

CCAR Rabbis in Cuba...with *Ayelet* Tours, Ltd.

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FROM THE PRESIDENT

David Stern



I didn't really know what to expect. The Cuba I knew began as Sky Masterson and Sarah Brown spending that magical night in Havana in Guys and Dolls and never got much past the Cuba gangster movies, colorful cars, t-shirts of Che, and photos of Fidel in military garb with an ever-present cigar. I knew some names and dates, the island's basic ebb and flow of politics and revolution, but had little sense of the lived Cuban life and no grasp of the contemporary Jewish community.

So when Nancy and I were privileged to join a group of thirty CCAR colleagues and partners on our CCAR Study Mission to Cuba in November, led expertly by *Ayelet Tours*, I was ready to learn.

Adela Dworin met us at Temple Beth Shalom in Havana and with wit and heart taught us about the history of the Cuban Jewish community, of which she currently serves as president: about roots centuries old, about the departure of upwards of 90 percent of the community when the revolution began in 1959. Once the revolution began, what was once a community of 15,000 Jews in Havana could no longer make a minyan for the High Holy Days.

From Jacob Berezniak at Congregation Adat Israel, we learned that anti-Semitism has never really taken hold in Cuba and that a visit from Pope John Paul II in 1998 re-opened the door to religious observance in Cuba, and thus allowed for the resumption of public Jewish practice and the emergence of the Jewish community from decades of communist-enforced shadow. Jacob added that during the time of complete government control of the economy, the only private enterprise permitted in Cuba was a kosher butcher!

Dr. Mayra Levy of the Sephardic Center, who like most Sephardic Jews in Cuba is of Turkish descent, helped us understand the generational dynamics of the contemporary community. Mayra's son became involved in the community before she did, and his involvement created a pathway to her own. But then, like most young Cuban Jews who have the ability, her son made aliyah. So she is now leader of a community into which he led her and he is making his Jewish future in Israel. It is a story we heard again and again, and leads to a Cuban Jewish landscape almost devoid of young people – one of our speakers estimated that there are only one hundred Jewish young adults in the whole country.

This dance of shadow and hope mimics the history of the country itself - a tragic history of conquest, slavery and dictators propped up by both capitalist and communist forces. It is sobering to consider whether Cuban Jewry has a path forward - many believe that absent a profound economic revival for the nation at large, the Jewish community will only continue to dwindle.

Yet in David Tacher and Rebecca Langus, we met leaders of tiny Jewish communities further east on the island who inspired us with their stubborn and uplifting resilience. With David we sang Oseh Shalom in the sanctuary in Santa Clara; with Rebecca and her son, we met in her living room, the gathering place for the small Cienfuegos community, and recited Kaddish for Rebecca's late husband. When we asked Rebecca's son what we could do for the Cuban Jewish community, he shrugged and said "Don't forget about us".

One of the great boons of the trip was the time with colleagues. Within our own congregations and communities, we all know the gifts that can come when we put people together outside of their habitual contexts, engaged in journeys of

discovery - and how much the more so with rabbinic colleagues. The opportunity to eat and drink, schmooze and laugh, share stories and wrestle with questions, connect with old friends and make new ones, made our trip all the more rich.

These small Jewish communities in Cuba only receive periodic rabbinic service, if any. So in our own small act of spiritual solidarity, at the spontaneous suggestion of our colleague Ike Serotta, on that Monday afternoon in the sanctuary of the Sephardic Center, we took the Torah from the ark and read from Parashat Vayeitzei as we considered our people's journey up and down the ladder of history, rungs of challenge and surprise blessings.

As one example of the privilege of traveling with CCAR colleagues, I end by sharing a powerful observation from our California colleague, Michele Paskow. Standing on the roof of the congregation in Santa Clara, marveling at a mosaic created by the community, Michele said, "If they can do this in Santa Clara, I can do a whole lot more in Simi Valley."

Indeed: if communities that have faced every challenge that history has thrown at them, from economic decline to demographic decimation to political oppression to loneliness and isolation - if those communities can still sing, still lein Torah, still gather in a living room to study text or say Kaddish, still send kids to Maccabiah and Birthright, then surely we can rise to our own challenges as well. Just as on that rooftop in Santa Clara, may we all know the blessing of our colleagues' gifts and encounter our own high places of promise and possibility in the new year ahead.

