

FORUM III

A Framework for Hispanic-Jewish Relations

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There is a Spanish expression: "One people, one family." That sentiment is both accurate and flawed. Its focus suggests unity, yet Hispanics living in the United States, like their Jewish counterparts, are a highly diversified, geographically dispersed community. Likewise, to assume that because of this sentiment of unity, so similar to the "We are One" campaign slogan, a sense of community of understanding exists between Americans of Latin origin and our own American Jewish community far exceeds the current political realities.

WHO ARE THE LATINOS?

The Latino-Americans are a diverse community that today populate key metropolitan centers. It is both an old and a young community—old in the sense that some of its members are the descendants of the first settlers to this nation and young in that some of its members are among its most recent immigrants. They are from Mexico seeking work and improved living opportunities. They are fleeing the repressive regimes of El Salvador and Nicaragua. Today they account for approximately 9% of the American population (about 25 million individuals) and are disproportionately young communities. The median age of Hispanics is 22 years, in contrast to 25 years for blacks and 31.3 years for whites. Sixty-three percent of all Latinos are under the age of 30 years. By the year 2000, they will be the most dominant minority community in the United States.

Two-thirds of all Latinos reside in four states—California, New York, Florida, and Texas. Yet, despite this geographic concentration, the Latino community is characterized by great diversity. Although the bulk of Latinos are of Mexican origin (58%), Cuban-Americans and Puerto Ricans, each accounting for more than one million U.S. citizens, represent the most economically and politically diverse elements. Cuban residents are among the wealthiest of Latinos and are disproportionately Republican, whereas Puerto Ricans are among the poorest of all U.S. citizens and vote predominantly Democratic. The fourth category of Hispanics includes individuals from Central and South American countries. This group comprises skilled immigrants, primarily from Columbia and Argentina, and refugees from various Central American countries.

WHAT IS THE HISPANIC AGENDA?

Latinos are the largest immigrant community in the history of this nation. Their common agenda includes education and economic development, as well as integration into the American political and social system through citizenship and representation. As they seek empowerment, their focus will be the pursuit of educational and employment objectives, the need for affordable housing and access to adequate child care, and, finally, the search for political alliances and partners. To understand these objectives, the Jewish community, which as a group has achieved the American dream, must be sensitive to the educational and economic stresses and the feelings of powerlessness that dominate much of the Hispanic community.

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The American Jewish response to the Latino agenda has, at best, been selective, issue-based, and personality-driven. Although we have shared common cause on issues of civil rights, strains have arisen recently in our partnership in such areas as immigration and education. In these two arenas, past hurts and tensions over such matters as the allocation of resources for immigrants or matters of policy with regard to affirmative action have narrowed the basis of mutual understanding. Although numerous American Jewish communities have engaged in dialogues and workshops with Latinos, conducted missions to Israel and Mexico, and have identified and nurtured individual Hispanic leadership around common causes, the thrust of American Jewish interaction with this community has been significantly more constrained and more narrowly focused than with African-Americans.

More specifically, legislation by Congressman Howard Berman to channel existing funds set aside for amnesty programs for Latin American immigrants into an assistance package for resettling Soviet Jews created tension and division between the two communities. Similarly, the Jewish community has only selectively been involved in the sanctuary movement and the legal battle for immigrant rights, including provisions of aid and shelter for the immigrant homeless. However, in the debate over the Simpson-Mazzoli Immigration Bill during the 1980s, Jewish agencies did join with Hispanic groups and others in opposing identity cards, factory sweeps, and mass deportations, thus creating a mixed scenario of Jewish support and participation in immigrant matters of priority to the Hispanic community.

In the arena of education, the Bakke case served to drive a wedge between the two communities on the issue of affirmative action. In contrast, there have been numerous joint efforts by these two communities to work together on a variety of education issues, including bilingual edu-

cation, curriculum materials for public schools, and issues of discrimination in employment.

FRAMEWORK FOR THE HISPANIC-JEWISH ALLIANCE

American Jewry and the Latino-American community should build a 21st-century strategy around five interest centers. The community relations principle of investing our resources and talents to nurture coalitional partnerships has served as the basis of our discipline. It should continue to be the framework for the Hispanic-Jewish alliance.

Economic Development Strategy: The Jewish community has participated rather marginally in the past in this arena, but should be more significantly committed to it in the decades ahead. The partnership of private and public resources in new business enterprise zones, housing ventures, and community development projects may be the basis for future relationships.

Strategy of Educational Intervention: Our two communities have a commitment to quality public education and, as such, should seek public support for a campaign of reinvestment in the public schools. Currently, Hispanics have a 40% dropout rate from public schools.

Sharing Expertise in Service Delivery: The cadre of Jewish social services, health care, and educational agencies are the envy of our sister communities. The challenge to us is to develop genuine partnerships between our agencies and the emerging infrastructures of these other significant minority communities by providing training opportunities or developing joint projects. This arena represents a natural linkage for us with Latino and other urban communities.

Shared Cultural Traditions: We are two communities bound by common threads of Spanish and European history. For many Jews the literature and language of Ladino have been a bridge into the Latino world. We shall have a special opportunity

to use the 500th anniversary of Columbus' arrival in the New World as a creative vehicle for dialogue and programming between our two communities and cultures.

Political Arena: The Jewish community fully understands the value of political empowerment. As Latino-Americans assume an increasingly larger role as part of the electoral constituency, it is to our advantage, and arguably to theirs, to begin to build political relationships focused on three common elements that we share:

1. Members of both communities share a history of being refugees in a new land facing language and cultural discrimination and prejudice. Thus, they understand the need for legal and political protection for the status of minorities and the immigrant community.
2. We are bound together by the commonalities of our concerns for our origins and root systems. For Latinos, the Americas are their wellspring of family and memory; for Jews, the security and vitality of a Jewish state reflect this theme.
3. We are peoples of long and rich historic and cultural traditions, and, as such, share a common bond in building social systems that focus on the dignity of the individual and the magnificence of group achievement.

If one developed a scale of community organizational models, the Jewish community would be at the opposite end from the Hispanic community. Although we share many domestic agenda items, we are fundamentally at different points in community and political development. Hispanics are underorganized and are driven from the bottom up by individual leaders

and a limited network of grassroots organizations. The major Hispanic institutions include the Mexican-American Legal Defense and Education Fund (MALDEF), the National Council of La Raza, a Washington-based coalition body and policy research center, and the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), the largest membership-based organization of the Latino community. In contrast, the Jewish community is highly centralized in its organizational pattern, with an abundance of communal organizations.

As a consequence, there are few points of interaction between our two communities, and these exist for the most part on the national level in such areas as immigration and refugee matters. Our communities rarely interact on an intensive, sustained level, even around such common interests as poverty, illiteracy, hate crimes, and child care. No doubt, the opportunities for this type of more fluid interaction remain significant and offer challenges to both of our respective communities.

In the late 1960s, the American Jewish Committee, in a study of group life in America, noted, "The most challenging problem facing group relations . . . in the 1970s is the task of moving the underclass . . . into the working class." The Committee's findings in that period are no less valid for the 1990s, and clearly, the success of the American enterprise rests on the ability of all groups, especially those who are among the significant have-nots, to participate effectively in the American democratic process. Jewish interests, not to mention our religious imperatives, require us to pursue new roads of intervention with the emerging and significant Latino community.