

Adriana M. Brodsky

The Promised Lands of the Americas

As a scholar of Jewish Latin America and a Jewish Argentine who now lives in the United States, I have to confess that the assertion, however tentative, that Canada “may now very well be the safest, most socially welcoming, economically secure, and possibly most religiously tolerant home for the Jews than any other diaspora country, past or present,” put me in a defensive reading mode.¹ Particularly troublesome to me was the argument that Canada should also be considered “the better home” when compared to other countries in the past. As I read through the introduction and other chapters in the book, I kept thinking that many of the qualities listed for Canada as a better Jewish home could also be applied to Latin American countries. For example, weren’t there much better homes elsewhere in the continent for Jews after Canada (and the United States) passed restrictive immigration laws in the early decades of the twentieth century? Argentina, the better home my great-grandparents chose when moving out of Morocco and Bessarabia in the early years of the twentieth century, ended up providing them with the ability to find jobs, ascend into the middle class, send their children to university to become professionals and high-ranking government officials, and keep their families embedded in Jewish social and cultural circles. They *chose* it, not as a “second” option to a potentially better home elsewhere; and some who may have migrated to it as an “alternate” option, chose to stay. What does identifying “the better home” tell those Jews, like my grandparents, who sought and found a great home in the countries in which they settled? That they “chose” wrongly? Many years later, the home my grandparents found lost some of its appeal for me, and I sought to find “better options” in a much more globalized world. Latin America, a region plagued by economic and political hardships, realities that countries in North America were able to avoid completely or weather differently, made its (Jewish) populations seek alternatives elsewhere. Yet the reasons that guided *my* move had little to do with my life as a Jew, which had motivated some of my grandparents’ search a century before; in fact, one of the hardest adaptations to life in my new country has been the inability of feeling truly at home among US Jews.² And, I ask, isn’t Argentina still *my* home, even when I am now a citizen of another country? The project to identify *the* best home for Jews across time and space, appears to be, ultimately, a task that leaves us with unsatisfactory responses, (and all sorts of alternative possibilities) and wondering what, if anything, the question helps us understand.

Yet, I certainly appreciated the chance the book provides to challenge the narrative about US exceptionalism when it came to Jews. One of the premises of the book, in fact perhaps the most important one, is to state that *because* Canada is and was (perhaps) a “better home” for Jews, it should figure more prominently in Jewish Studies scholarship. The lack of attention to the Jewish Canadian experience makes no sense, the editor suggests, given the past and present comforts that the country provide(d) its (Jewish) citizens. I have long believed in and argued elsewhere (with colleagues Raanan Rein and Laura Leibman) that the existing narratives about the history of

Jews in the Americas focus almost exclusively on the United States to the detriment of the field.³ But in order to challenge the US-centered narrative it is not necessary to make a claim about other countries being better homes for Jews. Hasia Diner makes this exact point in her chapter in the collection (but she ends her thoughts by reiterating that the Jews that went to Canada did not do better than those who went to the United States, circling back to the exceptionalism trope).⁴ But by taking this route, claiming that (likely) there was no better home for Jews than Canada, this collection may end up delegitimizing (or worse, declaring irrelevant?) the scholarship that focuses on smaller and lesser studied Jewish communities, or on communities in “lesser homes.”

Expanding our attention to the Americas as a whole and encouraging comparative work on Jewish communities across the continent, alternatively, presents advantages that go beyond identifying better or lesser homes. It would uncover that the United States was not where Jewish American history started (OK, perhaps this part of the story is already well known; but this “Latin American connection” gets explained away only as the steppingstone for the creation of the US Jewish community). A hemispheric focus would bring attention to other homes where truly innovative practices were tried, adopted, and (sometimes) circulated to other points in the continent and beyond. Think of Darhe Jesarim, for example, an African Jewish communal organization in Suriname in the mid-eighteenth century, which challenged the power of the (white) Portuguese Jewish congregation by requesting that they be allowed to pray independently, and demanded their members deserved full religious rights, even if they were Jews of color.⁵ Comparative work will help us identify what it was about the Americas that provided, as it were, so many good homes for Jews, and for the many differences in the types of communities Jews built across time. In the Jewish agricultural colonies founded by the Jewish Colonization Association at the end of the nineteenth century, for example, Sephardi Jews from the Mediterranean became Argentine government workers who taught Spanish (and Argentine history) to Russian Jews escaping pogroms and learning how to be farmers in the Argentine pampas.⁶ What did other experiences in nation-building look like in other countries, then, and what do they, all together, tell us about opportunities and agency in the continent? But the comparative angle should not just focus on how different (or similar) these communities were to the United States, but rather allow for the emergence of a truly continental picture that can inform our understanding of Jewish life on this side of the Atlantic in all its complexity, and contradictions. We also know that from the very beginning of Jewish life in the Americas, Jews were in contact with, and felt part of, the Jewish diaspora in the Americas. While Jews deeply connected to the homes in which they settled, they also, importantly, foster the connections (personal, institutional, and even communal) with other Jews in the continent. And not just Jews saw this hemispheric connection. A stand to sell kosher *choripan* (sausage sandwich, perhaps *the* most traditional of Argentine snacks) opened in Boca Juniors

soccer club stadium in 2018, after the non-Jewish president of the team learned of this possibility while watching a Miami Heat basketball game.⁷ This new kosher option came to join the (then sole) existing kosher McDonald's stand outside of Israel.⁸ The circulation of (Jewish) ideas, practices, and people within the continent all contribute to cement the idea of a hemispheric reality of *America* being an excellent home for its Jewish population.

This hemispheric picture is dependent upon the ability of scholars to access the (Jewish) archives and oral histories repositories that can make this fruitful exploration even possible (besides, of course, linguistic competencies). In Latin America, these (Jewish) institutions tend to be underfunded and unfavourably positioned to compete for international (Jewish) grants, perhaps because they are deemed to be peripheral to the "centers" of Jewish life, and not "better homes" for Jews. As well, universities (seldom) host Jewish Studies programs or centers, and research and teaching of Jewish Studies usually takes place as part of larger disciplinary or thematic units (like immigration or ethnic studies, for example). While there are important benefits for the field of Jewish Studies to not exist in isolation (Jews have always been studied in conversation with other groups), funding may also be difficult to obtain. It is these economic, political, and structural realities that need to be overcome to make this fuller picture emerge. Lack of resources for the study of Jewish communities in Latin America, then, should not be seen as a "failure" of the communities, or as an indication that they are "lesser homes" for Jews.

In short, we do not need to decide which of the countries in the Americas was the best home for Jews to challenge the narrative of US exceptionalism. Rather, we should seek to put the historiographies of these now national narratives in conversation with each other, so explicit or implicit comparisons can illuminate the Jewish experience from a hemispheric angle.

Adriana Brodsky is a professor of Latin American History at St. Mary's College of Maryland. Her most recent publication is a co-edited volume called *Jews Across the Americas: A Sourcebook, 1492–Present* (with Laura Leibman). She has written about Sephardi food, schools, beauty contests, and Latin American Jewish history.

1

David S. Koffman, "Introduction," in *No Better Home? Jews, Canada, and the Sense of Belonging*, ed., David S. Koffman (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2021), 3.

2

Laura Limonic, *Kugel and Frijoles: Latino Jews in the United States* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2019), 157-193.

3

Adriana Brodsky and Raanan Rein, "On Kosher Hamburgers, Yiddish Tangos and Non-Affiliated Jews: Writing Jewish Latin America into the Americas," *American Jewish History* 103, no. 3 (2019): 345-63; Adriana M. Brodsky and Laura Arnold Leibman, eds., *Jews Across the Americas: A Sourcebook, 1492-Present* (New York: NYU Press, 2023).

4

Hasia R. Diner, "Destination World Jewry: The United States versus the World," in *No Better Home?*, 33-40.

5

Jessica Vance Roitman and Laura Arnold Leibman, "Petition by the Jews of Color (Suriname, 1793)," in *Jews Across the Americas*, 137-40.

6

Adriana M. Brodsky, "Alliance Israélite Universelle School Curricula (Argentina, 1898)," in *Jews Across the Americas*, 270-72.

7

Brodsky and Rein, "On Kosher Hamburgers, Yiddish Tangos and Non-Affiliated Jews," 345.

8

Adriana M. Brodsky, "Kosher McDonald's Sign (Buenos Aires, 1998)," in *Jews Across the Americas*, 449-51.