Contemporary Jewry (2021) 41:823–841
https://doi.org/10.1007/s12397-022-09415-4

Rabbi Marshall T. Meyer as a Transnational Expatriate and Innovative Religious Entrepreneur: From the United States to Argentina and Back

Daniel Fainstein[1]

Received: 22 October 2021 / Accepted: 9 January 2022 / Published online: 9 February 2022
© The Author(s), under exclusive licence to Springer Nature B.V. 2022

Abstract
In this paper we use five complementary conceptual perspectives to describe, contextualize and explain the work and accomplishments of Rabbi Marshall Meyer (1930–1993), a dynamic American expatriate and educator, public intellectual and human rights activist in Argentina, from the 1960s to the 1980s. They are as follows: internationalism and transnationalism as a trademark of Judaism; the religious mutation of Latin America; exiles and expatriates as innovators of knowledge and agents of transculturation; the supply side of religion and the religious entrepreneur; and personal characteristics and attributes of leadership. Specifically, we analyze some mechanisms that help to explain his impact in Jewish life first in Latin America, and then in the USA, like *mediation*, *transculturalization*; the place of *hybridization* in the development of a Jewish liberation theology; the creation of *new human resources* through the establishment of the Seminario Rabínico Latinoamericano as a new center for the circulation of new ideas and leaders.

Keywords Religious entrepreneurship · Expatriates as creators · Rabbi Marshall T. Meyer · Jewish liberation theology · Transnationalism · Judaism

Background: Transnationalism and Religious Leadership

This paper contributes to understanding the circulation of persons, ideas, knowledge, and movements across the Americas through the analysis of the career of Rabbi Marshall Meyer, an emblematic figure in the religious and political life of Latin America in the second half of the twentieth century. To this end, our analysis will use five complementary conceptual perspectives:

✉ Daniel Fainstein
dfainstein@uhebraica.edu.mx

[1] Universidad Hebraica, Mexico City, Mexico

(1) Internationalism and transnationalism as a hallmark of Judaism
(2) Shifts in the religious composition of Latin America
(3) Exiles and expatriates as innovators of knowledge and agents of transculturation
(4) The supply side of religion and the religious entrepreneur
(5) Personal characteristics and attributes of leadership.

The first two are structural and contextual, while the other three are explanatory.

Internationalism and Transnationalism as a Hallmark of Judaism

The circulation of ideas and movements has been one of the outstanding characteristics of Judaism since ancient times. Understanding this requires the use of a long-term perspective as interpreted by the French historiographical school, particularly Fernand Braudel (Burke 2015; for a classical description of these processes of interaction between different Jewish centers and with the local contexts, see Baron, 1967, particularly vols. 6, 7, 11). From a *longue durée* perspective, internationalism until modern times, and transnationalism since the rise of nationalism, is a structural characteristic of Judaism, particularly concerning religious ideas and movements. The circulation of sages, ideas, and people, beyond local and regional limits, and even multicultural empires, has been a constant in Jewish history since the Second Temple period.

A very interesting example of this process of emigration, internationalism, and the establishment of new centers of Jewish learning in the Middle Ages is the tale of the four captives narrated by Abraham Ibn Daud in *Sefer ha Qabbalah* (Ibn Daud 1967, 63–69). In the story, a pirate captures a ship with four very important Jewish sages. These sages did not reveal their provenance and status and were sold as slaves. Each of them, after several ups and downs in fortune, became the religious leader in his community, one in Alexandria and later Fostat, another two in Cordoba and other cities of Spain, and one in North Africa. According to Gershon Cohen, this story is based on different previous traditions but expresses the process of establishing autonomous Jewish leadership and communities outside the orbit of the Geonim of Babylonia. The story and mode of thinking replicate the process of establishing a new center as did the master of Ibn Daud, Abd ar Rahman III, in Cordoba with the Eastern Caliphate (Cohen 1991).

In the words of Salo Baron, addressing changes that dramatically altered the old ways of Jewish life in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries:

> For some 3000 years the Jewish people have represented a synthesis of internationalism and nationalism, shedding a remarkable light on the history of both and their interplay in the various historical periods… **The rather precarious, but effective, balance** between **ethnic-cultural nationalism, religious universalism and political internationalism** was suddenly upset by the American and French revolutions. (Baron 1960, 217, our emphasis)

Nationalism and class struggle were determining factors in these developments. The creation of modern states, the emancipation of the Jews, the development of

modern antisemitism, massive migrations, two world wars, the Shoa, and the establishment of the State of Israel created new contexts for Jewish life (Karady 2001; Mendes Flohr and Reinhartz 1995). In the modern period, the impact of emigration on the establishment of new Jewish population centers from Europe to the Americas, among other territories, generated new processes but was also part of ancient and traditional patterns of Jewish history. In the last decades, the interactions between globalization, transnationalism, and Jewish identity have established complex new outcomes and processes (Bokser Liwerant 2014).

Religious Change in Latin America

Religious changes in the Latin American region during the last 70 years have been studied by various historians and sociologists and constitute a significant element in the global understanding of religion in the contemporary world. General discussions about secularization theory may be enriched by examining the Latin American case (Casanova 1994).

What is clear is that over the last decades, Latin America has become a more diverse continent in its religious makeup owing to the action of migrant groups and religious missionaries of diverse character, particularly evangelicals and Pentecostals (see e.g. Bastian 1997, 2004; Lynch 2012; Morello and Rabbia 2019; Mallimaci 2017; Pérez Guadalupe and Grundberger 2018; Bahamondes González 2012; Mora Muro 2013; Nuso 2015). Bastian points out four key factors in the changing religious makeup of Latin America over the last 70 years:

1. The transnationalization of religion after World War II inscribes Latin America in a worldwide trend of multilateral dissemination of religion.
2. The destructuring of traditional economies under the impact of state policies and the expansion of market economies resulted in vast migratory movements from the countryside to the cities and a general anomie that favored the processes of identity restructuring through sectarian-type religious sociability.
3. The perennial existence of a dual society, profoundly unequal; deprived and subordinate social sectors gain access to politics and seek their own forms of organization and expression through neo-religious communitarianism.
4. A market logic imposed by globalization stimulates the development of Latin American religious movements, and allows them to export their symbolic production (Bastian 2004, 159).

During the same period of time, the Jewish world, too, saw the arrival and growing impact of religious movements, particularly from Eastern and Central Europe and the United States—such as the Conservative movement, Chabad Lubavitch, as well as local rabbis trained in yeshivot in Israel and the USA. Particularly the latter—a sort of “Jewish missionaries”—generated important changes in their new communities.

We need to situate this transformation in Latin American Jewish communities within the complex framework of a changing regional religious landscape. These

transformations are part of what Stark and Bainbridge (1996) call the dynamic of the contemporary religious market. This includes secularization, as the main driving force of the process, religious revival, and the establishing of cults or new religious movements (Stark and Bainbridge 1985, esp. Ch. 19).

It is clear that in order to obtain a more complete understanding of the actions of local actors, they should be considered in the context of national, regional, and global transformations and processes that affected the world during those years. Examples were the impact of the Six-Day War on world Jewry, the beginning of the processes of desecularization, religious shifts in Latin America in general, and the crisis of left-wing ideological movements.

Such new processes as a whole generated the conditions that favored the strengthening of the religious and synagogal character of Judaism, and the subsequent entry into its scope of dynamic and innovative Orthodox Jewish sectors. The tactics which helped in developing their institutions and activities benefited from the previous work of *Judaic religious readiness* carried out by rabbis and leaders of the Conservative movement.

Exiles and Expatriates as Innovators of Knowledge and Agents of Transculturation

A way to understand the impact of different diasporas in the circulation and creation of new ideas and attitudes comes from the research in cultural history and comparative sociology by Peter Burke. He explored the contribution that expatriates and exiles have made in the last 500 years as figures of mediation and dissemination of knowledge and of hybridization between the homeland and hostland of diverse individuals. Burke explores the place of exiles and expatriates and their role in the creation and dissemination of knowledge. He underscores the strategy of integration between the different cultures (Burke 2017).

Unlike one-sided concepts such as acculturation used by anthropologists in the 1940s, *transculturación* and *transtierro* imply that change takes place for both parties in the encounter (Burke 2017, 3). Burke helps us better understand the intersection between the history of knowledge and the history of diasporas. He mentions a series of processes that help explain the contribution of emigres, refugees, and expatriates in their new hostland and the reciprocal influences: deprovincialization, mediation, distancing (getting the broader picture from their differences), hybridization, bifocal vision, development of theory, and reception. We will illustrate how we can understand Rabbi Meyer using these categories.

The Supply Side of Religion and the Religious Entrepreneur

We also use as an explanatory conceptual framework the contributions of rational choice theory developed in the sociology of religion, and a personal development in the figure of the religious entrepreneur. Stark and Bainbridge are the key thinkers of the religious market theory. They are critical of the secularization theory and see it as Eurocentric, meaning that it focuses on the decline of religion in Europe, but fails to explain its continuing vitality in America and elsewhere.

A range of studies support Stark and Bainbridge's view that the demand for religion is influenced by the marketization of religion, providing the breadth and depth of the quality and variety of religion. The marketization of religion is merely supplying the religion that people need/demand (supply-and-demand-led economics) (Stark and Bainbridge 1996; Young 1997; Stark and Finke 2000). Religious economy theory functions as a heuristic device for understanding religious provision and consumption. The rational choice theory of religion has shown that it involves active agency and is not simply the product of socialization. It involves behavior no less rational in many ways than any other form of human behavior (see also Chiswick 2014).

Religious markets are like other markets in that they are social creations. The exchanges that take place in a religious market are regulated by social factors. Elements of social interactions such as norms and morals influence the individual choices and preferences of the religious consumer. Therefore, elements of social interaction influence the types of religious goods offered to consumers in the marketplace and the changes in consumer demands over a span of time.

We agree with MacKinnon that we need to take the definition of religion as a market, in a metaphorical sense:

> So long as we maintain an ability to examine religion "as if" it were an economy, this keeps the questions open, and allows us to use the metaphor. As soon as we start assuming that religion is an economy, we begin to be used by the metaphor; the metaphor begins to think for us. (MacKinnon 2011)

The popularity of religions and religious groups is dependent on the laws of supply and demand. Religious changes come mainly by the supply side. In this context the figure of the *religious entrepreneur*—someone who reads well the current religious market and its limitations, and has the ability to provide effective alternative services and programs, basically combining preexisting elements into new configurations—can have a strong impact in his or her niche and, if successful, beyond (Stark and Bainbridge 1996, 168–178. They deal with the religious entrepreneur in the context of the creation of new religious movements; we add this figure in the context of religious revival).

It is very interesting that the missionary model or the religious entrepreneur has almost never been used or implemented in the study of contemporary Jewry. However, we have many cases that could be studied with this useful category, like the Zionists' *Shlichim* from the 1920s to the 1990s, Conservative rabbis in the 1960s and 1980s, the Chabad *Shluchim* worldwide, and the *Aish HaTorah* representatives.

It is important to mention in this context that Judaism is not only a religion, in the Christian understanding of the term. It is a multifaceted complex of normative, cognitive, affective, behavioral, and other expressions. It can be at the same time religion, ethnicity, culture, community organization, social group, personal and collective memory, folklore, and more. Jewish identity can and should be measured through various indicators (DellaPergola 1999; see also Batnitzky 2011). This means that we need to add additional perspectives in the sociology of religion of Judaism, to avoid the pitfalls of a reductionist position.

Personal Characteristics and Attributes of Leadership

Marshall Meyer was a person possessing extraordinary human and leadership qualities, which clearly fit with Max Weber's (Weber 1977, 193–197; Sherwin 2004) description of charismatic leadership. During the words spoken at his funeral at the B'nai Jeshurun Congregation in New York, his friend and colleague Eugen Weiner highlighted some of those qualities.

According to Weiner (1994), Meyer

> made an effort to achieve a pure and ultimate form of expression. This was manifested in his great love for music and his commitment to prayer. He was a rabbi who understood the spiritual power of music, as sounds in time united by the capacity of memory and imagination. His congregants learned to pray because he taught them how to do it through the intelligent use of music.
>
> There was something wonderfully excessive about him. He saw reality and acted in the world through superlatives. Meyer exerted a charm on all those whom he loved and cared for, and included them in a dramatic narrative full of meaning. He was a genius in building credible stories that included *us* and shed a light consistent with *our* deepest personal hopes. Many knew that they were the subjects of those narratives. What helped his narrative gift was his incredible ability to quickly reach a level of personal intimacy in its contacts with people. His was a colossal presence in the lives of many. It was a presence that challenged and supported; controversial but reasonable; tireless in questioning conventional piety, but affirmative in the need to integrate religious attitudes. He was the repository for most of life's most interesting questions and quests and embodied these questions in his interactions with his people. (Weiner 1994)

In Volcovich's book there are dozens of pictures, testimonies, and stories of people impacted by their interaction with Rabbi Meyer in Argentina (Volcovich 2009).

Without doubt, the experience of growing up, being educated, and living his early adulthood in the United States and being a member of a progressive Jewish current helps in part to explain Marshall Meyer's career as a leader and activist in Argentina and later in the United States. But Meyer's unique personal qualities cannot be underestimated. Many people with similar experiences and education never had the prominence, vision, and the willingness to take the risks that he had.

Rabbi Marshall Meyer: A Short Biography

Marshall Meyer was born in a traditional Jewish family in Brooklyn, New York in 1930. The family lost its fortune in the Great Depression and moved to Norwich, Connecticut to start over. He was educated at Dartmouth in a strong liberal arts

program. He was strongly influenced by Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, a Jewish convert to Christianity and a powerful and polymath thinker who was a partner in the debate on Judaism and Christianity with Frank Rosenzweig.

When he decided to become a rabbi, Meyer became a close student and disciple of Abraham Joshua Heschel.

> The debt that I owe to my admired teacher, Abraham Joshua Heschel, is impossible to pay off. I am convinced that Dr. Heschel's *The Prophets* contain categories of thought and points of view that are vitally necessary for this part of the world in critical times that we are living, and in the most critical period that we will still have to face in the coming decades. The raw fact is that during our century morality has dropped to a new nadir and that we lived in the post-holocaust era. Our own continent is on fire with varying degrees of heat. (Prologue by M. Meyer in Heschel 1973, 9–11).
>
> Heschel held an outpost in the fight for civil rights in the United States of America, and was one of the closest collaborators of Martin Luther King, Jr. He was one of the most vocal and active university voices in criticizing his adoptive country's participation in the Vietnam War, and worked tirelessly in the fight for the liberation of Soviet Jews and for their right to emigrate to Israel. It is impossible to find a noble and just cause in which Heschel was not a member of, year after year. Not only his great literary production: his own personality helped hundreds of thousands of men around the world to find a new magnitude of faith, a renewed and dynamic sense of the living God. The voice of A.J. Heschel resonated throughout the length and breadth of the nation, teaching that it was the duty of every religious person to remain constantly engaged in the agonizing fight for the triumph of the spirit. All too often the world is a lonely, cold, and dark place. Human beings desperately need and seek examples from peers who vindicate the history of man. This anxious search for individuals endowed with spirituality, willing to take their convictions and beliefs to their ultimate consequences, is rarely crowned with success. Abraham Joshua Heschel was precisely one of these men. (op. cit., 12–13)

Meyer graduated from the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York. There he was exposed to a faculty mainly composed of refugees and emigre scholars, a fact that as Burke mentions was important in widening his intellectual horizons (Burke 2017). In 1959 Meyer and his wife decided to go abroad and arrived in Argentina to work at the *Congregación Israelita de la República Argentina* (CIRA), the oldest and most prestigious synagogue in Buenos Aires.

After a few years in which he was the youth rabbi and established Camp Ramah in Argentina, because of strong disagreements with the senior rabbi and his more conservative approach to changes in liturgy and other matters, a group of families left the CIRA and established the Bet El Community under Rabbi Meyer's leadership in 1962. He also took the helm of the newly established Seminario Rabínico Latinoamericano (SRL). After his death, the SRL added *Marshall Meyer* to its name in a very massive and moving ceremony. Marshall and his family stayed in Argentina for 25 years.

> The original two years became twenty-five and despite the many years of frustrations, pain, attacks and obstacles that threatened to destroy me, I can say that I do not regret a single minute of the quarter century that I was in the Argentine Republic. It is not just out of a lack of repentance but out of a deep sense of gratitude that I was in a place that posed such enormous challenges that I was forced to make significant achievements that would otherwise have eluded me. I also owe a huge debt of gratitude to a great number of people we love, and who in turn loved us. In fact, they became our family. (Meyer 1986, 18)

Meyer was a prominent activist in different fields including interfaith relationship, social action, and finally in the fight for human rights during the military dictatorship that ruled Argentina between 1976 and 1983. Meyer was a member of the *Asamblea Permanente por los Derechos Humanos*, an important and inclusive human rights nongovernmental organization (NGO), and worked together with some embassies (Israel, USA, among others) to help to save prisoners and fugitives from the military security forces. His intervention on behalf of the famous journalist Jacobo Timerman, kidnapped and later put on home arrest by the Junta, gave him an international standing. Timerman's famous book, *Prisoner without Name, Cell without Number*, was dedicated to "Marshall Meyer, a Rabbi who brought solace to Jewish, Christian and atheist prisoners" (Timerman 1981).

At the end of the dictatorship, Meyer was elected by President Raúl Alfonsín as a member of the CONADEP, the national commission investigating the whereabouts of the "desaparecidos," in spite of being a foreign citizen. The final report NUNCA MAS, became one of the central documents in human rights in Latin America, and the basis for the trials of the military with the arrival of democracy (for a detailed account of this facet of Meyer's activism see Fainstein 2006, 301–348; Goldman and Dobry 2014).

He went back to the USA in 1984. The emotional toil of working with the families of the "desaparecidos," the inner need to prove his ability to succeed in his homeland, and the sense of a cycle completed were the main factors of this decision.

> Upon my return to the United States, it seemed to me that American Judaism had leaned toward right-wing positions. One of the things I became aware of is seeing how parochial we are as Americans, not just Jews, but overall. We really believe that we are the center of the world, that we are the best democracy and the best country. Americans should know that there are more murders in New York City in one year than in all the combined capitals of Europe. We are the most violent society at the moment (Sandler 1992, 60–63).

Shortly after taking office in New York, Meyer made the following statement, summarizing his vision of the role of a synagogue in the postmodern world:

> The B'nai Jeshurun congregation believes that a community synagogue that answers the authentic questions of life, death, love, anxiety and the search

> for meaning can once again attract Jews, both families and individuals, if she is ready to face the great issues of life. (Web Page, B'nai Jeshurun Community, New York, 2005)

Over time, B'nai Jeshurun would become one of the most active and dynamic synagogues in the United States, with a wide range of study and social action activities such as how to shelter the homeless; aid and assistance programs for AIDS carriers; participation in the movement *sanctuary*, which welcomed refugees from Central America during the civil wars that hit the region in the 1980s; meetings to generate dialogue between Israelis and Palestinians; interfaith dialogue; the ecology; an egalitarian position regarding the participation of women in rituals and religious ceremonies; and an openness to sexual diversity and alternative families, among other things.

To this relevant and spiritual Judaism he added sophisticated and creative innovation in liturgical music and a close interpersonal relationship with congregants that, on the whole, had a huge impact. It galvanized thousands of people—not previously affiliated with synagogue frameworks—who found a Jewish and universal space at B'nai Jeshurun.

At the same time Meyer became an activist for social causes and human rights in the USA, harshly criticizing the American government's foreign policy in Latin America for its support of authoritarian regimes, for pressuring these countries through foreign debt, and for ignorance of and an arrogant attitude toward the world in general (Fainstein 2006, 2013, 2019; Weiner 1988).

Marshall Meyer as a Creative Expatriate

Peter Burke (2017) mentions various mechanisms that help explain the impact that these charismatic expatriate figures have in their new hostland and beyond. We will use two of them to explain Rabbi Meyer's impact.

Mediation

Expatriates use their knowledge and experience, their "cultural capital," to act as agents of mediation between the cultural patterns of their place of origin and/or training and their new environment. In this way they contribute to the dissemination of new ideas and perspectives that allow for the renewal of local practices and discourses. They contribute to the deprovincialization of their hostland, and to the possible generation of new ideas or performances (Burke 2017, 168–173).

One of the strategies that Rabbi Meyer used for this purpose was the launching of a Jewish quarterly called *Majshavot*. It was his channel to educate the Spanish-speaking public about contemporary Jewish religious trends. *Majshavot* ("thoughts" or "ideas" in Hebrew) was founded in 1961, and continues to be published to this day. Its name comes from a phrase of a poem from the Bible commentator Moses Ibn Ezra in the twelfth century: "*Sink into the sea of thought and pluck precious pearls*" (Majshavot 1961).

Inspired by publications like *Judaism* and *Conservative Judaism*, for the Spanish-speaking world this magazine was an important source of dissemination of new ideas of religious and philosophical thought of the second half of the twentieth century. In an editorial entitled “Editor’s *Majshavot*,” Rabbi Meyer specified the purpose of the quarterly:

> Convinced of the deep need for a serious publication in the Spanish language dedicated to the spiritual and intellectual problems of the modern Jew, the World Council of Synagogues has decided to publish this modest magazine in the hope of contributing in some way to the long-awaited revival of culture and Jewish scholarship in Latin America. Judaism comprises a way of life that must be studied in order to be loved and lived deeply. At a time when man fights for his very existence, the spiritual light that emanates from Judaism must play a decisive role in enlightening the western world. The Jew, if he is to serve society, must return to the sources of his faith, and we hope that the dedicated and spiritually concerned Jew will find in the pages of *Majshavot* ideas, criticisms, theories that act as a catalytic force in his confrontation with the significant events of Jewish life and faith of our time. The editors sincerely hope that more than acting as an intellectual platform, *Majshavot* will constitute a creative force for the preparation of broad sectors of Jews committed to revitalizing Judaism and the sacred task of participating with God in the continual creation of His universe. (*Majshavot* 1961, 1, 1, p.1)

A high percentage of the articles published were translations from American journals like *Conservative Judaism, Judaism, Shema* and later *Tikkun*, but over time more original articles appeared, written mostly by graduates of the seminary. *Majshavot* reflected, in the selection of texts, the progressive Jewish thought of its editor, Rabbi Meyer. Thus, issues that concerned American Judaism during the 1960s and 1970s reached the Spanish-speaking reader, such as criticism of the Vietnam war, civil disobedience, the changing role of women in traditional Jewish life, the legitimacy of conversions, innovations in Jewish law, the Holocaust and its impact, the emergence of a new Jewish spirituality, new theological approaches, and new perspectives on Zionism.

Majshavot was the platform that disseminated the work of Heschel and other contemporary thinkers in the Spanish-speaking world, as well as Rabbi Meyer’s own texts, mainly transcripts of sermons and speeches. He also complemented this process with the edition of bilingual prayer books. More than 80,000 copies of the *Siddur* and the *Machzor* were published in 40 years, and used all around Latin America. Richard Freund considers these volumes "probably the two most successful books in Hebrew and Spanish published in Latin America, as well as one of the most important sources of Latin American theology of Judaism and its liturgy, among others” (Freund 1994, 34). Meyer also published academic and popular books on Judaism and religious studies.

Jewish Liberation Theology as Hybridization

Another mechanism mentioned by Burke is hybridization. As wanderers between two worlds, and as catalysts of intellectual and social developments, the emigres and expatriates are able to join and integrate various traditions and intellectual currents (Burke 2017, esp. 168–176).

One way in which Marshall Meyer participated in this process was through the development of a Jewish version of liberation theology. In this way Meyer integrated his readings of Martin Buber and Heschel, and the classical sources of Judaism, with the new theological developments originating in Latin America. He knew first-hand some of these progressive Catholic and Protestant theologians in his intensive interfaith activities (Fainstein 2015, 2019):

> According to my reading and my consequent teaching, and through my work not only in Argentina but throughout South America, I felt intensely that what Christian Liberation theology was developing was basically **an exegesis of prophetic Judaism,** clearly exemplified in the paradigmatic texts of the book of Exodus. I was motivated to act as I understood that a rabbi must act in a similar situation: that is, to be a witness of the living God in the constant search for the sanctification of all life and in the fight for the freedom of the oppressed and for achieving social justice. The ease with which the Hebrew words come to mind when these concepts are mentioned is proof, at least to me, that this was not a rabbi's interference in political affairs, nor from a new or sophisticated interpretation of old sources. Jewish Liberation Theology continues to push me to work for social justice, freedom from all oppression and the increase in the cost of human life for all peoples. (Senkman and Sznajder 1995, 357)

To speak in the style and with the passion of biblical prophets, according to Meyer, was not to invent a new theology. He believed that, although we are not prophets or children of prophets, we are instead descendants of those who preferred the desert to slavery, of those who understood that God wants all peoples to be free, and of those who gave the message of ethical monotheism.

> Will we renounce those lofty teachings and notions, just because certain exegetes are uncomfortable with words like universalism, liberation, and redemption? There is simply no way to allow the violation of human rights in the name of Judaism, or with its approval. (Senkman and Sznajder 1995, ibid.)

He continued with this theopolitical perspective in the USA:

> As a rabbi I felt compelled to visit prisons and try to comfort parents of the disappeared, whether they were Christians, Jews or agnostics. Why? After what little I did for human rights (which is such an endless task) there was and is a basic idea: if we are to take the prophets seriously we cannot deny history and return to a "golden ghetto". In this jungle I tried to respond to life, as I think a rabbi should respond. The problems are ours because Amos, Isaiah and Hosea taught us that they are ours, that there is only one humanity, just as there is

> only one god. This is the basis of liberation theology. Why should so few have so many to starve? This is a Jewish question. This is a biblical question. I bleed with people when I see hungry people crawling for safety. That is why I am so active in the sanctuary movement. I have heard too many Jews say: Why do I have to do with Guatemala? I do not speak Spanish! Why should he be in my synagogue? He is a Roman Catholic, let the churches take care of him! Do you remember the plethora of discussions and articles that appeared about the silence of the churches during the Second World War? What did they say? "What do I have to do with a Polish Jew? I don't speak Yiddish. Let the Jews worry about him!" Unless the synagogue becomes sensitive to the needs of all people who are hungry and oppressed, unless we are able to feel *Rachmanut* (mercy) and *Hesed* (compassion and love) for any human being who is persecuted, what right do we have to think that the world will become aware when we scream only for problems of anti-Semitism? (Senkman and Sznajder 1995, 10–11).
>
> Jewish participation in liberation theology and human rights is obviously both political and religious. My own participation in the human rights movement is not the result of any partisan politics. My answer with all the strength that I possess as a Jew who professes his faith, comes from my understanding of Judaism. We were slaves in Egypt and we taught the world to fight for freedom. I think that the future of the Jews of Latin America will depend exclusively on our ability to give a consistent response as a Jewish community (op. cit., 13).

In an interview given in November 1993 [1 month before his death], Rabbi Meyer characterized the SRL as a center of Jewish liberation theology:

> I think that the Latin American Rabbinical Seminary was the only institution that truly practiced the Jewish theology of liberation, although people say that it does not exist, because it truly does not exist in the United States. But by saying that it does not exist, they are limiting themselves by the academic paradigm of associating liberation theology with Marxism, which constitutes a real nonsense (Freund 30).

Marshall Meyer as a Religious Entrepreneur

Continuing our analysis of the religious changes from the supply side, we can say that the creation of the Bet El community was the first prototype (or "laboratory" as Rabbi Meyer used to say) of a different kind of synagogue.

Bet El as the New Product and Service That Changed the Religious Market

Meyer at the Bet El Community introduced a series of fundamental innovations in the field of Latin American Jewish life, some of which were transnational practices based on developments in the USA but adapted to local conditions:

1. The transformation of the synagogue—traditionally an unattractive place for most families in Argentina, and frequented in most cases by the elderly—into a relevant space for the analysis of current issues, from the perspective of Jewish sources and with a progressive outlook.
2. The renovation of liturgy with the active participation of the community during the services, and a constant recreation of music and prayer, respecting the traditional structures of the *Siddur* (Book of Prayer) but incorporating the Spanish language and new texts in ceremonies and special occasions. This approach to revitalizing and generating active participation by the congregants at the synagogue, which broke down the formal barriers between the rabbi and the liturgical singer, Meyer called *neo-Hasidism*, "which I learned from Heschel. It is a type of Hasidism that promotes passion, music, dance in the religious service" (Shiff n.d., 5).
3. The conversion of the synagogue into a family space, by abolishing the traditional separation of the sexes in religious services, and devising family education programs and activities.
4. The integration of Jews by blending together Ashkenazi (of European origin) and Sephardic (of Arab and Ottoman Empire origin) traditions in a new community and open and eclectic ritual space, thus creating the "Argentine synagogue style."

> The initial project of the Bet El community was to found the first Argentine synagogue. Not to have preaching in Arabic, or in German but in Castilian. The Jewish community in Argentina lived for decades organized in *Landmenshaft* (organizations of countrymen), the Sephardi Jew had to live among the Sephardim, and the Ashkenazi among the Ashkenazim. The first synagogue in history where Sephardim and Ashkenazim unite and make an amalgam of the Sefardi Nusaj and the Ashkenazi nusaj (the Sephardi and Ashkenazi rites) is the Bet El community. The Berlin synagogue was a reflection of centuries of life in Germany, the synagogue in Paris was very French and the Syrian synagogue was very Syrian. But there was no Argentine synagogue that reflected the Argentine reality, and that was our project (Meyer 1989, 111–112).

5. The renewal of the moment of preaching or teaching through a speech in Spanish that combined Jewish authenticity with contemporary relevance. It could take the form of a classic address, an open dialogue between the two rabbis, and/or a direct conversation with those attending the religious service.
6. An extensive program for young people with activities for the weekend, preparation courses for the Bar and Bat Mitzvah celebrations and, fundamentally, Camp Ramah, a real incubator of leaders and rabbis of the movement.
7. The creation of a community day school, which would allow formal education with a truly comprehensive approach to Judaism and the best of Western and Argentine culture, in the spirit of the values of Conservative Judaism.
8. Committed social action as part of congregational membership and religious practice.

> I worked on human rights in Argentina, not for political reasons. Many people would like to believe that the rabbi's task and the role of the synagogue is to talk about a Jewish house and the observance of Shabbat. These are elementary things that of course I do. But it is an empty thing if it is only that, it is an empty Judaism, just as the prophet Isaiah speaks of an empty fast (see Isaiah 58: 3-8) if you "do not release the ties of oppression and you do not feed the hungry and you don't give refuge to the homeless". In 1964 or 65 there were the worst floods in Argentine history, just before Yom Kippur. I sent a telegram to each member of my community informing them that they could not enter it, unless they brought along with their *talitot* and *majzorim* (ritual shawl used in certain religious services and the prayer book) blankets and food. The entire block was full of military trucks and before entering the synagogue they deposited packaged food and clothing and blankets in those trucks. Now, every year at Bet El, this tradition is part of Yom Kippur. (Fainstein 2006, 2013)

The Establishment of the Seminario Rabínico Latinoamericano as the Center for Human Resources to Win over the Religious Market

One of Marshall Meyer's most strategic actions was placing a large part of his enormous capacity for work and mobilization of resources at the service of the SRL. The background to this decision was the deplorable state of most of the religious congregations and the lack of local rabbinical leadership capable of attracting new generations:

> I must say that with very few exceptions, which can be easily counted, the Synagogue has died in Latin America. Of the 850,000 Latin American Jews, I doubt that there are more than 5,000 in the synagogue during Friday evening services. The synagogues are conducted mostly without rabbis; perhaps there are no more than 35 or 40 rabbis for the 850,000 Jews, and I am afraid I am exaggerating. There is nothing modern in the synagogue, almost nothing that can have any relation to Latin America in the 20th century. The synagogue is the least important Jewish institution in Latin American Jewish life. (Fainstein 2006, 277)

Faced with this situation, he affirmed that "it was clear that if we were not going to have native rabbis, there would be no future for Latin American Judaism" (Sandler 1992, 38). We can describe the mechanism that allowed this expansion as "the human resources availabilty hypotesis." It is connected with the supply theory in economics. For a religious movement, focused on congregations and personal contact with the spiritual leader, being able to expand the availability of leaders is a must. This, leaders must have been trained for, and they must have the skills and competencies to multiply, the group's message and beliefs.

For almost 20 years, until the end of the 1980s, the SRL, and therefore the Conservative-*Masorti* movement, maintained a virtual monopoly on the qualified human resources available to serve the communities of the continent. The SRL,

based on the guidelines proposed by Meyer, generated a new rabbinical profile that had not existed until then in Latin America. Most of the rabbis who tended to the needs of Latin American Judaism until then were immigrants from Eastern and Central Europe or Arab countries, who had difficulty understanding the cultural and language codes of the new generations of Argentine Jews. Others came from Israel and had the same limitations. These traditional rabbis were prepared at best to preserve the traditions of their communities of origin and guide the immigrants and their children through the life cycle, but not to articulate a Judaism based on a project of life adapted to the challenges of the new generations in a society in which religion in general had little strength.

The SRL, with its innovative ideological and educational initiatives, attracted a group of young people with intellectual and spiritual concerns who could not find their place fully either in the various Zionist movements, which were beginning to decline, or in the dominant ethno-secular Judaism. Given the success of the Bet El Community in attracting youth and in revitalizing the synagogal institution, which at that time seemed to be facing an inexorable decline, there was a growing demand for such spiritual leadership from various congregations.

These processes gave rise to a new figure within Latin American Judaism: *el seminarista*, *the student-rabbi*. Due both to the lack of enough rabbis who had completed their studies and to the educational conception that valued the relevance of having an intense rabbinical practice together with studies, the SRL students were sent out at the request of the congregations in various Latin American countries. They were to lead services on Shabbat and the Jewish holidays, with the expectation of attracting the younger generation. The work of these "new rabbis" and student rabbis was a key component in the process that Deby Babis Cohen characterized in her study of the transition from traditional Ashkenazi communities, synagogues and *Batei Am* (a new institutional development beginning in 1950 in which new buildings were built to host complementary Jewish schools, synagogues, and youth Zionist movements, with the help of AMIA) to Conservative community centers and the transformations in the community organization of the Jews of Buenos Aires (Babis Cohen 2002).

The development of the movement was so overwhelming that between the mid-1970s and the end of the 1980s, 25 traditionalist synagogues (or formally Orthodox in style and conception of worship) became Conservative community centers that offered a wide range of activities, in the capital and the greater Buenos Aires area. In other words, more than 50% of the existing synagogue institutions experienced a transformation whose focus was to attract new generations to Jewish life, through the approach of the Conservative movement as developed by Rabbi Meyer for Latin America (Fainstein 2006, 283–286).

Moreover, numerous rabbis and other community workers and specialists trained in Argentina at SRL moved to other countries including the United States, Israel, and several European countries, where they continued to work for local Jewish communities. They thus exported the outlook and skills they had also developed thanks to Rabbi Meyer's initiative and vision (DellaPergola 2014, 54–55; Bokser Liwerant et al. 2015).

Meyer established an important library at the SRL that became the most updated in Judaica in Latin America. Its collection of academic journals in particular brought new approaches and ideas to the students and rabbis and to researchers interested in Judaism. This is an additional example of cultural mediation (Münster, Irene/Saccal Rita).

It is worth mentioning that Meyer also established a Department of Introduction to Judaism, meaning courses and procedures for conversion to Judaism. This topic has been very controversial and problematic in Argentina since the famous *herem* (prohibition) against conversions by Rabbis Goldman and Setton in 1927, which was followed by most Orthodox communities (Zemer and Skorka 1996).

Meyer's idea was to open the conversion process in a systematic way, to answer to the new situation of increased mixed marriages and spiritual needs.

To that end the SRL established a new department to centralize the process of conversion among the different communities in Latin America, setting universal standards, *Batei Din* (rabbinical courts), and improving the learning and personal experience of those interested in converting.

As of 2010, more than 3000 persons had converted in this framework in Latin America.

Conclusions

Through a conceptual framework that comes from the sociology of knowledge and the sociology of religion, we have attempted to explain the development and impact of the figure of Rabbi Marshall Meyer in Argentina from the 1960s to the 1980s, as an example of the new circulation of ideas and movements in the Americas during those years.

His work and success reflected, on the one hand, certain structural elements of the development of Judaism, such as the international character of the transmission and dissemination of schools and currents, and on the other hand, conjunctural elements such as shifts in the religious composition of Latin America in those years, the new global religious scene, and the effects of the Six-Day War on the Jewish people. This is not to diminish the importance of Rabbi Meyer's special personal characteristics that allowed him to generate a significant change in his 25 years of living in Argentina, and then during 8 years in New York. From Rabbi Meyer's career in those years, we can learn about the transnational dynamics of Jewish life and the value of the expatriate and religious entrepreneur, as an agent of change. We can learn about the validity or weakening of community models and foundational ideologies starting with the second half of the twentieth century in the Jewish community in Argentina, which previously fundamentally reflected patterns of immigration from Eastern Europe at the end of the nineteenth century.

This analysis sheds light on several general questions, among them some of the explanatory factors that the international circulation of people and ideas contributes vis-à-vis the preexisting local and conjunctural factors; the degree of stability of existing religious and identity markets, and the factors that can generate their transformation and evolution; and the role that long-lasting structures play, versus the

role played by human agency and voluntarism. Without doubt, the study of the trajectory of Rabbi Marshall Meyer has much to contribute to clarify these issues. It provides an exemplary case study of how Judaism has circulated in the Americas.

References

Babis Cohen, Debora. 2002. *De sinagoga Ortodoxa a centro comunitario Conservador. Transformaciones en la organización comunitaria de los judíos de Buenos Aires*. M.A. dissertation. Jerusalem: The Hebrew University.

Bahamondes González, Luis Andrés. 2012. Una mirada a la metamorfosis religiosa en América Latina: nuevas ofertas de sentido en la sociedad contemporánea. *Revista Científica Guillermo de Ockham*, 10, 2, 109–116. Cali: Universidad de San Buenaventura. http://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=105325282009.

Baron, Salo W. 1960. *Modern Nationalism and Religion*. Philadelphia: Meridian Books and the Jewish Publication of America.

Baron, Salo W. 1952–1983. *A Social and Religious History of the Jews*. 18 vols. New York: Columbia University Press and Jewish Publication Society.

Bastian, Jean-Pierre. 1997. *La mutación religiosa de América Latina. Para una sociología del cambio social en la modernidad periférica*. México: Fondo de Cultura Económica.

Bastian, Jean-Pierre., ed. 2004. *La modernidad religiosa: Europa latina y América latina en perspectiva comparada*. México: Fondo de Cultura Económica.

Batnitzky, Leora. 2011. *How Judaism Became a Religion*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Bokser-Liwerant, Judit. 2014. Jewish Diaspora and Transnationalism: Awkard (Dance) Partners? In *Reconsidering Israel-Diaspora Relations*, ed. Eliezer Ben-Rafael, Judit Bokser Liwerant, and Yosef Gorni, 369–404. Leiden-Boston: Brill.

Bokser Liwerant, Judit, Sergio DellaPergola, Leo Senkman, and Yosi Goldstein. 2015. *El educador judío latinoamericano en un mundo transnacional. 1. Informe de investigación. 2. Síntesis, conclusiones y recomendaciones del informe de investigación*. Jerusalem: The Hebrew University, Centro Liwerant; México: Universidad Hebraica; Buenos Aires: AMIA.

Burke, Peter. 2015. *The French Historical Revolution. The Annales School 1929–1989*. New York: Willey.

Burke, Peter. 2017. *Exiles and Expatriates in the History of Knowledge 1500–2000*. Waltham: Brandeis University Press.

Casanova, Jose. 1994. *Public Religions in the Modern World*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

Chiswick, Carmel U. 2014. *Judaism in Transition. How Economic Choices Shape Religious Tradition*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Cohen, Gerson. 1991. The Story of the Four Captives. In *Studies in the Variety of Rabbinic Cultures*. New York: Jewish Theological Seminary.

DellaPergola, S. 1999. Asimilación/Continuidad judía: tres enfoques, pp. 467–485 in *Encuentro y Alteridad. Vida y cultura judía en América Latina.* México: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Universidad Hebrea de Jerusalén, Asociación Mexicana de Amigos de la Universidad de Tel-Aviv y Fondo de Cultura Económica, 467–485.

DellaPergola, Sergio. 2014. Jewish Peoplehood: Hard, Soft, and Interactive Markers. In *Reconsidering Israel-Diaspora Relations*, ed. E. Ben Rafael, J. Bokser Liwerant, and Y. Gorni, 25–29. Leiden-Boston: Brill.

Fainstein, Daniel. 2006. *Secularización, Profecía y Liberación la desprivatización de la religión en el pensamiento judío contemporáneo. Un estudio comparativo de sociología histórica e historia intelectual*. México City: UNAM.

Fainstein, Daniel. 2013. *Judaismo, Direitos humanso e espiritualidade. Uma biografía intelectual Rabino Marshall Meye*r. Shalom.

Fainstein, Daniel. 2015. Un pluralismo basado en la honestidad y la comprensión mutual. El Rabino Marshall Meyer y el diálogo judeo-cristiano. In *El Concilio Vaticano II y los judíos*, ed. A. Stofenmacher and A. Skorka, 283–315. Buenos Aires: Ediciones Seminario Rabínico Latinoamericano Marshall Meyer.

Fainstein, Daniel. 2019. Marshall T. Meyer: entre la tradición y las rupturas creativas. Breve genealogía de una trayectoria innovadora. *Majshavot*. Buenos Aires.

Freund, Richard. 1994. Somos testigos-We are witnesses. The Jewish Theology of Liberation of Rabbi Marshall T. Meyer. *Conservative Judaism* XLVII: 1.

Goldman, Daniel, and Dobry, Hernan. 2014. *Ser judío en los años setenta -Testimonios del horror y la resistencia durante la última dictadura*, Siglo XXI editores.

Heschel, A.J. 1973. *Los Profetas. Prólogo a cargo de Marshall Meyer*. Buenos Aires: Editorial Paidós.

Ibn Daud, Abraham. 1967. *Sefer HaQabbalah. The Book of Tradition*. A Critical Edition with a Translation by Gerson D. Cohen. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society.

Karady, Victor. 2001. *Los judíos en la Modernidad Europea Experiencia de la violencia y utopía*. Madrid: Siglo XXI ediciones.

Lynch, J. 2012. *New Worlds—A Religious History of Latin America*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

MacKinnon, A.M. 2011. Ideology and the Market Metaphor in Rational Choice Theory of Religion: A Rhetorical Critique of "Religious economies." *Critical Sociology* 39 (4): 529–543.

Majshavot. Seminario Rabínico Latinoamericano "Marshall Meyer" 1962–2020. Almost the complete collection was digitalized and is accessible online: Majshavot.org.

Mallimaci, Fortunato. 2017. Modernidades religiosas latinoamericanas. Un renovado debate epistemológico y conceptual. *Caravelle* 108: 15–33. https://doi.org/10.4000/caravelle.2218.

Mendes Flohr, Paul, and Yehuda Reinharz. 1995. *The Jew in the Modern World. A documentary History*. New York-Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Meyer, Marshall. 1986. *Confronting Injustice: An American Rabbi in Argentina*. Unpublished manuscript. The complete archive and personal papers of Rabbi M. Meyer in the Special Collection Library, Duke University.

Meyer, Marshall. 1989. *Mensajero*, ed. B. Plavnik. Buenos Aires: Comunidad Bet El.

Mora Muro, Jesús Iván. 2013. Pluralización religiosa de América Latina. *Relaciones. Estudios de historia y sociedad* 34(133): 273–279. Recuperado en 22 de julio de 2020. http://www.scielo.org.mx/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S0185-39292013000100012&lng=es&tlng=es.

Morello, Gustavo SJ, and Hugo H. Rabbia. 2019. Cambios religiosos y dinámicas demográficas: más allá de la Teoría de la Secularización. El caso del catolicismo en la ciudad de Córdoba, Argentina. *Revista de estudios sociales*, 69. Bogotà: Universidad de los Andes.

Münster, Irene/Saccal Rita: "The library of the Seminario Rabínico Latinoamericano. *Judaica Librarianship* 9(1–2): 125–130.

NUSO. 2015. Ser evangélico en América Latina. Elementos para un análisis. Noviembre-Diciembre, 260. https://nuso.org/articulo/ser-evangelico-en-america-latina/

Pérez Guadalupe, José Luis, and Sebastian Grundberger, eds. 2018. *Evangélicos y poder en América latina*. Lima: Instituto de estudios sociales cristianos y K. Adenauer Stiftung. https://www.kas.de/c/document_library/get_file?uuid=35e0675a-5108-856c-c821-c5e1725a64b7&groupId=269552.

Sandler, Shuki. 1992. *Interview with Marshall Meyer for the Oral History Collection*. New York: The American Jewish Committee.

Senkman, L., and M. Sznajder, eds. 1995. *El Legado del Autoritarismo. Derechos humanos y antisemitismo en la Argentina contemporánea*. Jerusalem: The Hebrew University, Instituto H. Truman.

Schenquer, Laura. 2016. Narrativas privadas y problemáticas colectivas: Religión judía y dictadura. *Perfiles latinoamericanos* 24 (47): 31–45.

Sherwin, Byron. 2004. *Workers of Wonders*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.

Shiff, Ofer. n.d. *Interview with Marshall Meyer*. The complete archive and personal papers of Rabbi M. Meyer in the Special Collection Library, Duke University.

Stark, Rodney, and W.S. Bainbridge. 1985. *The Future of Religion Secularization, Revival and Cult Formation*. New York: University of California Press.

Stark, Rodney, and W.S. Bainbridge. 1996. *A Theory of Religion*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.

Stark, Rodney, and R. Finke. 2000. *Acts of Faith*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Timerman, Jacobo. 1981. *Prisoner Without a Name, Cell Without a Number*. New York: Alfred Knopf.

Volcovich, Mariela, ed. 2009. *Marshall T. Meyer el hombre. Un rabino*. Buenos Aires: Grafos Impresiones y Diseños.

Weber, Max. 1977. *Economía y Sociedad*. México: Fondo de Cultura Económica.

Weiner, Eugene. 1988. El desafío de comprometer a los judíos post asimilacionistas. *Majshavot* XXVII: 3.

Weiner, Eugene. 1994. In *Jeshurun Journal*, March–April.

Young, Lawrence, ed. 1997. *Rational Choice Theory and Religion*. London: Routledge.
Zemer, Moshe, and Abraham Skorka. 1996. El edicto rabínico sobre conversión en la República Argentina, *Majshavot*, Vol. 34, N 1, Buenos Aires.

Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

Daniel Fainstein is the Dean and Professor of Jewish Studies at the Hebraica University in Mexico City. He completed his education at the University of Buenos Aires, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), where he earned his Ph.D. in Social and Political Sciences, summa cum laude. He studied at the Seminario Rabínico Latinoamericano "M. T. Meyer" and was a member of the "Jerusalem Fellows Program" at the Mandel School. Among his publications are *Judaism, Human Rights and Spirituality; An intellectual biography of Rabbi Marshall Meyer*, Shalom Publishing, Sao Paulo, 2013 (Portuguese); "A Pluralism based on honesty and mutual understanding: Rabi Marshall Meyer and Jewish Christian Dialogue" in *The Vatican Council II and the Jews*, Ariel Stofenmacher and Abraham Skorka (eds.), Seminario Rabínico Latinoamericano, Buenos Aires, 2015 (Spanish); *Jews and Judaism in History* (ed.), Anthology of Academic texts, Universidad Hebraica, México, 2016 (Spanish).