

## **CTE Mission to the Jewish Community of Cuba**

This past year, I had the unique opportunity to visit with a group from our community. I didn't know much about the country in general, let alone about the Jewish community, but in recent years the laws have become a bit more flexible, allowing more groups from the U.S. to visit Cuba, and when members of our congregation approached me with the idea of taking a group trip, it seemed too good to pass up. The ultimate purpose of our trip was to connect with, and offer support to, the Cuban Jewish community. But before I share details about that aspect of our visit, let me paint a brief picture of life in Cuba today.

The premise of the Cuban government is that their political and economic system is a great equalizer among the people- providing enough food, health care and basic necessities of life to meet the needs of everyone. But the reality that we experienced was certainly far from that. From the emaciated cows that we saw roaming the countryside, to the beggars that we experienced outside of the Jewish cemetery in Cuba- poverty and struggle is everywhere. A large part of our trip was dedicated to providing funds and material goods to the Jewish community, as well as finding small opportunities to help those in poverty that we encountered along the way-

handing out baseball hats to children along the road, and small bottles of soap and shampoo to individuals who looked so grateful to receive them.

Our tour guide, Julio Chaves, was a tall, humorous, and kind man who loved guiding Jewish groups. Julio welcomed us to Cuba with open arms and proved to be a wonderful, informative, and friendly man who seemed to connect with the mission and sentiment behind the Jewish groups he routinely guided through the country. And while Julio was clearly proud of Cuban society, he was also surprisingly open about the challenges of daily life in Cuba. While he would speak glowingly about the kindness, generosity, and musical talent of his fellow Cubans, moments later he would pass around a copy of his family's food ration book, showing us a first hand example of one of the many challenging parts of their day-to-day existence. The quantities of food they receive are generally insufficient to feed an average family and most Cubans have to resort to all types of tips and tricks to skirt the system and get the items that they need. Their government provisions, combined with some wheeling and dealing, generally get them what they need, but it is far more complicated than the way the government would like it to appear. Julio made it very clear that the black market economy throughout Cuba is the key to survival.

Beyond basics like food, other aspects of life that we take for granted in the Western world in the 21st century continue to elude most average Cubans. For example: if you want cable or Internet, you *may* be able to get it. But the primary way would be by connecting an elaborate system of extension cords and cable wires in order to illegally share access between many families or across an entire neighborhood. And of course whatever system you can rig up, you have to constantly be vigilant to avoid being caught. If one wanted to start his own business and open a private restaurant, called a *Palador*, he could -- but he is restricted to purchasing supplies directly from the government, and required to pay out a large percentage of your profits. If you try and purchase items for your restaurant on the black market, or to circumvent the government in any way, you will likely get caught and deeply fined (though paying off government inspectors seems to be a pretty commonplace and expected part of day-to-day business). The government provides health care to everyone, but the pharmacies provide the most basic medical supplies, as prescribed by a doctor only, and often leave the people without many of the products they need. And even while everyone has supposedly equal access to doctors and care, it's obvious that the behind the scenes wheeling and dealing even applies here, as Cubans frequently resort to bribery or other back-room negotiations in order to get the health care that they want. According to the many stories we heard, this type of black market dealing, bribery, corruption, and aggravation permeates essentially

every aspect of Cuban society and life--from business, to healthcare, and even to the schools. In a country where everyone is meant to be equal, it is clear there are haves and have-nots, and even those who seem to be getting by are only doing so by in one way or another working the system on a daily basis.

It is among these challenging circumstances that a small Jewish community survives, and in some instances, thrives.

To give some context: do you know how many Jews there are in Monmouth County? According to the most recent data from the Jewish Federation of Greater Monmouth county there are **75,000 Jews in our area**. That is a fairly significant number, and ours is a community with a tremendous wealth of cultural, institutional, and day-to-day resources for the Jewish people. Of course, we have our challenges, and yes, institutional Jewish life is changing all across the country- but it is amazing just how many venues and opportunities our community has to engage Jews of all ages, backgrounds, practices, and beliefs.

Contrast this with the Jewish community of Cuba. Cuba has, in total, approximately 1500 Jews. Just about equivalent to the number of individuals sitting in our congregation when it is full.

Some background: in the first half of the 20th century, there was significant Jewish immigration to Cuba: from Turkey following the break up of the Ottoman Empire and from eastern Europe and Russia. In 1924 there were 24,000 Jews in Cuba, and in the 1930s, many more Jewish immigrants came from Europe to escape Nazi and fascist persecution. In 1959 before the Revolution, an estimated 15,000 Jews lived in Havana alone, where they had five synagogues. But nearly 95% of Jews left Cuba for the United States after the coming of Fidel Castro and his implementation of a communist government. They left their homes, their successful businesses, their synagogues, and their communities.

Those who stayed were for the most part forced to keep their religious lives to themselves. It was not until the 1990's that Castro started to loosen restrictions, and granted individuals freedom to openly practice and gather as religious communities.

The Joint Distribution Committee initially helped to identify and rebuild some infrastructure for local Jewish communities to try and put themselves back together. The JDC sought out individuals who recalled having a Jewish connection of any kind, and brought support to those few who had tried to

secretly hold onto their Jewish identity in small ways, hoping for the day that they would be permitted to reclaim their heritage.

At this point, anyone who has a Jewish connection in their family, on either side, is welcome to participate in the Jewish community of Cuba. Like in America, there is a high rate of intermarriage among Cuban Jews, though conversion is required for couples to marry Jewishly, or for their children to be identified as Jews. Weddings and conversions can prove to be somewhat complicated because the community has to wait for rabbis to come from Latin America to perform the wedding or conversion ceremony. We were told by one of our speakers that on their last visit to Cuba, these rabbis performed twenty-seven conversions followed by twenty-seven weddings in one evening, using the beach as their mikvah for ritual immersion. Boys who are born in Cuba to Jewish mothers, need to wait until a mohel can be flown in to perform the brit milah, or draw the symbolic drop of blood, to enter the child into the covenant of Abraham and Sarah. Can you imagine waiting to get married in a Jewish ceremony, or waiting to circumcise your child or go through conversion until three rabbis can be flown in from another country? Talk about dedication to tradition. Interestingly, the rabbis who are most involved in helping the Jewish community of Cuba are Masorti, Conservative, rabbis- mostly from Latin America. Interestingly, many in Jewish community in Cuba identify as proud Masorti/Conservative Jews.

The first real community that we came into contact with was the Jewish community of Cienfuegos. I use the term community lightly because they are incredibly small- consisting of five families and two children. In other words- barely a minyan. They have no rabbi, no sefer Torah, no synagogue building. And yet, they manage. Rachel, the head of the community, told us that she works hard to make sure the few children, and adults, receive some type of Jewish education. She organizes festive meals and transportation for holidays and services- which involves driving over an hour in order to pray in a synagogue that has a Torah. I am guessing that in Monmouth County alone there are hundreds of Torahs across our synagogues.

We took that one hour drive the next day to meet David, the representative of the Jewish community in Santa Clara. As we walked into the modest Am Shalom synagogue, whose whole building could fit inside of our social hall, we were greeted warmly by David, who was so excited to tell me that he had just begun teaching himself how to chant from the Torah using a program called "Trope Trainer" that he had just loaded onto his computer. He has no one in the community to help him learn Torah trope. He has no synagogue, like ours, with an incredible program that teaches countless teens and adults how to read Torah. He has no one to sit with him to help him learn how to chant. It is just him, and his computer screen. But learn

he must, because, as he explained, *"Although there is no one here to teach me, I must hold onto our tradition. We do the best we can."*

Like many of his friends, David's own children have left for Israel. There are no children left in the Santa Clara community. But David told us that despite the demographic, and economic challenges, he is optimistic about the future. In telling us his story, he reflected on his grandparents, and remembered their Jewish practice before the Revolution. David beautifully compared rediscovering Judaism as an adult to coming back to one's first love. While he does not know what tomorrow will bring, he chooses to live for today. He told us he was doing his best to ensure a Jewish presence in Cuba for future generations. As I left that synagogue I was inspired by this humble man who was trying to preserve his heritage against tremendous odds. I pray that God gives him the courage and strength not to give up. We all have much to learn from this man's enthusiasm, engagement, and commitment to ensuring that Judaism is sustained and passed on.

We ended our trip in Havana where we experienced two different Jewish communities. We first met Miriam at the Hebrew Sefardic center. She told us about her synagogue that currently has seventy kids in the school and a high rate of intermarried families. While there remain several synagogues in Havana, they are tiny compared to what they used to be. As Miriam was



explaining about the history of the Jews in Havana, she told us that for many years after the Revolution, the few people who knew that they were Jewish worked incredibly hard to keep these synagogues alive in the hopes that one day they could be publicly used for their original purpose. In order to hold onto the synagogue buildings themselves, rather than relinquish or lose them to the government, community members would run from place to place, week to week, holding meetings or other informal gatherings, in order to create the illusion that the buildings were in regular use. As we sat together in her synagogue building, I thought about the miracle of its very existence today. Can you imagine -- fewer than ten Jews running from building to building all around Monmouth County just to keep the last vestiges of the community alive?

Finally, we visited the Patronado in Havana, where we met Adela Dowrin, the president of the Havana Jewish community. Adela told us that life for the Jews of Cuba was relatively good. She emphasized the fact that there is no anti-Semitism in Cuba, the Jews are left alone to practice as they wish, and those who want to leave Cuba to make aliyah to Israel can do so relatively easily. Adela had many fascinating stories to tell us, including stories of visiting the captured American Jew Alan Gross in prison, and her tale of the first time that she met Fidel Castro and invited him to speak at the synagogue for Hanukkah. "What's Hannukah?" he asked. To which she

replied: "It's our Revolution!" A few months later- Castro accepted her invitation and came to synagogue and delivered a two-hour speech (apparently short for him) to the Jews of Havana.

Today, the Patronado has 100 kids in the Sunday school and is bustling with life. We attended Friday night services in a sanctuary that was packed with the local Jewish community, some tourists, and at least thirty teens who had come in their jeans, tank tops, and flip flops to pray, eat Shabbat dinner following services, and hang out with their friends. The services and sermons are completely lay-led, by congregants who rely on skills they learned from one of the Latin American Masorti rabbis who has spent brief periods of time in the country. As all of us held hands together singing *Hinei Ma Tov U'Ma naim*-how good it is for brothers and sisters to be together, I was truly inspired by these new-found members of my Jewish family who had managed to not only sustain, but begun to build anew a vibrant Jewish community against all odds. Shabbat morning was no different. There were plenty of young men and women, proudly wearing their talitot, and leading us in prayer. There were multiple leaders for multiple parts in the service and the Torah reader read from the Humash while someone else pointed along in the Torah. Again, it was the best that they could do, and it was more than enough. No rabbi. No cantor. No Jewish professionals. Just a

bunch of committed and passionate individuals who were taking charge of their own religious present and future.

When thinking back to the whole experience, the thing that most impressed me about the Cuban Jewish community was how much they seemed to accomplish with so little. Each time that we met someone in the Jewish community and heard their story, I was reminded a bit of the TV character from the 80's hit show MacGyver who seemed to be able to accomplish almost anything with extremely limited resources- usually using a stick and a piece of bubble gum to get out of a jam. Ever since we've returned from the trip, I have been considering what this type of Jewish community mode and mentality could teach to our American Jewish community in general, and our Torat El family in particular.

In the United States, we have more than enough resources in the Jewish community, and yet we have a huge number of individuals who are disenfranchised and disconnected from their Judaism. In Cuba, there are barely enough resources to survive, and yet the sense of commitment, connection, and dedication to Jewish life is incredibly strong. Why is it that in a community where things are so difficult, Jews seem so engaged in Jewish tradition, culture, and living? Whereas in our community, where

there are so many opportunities for Jews to be involved, yet the majority are at best marginally connected?

We are often critical of the organized Jewish community for creating barriers that are too high for disenfranchised and disconnected Jews to connect -- a criticism that is valid though I am proud to say that our Torat El family has started to take this challenge much more seriously in recent years. But have we become so comfortable as Jews in America that we just assume our Jewish community will always be there for us when we need it? Is it so easy to be Jewish in America, and have we come "so far" as American Jews in the past century that we assume the synagogue and the community are like the famous tree in the Shell Silverstein book "The Giving Tree" that will simply continue to give and give whenever we decide to come back to take?

Our lives as Jews living in America are so filled with freedom and blessing. Although we have recently endured challenging economic times, most of us are blessed with an abundance of the basic necessities of life including food, clothing, shelter and access to health care. Our Judaism is no different. Freedom of religion and access to Jewish life and living in America is also a profound blessing that we have in such abundance -- but we dare not take it for granted. Just as it often takes a tragedy to remind us of the blessings in our lives, we should look to small Jewish communities around the world like

the one in Cuba where being Jewish is far from simple or easy, to remind us of the blessings we have in our community, and to inspire us to do better. A community of Jews who are so passionately holding on to their faith, and traditions, can remind us of the wisdom, blessing, inspiration, and comfort that lie ready and waiting for each of us to reclaim.

There is a core of committed Jews holding the American Jewish community together, and there is a core of committed and involved members who work tirelessly to hold our synagogue community together. We have incredible things happening at Congregation Torat El. Our core continues to expand on a monthly and yearly basis because of committed Jews who are dedicated to taking hold of, and reconnecting with, our Jewish heritage. Make no mistake, while we have our challenges, we are doing some amazing things as a congregation. But if you are not among the committed core who is helping us to sustain the present and build for the future -- if you are not among those who are helping us to fulfill our mission of being a community building relationships with God, Torah, and one another -- then I invite you to consider why not and encourage you to try becoming more involved this year.

Our Scholar-in-Residence this year, Rabbi Shawn Fields-Meyer, taught us that *we are to be producers of spiritual life, not consumers*. It is not about

what you take from the synagogue, it is about what you give. The Jews of Cuba have given so much to their community, and that is the secret to their survival. Pick at least four events throughout the year to attend and see how it might change your life. I know that as each of you work to become producers of your own spiritual life by increasing your involvement at Torat El, your presence will change our lives as well as your own.

Each time we put the Torah in the ark we conclude by saying *Etz Hayim Hee. It is a tree of Life.* Judaism is waiting for you to embrace it. Your synagogue is inviting you to hold fast to this tree of life, and to allow it to play a central role in your lives. *V'tomcheha m'eushar-* because those who take their Judaism seriously, those who hold onto it for dear life- will reap the blessings of wisdom, happiness, meaning and the deep sense of satisfaction that comes along with being a part of a sacred community.

*Shanah Tovah U'metukah-* Wishing you and your family a meaningful, healthy, and happy year ahead.