contribute to the overall climate of spiritual welfare. However, this always occurred within the walls of the congregational buildings, in private and often disconnected from what Heschel, and later Meyer believed to be the universal purpose of Judaism, the prophetic imperative of “*tikkun olam*.”

Because of Heschel’s beliefs regarding *tikkun olam*, he emphasized prophetic discourse and felt that Jews were required to take action in order to improve society. According to Heschel, God questions humans with the same words that were used to question Adam, the first human: “Where are you? *Ayekah?*”. It was not that the Jew turns to God in his search for answers but instead it is God that requires answers from the Jew. This shift of paradigms, where the one requiring an answer is God and not humans, generated a sense of relevance for the new generations, chief among them Marshall Meyer.

Meyer had a personal relationship with Heschel. He studied with him at JTS and from Meyer’s writings and actions we can appreciate how much this teacher influenced him. Heschel’s philosophical approach can be divided into the Haggadic works and Halachic works. Some authors²³ affirm that Meyer deliberately left out the Halakhic work of Heschel and some other authors²⁴ and some of the interviewees say that he slowly drifted away from it during the first fifteen years of his rabbinate in Argentina. Marshall Meyer always prioritized the prophetic

²³ (Bursztein, 2019)

²⁴ (Fainstein, 2019)

dimension of Judaism. For him Haggadah is the cornerstone of Judaism. Halakha, on the other hand, was considered by him as a rigid system of behavioral Judaism that wasn't providing answers for the Jewish people at a pace that was required. He deemed the Shulchan Aruch incapable of dealing with modernity, with the challenges of the society of his time. This anecdote illustrates it: in Argentina in the late 80's women started leading prayers, wearing tallit and tefillin and that disturbed not only the orthodox establishment but also some of the Seminario students. One of them, asked Meyer the following question:

*“What does the Shulchan Aruch say about women wearing Tallit and Tefillin?
Marshall's answer was: “I don't care so much about what the Shulchan Aruch would
say about it, I care much more about what our women will say”²⁵*

Meyer was internationally known as one of the few religious personalities that confronted the military dictatorship regime in Argentina. He got involved in the local human rights movement during the violent years between 1976 and 1983. During this period, he visited the jails, saved imperiled people and worked in the international political arena in order to restore democracy. In that regard, he walked a similar walk to his teacher Heschel. Both were active and vocal for causes that, although seemingly disconnected from the Jewish communities' needs, were profoundly Jewish in their essence and in its discourse of social justice and human rights based on the prophetic imperative that characterized their respective rabbinates.

²⁵ (Kogan, 2019)

Meyer also revolutionized worship. He eliminated the *Mechitza*, introduced musical instruments in all the services and included numerous Spanish readings or translations of the prayers. He called the style that proposed a renewed liturgy “*Neo-Hasidism*.”²⁶ There was no justification for all these changes under the parameters of the Conservative Movement at that time. Instead, he justified them through the teachings of A.J Heschel. Rabbi Rolando Matalon, who joined Rabbi Meyer in B’nai Jeshurun upon his return from Argentina, summarizes Marshall’s (as his students called him) influence as follows:

“In 1985, a remarkable rabbi was invited to revitalize this community: Rabbi Marshall Meyer, who was my teacher and mentor. He had been a disciple of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, one of the great Jewish thinkers and activists of the twentieth century. Rabbi Meyer had spent twenty-five years in Argentina, creating new Jewish life, including a new-paradigm synagogue and a rabbinical seminary that trained rabbis who eventually spread throughout the continent, attracting thousands of Jews to an exciting and relevant Judaism, especially young people who brought their parents to a meaningful Jewish religious life. Rabbi Meyer was very active in the struggle for human rights in Argentina from 1976 to 1983 during the years of the military dictatorship that caused the disappearance and the murder of thousands of people. He incorporated into religious life what is known as spiritual activism.”²⁷

²⁶ Neo-Hasidism is a name given to the contemporary Jewish adoption of Kabbalah and Hasidism teachings by members of other existing Jewish movements. It stems from the writings of non-Orthodox teachers of Hasidic Judaism like Martin Buber, Abraham Joshua Heschel, Lawrence Kushner, Zalman Schachter-Shalomi and Arthur Green. (Mansoor, 1991)

²⁷ (Matalon, 2006)

Probably the biggest change that Meyer introduced into Latin-American Jewish culture was the transition of religious expression from the private realm to the public sphere. This process, often called “deprivatization”²⁸ by the scholars who studied the subject, is described by Fainstein in the following words:

“After exploring the lives and work of thinkers like Martin Buber(Vienna 1878- Jerusalem 1965), A.J. Heschel (Warshaw1907- New York 1972) and Marshall Meyer from a sociology of religion and Jewish thought points of views, I could document something that I intuited at the beginning of my intellectual and spiritual Journey: the existence of a ‘political theology’ of universalist character.”²⁹

This idea is further developed by Fainstein who affirms that Buber, Heschel and Meyer proposed a “*public Judaism*” as opposed to the more isolationist, rigid and ritualistic approaches derived from the traumatic experiences that Jews endured throughout their history. They *privatized* Judaism as a reaction to modernity. Buber, Heschel and Meyer proposed a public, “deprivatized” Judaism actively involved in the social, cultural and political worlds from a prophetic religious perspective.

“My research allowed me to discover in its full expression a Jewish religious stream that proposed as a strategy to revitalizing Judaism while being faithful to its original purpose, the ‘deprivatization of religion’ as a way or repairing (tikkun) the limitations caused by the insertion of the Jewish communities in the interstices of the European

²⁸ Deprivatization is a term borrowed from Economic Sciences. It means the transference of ownership from the private sector to the public sector.

²⁹ (Fainstein, 2019)

societies since the middle ages on and by the contradicting demands of modernity and secularization.”³⁰

Latin American Conservative Rabbis in the United States

During the last four decades a number of rabbis emigrated from South America to the United States. They brought with them a baggage of costumes, traditions, melodies and skill sets that made them unique and successful in their new positions across America. These spiritual leaders had to adapt to a new culture and to a specific Jewish American subculture and did so in a way that created an entirely new approach to Jewish life.

Emigration has always been a constant trait of the Jewish people. The large emigration waves were historically determined by demographic, economic, social and political factors.³¹ It is evident that, because of the openness of American society, Jews reached high education levels and professional success far above average. In addition, the ability for Jews to openly interact with individuals of all backgrounds allowed Jews to become more involved in politics and take on leadership roles. What is not so evident is that the liberalization of American immigration policies in 1964 made the US attractive to millions of Latin American immigrants, among them Jews.

Although we can find some Latin American rabbis who immigrated to the US in the 60's and 70's, most of the Latin American rabbis arrived between the 80's and mid-2000's. The

³⁰ (Fainstein, 2019)

³¹ (Dellapergola, 1989)

reasons that prompted them to leave their countries are diverse and sometimes random or the result of “fate”. I had the opportunity to see in action some of the rabbis that emigrated to the United states to study at JTS. They weren’t a product of the Seminario Rabinico. Their training was different and that made them different from their colleagues who came later. At the same time most of the traits related to the Latin American society rather than the specific rabbinic training, were present also in those pioneering rabbis who arrived to the United States in the 60’s and 70’s.

The total study population is comprised of 17 Latin American rabbis, most of whom were ordained in the Seminario Rabinico Latinoamericano. Ten of them were interviewed with the purpose of exploring one central question: is being a Latin American-trained rabbi the determining factor in shaping their rabbinate?

This methodology always presents a challenge. How can the observer remain objective while being also a subject in the group in question? This challenge is probably a common one in most sociological research. It also represents a great advantage as the researcher is also an expert observer. The purpose of the research is to explore the following questions:

- What are their common inherent characteristics as immigrant rabbis?
- How much of the Latin American history of defending human rights influenced their rabbinates?
- What remains from what they were trained for in their original countries and what was acquired as a result of their ability to adapt to new realities?
- Do they perceive themselves as trendsetters in American Jewish synagogues?

- How do they perceive American Jewry and South-American Jewry in regard to their respective identities, observance, and relationship with Israel, and how much of that permeated or influenced the rabbis' current identity and ideology?
- What role did the Seminario play in setting a particular style of rabbinical practice?

Common inherent characteristics as immigrant rabbis

Versatility and creativity.

Latino rabbis perceive themselves to be more versatile than their American colleagues. When asked to define versatility they use a very popular expression “*lo atamos con alambre*”, literally: We tie it with wire. This refers to a popular song that uses that phrase in the refrain. The following lyrics better illustrate not only the meaning of the phrase but also the connotations of growing up and working in a culture where not all of one’s needs are satisfied and where not everything turns out to be as we expected or planned. The idea that when a person doesn’t have the means to do something he needs to appeal to creativity and ingenuity is, according to almost all the interviewees, inherent in the Argentinian/Latin American culture. As they also said “*necessity is the mother of invention*”. Versatility is often associated by the interviewees with improvisation, the capacity to quickly adapt to a new situation and perform with success. That was reflected by one of the interviewees who said that something unexpected may have happened at the service, which led to a certain unplanned teaching or song.³² In another case when talking about the “*lo atamos con alambre*” concept, the interviewee said:

“if we combine “lo atamos con alambre” capability with planning, strategy, budgeting, teamwork and means, we can achieve an explosive combination for success.”³³

³² (Karpuj, 2019)

³³ (Bronstein, 2019)

Although creativity born from necessity is seen by the vast majority as a positive attribute, there is one rabbi that introduces the following caveat: Creativity born from necessity is good but sometimes it is limiting. When all you do is to use your creativity for survival purposes it prevents you from creating other things that may be more important. At the same time, creativity when born from abundance is also limiting. When someone endows a project it That versatility is also associated with the fact that, as with any other immigrant, they had no problem undertaking tasks that were not necessarily theirs to perform, or deemed reserved for custodians or other workers like moving chairs, connecting projectors, arranging tables or preparing kiddush. Some acknowledge perceiving the immigrant condition as a humbling experience. Like other immigrants, rabbis also saw no problem in performing labor that may not be considered appropriate for a rabbi.³⁴

The fact that the Seminario graduates were trained to be *Kolboiknicks*³⁵ translated into them being able, for instance, to be a youth madrich and, at the same time, sit at a high-level interfaith meeting and be able to equally connect to both crowds and gain their respect. Rabbi Rojzman support this notion: “*What we were trained to do on a small scale there, we do here on a larger scale.*”³⁶ This idea of larger scale refers to the size of the Jewish community and the impact a rabbi has in it also to the access they now have to alarger amount of material resources.

³⁴ (Kogan, 2019)

³⁵ From the Hebrew כּוּל בּוּ; Kol Bo (literally “everything in it”), meaning that a single person can perform diverse roles in an organization.

³⁶ (Rojzman, 2019)

Closeness

A trait that all the interviewed rabbis agreed on is the perception of having close and warm interactions with people. They understand this to be a clear cultural manifestation that contrasts with the more formal and “cold” way of relating to others that they encountered in America. This is a way of conceiving the rabbinate not “*from up on the bimah*” but on the same level as the congregation. As a reflection of the closeness that they feel to their congregants, many of them are called by their first names. This is what Rabbi Analia Bortz called:

“being horizontal in the relationships. Not finding the need for an assistant or the need to put unnecessary distance between themselves and the people. It is also reflected in being accessible. They have my cell phone and they can call me and they call me by my first name”.³⁷

That closeness is also reflected by the human touch, the spontaneous hug or the funny unexpected response to a question or comment. Most of them agreed that the Latin-American culture differs from the Anglo-Saxon one in that respect. While at times taken aback, the overall common reaction of their congregants to spontaneous manifestations of warmth or affection in a “Latin-American style” was welcomed and appreciated. These physical manifestations of warmth are often understood as a way of walking the walk, creating relationships in such a way that are considered sacred, godly. We can find here a profound connection to the Buberian influence of Rabbi Meyer’s approach to spirituality. We see how the “*Latin-Americanization*”- translates into hugs, closeness and spontaneity, of how Buber and Heschel’s philosophies speak

³⁷ (Karpuj, 2019)

to the contemporary American Jewish communities on a renewed and original level. Rabbi Rojzman offers his own *drash*³⁸ on hugging:

“The same way that the Mashiach according to one legend, sits among the lepers at the gates of Rome tending to their wounds waiting to come, or the same way that God after creating the world, dedicated itself to putting couples together; we could say that another task that God has been performing ever since the end of creation is hugging people. And we are just doing God’s work. Hugging is a godly task.”³⁹

Another interviewee mentioned that the inclusion of personal stories in their sermons or sharing their own personal experiences in one-on-one conversations brings a sense of closeness that is common to Latin-American rabbis.

Taking the profession with passion

There is a convergence of concepts related to the approach that Latin American rabbis have towards their profession. More than a profession they say, it is a calling and we take it with a lot of passion. That passion is reflected in the everyday activities such as teaching or praying but mostly in the way they approach relationships and are ready to drop everything, like first responders do, to take care of the community in general or the individual member of the congregation. Rabbi Bronstein refers to passion as an ingredient of the following mix:

“We were always seeking authenticity, relevance and passion.”⁴⁰

³⁸ Homiletic interpretation

³⁹ (Rojzman, 2019)

⁴⁰ (Bronstein, n.d.)

The unavoidable need to insert oneself into the American society, language and social culture

The way they acclimated and assimilated to the new culture was different in each case.. However, there is one common denominator. They all had to confront cultural differences in one way or another. For some it was their accent, which they perceived made them interesting, but also became a permanent reminder that they didn't grow up here, that they didn't experience certain historical episodes in American society and were often reminded of that by their own congregants. At times they also found themselves trying to put into English words something that required more than just a translation to be understood. The cultural adaptation was not always easy for them. One rabbi in particular believes that his being a foreigner prevented him from being hired when the senior rabbi position in his congregation became available.⁴¹

In my first years in the United States, my English was limited and my accent heavier. Thankfully my first congregation upon arriving was the Cuban Hebrew Congregation of Miami, where most were Cuban immigrants, Spanish speakers and didn't really care about it. But when interacting with native English speakers I used to be talked down, or dismissed as if my heavy accent represented some sort of mental disability.

Another phenomenon that is inherent to the immigrant condition is looking at things from an outsider's perspective. Whether deliberately or inadvertently, this way of relating to the reality of society or a congregant more like a spectator than an actor is a relevant common

⁴¹ (Rosenwaser, 2019)

factor that only few interviewees mention specifically, but is a condition that emerges from their answers on different topics.

“After 9-11 I could sense that the community didn’t know how to react, how to overcome what just happened. I thought to myself, wow they now see what it is like being like the rest of the world. I already had a way of thinking about terrorism due to my prior experiences in Latin America. When I addressed them on the topic, I said that I felt sorry for them because all of a sudden, they felt they lost their innocence and I knew how they felt because it had already happened to me. I left Argentina because of the AMIA bombing⁴². I had a similar experience a few years before. That perspective from the outside helped me to better address the needs of my community. As an immigrant you see things from the outside. You see the community from a different place. People are open and receptive to new perspectives.”⁴³

⁴² The AMIA bombing was an attack on the *Asociación Mutual Israelita Argentina* (AMIA; Argentine Israelite Mutual Association) building in Buenos Aires, Argentina on 18 July 1994, killing 85 people and injuring hundreds.

⁴³ (Karpuj, 2019)

Influence of Latin America's history of defending human rights in their rabbinates

Permanent violations of human rights were common and blunt during the same years of the birth of the new Judaism spread by the Seminario under the Leadership of Marshall Meyer and his disciples. At that time, military dictatorship regimes prevailed in Argentina, Bolivia, Brasil, Chile, Ecuador, Guatemala, Honduras, Panamá, Perú and Uruguay.

There is little to no chance of escaping their impact if you were a young rabbi or a rabbinical student during those years or immediately afterward. As Marcelo Bronstein tells it:

“While I was at the Seminario Daniel Fainstein and I went to the Assembly for Human Rights. Later when I served as a Rabbi in Chile too. I never knew of a Judaism that wasn’t related with human rights and social justice. That is the only Judaism I knew. Marshall has two big influences and he handed them over. One is spoken and the other one is non-verbal. The first one is Heschel and the second one is Buber. For Marshall God is present in the relationships. Heschel’s existential mysticism, Buber and Heschelian prophetism applied to reality were their big influences. He had little patience to let Judaism become a behavioral religion. Without being dismissive towards Halacha, he prioritized more how the people behave, how they treat each other. Observance is what feeds you; it is the practice that enables you to act. For him it was like a gestalt figure/ground image. What is figure and what is ground varies according to the perception. He used to get annoyed by halachic nonsense while he

felt that there was so much to do. Used to say: “you are talking about ‘batel b’shishim’⁴⁴ when there is so much to do out there?”

However, another Latin American rabbi asserts that his model is academic and educational, not social action-oriented. He feels that, despite being an American citizen and living here, he doesn’t belong here, and adds:

“I don’t feel I adapted to the US. In South America the social action causes were clear. Here I found them all mixed with partisan politics and that prevents me from finding my space”⁴⁵

This particular question seems to draw dissenting answers. All the interviewees admit being influenced by the struggle against military dictatorships, but only a minority felt that human rights is something that had marked their rabbinate. The reasons vary. Some because they find their personal profile more fitting to other causes, others because they never had the opportunity, and still others because their personal realities were different and they only learned about the Latin American human rights history rather than directly experiencing it.

Atlanta’s based Rabbi Analia Bortz affirms that for her, defending human rights is part of her original identity.

“It touches me in a very personal way. I just returned from New York from a gathering of two-and-a-half days with a cohort of fellows of the ‘Global Justice Fellowship’ that belong to the American Jewish World Service. We prepared to go to Guatemala where

⁴⁴ Hebrew: בטל בשישים (literally: nullified in 60) In reference to the Jewish law of Kashrut that renders nullified certain types of forbidden mixtures if their concentration is 1/60th of the mix.

⁴⁵ (Borodovski, 2019)

we will work for Human Rights. It was for me like going back to the roots because the topic was also other Latin America's dictatorship regimes. Because we lived under dictatorship in our countries, I find that most of us are committed and sympathize with the cause of human rights. That is reflected in our pulpits through our teachings on immigrants and refugees.”⁴⁶

The issue of the human rights was recurrent in the interviews. Everyone acknowledged the importance of the topic. Those who studied at the Seminario during the time when human rights violations occurred or in their respective communities throughout South America after they became rabbis seem to be more influenced by it. The newer generation of rabbis received that influence as part of an historical legacy through their teachers who were Meyer's students but they don't relate to the topic in the same way. What remains though, is the guiding principle of taking Judaism outside the “ghetto” and bringing it to the public arena. The idea of “deprivatization” that was expressed through social activism in its origins gave way to new forms of expression that went from interfaith dialog to dabbling into politics as candidates for elective positions in Argentina. Each one of the rabbis was following their own passion and making their Judaism a universal, prophetic imperative the same way Marshall Meyer did with the human rights during the dictatorship years. They are applying the principle of holding the Torah in one hand and the newspaper in the other but the newspaper kept bringing different news and the new rabbis adapted to that not only in Argentina but in the United States as well.

⁴⁶ (Bortz, 2019)

Chilean born Rabbi Kormis had always heard about Marshall Meyer but never had the chance to meet him. He met Rabbi Angel Kreiman,⁴⁷ one of Marshall's disciples, who was very active in interceding for the Jewish political prisoners of Pinochet's regime⁴⁸.

“Marshall and Angel were both personal examples for me. As I became more mature in my profession, I began to believe that it was important. My rabbinate in Chile was about religion and halacha. Here it is more of a personal calling. There are issues that being in Latin America I wasn't aware of like gun control, LGBTQ rights, immigrants, women's rights, the environment. I feel that here there is an expectation that I should get involved in social justice issues.”⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Rabbi Angel Kreiman (1945–2014) was born in Argentina and worked most of his career in Chile. His wife Susy was one of the victims of the AMIA bombing (See footnote 29). They had returned to Argentina and were living in Buenos Aires.

⁴⁸ General Augusto Pinochet was the dictator in Chile from 1973 to 1990 after taking power in a coup d'état against the democratic elected socialist Salvador Allende.

⁴⁹ (Kormis, 2019)

What remains from what they were trained for in their original countries and what was acquired

According to Rabbi Alfredo Borodowski, of Westchester's Sulam Yaacov synagogue, most of the Latin American rabbis forgot the Latin American model when they arrived in the US. Some of them didn't even know Marshall and adopted a more modern Orthodox approach. They became more 'halakhic'⁵⁰ as opposed to the model that we grew up with that was more liberal. Borodowski remarked:

*"...the American halakhic model stifles. I believe that there is no way of adapting one model to another. One can only adopt not adapt. Most of my colleagues left behind the music and the instruments."*⁵¹

The vast majority of the interviewees agree that what they were trained for in Argentina wasn't enough. They had to undergo a process of adaptation in order to bring the best of their training into the new American reality. They did it in different ways and not always successfully in their first attempt. Creativity and versatility rank among the most mentioned skills from their original training. Adherence to formality, planning, teamwork and budgeting were the most mentioned among the ones acquired in their respective positions here in the US.

All who graduated from the Seminario Rabinico Latinoamericano agree that their formation was solid and they had great teachers. They were trained in a variety of skills and

⁵⁰ From Halakha: Jewish law.

⁵¹ (Borodowski, 2019)

with many different teachers. At the same time, they acknowledged that perhaps there was a lack of formality in the structure. At times the syllabi might have been lax but that opened the room for spontaneity. Here are some examples:

“In the Seminario we learned to open our hearts, to use music, to do whatever it takes to make things happen. When we arrived here, we had to learn to let others do, not because we had to control things, but because that was the way we were trained.”⁵²

“In our countries we looked for authenticity, relevance and passion. After coming to the US, I developed an interest in mindfulness and meditation while my colleague and partner Rolando Matalon focused on music. I had the influence of Rabbi Zalman Schechter-Shalomi. Today I do a blend of mindfulness, Jewish wisdom and psychology. The importance of being in a city like New York is like the pressure that is applied upon diamonds in order to polish them. The great masters of all disciplines have the resources that enable them to think. To me it was like moving into a new world, the world of ideas and academics from the old world of survival that opened new worlds.”⁵³

“While in South America we acquired versatility, improvisation skills due to lack of resources, we also acquired a solid academic training. What we acquired here is the dose of formality, advance planning, better organizational skills and teamwork.”⁵⁴

⁵² (Karpuj, 2019)

⁵³ (Bronstein, 2019)

⁵⁴ (Epelbaum, 2019)

“What remains is the conviction that our rabbinate is teaching Torah and preaching. What I learned is the formalities, the expected structures for certain ceremonies like funerals are less flexible here. Another thing that I acquired is my work with non-Jewish NGO’s”⁵⁵

Rabbi Mario Karpuj who currently serves at *Or Chadash* in Atlanta, Georgia describes his experience from a slightly different angle:

“What remained is that the Latin American rabbis are community organizers while being also rabbis. [We’re] more about social communities than religious congregations. I got my first pulpit in Avellaneda where I developed the organizational skills. More like a ‘madrich’ than a rabbi. Our societies are secular societies. Religiosity is an addition to the mix but their principal need was to build community. That is why it was much more about building community than religion. More about the other than God. The key to the success of the Latin American rabbis is, among other things, timing. It happened when the American society moved away from the traditional ‘vertical, high up on the bimah’ rabbinical style to a new model where the verticality was broken and the relationship to the other becomes more important. The communities became less religious in the traditional sense and we were exactly what they were looking for. Before they had a relationship with religion that, according to all Pew’s surveys, has been changing. They used to wake up on a Saturday morning and massively flock to synagogue because that’s what they did. Orthodox, Conservative, Reform equally assigned this role to the religious practice. This is what they had to do as good Americans. What happened in Judaism happened in all

⁵⁵ (Rosenwaser, 2019)

religions. Now what is happening is that all across the population, Americans don't give religion such an important place in their lives. So, the rabbi who arrived in that context is a rabbi who hugs you, who talks to you on a horizontal level, is a rabbi whom you can call over the phone, who can be addressed on a first-name basis. We first arrived in Atlanta to a congregation whose rabbi was never addressed by his first name, not even by his wife when in public. Our arrival was a breath of fresh air for them. We arrived just at the time that there was a need for it. The vast majority of the rabbis who immigrated to the US, did so between the 1990's to the early 2000's, when the transition in the American Jewish population took place. We all grew up more like secular Zionists in the 'Tnu'ot Noar'⁵⁶ environment rather than in religious environments."⁵⁷

Marcelo Kormis is a rabbi from a later generation. He is also one of the last ones to arrive in the United States. He currently serves at Beth El in Fairfield, CT. He affirms that the training in Argentina was multifaceted: its subjects ranged from board politics to pastoral care and sociology, psychology and homiletics. That is what lasted; the new things that he acquired here are social leadership and interfaith work.⁵⁸

There is a crucial factor that was mentioned directly or tangentially by at least half of the rabbis of this study: they all started working while they were still students due to the rapidly increasing demand for serving new pulpits. That contributed to creating a generation of

⁵⁶Hebrew: תנועת נוער Youth Movements: organization of Zionist youths engaged in informal education. They emphasize the involvement of the youth in decision-making and direction in light of values of informal education such as autonomy, the principle of "youth guides youth" and community contribution.

⁵⁷ (Karpuj, 2019)

⁵⁸ (Kormis, 2019)

rabbis that had accumulated vast experience at a young age. At the time they were applying for US-based rabbinical positions they were both young and experienced.

Do they perceive themselves as trend setters in the American Jewish synagogues?

When asked if they perceived themselves as trendsetters most of the interviewees responded that they didn't. There are, though, some elements that need to be expounded. The fact that they don't perceive themselves as such, doesn't mean that others don't perceive them as such. In fact, they expressed that some of their colleagues, congregants, journalists or social researchers think of them as trendsetters.

One famous case of a trendsetting synagogue is B'nai Jeshurun⁵⁹. In the 90's BJ, as it is normally called, became "the place to be" on Manhattan's Upper West Side. The resurgence of an old congregation that was on the verge of closing its doors materialized due to the leadership of Rabbi Marshall Meyer who returned from Argentina in 1985 to undertake yet another challenge, and thanks to Rabbis Rolando Matalon and Marcelo Bronstein and Hazzan Ari Priven who expanded upon that legacy.

"In 1985, a remarkable rabbi was invited to revitalize this community: Rabbi Marshall Meyer, who was my teacher and mentor. He had been a disciple of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, one of the great Jewish thinkers and activists of the twentieth century.

⁵⁹ B'nai Jeshurun is a nonaffiliated Jewish synagogue in the upper west side of Manhattan.

Rabbi Meyer had spent twenty-five years in Argentina, creating new Jewish life, including a new paradigm synagogue and a rabbinical seminary that trained rabbis who eventually spread throughout the continent, attracting thousands of Jews to an exciting and relevant Judaism, especially young people who brought their parents to a meaningful Jewish religious life. Rabbi Meyer was very active in the struggle for human rights in Argentina from 1976 to 1983 during the years of the military dictatorship that caused the disappearance and the murder of thousands of people. He incorporated into religious life what is known as spiritual activism. After twenty-five years in Argentina, Rabbi Meyer accepted the challenge of reviving B'nai Jeshurun and returned to New York in 1985 .”⁶⁰

“Our community became a model for many around the country, and people started to come and try to learn something from our experience that they could take to their own congregations and apply to their own settings. We have tried to understand what principles are operative at the core of our community.”⁶¹

Between the months of September 2000 and May 2001, a cultural anthropologist, Ayala Fader, and ethnomusicologist Mark Kligman, conducted a study of B’nai Jeshurun at the request of Synagogue 2000⁶² and funded by the Righteous Persons Foundation.⁶³ They were

⁶⁰ (Matalon, 2006)

⁶¹ (Matalon, 2006)p. 127

⁶² (Synagogue 2000, co-founded by Dr. Ron Wolfson of the American Jewish University and Rabbi Lawrence A. Hoffman of Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, promotes synagogue transformation., n.d.)

⁶³ Steven Spielberg established the Righteous Persons Foundation (RPF) to fund innovative approaches that help bridge the divide between people of different backgrounds and ensure that the moral lessons of the Holocaust are not forgotten.

interested in learning lessons that could be applied in other contexts to promote Jewish continuity. The conclusion was that BJ's vision of Judaism approached Jewish life as a

“continuous search for a connection to the divine or to a life lived in the presence of the divine: through prayer, through observance, through the study of Torah and our sacred texts, through gemilut hasadim—acts of loving-kindness performed for others—and through social justice. Four elements are at the core of our identity as a congregation and our experience: 1) The centrality of the experience of the divine. 2) The expectation of an engaged participatory membership. 3) An approach to Jewish practice in which existing materials are used and combined in a way that creates something new and unexpected. 4) A rabbi-led congregational structure.⁶⁴

The study highlights that the BJ experience is an all-encompassing approach and not just an original aesthetic style of prayer. That is just one part of it. BJ is a communitarian spiritual organization with multiple portals of entrance that provides different meanings to different people. Integrity and authenticity are hard to find in models that just take the musical aspect of the service as the only factor. Another key element mentioned by Rabbi Bronstein in his interview is the capacity of mixing and blending that he has with his co-rabbi, Rabbi Matalon. Fader and Kligman call it “bricolage”, which is when elements that are not supposed to go together are put together in an artistic and harmonic way. In their report they quoted Rabbi Matalon who jokingly tried to explain the concept:

"What kind" of a synagogue is BJ? "We are a synagogue with an Ashkenazi history and rabbis from South America that prays with a Conservative SIDDUR, uses a Reform

⁶⁴ (Matalon, 2006)

CHUMASH and sings Middle Eastern and Hasidic melodies. What kind of synagogue are we? The Jewish kind.”⁶⁵

Nevertheless, Rabbi Bronstein doesn’t seem to feel they were trendsetters. They were just trying to be themselves and added:

“I don't see myself that way, but they perceive us that way. Ours is a phenomenon that was studied and people wanted to emulate. At the time in the 90s boom we were a trend. Music ensemble, world music, etc. The intention was to be just authentic.”⁶⁶

It wasn’t only Americans that found BJ’s successful approach something to be emulated. When asked if he perceived himself as a trendsetter, New York based Rabbi Manes Kogan answered the following:

“There are rabbis that set a trend. Not all of us have that ability. We now benefit from the generalized idea that Argentinian rabbis are great because BJ’s rabbis are great. That’s true, we all have some spontaneity and improvisation, some ‘lo atamos con alambre’ but Roly and Marcelo have much more than that, much more than just the music, they are an integral model. The services of some Latin American rabbis may look or sound alike but the models are quite different.”⁶⁷

Some of these models only retained the melodies and the musical accompaniment from Argentina and never developed the social action or the public sphere commitment that was an integral part of Meyer’s models developed in Argentina and also in BJ after he returned to

⁶⁵ (Fader, et al., 2002)

⁶⁶ (Bronstein, 2019)

⁶⁷ (Kogan, 2019)

America. Other retained just the personal qualities of the Latin America rabbinical figure but assimilated to the North American Conservative style.

On American Jewry and South-American Jewry in regard to their respective identities, observance, relationship with Israel

From the interviews it is clear that the two societies - America and South America - are different and the two Jewish experiences are different. For all of the interviewees, these differences affected the way they see their own identities and their congregants' identities. As we mentioned previously the South American Jewish communities organized themselves around their cultural identity rather than their religious observance. Their Judaism evolved in different ways than their North American brethren and it is logical to assume that their identities, observance and relationship with the State of Israel would be different. Rabbi Bronstein learned from Eugene Borowitz that there are two types of Jews those who care and those who don't care.

"In general, there are two types of Jews. Those who care and those who don't. In Argentina the main difference is that the one who cares is very passionate. It'll be hard to find a secular Jew as passionate like, for instance, a Yiddishist Argentinian Jew. The Latino requires less proof, is less rational and more emotional and that is reflected in their identities, in their observance and their relationship with the State of Israel. If you look at Israel you see the divide between the right and the left. I see that the Israeli left is more similar to the Latin American left, because they share a socialist vision that intersects with some anti-American sentiment. In the Jewish liberal movements in the US there is a not-too-small crisis. The liberal Jew in the US has been disappointed by certain policies that Israel applies with their minorities that separate them from Israel and made them question their support. For instance: an American Conservative or

Reform rabbi will not be able to perform a wedding in Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Egypt, Lebanon and Israel. What do they have in common? This theocracy that is being slowly imposed on the Israelis is alienating the liberal Jews and I consider it a catastrophe.”⁶⁸

“We grew up in such a Zionist community that I can love Israel despite Netanyahu. In this politicized moment we must reaffirm more than ever our relationship with Israel. Unlike the South American, the American Jewish community didn’t grow up with that unconditional love, therefore, their relationship is not based on love. We grew up listening to Hebrew songs, speaking in Hebrew as kids, and that is crucial for developing a love for Israel. It affected me so much that in the mission statement of the community that Mario and I ⁶⁹ founded reads that we are a Zionist congregation with a Zionist religious school. That is how committed we are.”⁷⁰

⁶⁸ (Bronstein, 2019)

⁶⁹ Rabbis Mario Karpuj and Analia Bortz are a husband and wife couple that together founded Or Chadash in Atlanta in 2002.

⁷⁰ (Bortz, 2019)

Role of the Seminario in developing a particular style of rabbinical practice

Not all the rabbis that were interviewed are Seminario's graduates but most of them are. The tone and the expressions changed when they started talking about their years at the Seminario and their relationship with their colleagues, teachers and friends. Their words reflect gratefulness and passion. In most cases they acknowledge that they wouldn't be who they are today if it wasn't for the role that the Seminario played in their lives. As Rabbi Kogan says:

"The Seminario is not just an Alma Mater. It was our home, everything. It is impossible to conceive the rabbinate without the Seminario. It represents studies, the Conservative Movement, the 'parnasa'⁷¹. There are one hundred graduates in sixty years and we all know each other. We are more closely connected because we share an identity. I met my wife at the Seminario. My best friends are from there. I worked there, I taught there. The Seminario used to be my world."⁷²

The intimate, familiar relationship with that house of study is a reflection of the passionate and warm nature of the people that studied in it and, at the same time, it can be affirmed that that relationship made them become warm and passionate rabbis.

⁷¹ In Hebrew: material sustenance.

⁷² (Kogan, 2019)

The fact that the professors or “*morim*,”⁷³ as some referred to their teachers, were not exclusively from the academic world and not exclusively from the professional world translated into a loving and vocational environment⁷⁴. As Rabbi Kormis said:

*“That warmth and closeness translates to the closeness that one generates with the congregants. I acquired there (in the Seminario) the ability to blend current events with Jewish content. Melodies and joyfulness without losing solemnity. It is not just the Seminario, it was taught by teachers that although they graduated from the Seminario they didn’t teach there. They were also my role models.”*⁷⁵

Rabbi Rojzman, who didn’t study at the Seminario, is grateful for the openness and adaptability of its leadership. His request of being able to study in Israel for the entire length of his training and not only for a year like the rest of the Seminario’s graduates, was granted in a display of deep understanding of what the main goal of that house of study was: to create an innovative and committed new generation of spiritual leaders that would bring Judaism to the modern Latin-American Jew, and to talk the same language in order to bring spirituality to the meaning-seeking younger Jewish members of the different communities. Despite of not being a Seminario graduate Rojzman does not differ in style from his Seminario graduate colleagues. His journey of becoming a rabbi began one Friday night at Bet El when a spur of the moment invitation to share dinner by Marshall Meyer defined who he wanted to be in the future. He then thought ‘*I want to be like him*’. Rabbi Rojzman attended Bet El that night because he was reciting kaddish for his father and Meyer thought that he was too young to lose a parent. He

⁷³ In Hebrew: teachers More in singular (מורה). The word shares the same root with the word הורה (parent) hence the more familiar connotation.

⁷⁴ (Bortz, 2019)

⁷⁵ (Kormis, 2019)

brought him in and the rest is history. For Rojzman the only model was Bet El, his role model was Marshall Meyer. Rojzman himself years later assumed Bet El pulpit. He said:

“I was cheated, for me Conservative Judaism was what I knew from Argentina. That is all I knew. When I came to the United States, I realized it was totally different”⁷⁶

⁷⁶ (Rojzman, 2019)

Conclusion

In a time when the spiritual quest of individuals seems to be guided by customized solutions and personal relationships, the “Latin-American” style of spiritual leadership proved to be incredibly successful. How is it that such a small group of rabbis made such a name for themselves and affected change in so many unexpected ways? The answer to this question is found in the combination of all the elements we mentioned above. The need of the societies, their readiness and preparation, their inherent attributes as Latinos, and the fact that they represented an expression of Jewish identity and a way of living Judaism that originated several decades before them, was bigger than them and it met the spiritual needs of a much larger Jewish population.

All the rabbis interviewed for this study are immigrants whose rabbinical training also comes from a long line of immigrant rabbis. Marshall Meyer was influenced by Heschel and Buber, who were immigrants, and in turn he impacted the Seminario Rabinico Latinoamericano for generations to come. That is likely the reason why these rabbis had a particular and innovative approach to their respective communities that broke the status quo. They were able to observe from the outside, and to transfer and adapt experiences from their previous societies. Most of the interviewees mention this as a key element in their rabbinic practice. In other words that ability to “*come in and come out,*” to be both in and outside of a society, became one of the most remarkable qualities that not only helped them create their own rabbinical models but also that made them attractive to their congregants. That quality provides them with the ability to see things differently, adapt more efficiently to new situations, and be more versatile.

A successful immigration process does not come without suffering and sacrifice. All the rabbis who were interviewed recognized some degree of distress created by the cultural shock they experienced at their arrival. Despite the fact that some were here for decades, they still had problems adopting some social norms. In this way, what makes them special also makes them suffer. Moreover, there is a distance between immigrant rabbis and their congregants in terms of communal, historical, and shared experiences that goes beyond the language barrier. The most extreme case is the return of the American born Rabbi Marshall Meyer to the United States in the late 1980s. He told his BJ colleague Rabbi Marcelo Bronstein that he was having a hard time adapting to the North American culture and could not tolerate certain aspects of American culture.

Regarding the role of the Seminario we can conclude that it represented some sort of laboratory where learning and studying took place. This warm and embracing environment gave the graduates of this school the ability to develop the kinds of relationships they later established in the United States. Those relationships are built upon a manifest appreciation for the other through words and through nonverbal communication - like hugs, smiles, and jokes - the same way they built them at the Seminario.

Another important detail to consider is who the Seminario teachers were. They were not only members of Argentinian academia, but also rabbis who out of love and passion dedicated their time to train new generations. In doing so, they did not always stick to the syllabus but always prioritized the ultimate goal of training knowledgeable, passionate and compassionate rabbis. This exposure to role models from the Seminario who were mainly pulpit rabbis created another level of learning through modeling outside the classroom.

The warmth, the informality, and the passion of Latin American rabbis are not necessarily the result of their clerical training. Rather, it was the society in Latin America that shaped their personalities in a way that stands out when compared to North American social codes. These personal qualities, however, are certainly not enough to be a successful rabbi in the United States. All of the interviewees affirmed that they benefited from the formal structures, the planning, the budgeting and the teamwork they learned here in the U.S. This proves that these attributes – of warmth, spontaneity etc. - are necessary but not sufficient to be a successful Latin American rabbi in the United States. In my personal case this is also true. As a cantor my South American training was not enough to successfully navigate the American cantorate. Just as I had to acquire new skills and knowledge, so did the interviewees. We all integrated elements of our new society and also kept those from our homeland that helped us stand out among our colleagues.

The case of BJ is worthy of special consideration as many tried to emulate their musical model of services as a way of replicating their success. However, rabbis and cantors from all over the United States who visited BJ with the idea of adapting their style to their communities were exposed just to a limited part of BJ's model. Musical instruments, without the passion, the authenticity and the rest of the components such as education, tikkun olam, “deprivatization of Judaism,” just to mention a few, are just not enough. One can pray with the same melodies but creating the same spiritual experience takes a lot more.

We are so fortunate to live in this historical moment when the confluence of factors came together to shape a spiritual experience in the U.S. that helped to renew and revitalize American Jewish life. The “journey of the ideas” that started in Europe with Heschel and Buber

and continued in the United States were reformulated and transmitted to Marshall Meyer. He took those ideas to Argentina and adapted them to a different reality. Then, after twenty years those same ideas were brought back to America by him and his students (or student's students) and applied successfully to the needs of the American Jewry between 1990 and the early 2000s.

Those “*immigrant ideas*” that served as a foundation of the new Latin American Judaism and posteriorly became a powerful influence in North American Judaism did not appeal to the new generation just because. There was a need for a renewed Judaism in the late 1950s in Argentina when Marshall Meyer arrived and there was a need for a renewed approach in the early 1990s when the “*Protestant*” Judaism stopped being the way Jews identified with their spirituality; as Rabbi Karpuj said: “we arrived at the right moment, when they needed what we had to offer.”⁷⁷

⁷⁷ (Karpuj, 2019)

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