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## Visiting Fidel's Infidels

Ruth Behar's Return to the Cuban Home She Never Knew

By **Joel Streicker**

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### **An Island Called Home: Returning to Jewish Cuba**

By Ruth Behar, with photographs by Humberto Mayol  
*Rutgers University Press, 288 pages, \$29.95.*

It is hard to begin a book with a section of "blessings for the dead," but then it is hard to hail from a community that one never really knew much about. In the opening section of "An Island Called Home: Returning to Jewish Cuba," Ruth Behar explores the island's Jewish cemeteries as she hunts for the grave of a cousin who died before the revolution. By the book's end, she muses that were there a Kaddish that a Jew could recite for a lost home, she would say it: "Without fear. Finally letting go in order to believe that the only true home is the one we have searched for inconsolably."

Born into a Jewish family in Havana, Behar was brought out of Cuba by her parents when she was a young girl, soon after the revolution. Her family was not alone: The vast majority of Cuba's Jews had fled the island by the mid-1960s. Only about 1,000 Jews remain today of a once-thriving community of some 15,000 to 20,000 people. Haunted by feeling cut off from a home she does not remember, Behar, a professor of cultural anthropology at the University of Michigan, has returned repeatedly since the 1990s to explore her connection to the island and its remaining Jews.

Two framing chapters skillfully weave the author's family history into the history and sociology of the Jewish community in Cuba, but the book is neither history nor sociology. Its heart is made up of brief chapters, most no more than a few pages, that offer thumbnail sketches of the Jews of Havana — home to most of the island's Jews — and of those few Jews living in the provinces. United States government restrictions on travel to Cuba have obliged Behar to make only short visits to the island, and thus her relationships with many of the book's subjects were of necessity neither long-standing nor profound. The brevity of the portraits, even of those whom Behar obviously knew fairly well, suggests the fragility of her connection to the community and helps the reader understand how difficult it has been for Behar to recover or establish a satisfying relationship to a world she has lost. Moreover, as Behar points out, Cuban Jews — like non-Jews — are reluctant to talk too openly with outsiders about some matters, for fear of government reprisals.

As befits an author who is tormented by having no memories of Cuba, Behar spends much time with older Jews. Some are nostalgic for the days when the community was much larger, tight-knit and prosperous, while others are forward-looking, enthusiastic revolutionaries who argue that their participation in the revolution is consistent with the Jewish pursuit of social justice. At her best, Behar compresses an impressive amount of information and feeling into these small chapters.

She certainly does not slight the community's present and future. She highlights the importance of (mostly female) converts in helping revive Jewish life. Ironically, the community's recent success in educating its young

has fueled an exodus: Many young — and not so young — people have made aliyah because they know that in Israel they can lead fuller Jewish lives, as well as enjoy a prosperity that they can only dream of in Cuba. Emigration seems to call into question the value of the work that Jewish organizations outside Cuba have done to help preserve and renew the island's Jewish life. It is tempting to believe that the Kaddish referred to by Behar at the book's conclusion alludes to the dilemma of the island's Jews as a whole.

The book also contains more than 200 photographs by award-winning (non-Jewish) Cuban photographer Humberto Mayol. Many of the shots show people holding up old family photos or other objects of particular value that figure in the text about a specific person and his or her family.

Behar notes that by displaying photographs of photographs, the book enabled her to show “the private story of loss and longing, a subterranean layer of being Jewish.” To capture and share such intimate stories while preserving their tellers' dignity requires artistry. Behar has it, and her readers are the luckier for that.

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