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Drawing on its collective pasts, the Jewish community constitutes itself in ways that are particularly Brazilian. As James Holston says, “the past always leaks through the present” (2008:34). Jewish Brazilian identities are not made in the past but are continually in process, responding to the conditions offered at particular historical junctures, plucking meaning from the past to justify the present, and ultimately using the present to imagine and enact a different future, one in which Jewish belonging is not contingent upon sacrificing their meaningful pasts. Rather than being acted upon by a hostile history, these Jews are appropriating local and national ideologies, regardless of whether these are “mythic,” and insisting on proceeding as if they are real. Even if these ideologies are utopic, they may still be the hopeful “beacon” that Brazil continues to offer (Sheriff 2001:224).

Jewish Brazilian identity poses a series of contradictions stemming from the paradox of being non-Christian in a Christian nation, even though sometimes the dominant expressions of Christianity are more cultural than religious. Other contradictions are internal to the Jewish

community itself, rooted in what are often profound cultural and religious differences. Many *paulistano* Jews are willing to overlook differences of origin, religiosity, and even social class in the name of Jewish continuity, that is, making sure that young Jews marry other Jews. However, the emphasis on continuity is not sufficient to explain their flexibility. They locate the reasons for the acceptance of the sorts of differences that divide Jewish communities in other places in their Brazilianness, framing it in terms of Brazilian ideologies of race and tolerance. They even extend that explanation to a flexibility in religious practices, however much that might be part of the modern condition, and place great value on bridging difference as an expression of their national identity.

However, there are contradictions in community practices, as for example when some Orthodox families distance themselves from the non-Orthodox families that live in their same apartment building. The contrast with the celebrated tolerance in the context of shared institutions such as the Hebraica is just one of the ways that ethnic identity is exposed as a process rather than a fixed identity.

Jewish Continuity

“Where else could you see girls in ‘dental floss’ bikinis and Orthodox families side by side?” asked the maestro, with a mix of incredulity and admiration. (A professional conductor, formerly with the state symphony of Rio, and now responsible for the choruses at the Hebraica, he was frequently addressed by his title as a sign of respect.)¹ Although he claimed that the much smaller Jewish community in his native Uruguay integrated many kinds of Jews, Maestro León Halegua was nevertheless impressed by the unique synthesis of the São Paulo community that was in evidence that day at the Hebraica.

Indeed, weekends at the Hebraica club provide sometimes astonishing juxtapositions of the most apparently irreconcilable differences to be found within a Jewish community. Bands of bikini-clad adolescents sun themselves poolside while Orthodox women with long skirts and covered heads push strollers along nearby paths with a gradated set of children in tow. Hasidic men with their black garb, broad-brimmed hats, and full beards apprehend gangly boys sporting corporate logos on their oversized shorts and sneakers in order to remind them of their responsibility to pray; a few boys even accept help tying on the *tefillin* (phylacteries) right

there in the club,² holding out their left arm to get wrapped by the leather strap while they balance a basketball with their right.

That all these Jews with different agendas and different relationships to Judaism and Jewishness frequent the same social institution presents more than intriguing visual contrasts. That they share the same social space speaks directly to the inherent contradictions as well as the possibilities offered by an institution that defines itself, through its membership and activities, according to something as variable as Jewishness. That neither the membership nor the activities are exclusively “Jewish” is just one of the many contradictions that make the Hebraica such a compelling space for understanding what it means to be Jewish in São Paulo.

The club provides infrastructure and activities for all ages, from a full-day preschool to weekly activities for elderly members of the community, from dance and martial arts classes to sports teams, and from lectures by prominent authors for young professionals to thematic evening parties for mature couples. However, the club’s true emphasis is on the *jovens*, the youths of the community. The goal is for youths to transition from the dependence of childhood to a more independent young adulthood without distancing themselves from the community in the process.³

In order to accomplish this, that is, for the club to be seen as a “cool” place to be and be seen, activities are offered to attract young people, many of which are coordinated through the Youth Department, such as the Meidá group, which trains young people to be community leaders. The large Youth Department channels common youth activities into those that are meaningful for community identity and continuity. Its English-titled Adventure subdepartment draws on the growing popularity of outdoor sports such as hiking, camping, climbing, and scuba diving. The club also offers training in sports (including soccer, basketball, swimming, gymnastics, judo, and the Israeli martial art Krav Maga), and theater and dance activities. Many of these activities are offered elsewhere in the Jewish community as well as in the city at large. The point of offering everything in one place is to attract youths to this community center, to unify their social, athletic, and ethnic interests.

Each year culminates in the annual Carmel Festival, which draws Israeli folk dance groups from all over Brazil, as well as other Latin American countries and Israel, during which time the club is transformed into an enormous dance camp with bands of roaming, costumed kids. All of the club’s stages are used, and additional temporary stages are set up in

the Yitzhak Rabin Civic Center gymnasium, the covered Carmel Plaza, and outside in the grassy Jerusalem Plaza, while other areas of the club are used as refectories and dormitories. All festival activities are coordinated through the Youth Department as well.

The underlying logic of these many club activities for youths is that even if they attend non-Jewish schools, young people who socialize through the club are more likely to develop their strongest friendships within the community. In maintaining their involvement with the community they are more likely to continue as club members into adulthood, extending their community connections into business and employment networks. Most importantly, socializing through the club in young adulthood increases the likelihood that they will find Jewish spouses and have Jewish children, who will then attend the club, marry within the community, and so on. Their potential for social reproduction makes this age group centrally important for the continuity of the club, the community, and, indeed, Jewish identity.

In conversations with club members it became clear that Jewish continuity through brokering marriage was the real purpose of the club, the true mandate of this and other ethnic- and class-based clubs. Occasionally I heard thirdhand accounts of romances with non-Jews that began at the club. Non-Jews may join the club, and most of the staff and many of the instructors are not Jewish, so containing the majority of young people's activities within the walls of the club is no guarantee that these youths will develop romances only with Jews, though it increases the statistical odds.

While there are no reliable data on the rate of marriage between Jews and non-Jews in Brazil, exogamy has been sounded as the death knell for Judaism by demographers and rabbis for generations. The question of intermarriage is of particular interest to Jews concerned with the waning of Jewish communities around the world. Warnings about the demographic demise of Jewish communities are deployed to encourage participation in Jewish institutions. One Orthodox group launched an ad campaign in the Brazilian Jewish press that credited the superior fertility rates of Orthodox Jews for preventing this demise, appealing to the Jewish community to return to a deeper faith and its associated practices for the very survival of the Jewish people.

Sergio DellaPergola, famed demographer of international Jewry, has taken an unconventional and somewhat provocative approach to the

question of intermarriage, juxtaposing the rates of exogamy among Jews in the United States with interethnic Jewish marriage in the Israeli context (i.e., marriage between Jews of different subethnic groups), suggesting that both result from the same processes of social integration that are part of national formation (DellaPergola 1999:43–48). Though the consequences for Jewish continuity are different in each case, DellaPergola draws our attention to the similar underlying social logic and practices.

Meanwhile, millennia of intermarriage and the incorporation of local culture within Jewish communities scattered around the world have resulted in tremendous cultural diversity as well as the paradox of continuity in spite of external pressures to assimilate and disappear. The largest groupings of these separated communities resulted in subethnic groups marked by major sociolinguistic differences: Ashkenazi Jews are descendants of those Jews who settled in Central and Eastern Europe and spoke Yiddish, while Sephardi Jews descend from the Jews of the Iberian Peninsula who spoke Ladino and were further scattered at the end of the fifteenth century, many to North Africa and the Middle East, where there were also Mizrahi Jews (pl., Mizrahim) whose ancestors had apparently never left the region. In contemporary immigrant societies, like the United States, Canada, South Africa, Australia, and certainly Israel, Jews from these dispersed groups have encountered one another once again and have had to reconcile their notions of what it means to be Jewish with other Jews whose practices are so different. Where Jews from different countries converge in many places throughout the Diaspora, they construct parallel institutions and communities that serve to maintain their differences. However, in Brazil, the Jewish community has embraced the Brazilian ideology of “racial democracy” and applied the concept to explain internal differences. *Paulistano* Jews have constructed a community that incorporates the many traditions and sources of identity that Jews have brought with them from dozens of countries of origin. For Jewish Brazilians, braiding many strands makes for a strong cord of continuity.

Mixed Marriages and Traditions

The first joke I heard at the Hebraica upon beginning formal fieldwork there got right to the heart of what drew me to study the heterodox Jewish community in São Paulo. In a playful reference to the newly remodeled spa in the club, I was asked the setup question: “Hey, did you hear that the

Hebraica now has a *sauna mista*?” A “mixed sauna” usually refers to one for both men and women, a rarity in Brazil. When I expressed surprise, I was hit with the punch line: “Yeah, Ashkenazim and Sephardim!” Instead of being about the social (especially sexual) mixing of the sexes, the joke hinged on the idea of a social venue that “mixed” races, mapping the idea of race onto Jewish subethnic difference. Although Jews as a group are at the “white” end of Brazil’s socioracial spectrum, among Brazilian Jews the distinction between these two subethnic groups is often understood, albeit playfully, through a racial idiom. The differences between these broad social constructs are largely cultural (marked principally by linguistic and religious differences); however, in this context (and others), Yiddish-speaking Ashkenazi Jews with their European origins stand in for “white,” while Ladino- and French-speaking Sephardi Jews with North African and Middle Eastern origins are considered “dark.”

This idea of the social interaction between Ashkenazi and Sephardi Jews as being a kind of socially significant racial mixing was reiterated in the frequent, usually ironic, references to “*casamentos mistos*,” mixed marriages, employing a term usually used to refer to marriages between Jews and non-Jews,⁴ and between other incommensurable racial groups. That this concept should be used to describe mixing (or “miscegenation”) between Sephardi and Ashkenazi Jews reflected a deeply internalized sense of difference. It also suggested some of the ways in which the Brazilian context influenced Jewish conceptions of difference and belonging.

On one occasion, I met with a woman in her spacious apartment in the upscale Jardins neighborhood and spoke while the nanny took care of her eighteen-month-old son. It turned out that the large apartment in a desirable neighborhood was part of her dowry, an attempt on the part of her parents to attract a good husband.⁵ She explained that if she had not been able to marry a Jew, she would not have married. Brought up in an observant Ashkenazi family from Central Europe, she married a Sephardi man whose family was from Syria. In spite of their both being Jewish, the woman complained about the cultural differences between them, differences that she found alienating. Following patrilocal practices, she had married into his family, so she celebrated holidays with them and attended their synagogue. She was unaccustomed to the foods they ate, unfamiliar with the liturgy used in the synagogue services, and often unable to participate in conversations in their home, conducted in French.