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## Going home again to what remains of a Jewish Cuba

By **Kimberly Marlowe Hartnett**  
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To describe cultural anthropologist Ruth Behar as exceptionally honest risks insulting others in her line of work, but there's just no getting around it. Her peers tend to avoid admitting doubts, awkwardness and wrong turns they experience in the field. Behar, though, has a distinctive, decidedly nonacademic voice that relies on just such truthful, personal admissions.

In "An Island Called Home: Returning to Jewish Cuba" (Rutgers University Press, 297 pp., \$29.95), she writes: "I knew that I returned to Cuba with a longing for memory and I worried about imposing that nostalgia on Jews in Cuba, until I discovered that they too longed for memory. Like my two Jewish grandfathers who worked as peddlers when they arrived in Cuba, I felt I had a bundle on my shoulders — in that bundle were the memories kept by Jews who left Cuba and those who stayed, and it became my role to carry these memories back and forth."

Behar is, as she once described herself, "a specialist in homesickness." Born in Havana, she moved to New York City with her parents at age 4. Her longing to recover lost memories hinted at in the family's black-and-white snapshots was unyielding, and three decades later would bring her back to the haunting sights, smells and sounds of Cuba.

Jews in Cuba? Who knew? The first was Luis de Torres, a multilingual *converso* (a Jew who converted to Catholicism to survive the Inquisition) sent by Columbus to reconnoiter the area in 1492. Cuba's Jewish population would grow to an estimated 20,000 in the years following World War II. Behar's Cuban-born parents — descended from Russian-Polish Jews on one side and Turkish Jews on the other — were typical of the island's diverse population, even though their union was considered a "mixed marriage" in the Jewish community.

The Behar family joined the early-1960s exodus of those unwilling to live under Fidel Castro and communism. Despite Castro's 1960 declaration that discrimination against Jews and others was unacceptable fascism, 90 percent of Cuba's Jewish residents saw the now-official atheism and nationalization of industry as enough of a threat to immigrate to Miami, Puerto Rico, Mexico and other countries.

After sprinting through her education, Behar launched herself into a career as teacher, filmmaker and prolific writer with an eye to the power and mystery of diasporic life. (Her work has attracted a MacArthur Foundation Fellows Award, Guggenheim and Fulbright Fellowships, and many other honors.)

Despite countless trips during the past 15 years, Behar says her subject remains mysterious and resists easy labeling:

"To speak of 'the Jews of Cuba' is ostentatious, for the community is miniature and in continual flux. No matter how many people die or leave the island, somehow there are always a thousand Jews in Cuba (or some like to say fifteen hundred). The number seems to have been arrived at kabbalistically and neither death nor diaspora changes anything."

She embraces this idea of ever-shifting community, proffering life stories as she finds them, refraining from making any individual — or the sum of her subjects' lives — stand for some sort of quintessential Cuban Jew. She has an admirable ability to start each encounter with similar energy and curiosity, be it observing a

synagogue-goer wearing a Che Guevara T-shirt or understanding the role played by outside Jewish agencies in helping Cuban Jews. She returns often to the so-called mixed marriages that define the island, including a particularly memorable recounting of her acquaintance with teenager Danayda Levy, the proud observant Jewish daughter of a black Catholic mother and a white Jewish father.

Both Behar and Cuban photographer Humberto Mayol are veracious in their art, and they support each other well. Behar's warm-blooded descriptions are deepened by Mayol's lens as he captures her many subjects in their evocative surroundings. Their work does not recapture Behar's childhood memories, of course. Instead, she finds a home on an island of the heart, and in doing so delivers a long-hidden chapter of history to the rest of us.

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