

Jerusalem Letter

No. 407 17 Sivan 5759 / 1 June 1999

RETHINKING LATINO-JEWISH RELATIONS IN LOS ANGELES

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Building New Sets of Intergroup Relations

Much has been written about the state of race and intergroup relations in the U.S. While the primary focus has centered on issues related to the condition of black and white relationships, more recent attention has been given to the questions of multiculturalism in the society. As a subset of these discussions, the Black-Jewish connection has evoked considerable interest for some period of time, yet the story of Latino-Jewish relations has attracted minimal interest. Considering the fact that Latinos represent the largest single minority community in the United States, more than doubling their population base from 1980 to 1998 and today accounting for over 30 million individuals, it would seem natural for there to be a major dialogue underway between Hispanics and Jews. Increasingly, the Jewish community is encountering Latino politicians, Hispanic institutions, and the impact of Chicano culture. This phenomenon is particularly apparent in such major population areas as New York, Florida, Texas, and California.

The impact of the Latino presence can be seen in no more stark terms than in Los Angeles, where already 38 percent of this city's population identifies as "Hispanic." In the postwar period as the Jews of the city began to assume a renewed interest in political affairs, they turned their attention and support to the Black community and to the civil rights agenda, ignoring for the most part the then smaller Latino community. Throughout the years of Mayor Tom Bradley's dominance of Los Angeles politics (1968-1993), a Black-Jewish coalition served to shape and define this city's elections. Throughout this nearly quarter of a century, the Jewish community paid little attention to the growth

and presence of Latinos.

Four factors dominated Los Angeles' Black-Jewish coalition: a shared vision, individual relationships, institutional connections, and the element of time in order to build trust. While the same core ingredients will be essential for any Latino-Jewish alliance to be constructed, in reality these components are not yet in place. Most significant is the fact that there are so few points of connection between these communities and their leaders. Outside of a set of political relationships, there are at best only a limited number of casual and informal linkages.

In light of several recent incidents that have brought to the fore the emerging possibility for both intergroup tensions and political conflict between these two constituencies, I set out to explore the potential for a new Los Angeles coalition, involving Latinos and Jews. My thesis, at the outset, suggested that a Latino-Jewish coalition would emerge to replace the earlier Black-Jewish one. After all, as with other political alliances, the Latino community, with its bulging population led by its political elites, would need the Jewish community's voting base, which accounts for 15 percent of the city's electorate, its financial and organizational resources, and its long-standing political connections and experience. By the time I had completed the interviews, a review of the literature on coalitions and interest group politics, and an organizational assessment of these two communities, my conclusions reflected a totally different set of scenarios.

The Framework of the Research

The study was built around five core concepts. The first of these suggested that emerging political groups need to experience a sense of ethnic status and power before entering into coalitional relationships. The second premise focused on the Jewish community's past patterns of coalition-building as representative of how Jews have accessed power and how this constituency perceives the social and demographic realities of Los Angeles. Acknowledging the realities that Latinos and Jews are divided in Los Angeles by "space" (demographic divisions) and "place" (social and economic disparities), the third premise identified five factors that might serve as "points of connection" in building a coalition. These included past linkages or relationships between leaders and institutions; the impact of religious institutions and ideas experienced by both communities; their respective roles as "diaspora" cultures; their parallel voting patterns; and finally the identification of shared political and social concerns.

The last two premises were directed to two structural questions: communities relate to one another on two levels, by forming political coalitions and by

promoting inter-group relations; and the traditional model of the bilateral coalition could be altered or replaced in the city by the emergence of new power centers.

Shared Interest Patterns

The research uncovered a number of shared interest patterns that might serve to help build both the level of understanding essential for the inter-group relations agenda and critical to the future prospects for a political coalition. Below are examples of such a connection. Interestingly, these two cultures have developed both a similar pattern of *community building*, with a special focus on *family*, establishing mutual aid societies, and transnational linkages to their "motherlands." The idea of "diaspora," of course, holds different meaning to various nationalities. Yet, this notion of a cultural, philanthropic, and political connection may provide a shared agenda for Latinos and Jews. One could imagine a variety of programs focusing on these shared as well as unique transnational experiences.

Over the past ten years, these two groups have shared a core set of *political interests*, as both communities pay special attention to such issues as quality schools, safe neighborhoods, economic development, and civil equality. They have also exhibited *acommon voting pattern*, demonstrated in recent city and state elections, supporting the incumbent Republican mayor while overwhelmingly supporting the 1998 slate of Democratic state-wide candidates.

Yet there are a number of specific areas in which the two communities find themselves divided or in conflict. For example, Latinos influenced by the Church's public policy position are more likely to endorse school vouchers (84 percent) and prayer in the schools (75 percent), while also opposing abortions (43 percent). Hispanics similarly support bilingual education (67 percent) and affirmative action programs (63 percent) in far larger numbers than do Jews.

Correspondingly, the two communities are organized and led by significantly different institutional models. "The Latino community can be seen as a multiple set of 'communities' comprised of different ethnic or nationality groupings as well as class and generational divisions and competitive leadership factions."¹ The control of the community rests with its political elites who have neither encouraged nor created indigenous organizational leadership models. This may represent the most important difference between the two cultures. In addition, the Church plays a central role in defining and shaping the Latino community's social policy and political affairs agenda, with many of its advocacy activities being generated from within the religious framework. There is a unique opportunity for using the existing Catholic-Jewish infrastructures as

a vehicle for promoting intergroup connections.

The unique function of "village associations" provides an important linkage between Los Angeles Latinos and their home communities in Mexico and throughout Central America. These associations function similarly to the UJA model, providing financial resources to their home communities as well as offering lines of communication between the motherland and the immigrant residents. The Mexican government, seeing the value of such a relationship as a means of generating revenues and as a tool for sustaining ties to its former citizens, has been most supportive of these linkages.

Some of the social networks established by Latinos are quite similar to the mutual aid structures that Jews created upon their arrival in the U.S. The focus on self-help and communal assistance parallels the activities of the Workmen's Circle and other similar institutions.

Cultural Images

Reading the poem presented below, one would be hard pressed to believe this was not the work of a Jewish writer. The theme clearly resonates to a traditional Jewish focus on "memory" and history. Yet this is a Latino writer's quest to reflect on his people's experience within the United States. There are numerous other literary examples of common themes and messages dealing with such issues as family, past events, and holiday celebrations, as well as a focus on heroes and national symbols.

Remember
Who, how
Remember who you are.
How did I get here?
Remember your descendants.
Remember who you are.
Even when there is a prejudice
Of who
And what you are.
Remember.

Political Implications

The issue of "identity politics" represents a powerful force within certain Latino leadership circles. Many of its leaders now perceive the population growth of Latinos within the city as signaling that "their time has come." Focusing on

electing candidates to public office, these politicians dismiss the need or value for coalitional politics. Certain elements within this group argue that Latinos have for too long been the victims of anti-immigrant policies and ballot propositions and need to therefore exercise a form of "retribution politics," as a type of pay back for those who previously had set racial and ethnic roadblocks in the path of minority advancement. This group considers "rainbow" coalitions as a possible model.

A second cadre of Latino leaders believe that, despite the potential for electoral gains, Los Angeles will continue to be a city whose politics are built around coalitions. Within this sector, there are those who argue that especially in citywide races, Latinos will need both Jewish money and voters, who account for a solid 15 percent of the city's electorate. There is also a growing body of literature that argues that this type of coalition model is a natural next step for Los Angeles politics.

Yet for Jews, the question of a Latino-Jewish coalition remains uncertain, especially in the aftermath of a recent State Senate primary race where racial and ethnic invectives were introduced. In the 1998 Richard Alacone–Richard Katz contest, Latino politicians sought to equate Katz, a liberal Democrat, with the views of the Republican-led state-wide anti-immigrant initiatives. In doing so, Katz was identified as the "white" candidate, insensitive to Latino causes and concerns. Other recent incidents have created a heightened concern that certain Latino leaders have opted for a type of "identity politics" in which those candidates or appointees who are not Latino are targeted for defeat or removal. This has led to debate in the city as to whether Latinos feel the need to be sensitive to the idea and value of coalition politics, opting, as some have, to pursue power based on the premise that "it's our turn." The mayoral race in two years could be the principal testing ground, where a Latino candidate is likely to face off against a popular Jewish politician. Unless the city's civic and community-based infrastructures create the appropriate channels of intergroup communication and electoral guidelines for civil discourse, there is the possibility that political candidates will "trip-wire" additional ethnic tensions.

The New and Changing Dimensions of Los Angeles' Intergroup Relations

Beyond these realities, Jews in Los Angeles must confront the impact of demographic change on defining new political scenarios. Jewish power in the city is changing and will diminish over time. How will Jews manage and prepare for a different political environment? "The new realities of Los Angeles, dictated by demographics and economics, will bring Latinos to power in this city, more rapidly than possibly the Jewish community or others could have fully understood and appreciated. Among the considerations will be the role

Jewish leaders play, as described by Rafe Sonenshein as 'softening the landing,' by preparing this community for a new day in Los Angeles politics. In this transition of group influence, the issues remain open as to how this succession of power will occur."²

The need to leverage power becomes particularly significant, as not only Latinos but Asians as well assume greater political visibility and strength. Latinos, depending on class and status, have for the most part limited contact with Jews. If such encounters occur at all, they are most frequently in a business context of an employee-employer relationship or on the domestic level in the form of household help and gardeners. Our study also reveals that some Latinos hold negative views regarding Jews. "For some poorer Latinos, the theological notions regarding New Testament teachings about Jews are still prevalent; for middle class Latinos, the image of 'Jewish control' of Hollywood is expressed in their concerns over the image of Latinos in the media and their own ability to access that industry."³

There is evidence that over the past fifteen years a number of Jews have left Los Angeles due in part to the rise of ethnic tensions, the poor quality of public education, and a changing economic environment. In addition, a whole cadre of "new Jews" have come to Los Angeles from the former Soviet Union, Israel, Iran, and South Africa. They bring with them different political values and social experiences which will impact on the level of Jewish civic behavior, as these individuals tend to be less liberal and more inner-directed with regard to their communal priorities. Just as these groups may demonstrate less of an interest in the forging of new intergroup relations structures, the presence of Jews in Los Angeles from Mexico and Latin America can serve as essential bridge-builders in promoting social and political connections between Latinos and Jews, drawing on their shared language and cultural roots, and common concerns for establishing themselves in their new society.

Where We Go From Here

According to the notion of "selective engagement," a variety of groups form temporary coalition arrangements around a specific candidate or a shared political concern, only to move on to create different alliances with other partners around other individuals and issues. Traditional, long-standing models of urban coalitions may give way to short-term connections and an interim relationship.

Communities intersect on two levels, by building political coalitions and by promoting intergroup relationships, with the latter both informing and strengthening the basis for the former. Latinos and Jews in Los Angeles have a long way to go in constructing a significant intergroup relations agenda. The

ingredients for building these connections, a shared agenda, the importance of trust, leadership connections, and the element of time are also the core factors in promoting a political alliance. In Los Angeles, both communities will be tested, possibly in different ways, as the city moves to a new level of politics.

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Notes

1. Steven Windmueller, "Latino-Jewish Relations: Prospects for Building a New Los Angeles Coalition for the 21st Century," research report.
2. *Ibid.*
3. *Ibid.*

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The *Jerusalem Letter* and *Jerusalem Letter/Viewpoints* are published by the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, 13 Tel-Hai St., Jerusalem, Israel; Tel. 972-2-5619281, Fax. 972-2-5619112, Internet: jcpa@netvision.net.il. In U.S.A.: Center for Jewish Community Studies, 1515 Locust St., Suite 703, Philadelphia, PA 19102; Tel. (215) 772-0564, Fax. (215) 772-0566. © Copyright. All rights reserved. ISSN: 0792-7304.