



Faded glory. Signs of grandeur are still apparent in modern-day Havana, though the Jewish community has dwindled and weakened after years of Communism and assimilation

ARI & ARI VISIT THE
JEWISH COMMUNITY OF CUBA

TENUOUS HOLD

— IN —
HAVANA

Cuba is home to 12 million people. Just two of them are observant Jews. But Yacob and Sarah Berezniak devotedly serve the small congregation of the historic Adath Israel shul, hoping to breathe new life into a community diminished by the combined forces of Communism and assimilation. On their visit to the Berezniaks, Mishpacha's Ari and Ari duo took in a mélange of sights, sounds, and experiences — from candy-throwing to aging cars to an unexpectedly adventurous quest for Cuban cholent

By Ari Greenspan and
Ari Z. Zivotofsky, Havana

photos: Reuters, Ari Greenspan and
Ari Z. Zivotofsky, Dr. Andy Hurwitz

It's Thursday morning. About fifteen men, most of them elderly, have assembled to daven Shacharis. Half a dozen women join them. A young man with a bushy beard, big black yarmulke, and tzitzis hanging, is leading the services. All in all, a pretty typical scene — except that our venue is the sole active shul in the country of Cuba.

Cuba conjures up images of Guantanamo Bay, cigars, the Bay of Pigs, and 1950s cars. Few would think of it as a flourishing hub of Judaism. But in the mid-twentieth century, Cuba was home to a sizable Jewish population. It began when a wave of Turkish Jews began to flood the island, seeking a refuge from post-World War I instability. Then the interwar years brought Ashkenazim who could not gain entry into the United States. For a good few decades, the Jews of Cuba flourished — until the Castro revolution started in 1959, bringing spiritual desolation. The Cuba we visited was a sad place, where a tiny Jewish community remains mired in the mud of history.

Twelve Million People and Two Frum Jews Cuba is currently home to 12 million people. Just two of them are observant Jews: Yacob Berezniak and his wife Sarah. But the Berezniaks are so determined to perpetuate Judaism that they just might succeed in reigniting Cuba's Jewish spark. To call Yacob the pillar of the community is an understatement; he oversees every aspect of what remains of this once-active community.

Yacob was born to a family of activists. In 1927 his grandfather left Europe for Havana, where he served as a *shochet* and ran the shul. During this period and after World War II, Havana was a playground for the rich and famous. Big business and casinos moved in, along with the Mafia. One of the most famous Jewish personalities in Havana at that time was the Jewish-American organized crime figure, Meir Lansky. Born in Byelorussia (today Belarus) in 1902, Lansky moved to New York when he was nine, and a few years later he met Bugsy Siegel, another famous Jewish mobster. They formed a lifelong friendship and "business" partnership.

In the 1940s Cuban president General Fulgencio Batista, in exchange for kickbacks, offered Lansky and the Mafia control of Havana's racetracks and casinos. Lansky and his associates, along with the Batista government, created a corrupt but

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By age fourteen, young Yacob was the *chazzan* for every Minchah and Maariv. By sixteen, he was the shul treasurer. A year later, his father died, and the community was left in his hands

They still remember the glory days. A group of Adath Israel's older congregants



Some of the trinkets handcrafted by the women's auxiliary to bring in extra funds



A communist time warp. Cars from the 1950s still dot Havana's landscape



Holding on to tradition. Following Shacharis in Cuba's only observant shul, Rabbi Dr. Ari Zivotofsky, Dr. Ethan Schuman, Yacob Berezniak and Dr. Ari Greenspan (left to right) pose for the camera



very profitable "Latin Las Vegas," where the rich and powerful reveled in Cuba's good life. The fast times came to a screeching halt on January 8, 1959, when Fidel Castro marched into Havana. Lansky had fled the day before, and the new provisional Cuban president, Manuel Urrutia Lleó, closed the casinos and nationalized all casino and hotel properties. In October 1960, Castro outlawed gambling, essentially wiping out Lansky's asset base and revenue streams.

Unlike Lansky, the Berezniaks remained in Cuba. Yacob's father showed unusual zeal in his multiple positions of *shochet*, *chazzan*, shul administrator, and youth activity coordinator, particularly during the difficult years after the Cuban revolution. Back then, Havana was home to a cultural "Zionista" club, and Yacob's father kept Judaism alive among the youth who met there.

Decades later, we went searching for the old Zionist club hoping to discover some Jewish remnant — maybe some old, dusty books, or a forgotten mezuzah. When we found the building, we were shocked to find that the one-time Zionist club is today, of all

things, an Arab cultural center. The current director knew nothing about its history, and we found no obvious remnants, although there are quite a few mentions of Jerusalem on the walls.

The community center sadly mirrored the state of Cuban Jewry today. Although there are officially three shuls and 1,400 "Jews" in Cuba today, only one shul is religious, and just 300 to 400 of the "Jews" are halachically Jewish. This sorry picture resulted from the flight of more than 90 percent of the Jewish community immediately after the revolution, and a subsequent intermarriage rate that neared 100 percent.

As the community suffered a silent process of attrition, Yacob's father basically kept the small religious community going. When Yacob was a mere eleven years old, his father, knowing that he was ill with kidney disease, brought Yacob in front of the *aron kodesh*, opened the doors for him to see the *sifrei Torah*, and made him take an "oath" that he would take care of the Jews of Cuba.

By age fourteen, young Yacob was the *chazzan* for every Minchah and Maariv. By sixteen, he was the shul treasurer. A year later, his father died, and the community was left in his hands. In that sense, Yacob was carrying on the family tradition, filling the same roles as his grandfather and father. But while all three were *shochtim* and communal leaders, there was one major difference between Yacob and his father and grandfather: they were halachically Jewish, and he wasn't!

The Assimilation Ultimatum

How did this sad irony come about? As Yacob explains it, his father married a non-Jewish woman who had been converted by a nonobservant "rabbi," because, as he puts it, "in Cuba after the revolution, there was no other way." People were not allowed to leave, and the island did not have any observant rabbis who could teach Torah to its Jews. In fact, there are so few young Jewish people, Yacob explained, that "in Cuba, you need to make a decision. Either intermarry or don't have a family." Since nobody is religious, and a Reform official shows up and performs "conversions" every so often, even the guiltiest conscience about intermarrying is soothed.

That's how it came to be that Cuba's only *shochet*, *baal korei*, and *baal tefillah* was not halachically Jewish. He learned Torah and did the mitzvos, davened three times a day, and arranged kosher food for

the community. After his marriage to a non-Jewish woman, the young couple observed Shabbos and kashrus as well as *taharas hamishpachah* (having arranged for the kosher *mikveh* to be renovated by the Dallas Federation and the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee).

In early 2010, Yacob realized that the situation was untenable: the only *frum* couple on the island were technically not Jewish and the *shochet* (himself) did not really have the required expertise. He arranged, with the generous support of the Panama Jewish community, for himself and his wife to go to Israel to study for a formal halachic conversion by the chief rabbinate. Rabbi Eliyahu Birnbaum, the head of the organization helping Yacob, arranged for him to learn the theory and practice of *shechitah* with Ari Greenspan. After an intense four months of study, Ari Greenspan, Rabbi Birnbaum, and Ari Zivotofsky tested him and presented him with a *shechitah* certification. Although he was not training to be a *mohel*, we invited him on a halachic adventure to observe Rav Machpoud do several brissim, and then to buy *shechitah* equipment in Yavneh.

Yacob and his wife Sarah converted, remarried with chuppah and *kiddushin*, and returned to Cuba as a halachically Jewish couple ready to lead the island's tiny community.

A Shul Filled with Locks As the months went by, Ari Greenspan grew more anxious to see how his protégé was faring. So he proposed to Ari Zivotofsky and Dr. Ethan Schuman (a fellow *shochet*, *mohel*, and adventurer from St. Louis, Missouri) to visit Cuba and get a firsthand glimpse of the community. Having all grown up in the US where we were educated about the Castro regime, we began our trip with considerable trepidation — but were quite pleasantly surprised by what we found.

Israeli travelers require visas to enter Cuba, but there is no travel restriction. In fact, it is one of the few places in the world that is more amenable to Israelis than to Americans. Entering Cuba from the US is usually forbidden, due to the US trade embargo, but permission can be granted for humanitarian, religious, or educational reasons. Indeed, during our stay we met two cancer experts who were there for a scientific conference, as well as several Chicago Jews on a medical fact-finding mission.

We each arrived on different flights, with Ari Greenspan arriving a day before Ari Zivotofsky and Ethan. Each new arrival encountered that shock that comes upon entering a Third-World-like country. We were grilled about the purpose of our visit before being allowed out of the airport.

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Customs at the airport was tight, and the inspectors spent a full hour taking apart Ari Greenspan's luggage, item by item. When they came upon his *techeiles* dye kits, the dye powder seemed suspiciously similar to narcotics — a suspicion that was dispelled only through the combined efforts of a drug-testing kit and sniffer dogs. The next items to arouse the inspectors' suspicion were even more serious — Ari's two new, kosher, packaged salamis from Los Angeles. After a little lecture about kashrus, and a little schmoozing, they agreed to confiscate only one salami (probably to split among themselves) and let Ari keep one that we later greatly enjoyed.

At 9 p.m. on his first night there, Ari Greenspan made his way through the dark streets to the shul. The blaring Spanish music and the people hanging out in the streets reminded him of some less-inviting neighborhoods of New York City. He soon learned that the reality was completely

different. We safely and fearlessly walked those streets all week.

That first night, Ari found the shul locked up behind two rows of gates. In Spanish and pantomime he asked for Yacob, showing with his hands that he wanted the Jew with the beard. The locals sent him to a door leading up a dark, steep staircase. When he reached the top, he saw a mezuzah. Inside the apartment, he found a man with a big black yarmulke and tzitzis hanging out, sitting with his wife, grandmother, uncle and aunt, and mother, surrounded by the warmth of family, menorahs, and pictures from Israel. Ari had found his student Yacob, who has maintained his fervor even though he is far from the Holy Land, and who somehow manages to cobble together three daily minyanim in Cuba's only observant shul.

There are many impediments to finding a minyan in Cuba, but we hadn't counted mosquitoes among the potential obstacles. As a tropical island, Cuba has battled mosquitoes for centuries (during the Spanish-American War, yellow fever killed more US soldiers in Cuba than did the fighting). In fact, not far from our hotel was the site of the scientific discovery that the mosquito was the vector for transmitting this disease. Amazingly, except for the two afternoons when they were spraying the shul against mosquitoes due to the Dengue

fever epidemic (transmitted by the *Aedes aegypti* mosquito and in whose honor we now have caps that read "Campaña anti-aegypti"), we did not miss a minyan during our week in Cuba!

A veritable cast of storybook characters converges on the synagogue for davening. An eighty-seven-year-old Romanian native was thrilled to speak Yiddish with us. With the rest, we chatted in broken Spanish, in English, or through an interpreter. The mostly Spanish-speaking community uses old, torn *Tehillas Hashem* siddurim with a Spanish translation.

As honored guests, we were offered brand-new, 2010-edition ArtScroll siddurim with Spanish translation. You would have thought they were made of gold; one congregant handed them to us at the start of each *tefillah* and locked them away immediately after davening. One afternoon, we decided to introduce the congregation to *Pirkei Avos* and distributed some of those ArtScroll siddurim to the women. At the end of davening the "ArtScroll guardian" counted the siddurim, realized some were missing, and hunted them down in the ladies' section to lock them all up.

In fact, everything in Cuba seems to have a lock on it. Yacob told us that since petty theft is rampant, the shul is one of the

History comes to life. Ari and Ari discover a 90-year-old shul above a recently remodeled gymnasium. The verse above the entrance is clear proof of its identity



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safer places around, and people actually keep some of their personal valuables locked in the pew boxes along with their talleisim and tefillin. Yacob has no less than four full-size safes in the shul; they contain everything from the shul stamp to his *shechitah* knives. While these days he usually gets a minyan, he remembers years ago resorting to a non-halachic custom that he called a "Cuban minyan": eight men and two *sifrei Torah*, a dubious stretch of the already questionable

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Ari G (left), Yacob (center), Dr. Schuman (right) in the verdant rainforest of the Cuban island



Dr. Ari Greenspan smoothing Yacob's grandfather's shechita knife before embarking on a quest for Cuban cholent



CUBAN MINHAGIM

During our stay in Cuba, we observed several unusual customs. During davening, several sections were read aloud by one person in Spanish. These included *B'rich Shmeih*, as well as *Hashkiveinu*. They also sing Ashrei and the first paragraph of Shema aloud.

The congregation has a few old *sifrei Torah*, one of which is known to be kosher because Yacob brought it to Panama to have it checked. At the first Torah reading we attended, the man we came to know as “the ArtScroll guardian” took *pesichah*. We later learned that he is the designated *pesichah* man, and performs it every time. As the Torah was then marched around, several of the women started throwing candies from the *ezras nashim*. Cuban Jews don’t seem to need an *aufruf* to bring out the candy; their custom is to throw hard candies every time the Torah is removed from the *aron kodesh*. The candy makes a terrible racket, but we felt real pain when we saw a bunch of the old, poor men scurrying around trying to pocket whatever candy they could get, something we would expect to see kids doing in most of our communities.

concept of a minyan formed by nine Jewish males and one *sefer Torah*.

The minyan is only one aspect of the shul’s daily activities. Shacharis is followed by a small breakfast, and Minchah-Maariv by dinner. For the elderly retirees living on a Communist government pension, these kosher meals are very important. Once a week, all the community’s members receive a shopping bag of kosher food. All of this kosher food, including the gefilte fish that we ate sliced, breaded, and fried, comes courtesy of the Panamanian Jewish community, who donates an entire container of kosher and kosher-for-Pesach food to Yacob Berezniak’s Aath Israel congregation, as well as *arba minim* for Succos.

Following the morning meal, many men sat around talking, but the women got right

to work. Using an ancient sewing machine, they sewed yarmulkes with various images on them, such as an outline of the Cuban island, the Cuban flag, the word Cuba, and a Magen David. They also make little dolls. All of these are sold as shul fundraisers to the few Jewish tourists who wander in. It goes without saying that we bought some of their handmade souvenirs.

The regulars often return to Minchah early, some as much as an hour early. On one such occasion we were treated to a photo exhibit of one of the attendees’ European ancestors, and another time we found Yacob giving a lecture.

A Communist Time Warp
Throughout our stay in Cuba we kept encountering studies in contrasts, and collisions between past and present.

Religious freedom was limited in Cuba until 1991, although the five shuls (one has since collapsed, and another closed) continued to function. Today the Jews appear to enjoy total freedom to practice their religion. Raoul Castro, who succeeded his brother Fidel as Cuba’s president, even attended a public Chanukah menorah lighting this year at Patronato that was broadcast on national TV. Fidel Castro’s long-standing (although possibly changing), strong anti-Israel stance has not trickled down, and most of the people we spoke to in the street expressed curiosity and ignorance about Israel, but not animosity. In fact, in recent years a government known for institutionalized Holocaust denial has erected a Holocaust memorial menorah, albeit without a plaque but with a full-time state-funded guard.

We didn’t encounter any anti-Semitism among the Cuban locals; they barely know what a Jew is. Ari Z. has a long beard, something unusual in Cuba, and everywhere we went people remarked on his beard and asked half-jokingly if he is related to Fidel Castro. We would look at them, smile and say: “It is Fidel, viva la revolución!” always garnering a great smile in response.

When we say that Cuba is poor, we mean *really* poor. Strict socialism has reigned since the early 1960s. Everybody theoretically earns the same amount and receives the same services. But the average salary is about \$30 a month! Strict rations regulate meat and fish consumption. In this regard, the Jews have been lucky. They have slightly easier access to meat because they are entitled to kosher meat. But even that is anything but plentiful. When we visited a

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store graced with a “*basar kasher*” sign, we found a barren room. Coming from a family of *shochtim*, Yacob remembers when the revolution set in and the government took control of all butcher shops. Understanding that this would mean the end of kosher meat for Havana’s Jews, Yacob’s father wrote to Castro, explaining the special needs of the Jewish community. Special permission was granted for his store to remain open, and for many years it was the only independent



Ravaged by the revolution. Disrepair and neglect abound in Havana

business on the island. Today, Yacob carries out *shechitah* once a month.

Pork seems to be the meat of choice for most non-Jewish Cubans, and we saw a fair number of pork carcasses being dragged around in the daytime heat. Stores have a bare appearance, and the lack of new products for sale has led to improvising that would give a safety inspector a heart attack — all the fans were lacking covers, there was exposed electrical wiring, temporary pillars were propping up sections of the structure, and vehicles lacked headlights.

Buildings in Havana are in disrepair and virtually no serious construction was apparent during our visit. We noticed scaffolding on the sides of some buildings, but it wasn’t a sign of recent construction — in fact, vines were climbing the scaffolding to the upper stories of the buildings. Some houses have interior scaffolding to support collapsing roofs! Still, the people did not seem unhappy and we did not see any emaciated or clearly hungry people.

Many of the buildings are quite old. Our hotel, for example, was built 115 years ago. But quite a few of these old buildings must have been exquisite when they were first built, during the affluent period.

Internet access is not available to the average Cuban, even in academia, but the government does allow limited e-mail. That means that there is virtually no access to the outside world other than the information relayed by government papers and TV. The restrictions also apply to tourists. Our hotel had no Internet access; a nearby hotel had it in only a few computers, and only one hotel in the area had wireless. Access was expensive and came with a note explaining that it was pitifully slow because Cuba is not connected to the network via optic fibers.

Transportation is another challenge. Because of the US trade embargo and the general poverty in the country, few new cars have been imported since the 1950s. The sight of those cars made us feel like we had entered a time warp. Most people, even the doctors we met, do not have private cars, and thus either walk or take taxis. There are several types of taxis: the big old American cars, small motorized tricycles, small pedal bicycle taxis, and small Russian-type cars. Many locals ride old World War II-type motorcycles with sidecars. We have no idea if there is a helmet law, but we saw three shul attendees get on such a vehicle. The two on the motorcycle put on the available helmets, and the third got into the sidecar and proceeded to put an upside-down plastic mixing bowl on his head. And then they drove off. Oh — and the one with the mixing bowl is a psychiatrist!

Car maintenance is a do-it-yourself venture in Cuba, as we discovered during

CUBAN JEWRY THROUGH THE AGES

The history of Jews in Cuba begins with Columbus's discovery of the island in 1492. Several Jews came with him on his first voyage, including Luis de Torres, whom he sent into the island's interior to ascertain its character. De Torres stayed behind with a small garrison when Columbus returned to Spain. Upon returning to Cuba on his second voyage, Columbus found that his entire group had been wiped out by the Indians, but was told of one man who had preached to the Indians not to accept the false religion of Catholicism.

By the seventeenth century, the Inquisition was raging in Cuba, brutally uncovering hidden Jews, killing them, and confiscating their possessions. The Inquisition continued well into the eighteenth century, although by this time Jews from European countries had developed business connections to Cuba.

Despite these connections and the end of the Inquisition in the early nineteenth century, a Jewish community of significance did not develop in Cuba until 1898, primarily because of the dominance of the Roman Catholic Church. Thus, until the Spanish-American War, there were probably fewer than 500 Cuban Jews, mostly of Spanish origin, who were engaged in trade.

After the war, conditions changed and a large number of American Jews in the US Army who served in Cuba stayed. Other American Jews followed their example, and by the very early twentieth century there were over 1,000 Jewish residents in Cuba. In 1904 they established the Reform United Hebrew Congregations, which collapsed several years ago.

Then the influx started. During and after World War I, thousands of Sephardim, fleeing from an uncertain situation in Turkey, found their way to Cuba, followed in the 1930s and '40s by Ashkenazim fleeing the European nightmare. In 1935 there was a thriving community of about 25,000 Jews, which diminished to about 15,000 by 1952 as some of the European refugees made their way to the US.

One of Havana's rabbis was Jehuda Melber, a native of Germany who received his *smichah* at Poland's world-famous Chachmei Lublin yeshiva. But the good times did not last. About 95% of the Jews were lucky enough to escape within a short time of the 1959 Communist revolution, and were able to reestablish their lives in the US, Mexico, Venezuela, Costa Rica, Panama, or Israel. Today only a small number remains.

Much about a community can be learned in the local cemeteries. There are two in Havana, both under Jacob's control, and Adath has recently renovated parts of them. We visited both, the older Sephardic one and the nearby Ashkenazic *beis olam*. Both date to the early twentieth century; it is not known where the earlier Cuban Jews were buried.

The entrance to the Island's
Ashkenazic cemetery. Cuba is also
home to a Sephardic cemetery



"What a chad gadya!"
The team tries to free
the shul van from the
mud-soaked road



to those of the former Soviet Union, and an older physician took offense when we asked if Soviet doctors had come to teach in the Cuban medical school.

The Shul and the Gymnasium

On our halachic adventures, we try to visit as many shuls as possible, even (or especially)

shuls that are now closed. Jacob told us about three active shuls in Havana. All three shuls have been recently renovated using foreign donations, and look quite impressive. Adath Israel, Jacob's shul, is the only Orthodox shul and the only one with a daily minyan. There are two others that he described as non-halachic;

they only hold services on Shabbos, and most of their congregants are not halachic Jews.

Nonetheless, we visited both Shalom Synagogue (built in 1953 and also called Patronato — roughly the equivalent of a JCC) where we found a Hebrew school of sorts; and the Sephardic Synagogue, built in 1956, which was holding dancing practice for an upcoming Chanukah party. The former has successfully established links to US Jewish philanthropic organizations and has a well-equipped computer room.

The wall of the latter had several historical photos, including one of a shul that did not resemble any of the three we had visited. Further prompting extracted from Jacob a vague memory of a shul called Chevet Achim in the old part of Havana, not far from the ocean, which closed down more than ten years ago. He was not sure where it was or what was left of it, but after a little prodding he asked some of the older men, who gave him the exact address, on Calle Inquisidor, or in English, Inquisitor Lane. Built in 1914, it was known for years as the oldest shul in Cuba. The founding rabbi was Gershon Maya; his son, Rabbi Nissim Maya, later led one of the early Miami Cuban congregations. The founding rabbi's great-grandson attends minyan in Adath Israel daily.

our rides around the country in one of the two vans owned by the shul. These vans are used primarily to shuttle carless worshippers to and from shul. Jacob has personally refurbished them, including the square air conditioner unit hanging out the back window, and the tape deck playing Jewish music. It was a surreal scene: here we were touring Cuba in a shul van driven by the rabbi's non-Jewish father-in-law, with *shechitah* knives and a *Shulchan Aruch* between the seats, and chassidic music blaring. Our religious accessories didn't provide much comfort when the driver pulled onto the wrong side of a highway at one point.

Glasnost and *perestroika* may have made their marks on Russia, but in Cuba, traditional Soviet bureaucracy is alive and well. Our tourist visas could only get us so far. When Ari Zivotofsky desired to lecture at the Neuroscience Institute, he had to apply — and pay a not insignificant sum — for an academic visa. When Ari Greenspan requested an interview with Fidel Castro on behalf of **Mishpacha**, he was told to apply for a press visa. Leaving the country required a steep exit tax. Even the taxi rides came along with complicated currency systems: there are two taxi networks, one for the locals and one for foreigners, and each is paid with a separate currency.

Another paradox is the health-care system. While infrastructure seems sorely lacking, if one is to believe the numbers, Cuban health care is pretty good. Infant mortality is 5.72 per 1,000 births, placing it slightly worse than Israel's 4.2 but just ahead of the US's 6.1. Life expectancy of 77.6 years compares quite favorably with the US's 78.2. When Ari Zivotofsky gave a talk at the Havana Neuroscience Institute, he found poor aesthetics but relatively new equipment and a highly qualified staff.

Primary health care was delivered on a very local level. A physician came daily to the shul and monitored each person's blood pressure, medications, and any other issues they had. Each shul arranged for its members an in-house pharmacy that stocked most major items.

The Cubans take satisfaction in their status as exporters of medical and technical knowledge. Cuba's literacy rate hovers at near 100% and the country spends 13.6% of its GDP on education (Israel spends only 6.4% and the US 5.5%), second in the world only to Kiribati (a small Pacific country of 100,000 people). Latin American students train in Cuba's medical and engineering schools, and Cubans are sent on assignment to Latin America and Africa. Cuban physicians consider themselves far superior, professionally,

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A study in contrasts. Signs of Cuban pride coexist with dysfunction and poverty

Nobody knew what remained of Chevet Achim. We drove over along with Solomon Susi, the president of Adath, who had his bar mitzvah there in 1963. He had not been back since the 1970s. We got there to find that the Italian city of Florence had financed renovations of the building as a gift to the people of Havana; they had decided to convert the first floor to a gym (the second floor had contained the actual sanctuary).

Solomon was like an excited kid. He actually said he was *loco* (crazy) to see what was there. He fondly remembered spending Shabbos afternoons there as a child playing dominos, and almost cried when he remembered the Shabbos meals he ate at his aunt's house in the courtyard across the street.

The gym managers procured a key for us so we could head upstairs to where the shul had once been. To our disappointment, all we found was a dark, dusty series of rooms, with no electricity and without a single remnant of any Jewish past, save for the faint imprint of the mezuzah that had once stood sentinel on the doorway.

Then we shined a flashlight at the high ceiling in what had been the social hall. To our surprise, an electric light fixture in the shape of a Magen David became visible. Then Yacob shouted excitedly from an adjacent room to inform us that he'd found

a mezuzah. When we examined it, we found that the *klaf* inside was still kosher.

As we continued our search by the light of the flashlight, almost like a *bedikas chometz*, we suddenly noticed above the entrance to the main sanctuary a beautiful glass-covered sign that read "*Ki beisi beis tefillah yikarei l'chol ha'amim.*" Several doors were embellished with wooden Magen Davids, including one leading out to the porch, where the remnants of the *schach* supports for the succah were still visible.

The Cholent of a Lifetime Shabbos soon drew closer and we decided to give the Cuban Jews a genuine Shabbos experience. What's Shabbos without chicken and cholent? When we offered to donate chickens for the communal Shabbos meals, Berezniak seemed pleased. The cholent, though, was in a category of its own.

To make a proper cholent, we needed a kosher animal, and a suitable location to slaughter it. The shul itself has a little slaughterhouse for chicken — Yacob *schechts* a few hundred a month — and an area for *kashering*, which is done by his wife, Sarah. But the slaughterhouse couldn't accommodate our cholent effort. We would need to use some creativity and innovation to get this cholent going.



For the first time in his life, shul member Roberto lays tefillin in an emotional "bar Mitzvah ceremony" facilitated by Dr. Schuman

Considering he never spent a day of his life in yeshivah, his sermon was masterful

So, armed with the *shechitah* knives that Yacob's grandfather had brought from Europe, we went out to the countryside and bought a young sheep. We *shechted* it (it was glatt, thank G-d) and just as we finished preparing the carcass, the heavens opened with a tropical rainstorm. Working as quickly as we could, we removed the back half of the animal and gave it to the non-Jews so as not to get involved with removing the *gid hanasheh* and forbidden fats.

On the way back to the van, as we approached a neighboring farmer's hut, a dog ran out and bit Ethan in the leg. The rabies concern had us calling Ari Zivotofsky's brother Doni, who works as a vet [see **Mishpacha** Issue #341]. We headed back to our van, only to find it mired in mud, with the wheels spinning as if they were stuck in a Monsey snowstorm. So there we were, soaked to the bone, holding kosher meat and nearly 100-year-old *shechitah* knives, with seemingly no way to get back to the waiting cholent pot. It took an hour of work and an ancient tractor to finally drag us out of the mire.

Dr. Schuman pronounced our escapade "a modern-day *chad gadya*," with its familiar storyline of buying an animal, dog bites, and slaughter in action!

We had a good laugh when Yacob introduced us on Friday night as "this

esteemed professor" or "that learned rabbi" (knowledge is clearly relative) and then went on to explain to the congregation, in Spanish of course, that we had prepared a traditional Jewish Shabbos dish called cholent, something that was "extremely difficult and unusually complicated to do."

It must have sounded tantalizing, because some congregants returned on Shabbos morning for a taste. One person — the psychiatrist, he of the mixing-bowl helmet — told us that he thought he might never again in his life have the opportunity to taste the "exotic dish." We weren't sure if the fact that they served it again for Seudah Shlishis, and lunch on Sunday, and dinner on Monday, was due to its popularity, or to the poverty of the congregation and the huge quantity remaining. Either way, they loved it.

Shabbos in Havana Shabbos was special, something we could have predicted in such an unusual locale. As we sat down for the communal meal on Friday night, Yacob began with a fifteen-minute recap of the *parshah* (*Vayishlach*) delivered in a self-confident and knowledgeable manner. Then he explained that while Eisav went to Seir, Yaakov went to Succos and built a house (*Bereishis* 33:17). The lesson for us is that while Eisav may wander, Jews

see the home as a central place, since this is where Judaism is practiced and transmitted. Considering he never spent a day of his life in yeshivah, his sermon was masterful. When we suggested that the lecture might be better received on a full stomach, Yaakov explained that the congregants tend to leave as soon as they are finished eating. Some of them have a two- to three-hour trip home. We quickly grabbed our chance to offer them *chizuk* and to encourage communal learning as a way to strengthen the community.

While we enjoyed the meal, we noticed that Yacob and his wife didn't seem to be eating anything. He explained that because his life is the shul and he must run the meal, he suffices with Kiddush and challah, and only later eats a real Shabbos meal with his wife in a private room on the third floor of the shul. He took us there, and we were quite impressed with the library of old Hebrew, Spanish, and Yiddish books he has collected over the years. He has even put a bed in the room, and that is where he spends his Shabbosim.

After the congregants had dispersed, the five of us sat around. We sang a *niggun* or two, but it was clear that he was *chalishing* to learn. When we opened a *Shulchan Aruch* to review *hilchos shechitah*, our host came to life. We noticed Sarah sitting elsewhere

and reading a Tanach, and invited her over to join the learning, which we switched to *hilchos melichah*, the *kashering* of meat. That is one of her many jobs in the shul, and we thought she might enjoy learning the laws from a primary source.

Shabbos morning was rewarding with a large crowd attending, women and men and children, although not all of them halachically Jewish. Dr. Schuman graced us with a unique sermon that evoked both laughter and tears.

The high notes of the laughter and the emotions behind those tears stayed with us long after we left the Jews of Cuba and headed home. Although many of the aging Jews do not see a future for Judaism on the island, they feel secure in knowing that the devoted young Berezniak couple will at least see them to their final resting place. But as the Berezniaks proved with their vitality and nonstop activity, they don't limit their responsibilities to the *chevra kadisha*. With a palpable sense of mission, they're doing their best to breathe new life into their community, and help other Cuban Jews reclaim the legacy that has enriched their own lives. ■

The Jewish community of Cuba is very glad to have visitors from Israel or the US. Visitors can contact Yacob at adath@enet.cu.