Journal of Race, Ethnicity, and Religion

Becoming a Latino Jew:

The Construction of a Panethnic Identity

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"I don't understand, how can you be Jewish? Aren't you Latina?"
"How is it that you speak Spanish, I thought your family was Jewish?"

In recent decades social scientists studying immigration in the United States have paid special attention to the origins of panethnicity and panethnic group construction.[1] How do

[1] Frank D. Bean and Marta Tienda, *The Hispanic Population of the United States* (New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation, 1988); J. Calderon, "'Hispanic' and 'Latino': The Viability of Categories for Panethnic Unity," *Latin American Perspectives* 19, no. 4 (January 1992): 37–44; Victoria Hattam, *Ethnic Shadows: Jews, Latinos, and Race Politics in the United States* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2007); D. Lopez and Y. Espiritu, "Panethnicity in the USA," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 13.2 (1990): 209; Eileen Diaz McConnell and Edward A. Delgado-Romero, "Latino Panethnicity: Reality or Methodological Construction?," *Sociological Focus* 37.4 (2004): 297–312; D. G. Okamoto, "Toward a Theory of Panethnicity: Explaining Asian American Collective Action," *American Sociological Review* 66.6 (2003): 811–42; RS Oropesa, NS Landale, and MJ Greif, "From Puerto Rican to Pan-Ethnic in New York City," *Ethnic & Racial Studies* 31.7 (2008): 1315–39; G. Cristina Mora, *Making Hispanics: How Activists, Bureaucrats, and Media Constructed a New American* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2014).

immigrants become Latino or Asian Americans? What factors affect the creation of panethnic groups; and once created do members of these panethnic groups possess a sense of group consciousness? While the literature is vast and varied on the issue of on ethnic identity and panethnicity, little has been written about the intersection of religion and ethnicity, in particular Judaism, and its role in the construction of a panethnic group identity.

By using a case-study of Latin American Jewish immigrants in the Northeastern U.S., this paper contributes to the sociological literature on immigrant incorporation and identity construction through an analysis of how a religious identity and ethno-religious institutions act as catalysts for the construction of a panethnic group identity. This immigrant group, from countries such as Argentina, Mexico, and Venezuela and estimated to be between 100,000 and 130,000 is particularly interesting to study because its members are not easily classified within the U.S. racial and ethnic structure and existing ethno-religious categories.[2] As inhabitants of two worlds, that of Latinos, who are generally seen as non-white in the U.S. and that of Jews, who are viewed as white, they face an identity conflict. A central question is whether these immigrants are to be classified primarily as Jewish and therefore white; or whether, and in what situations, their national identities as Colombian, Argentine, Mexican or Cuban trump their Jewish ethno-religious identity. Moreover, as they incorporate or assimilate many begin to take on or identify in some way with a Latino panethnic identity. However, unlike non-Jewish Latinos or non-Latino Jews, these immigrants often find that their cultural or ethno-religious background prevents them from fully belonging to one or the other group.

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[2] Sergio DellaPergola, "World Jewish Population, 2012," in *American Jewish Year Book 2012*, ed. Arnold Dashefsky and Ira Sheskin (Switzerland: Springer, 2013), 109-112.

Review of the Literature

Assimilation

Scholars who studied earlier waves of immigration and assimilation posited that as immigrants became more integrated into U.S. society they would begin to lose their ethnic identity and shed some of the characteristics that differentiated them from mainstream Anglo-Americans.[3] Immigrants were expected to approximate the mainstream in culture, appearance and socio-economic standing with the passing of each generation.[4] While the debate on both the inevitability and the process of immigrant assimilation is contentious there is evidence that the descendants of the early 20th century European immigrants did indeed become part of the mainstream. They achieved economic parity with the white majority, gained political power and spatially integrated with members of the U.S. mainstream.[5]

Post-1965 immigrants face a different racial and ethnic landscape. By eliminating national origin quotas, the Hart–Celler Act of 1965 paved the way for increasing numbers of non-European immigrants to enter the U.S. These new immigrants transformed the U.S. racial and ethnic landscape from a largely binary black-white one into a multi-racial and multi-ethnic

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[3] Milton M. Gordon, "Assimilation in America: Theory and Reality," *Daedalus* 90. 2 (April 1961): 263–85; William Lloyd Warner and Leo Srole, *The Social Systems of American Ethnic Groups* (New Haven, CT :Yale University Press, 1945); Richard Alba and Victor Nee, "Rethinking Assimilation Theory for a New Era of Immigration," *International Migration Review* 31.4 (Winter 1997): 826–74.

[4] Herbert J. Gans, "Symbolic Ethnicity: The Future of Ethnic Groups and Cultures in America," *Ethnic & Racial Studies* 2.1 (1979): 1-20.

[5] Richard Alba and Victor Nee, *Remaking the American Mainstream: Assimilation and Contemporary Immigration* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).

society.[6] Not only were the sending countries dramatically different in the latest large immigration wave to the U.S. but so were the political and social movements taking place at the time which greatly altered the integration process for these new immigrants.[7]

Panethnicity

In the wake of the 'new' immigration, there has been considerable interest in the emergence of Latino and Asian panethnicity and panethnic groups that is, "what happens when a number of previous discrete groups seek to join together in reaction to the dominant group's tendency to homogenize them".[8] Contemporary studies of panethnicity, while not dismissing cultural ties, focus primarily on structural factors that underlie the creation of panethnic groups.[9] In uncovering the roots of panethnic construction and institutionalization, some scholars emphasize the role of government policies such as classification by the Census Bureau and government funding for social programs that target panethnic groups (Hispanics, for example); other studies focus on class and economic structures which have influenced the development of

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[6] Ibid.; Frank D. Bean and Gillian Stevens, *America's Newcomers and the Dynamics of Diversity* (New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation, 2003).

[7] Philip Kasinitz et al., *Inheriting the City: The Second Generation Comes of Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008).

[8] Nancy Foner and George M. Fredrickson, *Not Just Black and White* (New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation, 2005).

[9] Frank D. Bean and Marta Tienda, *The Hispanic Population of the United States* (New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation, 1988); J. Calderon, "'Hispanic' and 'Latino': The Viability of Categories for Panethnic Unity," *Latin American Perspectives* 19.4 (January 1992): 37–44; Victoria Hattam, *Ethnic Shadows: Jews, Latinos, and Race Politics in the United States* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2007); J. Itzigsohn, "The Formation of Latino and Latina Panethnic Identities," in *Not Just Black and White*, ed. Nancy Foner and George M. Fredrickson (New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation, 2004), 197–218; D. Lopez and Y. Espiritu, "Panethnicity in the USA," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 13.2 (1990): 209; Eileen Diaz McConnell and Edward A. Delgado-Romero, "Latino Panethnicity: Reality or Methodological Construction?," *Sociological Focus* 37.4 (2004): 297–312; D. G. Okamoto, "Toward a Theory of Panethnicity: Explaining Asian American Collective Action," *American Sociological Review*, 66.6 (2003): 811–42.

panethnic identities. Regardless of which factors explain the construction of panethnic groups, there is evidence that many recent immigrants from Asia and Latin America and their children incorporate a panethnic label as part of their individual ethnic identification.[10]

Religion and Immigration

Latin American Jewish immigrants enter a society with a much wider array of ethnic and panethnic identity options than their Jewish predecessors that came at the turn of the century. They may identify as Latino, or Jewish, or simply white. Or, construct a new panethnic identity, which encompasses a larger regional, cultural and religious group. One of the ways in which immigrants engage with, build and strengthen an ethnic identity is through religious institutional affiliation The ties between ethnicity and religion have been thoroughly documented [11] and the experience of Latin American Jewish immigrants follow suit. They are ethnically, culturally and religiously Jewish (albeit with varying levels of religiosity) yet they discover a new ethnic identity here – a Latino one, that was not previously tied to their understanding of a Jewish ethnic identity. Previous literature has documented the role of an ethnic church in transmitting

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[10] Itzigsohn, "The Formation of Latino and Latina Panethnic Identities"; Michael Jones-Correa and David L. Leal, "Becoming 'Hispanic': Secondary Panethnic Identification among Latin American-Origin Populations in the United States," *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences* 18.2 (1996): 214–54; Joane Nagel, "Constructing Ethnicity: Creating and Recreating Ethnic Identity and Culture," *Social Problems* 41.1(1994): 152–76; C. E Rodriguez, *Changing Race: Latinos, the Census, and the History of Ethnicity in the United States* (New York, NY: NYU Press, 2000).

[11] Wendy Cadge and Elaine Howard Ecklund, "Immigration and Religion," *Annual Review of Sociology* 33 (2007): 359–79; R. Stephen Warner, "Work in Progress Toward a New Paradigm for the Sociological Study of Religion in the United States," *American Journal of Sociology* 98.5 (1993): 1044–93; Phillip E. Hammond and Kee Warner, "Religion and Ethnicity in Late-Twentieth-Century America," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 527 (May1993): 55–66; R. Stephen Warner and Judith G. Wittner, *Gatherings in Diaspora: Religious Communities and the New Immigration* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1998).

and strengthening ethnic identity.[12] This study examines the role that Jewish religious as well as cultural and social institutions have in promoting a new panethnic identity, one that encompasses an ethno-religious (Jewish) and panethnic (Latino) identity.

Method

Research Design

The research for this paper draws on two years of observation and ethnographic research at Latino Jewish religious institutions and cultural events as well as informal gatherings. The majority of the observations took place at the Jewish Latin Center, a religious institution serving Latin American Jewish Immigrants in New York City. I also conducted 41 face-to-face in-depth interviews (14 males and 27 females). The interviews were semi-structured and lasted between one and three hours. Of these twelve of the respondents were from Mexico, sixteen from Argentina, eight from Venezuela, two from Puerto Rico, two from Colombia and one from Uruguay. About two-thirds of the sample resided in the New York area (primarily New York City but also Westchester, Long Island and New Jersey and the remaining one-third in the Boston area). Their length of stay in the U.S. ranged from 2 to 51 years, with an average of 19 years in the U.S. At the time the interviews took place the respondents ages ranged from 28 to 70, the average age was 45. Of the 41 respondents, 27 were married and of these all but two had children, with ages ranging from less than 12 months to the late 30's. In general, the interviewees

[12] Helen Rose Fuchs Ebaugh and Janet Saltzman Chafetz, *Religion and the New Immigrants: Continuities and Adaptations in Immigrant Congregations* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2000); Pyong Gap Min and Jung Ha Kim, *Religions in Asian America: Building Faith Communities*, vol8 (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2001); Pyong Gap Min and Dae Young Kim, "Intergenerational Transmission of Religion and Culture: Korean Protestants in the U.S.," *Sociology of Religion* 66.3 (2005): 263–82.

had high levels of education. All but one person had college degrees or equivalent and more than two-thirds had obtained a Master or Ph.D. degree. Also the majority was employed in finance, law, education, marketing, or the arts. Only one person was out of work and seeking a job, the reaming respondents who were not working were taking care of small children or studying or pursuing independent projects (i.e. not technically unemployed). All of the respondents had legal authority to either live or work in the U.S. Some were either naturalized citizens or permanent residents while those who did not have permanent residency or citizenship had professional or investor visas or student status. None of the respondents mentioned their legal status as an obstacle to settling in the U.S. The majority of the respondents were not religiously observant; of the 41 interviewees only five expressed high levels of religiosity. Most were in the middle, choosing to identify as Conservative Jews, even if in practice they seldom attended synagogue. Of the respondents that were married, three were married to non-Jews, and as expected, for this sub-set of respondents, Judaism played a smaller role in their everyday lives. Whereas most respondents (35) reported attending a Jewish day school in their home country, only five of those with school-aged children enrolled their children in Jewish day schools in the U.S. Of the 41 respondents, ten belong to a Jewish Community Center (though others said they had been members when their children were younger); in comparison all but four respondents had been members of a communal athletic club (similar to Jewish community centers in the U.S.) in their home countries.

Findings and Discussion

In general, there are numerous factors that affect how immigrants define or identify themselves as well as what racial and/or ethno-religious categories they are placed in by others. These choices and constraints are related to factors such as age, time in the U.S, religious identity, professional affiliations, socio-economic status and political participation as well as phenotypical characteristics and language ability. For Latin American Jewish immigrants in particular, two additional factors are directly linked to the evolution of a panethno-religious identity. The first is the lack of a perfect proximal host as defined by Mittleberg and Waters[13] in the form of an existing ethnic group they can connect to; the second is the opportunity to identify as a Latino Jew or Jewish Latino through an organized group or institution. The second factor is especially salient for this group. My research suggests that Jewish institutional support (in the form of synagogues, communal clubs, social clubs, and outreach groups) is a central element in shaping self-identification and group consciousness as a Latino Jew; regardless of the shared cultural values members of this group acknowledge having.

Imperfect Proximal Hosts

Mittleberg and Waters define proximal hosts as 'the category to which the immigrant would be assigned following immigration'. The identity of the immigrant is influenced by how the immigrant herself sees her own identity, how the host society assigns an ethnic identity to the immigrant, and by acceptance (or lack thereof) from the proximal host or the immigrant's co-

[13] David Mittelberg and Mary C. Waters, "The Process of Ethnogenesis among Haitian and Israeli Immigrants in the United States," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 15.3 (1992): 412.

ethnics. If, as Mittleberg and Waters point out, there is little variation across the three then an immigrant ethnic identity is strong with a low probability of ethnogenesis, or the creation of a new ethnic group identity. But if there is greater variation, then there is a higher likelihood of ethnic ambivalence and ethnogenesis. Jewish immigrants from Latin America have two possible proximal hosts, Latinos and U.S. Jews. Acceptance into either of these groups would make ethnogenesis unlikely, but for many members of this immigrant group, U.S. Jews and Latinos have proved to be imperfect proximal hosts. For example, Claudia, an Argentine native who immigrated to Puerto Rico as a child, is a long-time Boston resident. She is active in both in her local Jewish synagogue and in Boston's Latino community through her professional work and social milieu. Nonetheless, she feels that she does not completely belong to either group. When I asked if she felt accepted by other U.S. Jews, she answered, 'I mostly identify as Latina or Hispanic and that's when I get "What, I thought you were Jewish?" It's amazing to me how provincial American Jews can be.' Yet when I asked her to discuss her identity as a Latina, she spoke about not being accepted as a legitimate Latina:

> Because of my last name [Jewish] nobody takes me for Latina, but I am Hispanic. Some people with darker skin color or life experiences would look at me as European. I was very active in the Latino community but I question my own legitimacy and I think the average Latino does not perceive me as legitimate.

Claudia's sentiments were echoed throughout the interviews. Many respondents feel that they are both Jewish and Latino though never completely one or the other. The majority of the Latin American Jewish immigrants in the study arrived to the U.S. with a strong Jewish identity. While in their home countries they (as Jews) are a distinctive ethnic minority, in the U.S. they find themselves in a sector of society (within the Northeastern U.S.) where Jews are part of the

white majority. Like Claudia, most of the respondents feel that they do not fully belong to one group or community, that there are aspects of their cultural identity that are simply lost in the process of assimilating into a particular segment of U.S. society.

Latinos as Imperfect Proximal Hosts

The majority of the people I interviewed spoke about a Latino connection, primarily as a cultural or emotional link. A Latino identity, in this case, is tied to language, food, music, family structure and what some describe as '*calidez humana*' or human warmth. At the same time, many drew a distinction between themselves and the larger Latino group in the U.S. For example, Sonia, a Mexican Jew living in Brooklyn, has a strong Latino identity; in her job, she targets the Latino population in the marketing and advertising industry and most of her colleagues are Latinos. She feels, however, that she is somehow different from her Latino colleagues and her target audience:

> It is because I am Jewish or maybe not because I am Jewish but because of my social class. It is not that they [other Latinos] are a lower social class, but they have a different upbringing; many of them are 2nd generation Latinos. I have more opportunities due to my upbringing.

Like Sonia, many Latino Jews draw from the class and racial paradigms of their home country to establish a separation between themselves and what they perceive as the larger group of 'typical' Latinos in the U.S.[14] Another example is Ana, a Mexican Jew, who self-identifies as Latina:

[14] While we cannot dismiss that classism exits in the U.S., the rigid social class system in Latin America erects social barriers which are much more difficult to cross. Moreover, while racism and a racial hierarchy which place whites at the top exist in Latin America, the color line is somewhat blurred since racial categories are heavily influenced by class. For an in-depth discussion on race and class see Peter Wade, *Race and Ethnicity in Latin America* (London, UK: Pluto Press, 1997).

> I used to work at Elite Consulting Group and there was a Latino group – Argentines, Spanish, Mexicans, Peruvians – we were all a group and I did not feel that we were different from Mexicans. We share a language, a culture, we are not as strict as the *gringos*, we are more politically incorrect and more *fiestero* [party-loving] I felt more identified with them.

At the same time, Ana is quick to separate herself from Latinos of lower socio-economic classes:

> Unfortunately, Latinos here [in the U.S.] are disproportionately Latinos who are illegal immigrants, or low-education, or the 2nd generation – they are of lower socio-economic classes. They do not mix very much. I don't have anything in common with them. For example the other day I was at a concert and a Mexican guy came to talk to us; he told us he has been here for 8 years and was a general manager of a restaurant. He told me where in Mexico City he was from – an area of lower socio-economic status – and then I started to think, 'even though this guy is from Mexico City, I have nothing in common with him, I do not identify with him at all'. He started off as a waiter and is now a manager of a restaurant, but I came here to do an MBA at Ivy U.

Like Ana and Sonia, most of the Latino Jews I met make a clear distinction between themselves and those whom they perceive as 'other Latinos'. The line between the two groups is drawn around issues of socio-economic class, race, immigration status and religion. The separation made by Latino Jews between themselves and those they perceive as 'other Latinos' is shaped in large part by their outsider status in their home countries – and sense of social distance from the majority of the population there. While the experience is not universal across all Latin American nationalities, most said that being Jewish in Latin America is synonymous with a being an ethno-religious minority. Class plays a role, too. A large number of Latino Jewish immigrants are from well-off and highly educated families in their home countries, where they (like most other Jews there) had minimal interaction with the lower socio-economic classes, which contributed to the 'otherness' of the Jewish community, especially in countries with a stark separation of social classes such as Mexico and Venezuela. Most of the respondents were quick to establish a

boundary between themselves and the group they perceive as 'typical Latino' in the U.S. Like other immigrants, their place in this hierarchical social system is an important predictor of their successful integration into the U.S. society and they are quick to separate themselves from those they perceive as having a place on the lower rungs of the U.S. racialized social class system.[15]

In general, the majority of Latin American Jewish immigrants in the Northeast have a privileged status: they are well educated, middle to upper class and white.[16] The respondents themselves make firm distinctions between themselves and other Latinos, and are able to do so in many circumstances due to their skin color, religious affiliation and social class.[17] However, most feel that, even if they wanted to be considered part of a greater Latino panethnic group, their identity as in-group Latinos is questioned.

This lack or perceived lack of acceptance by other Latinos is related to many of the same distinctions that Latino Jews themselves use to mark the boundaries between themselves and the larger Latino panethnic group. Latino Jews see themselves and are seen by others as phenotypically different from Latinos in the U.S. Maya, an Argentine woman, spoke about her husband's experience as a doctor and the interactions he has with his patients:

> Many people ask my husband where he is from; they don't believe he is actually from Latin America nor understand why he speaks Spanish, and the patients often don't understand how a white man can be Latino.

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[15] J. E Barrett and D. Roediger, "How White People Became White," in *White Privilege: Essential Readings on the Other Side of Racism*, ed. Paula S. Rothenberg (New York, NY: Worth Publishers, 2004), 35–40.

[16] This does not mean that all Jews are white, wealthy and educated in Latin America even though Mizrahi Jews might be darker in skin color than many of the Jews from Eastern Europe, in Latin America 'money whitens'. Jews with lower socio-economic status are more likely to immigrate to Israel where the government provides ample financial and resettlement assistance.

[17] Joane Nagel, "Constructing Ethnicity: Creating and Recreating Ethnic Identity and Culture," *Social Problems* 41.1(1994): 152–76.

Jose, a physician from Venezuela, related similar experiences:

> To some extent, I am defined by my name. My name is Jose and that makes my identity. That forces it. My patients ask me, 'Are you Hispanic? You don't sound like it, you don't act like it.'

Jose is assuming that because his name is Spanish, he is in a sense, showing the world he is Latino or Hispanic. And in fact, he has consciously chosen to be called Jose and has not Anglicized his name. However, his whiteness, lack of accent, and position of power as a doctor all establish a social and ethnic distance between himself and his patients. The identity of Jewish immigrants from Latin America is shaped – and constrained – by a combination of the experiences they had in their home countries as well as the reception received in the U.S. by existing Jewish and Latino groups.

U.S. Jews as Imperfect Proximal Hosts

Cultural religious practices and religious communal experiences are highly influenced by the larger society in which they are found. Jewish life and Jewish culture in Latin America differs from the lived Jewish experience in the U.S. across institutional, political, communal and religious lines. The differences are reflected in how Jewish life is carried out in the myriad Jewish institutions, including schools, synagogues, and cultural and community centers. Yet, there is a belief, at least among U.S. Jews that in modern times different groups within Judaism cross regional boundaries. An Ashkenazi Conservative synagogue, for example, is expected to be the same in New York, Paris and Mexico City. Yet, a Conservative synagogue in Mexico not only differs from a Conservative synagogue in New York in the language of the sermon (Spanish) but

also by separating men and women in the synagogue – a practice that in the U.S. is reserved for the more Orthodox synagogues. Jewish culture or the Jewish experiences also varies greatly. Across Latin America, the influence of local cultures is apparent in the characteristics of Jewish communities. In Mexico for example, Jewish cooking has evolved to include *chiles* and cilantro.[18] In Argentina, participation and support of a 'Jewish' soccer team is one of the most prominent ways of displaying a Jewish identity.[19] The U.S. Jewish paradigm, both religious and cultural, is largely based on the German Ashkenazi or Eastern European experience. Yet many of the Latino Jews I met, despite their Ashkenazi European background, found that there was something 'American' and not 'Latin' in the Jewish paradigm found in the U.S. In Latin America, Sephardic and Mizrahi traditions are important facets of the collective community, through food, language and cultural values. Moreover, Latin American Jewish life is practiced beyond the walls of a synagogue, in Latin America many belong to and actively participate in the Jewish community through Jewish organizations that are outside the religious sphere. As one participant explained to me:

> In Venezuela, our lives revolved around *Hebraica* [the local Jewish community center]. Our kids went to school there, or the school was right across the street. We took classes, did sports, socialized, went to the pool. In fact that is what we did every weekend. We spent our time at *Hebraica*. That is a how you were Jewish in Venezuela. The JCC here is not like that at all; it's pretty much just a gym.

Like *Hebraica* in Venezuela, Mexico has a similar institution [*Centro Deportivo Israelita]* and Argentina has a number of Jewish community centers, where Jewish communal life thrives. It is

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[18] Ilan Stavans, *Return to Centro Histórico: A Mexican Jew Looks for His Roots* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2011).

[19] Raanan Rein, *Fútbol, Jews, and the Making of Argentina* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014).

in these spaces, as my participants reported, that socialization, education, and entertainment take place, but also where professional and business connections were fostered. These centers served to build and exchange social and cultural capital within an ethnic milieu. This aspect of communal life and organization is less common in the U.S. Jewish life has, since the 1950s progressively moved beyond communal organizations and into the synagogues Even though many people continue to 'feel Jewish' or identify as Jews, fewer people have an institutional connection to Jewish life in the U.S.[20]

Most of the Latino Jews I interviewed professed a tentative connection with U.S Jews. This was a result of the different way Jewish communal life is organized in Latin American as well as the cultural disparities found in Latin American and U.S. Jewish groups in the form of language, accepted behavioral codes, strength of familial ties and levels of religiosity. As a result, many immigrants do not relate to or identify with U.S. Jews, seeking out people with similar backgrounds instead: 'we would like to meet people like ourselves.' Some also felt that U.S. Jews did not really understand them. A Venezuelan man I met at the Jewish Latin Center in New York (discussed in-depth in the following section) told me how difficult it has been for him in the U.S., as a Jew and a Latino:

> I am so excited you are studying this (Latino Jews). I have thought so much about being Jewish and Latino, because it has been so difficult for me here. I went to a synagogue in Atlanta, and people would say to me, 'oh you are Venezuelan, are you in the process of converting [to Judaism]?' Don't people know there are Jews all over the world? That is why I am so happy to find this place [the Jewish Latin Center].

[20] Jonathan D. Sarna, *American Judaism: A History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004).

Given the ambivalent reception by U.S. Jewish as well as Latino proximal hosts, one would expect the formation of a new panethnic group combining Jewish, national, and Latino aspects of cultural and ethnic backgrounds. However, the majority of respondents in the Northeast do not self-define as Latino Jews and in fact their ethnic identity is much more bifurcated and situational. In general, the respondents who do self-identify as Latino Jews have had some interaction with an organized religious or cultural institution that fosters a panethnic Latino Jewish community. Though other factors, such as age, profession and social contacts, seem to have some influence on the creation of a panethnic Latino Jewish identity, my research suggests that participation in an established organization which caters to and actively recruits Jewish members of Latin American descent is the strongest predictor in constructing a Latino Jewish identity.

One such organization and the site of my ethnographic research is The Jewish Latin Center, a *Chabad* organization in New York City formed in 2009 that actively seeks to build a community of Latin Jews. The Jewish Latin Center functions as an organized space where members construct a panethno-religious identity that is outside the sphere of existing ethnic and religious categories. Though one might suspect that it is self-selection that draws people to these organizations, I found that in reality, people did not seek out a Latino Jewish organization like the Jewish Latin Center. Most ended up there by happenstance, hearing about it through friends, and surprised to find how 'at home' they felt there.

The Jewish Latin Center: An Ethnographic Sketch

I visited the Jewish Latin Center for the first time in the fall of 2010. The Jewish Latin Center functions as a provisional synagogue as well as religious community outreach center, located on the 6th floor of a high-rise building in Manhattan's Flatiron district. I stepped off the elevator and picked up a prayer book from a folding table before entering the main room. I saw that I was among the first to arrive and made my way to the back of the room. The room was set up with folding chairs in rows and a screen dividing the front and back of the room, to separate the men from the women, as is customary in Jewish Orthodox synagogues. Jewish Orthodox rules prohibit men and women praying together; often times the women's sections are found on the second level of synagogues where women can look down on their family members and rabbi during the service. Since this was not a traditional synagogue but rather a large auditorium-like room, the screen in the middle served as a barrier between the men and women. The service had been called for 7:00 PM and it was now 7:20. I have grown used to U.S. punctuality and was surprised by the more common Latin American custom ('Latin' time) of arriving 20 to 30 minutes after the starting time. I looked around and saw about 10 men entering and making their way to the front. The men were dressed in suits or trousers and sweaters, and all wore *kippot*, the traditional skullcap that Jewish men wear as a head covering. None of the men were dressed in typical Orthodox garb, such as black suits, tall hats and prayer shawls. As the women trickled in, alone or in small groups of two or three, they made their way to the back of the makeshift synagogue. Their style of dress was much more varied than the men's, but all leaned towards modern and fashionable. While some women dressed in skirts and long-sleeved tops, as is

customary among Orthodox Jewish women, the majority wore less traditional attire such as pants or shorter dresses or tops with exposed arms. None of the women covered their heads with a scarf or a wig. I was particularly interested in the attire because traditional dress is one of the most visible markers setting Orthodox Jews apart from non-Jews as well as less religious Jews. In fact, many came dressed as if this was the first stop before a night on the town. I later learned that this is common among *Chabad* congregations; they are open to all and in fact have a mission to proselytize among and often attract younger, less-religious Jews. The success of *Chabad* can be largely attributed to the philosophy of inclusion and serving as a safe space for all to discover and practice Judaism, not just the extremely pious.[21]

People milled in slowly. The men took their seats upfront and the women made their way to the back of the room, kissing friends on the cheeks, stopping to chat with one another before settling down for the remainder of the service. The service that night was *Kol Nidre*, named for the *Kol Nidre* prayer that starts *Yom Kippur,* the Jewish Day of Atonement and also the holiest day of the year. In my previous experiences, *Kol Nidre* services had been somber events where people arrived early, and appeared to make concerted efforts to concentrate on the service and prayers. Since these experiences had taken place at less religious Jewish synagogues such as Conservative or Reform houses of worship, I had expected the *Chabad* services I was attending that night to be much more solemn and somber. The chatter of the women sitting near me in the back of the room was the second signal that the Jewish Latin Center served more of a socializing function for the people who attended, rather than a space to practice religious rites and traditions.

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[21] Sue Fishkoff, *The Rebbe's Army: Inside the World of Chabad-Lubavitch* (Random House Digital, Inc., 2009); Samuel C. Heilman and Menachem Friedman, *The Rebbe: The Life and Afterlife of Menachem Mendel Schneerson* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010).

The Rabbi leading the service, Rabbi Mendy as the congregation called him, was a young Orthodox man in his early to mid-20s. I had read earlier on the center's website that Rabbi Mendy was originally from Brazil, which helped explain the snippets of Portuguese I heard throughout the women's section. Rabbi Mendy welcomed everyone to the service in English, with interjections of Spanish and Portuguese. The service was short, as *Kol Nidre* tend to be. The women sitting around me participated in the prayers and chanted alongside the rest of the congregation. Their participation, however, did not hinder their socializing, which they did during small pauses or breaks in the service. At the end of the service the Rabbi wished everyone an easy fast[22] and invited everyone back the next day for a day of prayer and an evening meal to break the fast. I did not return the next day for the *Yom Kippur* services, but over the next year and half, I began to attend regular Friday night services and monthly dinners. I engaged with many of the members, got to know the Rabbi and his wife, and began to try to understand what drew people to the Jewish Latin Center.

I returned a few weeks later for my first *Shabbat* (Friday night service) and monthly dinner. The service was again short, primarily in English and people seemed eager to get on with the second half of the night - the *Shabbat* dinner. When the service ended, people found their way to the other side of the room where tables had been set up to accommodate 75-100 people, many more than had been present at the service. I realized that evening and over the next year, that the dinners were the main draw as the events gained popularity. I found a place at a table with about eight other people, men and women ranging in age from mid-20s to mid-50s. It

[22] On *Yom Kippur*, Jews are required by religious law to fast and are prohibited, according to Jewish law, from engaging in any activity that might distract them from the serious work of atonement.

seemed from looking around that most were sitting with old friends or friends of friends. I listened to the accents at the tables and realized that they were more or less divided by nationality. From what I could glean, there was a Venezuelan table, an Argentine table, and a Mexican table.

The food was served buffet style, dishes ranged from traditional eastern European Jewish cuisine, such as *gefilte* fish (balls of chopped white fish served boiled), to Middle Eastern specialties like hummus and eggplant salad. The bar was stocked with wine, spirits and soft drinks. As we served ourselves and took our seats again, Rabbi Mendy called for our attention. He began by reciting the traditional Hebrew blessings over the wine and bread. After the prayers were uttered and as people began to partake in the evening's dinner, the Rabbi welcomed the guests and began to call on individual people to stand up and say a few words. When he spoke now, he spoke in both Spanish and English, peppered with Portuguese, a marked difference from the religious service where he spoke in English and prayed in Hebrew and English. The use of language set a different tone for the dinner. People were being addressed in the language of their home country and throughout the night spoke Spanish or Portuguese to Rabbi Mendy, which gave their conversations an air of intimacy and created an atmosphere that served to foster a Latino environment.

That night and over the next year, Rabbi Mendy asked many people to stand up and tell a bit of their story. Some were new arrivals to the city and were happy to find a place that 'felt like home'. Others were just passing through and had heard about the Jewish Latin Center from an acquaintance and wanted a place to spend a *Shabbat*. Through listening to the introductions and

the few words spoken by the people attending the Friday night dinners, I was able to get a sense of how this congregation was constructed. Rabbi Mendy was likely not only to mention a person's home country, but also their spouse and their profession. For example a typical introduction might be, 'I would like Ariel, from Uruguay, to say a few words. Ariel works at Goldman Sachs and has been an important supporter of the Jewish Latin Center'. As a sociologist, these snippets of information gave me insight into the socio-economic and demographic nature of the population, but they also served as points useful for networking, which I would come to see was a major function of the Jewish Latin Center. In fact, I found that many people who attended did so precisely for business opportunities and job prospects.

Joining or creating a congregation composed of fellow immigrants is not a new or unique phenomenon. The literature on immigration has many examples of co-ethnics congregating in a religious setting to develop the social networks that allow them to adapt to their new country [23]. Ethnic religious institutions have important social functions that differ from non-ethnic religious organizations. In his work on Korean churches in the U.S., Pyong Gap Min [24] describes the four major social functions of immigrant and minority churches as fellowship, maintenance of ethnic identity and ethnic subculture, provision of social services, and ability to gain social status and social positions. This model is useful in analyzing the functions of the Jewish Latin Center, with one major exception: rather than maintain ethnic identity and ethnic subculture, the Jewish Latin

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[23] Nancy Foner and Richard Alba, "Immigrant Religion in the U.S. and Western Europe: Bridge or Barrier to Inclusion?," *International Migration Review* 42.2 (2008): 360–92; Warner and Wittner, *Gatherings in Diaspora*; F. Yang and H.R. Ebaugh, "Religion and Ethnicity among New Immigrants: The Impact of Majority/minority Status in Home and Host Countries," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 40.3 (2001): 367–78.

[24] Pyong Gap Min, "The Structure and Social Functions of Korean Immigrant Churches in the United States," *International Migration Review* 26.4 (1992): 1370–94.

Center actively promotes a new ethno-religious identity. The Jewish Latin Center does not actively provide social services, nor is it a place where large differences in social status occur. Since the Center is at the early stages of development and growth, it does not have the financial capital to provide social services and concentrates on recruitment and building its own membership base. It is possible that as member begin to take on more leadership roles, social status within the congregation will begin to matter more.

Fellowship

As Min points out, churches have always been a central meeting point for people to congregate and feel part of a group. This is a particularly important function in immigrant's churches, which cater to people who are far from home and lack a sense of community and a dense network of familial ties that they had there. In this sense, the Jewish Latin Center actively fulfills this function. It is not merely a place to practice religious rites; in fact, religious observances do not appear to drive the attendance of many of its members. The social events sponsored by the Jewish Latin Center were even more popular than the religious services. Community building is in fact, one of the guiding missions of the Jewish Latin Center. When I met with Rabbi Mendy, he spoke extensively about the need to fill a void, to construct a community similar to those in Latin America:

> Latin American Jews have a strong Jewish community because we are from small communities. Most families belong to something that is Jewish and gives a stronger sense of community. Here in New York there is less of a sense of community because the Jewish community is larger. This disturbed a lot of Latin Americans that came here and creates a distance to Judaism. They do not feel comfortable here. Communities in South

> America are very warm and welcoming. The community and family life is very important.

Fellowship is a key function of the Jewish Latin Center. This is evident not only in the interactions I observed among attendees but also in the social groups and relationships that have grown out of meetings and events at the Jewish Latin Center. Many people feel that even though they can connect with other non-Latino Jews, co-nationals and non-Jewish Latinos, they have a stronger connection with Jews from Latin America, i.e. other Latin Jews. The commonalities shared by Latin American Jewish immigrants, which include being Jews from small communities in Catholic dominant societies, speaking a common language, and having shared cultural values, rise to the forefront and obscures for the moment the regional differences.

Rabbi Mendy actively works to have the Center fulfill a fellowship function. On any given evening, he makes it a point to introduce people as potential friends, and he also sometimes acts as a matchmaker. He has married a few couples that have met at the Jewish Latin Center and actively seeks to make other matches. Since Rabbi Mendy is concerned with Jewish people marrying outside the Jewish faith, he seeks to match people romantically as a way to curtail intermarriage:

> One of our primary goals is that young professionals get together. A few couples have met at the center. In a world where we are living today, assimilation is threatening our nation. We are actively setting people up.

The Jewish Latin Center, therefore, functions as a meeting place for many new immigrants who have not found a congregation or social venue to meet others with similar backgrounds. Since the majority of the attendees are recent immigrants, the center functions not only as an entry into an

established or, perhaps more accurately, establishing community and religious institution but also as an organized space to forge new social ties.

Establishing a New Panethno-religious Identity: The Construction of Latin Jews

When I first started attending services and dinners at the Jewish Latin Center, most of the small groups that formed seemed to be made up of co-nationals. There was, as I noted, a Venezuelan table, a Mexican table, an Argentine one and a Brazilian one, among others. As the Jewish Latin Center began to grow in numbers, these tables became more integrated. While many people may know each other from their home countries, they also often join tables and groups with people from other countries. This cross-national intermingling is even more apparent during the cocktail hour (added to the Friday night dinners in 2011) or parties sponsored by the Jewish Latin Center but held off the premises.

There are both cultural and structural factors that affect the development of a panethnic group among Latin American Jewish immigrants. One factor I have emphasized is the lack of a perfect proximal host: Latin American Jews do not feel completely integrated or accepted into either Latino communities or the U.S. Jewish community. Additionally, shared cultural essentials, such as language, are strong influences on the construction of the Latino Jewish identity. Furthermore, as minorities from overwhelmingly Catholic societies, Jews from Latin America bring with them a shared experience that extends beyond national boundaries. Not only are Catholics the majority, Catholicism in Latin America is institutionalized in government and schools, and the national psyche at large. As a result of their status as religious and ethnic

minorities, strong Jewish communities emerged and continue to thrive in Latin America while remaining much less assimilated into the mainstream culture than in the U.S. The majority of Jews share a sense of belonging to Jewish communities across Latin America, and this serves as a basis for connection for Latin American Jewish immigrants in the U.S. For those immigrants who have learned about and joined the Jewish Latin Center, their participation fills a void and re-creates, in a small way, the feeling of community that existed in their home countries. Latin American Jews are accustomed to having their social, professional and religious lives intertwined and taking place within large Jewish institutions. Given the important place that Jewish institutions have in Latin America and the tight-knit Jewish communities there, Latin American Jews are more likely to have culturally based panethnic identification than non-Jewish Latinos. They not only share a language and some regionally specific norms, they also have a shared experience of belonging to a religious minority group and many were entrenched in the communal institutions of their Jewish community.

Other Latino Jewish organizations

As the numbers of Latino Jews in the U.S. continues to grow, organizations and institutions have begun to take notice and provide cultural, social, and religious outreach programs and services. A number of Jewish institutions, especially in places like New York, Miami and Southern California organize and offer programs for Latino Jews. The promotion of Latino Jewish panethnicity is also apparent in various artistic endeavors such as film, music, visual arts and literature that engage with the cultural aspects of a Latino Jewish heritage. The

92nd Street Y, a prominent and longstanding Jewish cultural organization in New York City, has sponsored a number of Latino Jewish Arts Festivals or *Feria Latinas* featuring a visual art exhibit, film screenings, lectures and social events. The weeklong series promotes Jewish Latino culture and partners with the social group *Judios Latinos (Latin Jews)*. Other cultural institutions also have begun promoting the subject Latino Jews within larger programs such as the Latino Film Festival in San Diego, which now includes a Jewish Latino film festival. The 29th Chicago Latino Film Festival also included a film series titled "Mexican-Jewish Connections".

There are a number of communal groups, aimed primarily at promoting socializing among young, urban, professional, Latino Jewish immigrants. In New York City, the largest and most prominent social group was the *Judios Latinos* (Latin Jews).[25] A young Argentine Jewish woman started the group in 2002. The mission of the *Judios Latinos* was to promote unity among Latin American Jewish immigrants and foster a strong sense of belonging. Other similar groups have formed around the country at colleges and universities. For example, the Hillel (Jewish students organization) at the University of Miami has taken steps to encourage unity among Latin American Jewish students, through an organized sub-group called *Hola Hillel*.

Other community organizations also try to recreate the Jewish organizations that are so central to Jewish life in Latin America.[26] In Miami, *Hebraica* functions within the Jewish Community Center as a Latino Jewish communal space and organizes events such as art festivals, Israeli folk dancing, young Jewish leadership training academies and Maccabee

[25] The group is now defunct, but its members continue to maintain strong ties with one another.

[26] Many of the respondents mentioned that the lack of these clubs in the U.S. is what makes it difficult to become "part of a community."

(Olympic) games that take their cues from the activities popular in the athletic and communal centers of Latin America. Another institution, the Ken Jewish Community Center in San Diego is exclusively focused on creating and preserving a Latin American and Jewish experience, as the website states (http://kenjc.org):

> The KEN Jewish Community is the place where Latin Jewish families find friends for life who share their beliefs, values and traditions. Through a wide range of educational, leadership, social, performing arts, and sports programs and activities, its members strengthen their Jewish identity, build a connection with Israel, and maintain their Latin culture. In more than thirty years since its founding, the KEN Jewish Community has established itself firmly within the landscape of Jewish communal institutions in San Diego, occupying a distinctive space as the sole organization serving the Latin Jewish community in the area.

CONCLUSION

The evidence from the interviews I conducted as well as the ethnographic research I undertook at the Jewish Latin Center show the there is an inclination towards a panethno-religious identity among Jewish immigrants from Latin America, though in the Northeastern U.S. few actually name or call themselves Jewish Latinos. Most Latin American Jewish immigrants identify themselves as Jews as well as in terms of their national, and often Latin American, origins. Self-identification as Latino Jews is less common, and generally only salient for those who are involved in various ethnic or ethno-religious groups that bring Latin American Jews together. The extent of involvement in Latino Jewish ethno-religious groups and strength of a Latino Jewish identity vary by degree of religiosity, education, and social class, as well as experience in the home country. For example, those who are less religious are more likely to be involved in Latino Jewish groups than are those with a strong religious background, who are

more likely to identify with long-established Jewish religious groups in U.S. What is clear, however, is that while virtually all Latino Jews have a panethno-religious identity, due to their common language, perceived feeling of otherness among Jews or Latinos in the U.S. and as ethnic minorities in their home countries as well as a similar upbringing in Latin American Jewish communal and institutional life, those that identify and create Latino Jewish networks have access to other Latino Jews through organized institutional affiliation or sponsored communal spaces. It is likely that as the number of Latino Jews continues to increase (and this is probable given the on-going political and personal safety issues in Latin American countries with sizable Jewish populations such as Mexico and Venezuela), a growing number of U.S. Jewish institutions will sponsor Latino Jewish programs, events and organizations, which will expand the number and strength of those who call themselves - and thus are – Latino Jews.