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An advertisement for M.A.E. Cord Blood Laboratories. It features a photo of a baby in a white blanket at the top. Below the photo is the logo "M.A.E." in a stylized font, with "CORD BLOOD LABORATORIES" written underneath.

## Havana Hebrew

**With many members leaving for Israel, Cuba's mostly-intermarried Jewish community is rapidly shrinking, reports a new book.**



*Ruth Behar: Her childhood in Cuba "was a dream." Her book explores the Jewish community's current reality.*

by Eric Herschthal  
Staff Writer

Ruth Behar, an anthropologist, met Danayda Levy in 1991, when Levy was 2. Born to a Sephardic father and Afro-Cuban mother, Levy attended weekly Shabbat services with her father José in Havana's sole remaining Sephardic synagogue, the Centro Hebreo Sefaradí. Behar has visited Levy regularly since her trips to the island began in the early '90s. And Levy's story, among many others, is now the subject of Behar's new book "An Island Called Home: Returning to Cuba," published on Nov. 1.

Behar's first encounters with Levy were something like research. Behar, 51, traveled throughout Latin America in the 1970s and '80s for scholarly research. In 1988, she was awarded a MacArthur fellowship (often called a "genius" grant), which led to her well-reviewed book "Translated Woman," an anthropological study of a Mexican Indian published in 1993.

Behar has since become a tenured professor at the University of Michigan, publishing frequently, but unlike her other scholarly work in Latin America, her trips to Cuba were decidedly less focused. "For years I went to Cuba without a clear idea of what I was seeking," she writes in "An Island Called Home" (Rutgers University Press), which she will be speaking about at various New York City locations this weekend (Nov. 2 to Nov. 4). "What began as a vague desire to find my lost home in Cuba gradually became a more concrete search for the Jews who make their homes in Cuba today."

Behar was born in Cuba in 1956 to an Ashkenazi father and Sephardic mother, a coupling then viewed as an "intermarriage" that was "simply taboo." Her father was the child of Turkish Jews who immigrated to Cuba in the 1910s. Like thousands of other Jews under Ottoman rule, Behar's grandfather, as well as her grandmother's family, came to the island in order to avoid conscription in the new Turkish military.

Behar's mother was born to Polish immigrants to the island who were barred entry into the United States. Facing new quota laws enacted in America during the 1920s, Eastern European Jews escaping pogroms fled to the island hoping it would be a temporary stay. The polacos, as they were called, had their own name for the tropical way station: "Hotel Cuba."

The name didn't last long, though. International Jewish organizations pumped aid into the



A small version of the JDate.com banner advertisement, featuring a couple and a "JOIN NOW" button.

An advertisement for a recipe book. It features the text "GET 300 RECIPES FREE!" and "EASY & ELEGANT" in large, bold fonts. Below that, it says "\$19.95 value" and shows a small image of the recipe book cover.

island, sensing that the United States' quota laws would not slacken with tensions rising in Europe. So Jews gradually made Cuba home, becoming citizens and part of the country's burgeoning middle class. Behar's parents were a prime example, owning a small convenience store on the outskirts of Havana.

Castro changed everything. Six years after he overthrew the Batista regime, in 1959, over 90 percent of the island's estimated 15,000 Jews fled, mainly because of economic uncertainty. Behar was not even 5 when she and her family left in 1961, initially immigrating to Israel for a year, then moving to Queens.

"I had no memories of Cuba," Behar writes. "I wondered if the time I spent in Cuba was a dream."

Over 15 years of traveling to the island have proved it not. But like Levy's experience, Cuban Jewish life is hardly what Behar might have imagined.

Of the estimated 1,500 Jews who now live in Cuba — more than two-thirds in Havana — most are from mixed racial and religious parentage. Many are proud communists. And most Jews in Cuba "are poor," Behar said in an interview from Ann Arbor, Mich. "Not intellectually, but economically."

In 37 short chapters accompanied by the photographs of Cuban photographer Humberto Mayol, "An Island Called Home" provides brief but vivid sketches of the island's remaining Jews. Like Levy, now 17, they are mostly the children of just one Jewish parent, and both generations have experience a new interest in their Jewish identity. (Levy's father himself has one Jewish parent; Behar reports that only 25 Jews on the island have both a Jewish mother and Jewish father.)

Since the fall of the Soviet Union, Castro's Cuba has experienced a resurgence in all types of religious life. Though the Jews who remained on the island took their religion largely "underground," from the 1960s through the '80s, a confluence of factors helped revive it. Castro's government changed its constitution in 1992 from being officially atheist to secular. What Behar calls "the lost generation" — the Jews who stayed on the island but downplayed their Jewish identity from the '60s through '80s — sought to reclaim it, for them and their children. International Jewish aid organizations, like the Joint Distribution Committee, Canadian and American Jewish "missions," and Lubavitch rabbis in Latin America, have provided kosher food, Jewish texts and visiting rabbis for years now.

In addition to the foreign aid, which Behar and other scholars note is essential to the community's resurgence and survival, Behar says that "there's a core group of people that could run the community if they wanted to."

Her book describes encounters with many in this core: there is Adela Dworin, vice president and librarian of the Patronato, the island's largest synagogue that was refurbished in 2000; José Miller, president of the Jewish community from the 1970s until his death last year, who was the crucial liaison with the JDC; José Levy Tur, who maintains the Centro Sefaradí, the second largest of three functioning synagogues in Havana; the Prinstein family, who lead many of Havana's Sabbath services and holiday parties; and in the island's much smaller towns, there are people like David Tacher Romano, who spearheaded the building of a Holocaust memorial in Santa Clara, completed in 2003.

But the resurgence is not entirely what it seems. "There's a feeling that [within the Cuban Jewish community] they're being a little patronized, like they're always needing to be helped," Behar said. In her book, she provides an example, with Alberto Behar Medrano. An engineer who works for the national telephone company, Medrano shares a public Sabbath meal with an American Jew on a humanitarian trip to Cuba. The meal, oddly enough (the book does not clarify where exactly it took place), features lobster, which the unobservant American digs into. Medrano, who keeps kosher, later tells Behar that the message seemed to be: "I as a Jew from the United States can eat lobster, but you here in Cuba, we're going to give you a lots of matzah to eat." When the visitor later asks how much money Medrano earns on his state-sanctioned salary, "the man practically bursts out laughing." That, despite Medrano highballing the figure. (Cuban citizens earn an average monthly salary of \$15, according to the BBC statistics reported in 2005.)

Still, the most dire threat to Jewish life in Cuba is immigration to Israel. Since the Castro government secretly began granting visas for Jews to immigrate to Israel in 1994, an estimated 700 have left. The current number of Jews in Cuba remains around 1,500 though, because of the high number of intermarriages and conversion. Margalit Bejarano, a historian at Hebrew University in Jerusalem who studies Cuban Jewry, said that many of the Cuban immigrants do not fit into Israeli society and soon leave for the United States. "For the majority of them, [immigration to Israel] is a way of getting out of Cuba," Bejarano said.

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But she noted that for some there is a spiritual element to immigration to Israel, and a significant number of Cubans do stay. The reason the Cuban government allows Jews to leave for Israel, she and other journalists have noted, is that the government receives revenue from the Jewish Agency in Israel, which pays for the expensive visas and most of the travel costs.

Behar's book ends on this theme, titling the second-to-last chapter "Departures." She goes through a list of Cuban Jewish immigrants to Israel she has met over 15 years of traveling to the island. Behar writes about 10 who have left since 2004 alone.

The last is Levy. After marrying her childhood sweetheart, Levy left with him for Israel in October 2006. As a minor at 17, she needed her father's signature for her government visa, which he signed reluctantly. Levy had always told Behar that she would not leave Cuba, and certainly not without her father, José. "But she was a girl then," Behar writes. "She is a woman now, and she is leaving him. Hopefully not forever. Hopefully he will follow. Hopefully."

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