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Israel and Latin America
A Relationship To Be Developed

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A Relationship To Be Developed

I start this paper by stating my perception of Israel so that there are no misunderstandings.

It seems obvious that Israel has every right in the world to exist as an independent nation. By now, it is useless to discuss the legitimacy of the creation of the State of Israel. It was an act legitimized by a U.N. majority sixty-six years ago. For example, I do not think that anybody puts into doubt Brazil's right to exist as a state because the territory was granted to Portugal via a papal bull. It is clear that trying to destroy Israel has already cost much blood and insisting on following that violent path can cause even more serious future conflicts. That state is not going to evaporate and its society will not allow to be exterminated, although its worst enemies threaten to carry out a massacre.

Israel is the only real democracy in the region. Despite wars and authoritarian temptations, that naturally arise in any country whose military and intelligence sources are key to its survival, this nation—invariably subordinate to civilian authority—has kept in place fundamental freedoms, including freedom of expression and freedom of association, essential foundations for a real liberal democracy. Israel's parliament, continuously open, pluralistic, and deliberative, has not stopped self-renewing and engaging in passionate debate, in spite of its complex electoral law governing a system that gives too much leverage to small parties. Its political parties, including those of Arab-Israelis, that have significant leverage in parliament, have alternated in the conquest of power through free elections. Its judiciary is independent. In short, Israeli society embraces the rule of law.

Although it is a Jewish state, as defined by the U.N. when it authorized Israel's creation, it is actually a multiethnic society. There, along the Jewish majority, Islamic Arabs, Christian Arabs, Druze, and other ethnic, ideological, and religious minorities live together in peace. It is a mosaic where not even the Jews form a unitary block. Alongside the Ashkenazim (generally from Central Europe,) you will find Sephardim (from Spain,) and Mizrahim (originally from Arab countries). To these three historical groups—sometimes ill-assorted and without similar external features since the uniqueness of the

Jewish phenotype is a myth—you will have to add several thousand Falashim, dark-skinned Jews from Ethiopia, and more recently a million Russian Jews arrived during the 1990s – the survivors of the communist experience and debacle. They bring along and provide quite different worldviews based on their experiences, as it was perfectly predictable.

In Israel, whose society is based on today's Western values, there is complete freedom of worship—interestingly, the country has a high percentage of non-believers—, women and men have equal rights, and people are not at risk of persecution on grounds of sexual preferences.

I know that most of the leading groups (and, according to polls, most of the people), are willing to live next to a new Arab state, according to the 1947 U.N. approach, adapted to the current reality and as long as this state is peaceful and recognizes Israel's right to exist as an independent nation. Egypt and Jordan have acknowledged the latter and they have had a good relationship with Israel for decades now.

Having said that, it is inevitable to express my position regarding the recent fighting in Gaza. I believe it is evident that no nation can tolerate that a neighboring enemy, bent on one's destruction, launches thousands of rockets and missiles, or dig tunnels in order to carry out terrorist actions. Israel acts in self-defense and tries to do it with the kind of care that the enemy certainly does not take when attacked. Put the blame on the Hamas terrorists for the unfortunate damage to Gaza and Gazans.

For all the aforementioned, I find unfair and counterproductive the anti-Israel attitude regarding this unfortunate conflict that the Mercosur governments—very close to the orbit of nations identifying with the Socialism of the Twenty-First Century—have taken, with the exception of Paraguay. By the way, these are the same governments exhibiting an attitude that favors the interests and policies of the Iranian religious tyranny.

A Bit of History

After the disclaimer, let's start with a bit of history, but just a few strokes. It's always useful to look at the roots.

The Jewish presence in America began with Christopher Columbus's first voyage, which, by the way, started the same day—August 3, 1492—when the

Catholic Monarchs issued the edict that all Jews should be expelled from the kingdom of Castile and Aragon and its territories if Jews did not convert to Catholicism.

With the Admiral—a red-headed character, with freckles, white skin and blue eyes, to whom some historians attribute Hebrew origins—several Jewish or crypto-Jewish people came along. Who were they? They were all odd characters:

Rodrigo de Triana, the first who sighted land on October 12. Before anyone, he saw the glow of a small island of the Bahamas, but ended his days in North Africa, in Barbary, and converted to Islam because neither Columbus nor the Catholic Monarchs rewarded him properly.

Luis de la Torre, polyglot and interpreter of the expedition, because Columbus thought Hebrew as the language of Jesus (it was actually Aramaic, but that's another matter) would be the *lingua franca* of Cathay, the mythical Chinese kingdom described by Marco Polo and where Columbus thought he was going with the two caravels and the *nao capitana* when he came across a new continent. De la Torre did not find anyone who spoke Hebrew (or Arabic, that he also spoke;) however, in Cuba, he saw an Indian blowing smoke out of his the mouth while holding a burning leaf in the nostrils: He had discovered tobacco.

Maestre Bernal was the physician on board. The most common illnesses he had to treat were diarrhea and scurvy. Diarrhea was caused by food corruption. The “bizcochos” (as they called the cookies twice baked in the oven as the French *biscuits*) would teem with worms and fungi and needed softening by soaking them in wine or water. In those days no one knew that scurvy was the consequence of a lack of vitamin C. (Actually, the Portuguese found it out when they left some dying sailors in a Caribbean island to perish alone. When they returned to bury the bodies, the sailors were healthy and cured because they had been eating fruits. They called the island Curaçao, which means “healing,” according to one of the explanations given by some linguists.)

Alonso Calle, or Lacalle, was the treasurer of the expedition. He must have been an important bureaucrat, very well versed in numbers. Keep in mind that the expedition (just under 100 people) had a triple commercial angle. First, the Crown was to receive one-fifth of any booty obtained. (According to research by economist Diocenis Espinosa, Columbus's four voyages cost

the astronomical sum of 623 million maravedis, equivalent to 2.53 billion euros today.) Second, those who armed the expedition expected a percentage of the profits (they were going in search of valuable spices: cinnamon, pepper, cloves, etc.) Third, the expeditionists wanted their own reward. By that time Fra Luca Paciolo, an Italian friar, had already popularized the double-entry system of bookkeeping and the accounting records reflected fairly accurately inventories. Alfonso Calle, or Lacalle, was probably well versed in basic accounting.

Regardless of these services to the Crown, the religious prejudices of that era were stronger than common sense, even stronger than one's own interests. Thanks to Bernal Diaz del Castillo's chronicles, it is known that Hernando Alonso, a notorious *conquistador* and shipwright who built the brigantines used by Hernán Cortés to invade and dominate Tenochtitlan along with a handful of adventurers, was burned alive at the stake, accused of being a Jew and a Judaizer according to an *Auto de Fe* (Act of faith) that took place in Mexico in 1528. Alonso was not only a skilled craftsman, but also a successful entrepreneur who achieved remarkable wealth as a trader. It is possible that this envy-generating factor might have perhaps cost him his life. A priest accused Alonso before the Holy Office to have seen many years earlier in Santo Domingo how Alonso rubbed the head of his newly baptized son with wine to remove the traces of the holy water. During his torture, Alonso acknowledged that he was in fact a crypto-Jew. The pain was too much and Alonso would have probably admitted any offense or crime just to end the torture.

Israel and Latin America Today

Of course, all this is ancient history now. For various reasons, almost always as a consequence of persecution in Europe or in the Ottoman Empire, Jews started going to Latin America in significant numbers. Originally, Jews settled in Surinam and Curacao, where the Dutch were more tolerant. Then, gradually, Jews moved to Latin America, especially after the creation of the republics, including Lusoamerica, since Brazil was also a favorite destination for the Jews (the first Latin American synagogue was founded in Recife.)

Roughly speaking, it is estimated that, from Mexico to Patagonia, there are around 500, 000 Jews. Approximately one in every thousand Latin Americans is Jewish (less than half the global average.) Out of that half a



million, more than 300,000 Jews live in Argentina, most of them in Buenos Aires, though one always has the famous Jewish gauchos, which Alberto Gurchonoff immortalized in his famous book of the early twentieth century, entitled, precisely, *The Jewish Gauchos*, and even Ruben Darío did it in his *Canto a la Argentina* in the verse that begins “ Cantad, judíos a la pampa.” These numbers, of course, do not depict the phenomenon in its entirety. By religious definition, Jew is only the one who is born from the womb of a Jewish mother, or who converts to Judaism after the complicated process that a religion that does not proselytize requires; however, many Jews intermarried with Gentile women, while others, men and women, walked away from Judaism, so that people with Jewish roots are many more than those who claim to be members of that community.

Only in Buenos Aires it is estimated that a million people have at least one Jewish grandparent. A fact less than surprising if one recalls that when the Jews were expelled from Spain in 1492, perhaps a sixth of the population in that nation had some kinship with the Jews in the region since Hispania was a Roman province. Ultimately the Jewish community in the days of Jesus was very large.

According to the census of Jews carried out by Emperor Claudius in the mid-first century AD, there were almost seven million Jews in the empire, which means that one of every ten Romans had Jewish blood, but this proportion increased in the Greek region of the empire (Hellenistic Rome,) in which one of every five inhabitants probably had Jewish roots.

In general, Latin American Jewish communities are characterized by their industriousness, business success, and high educational level. Their members are often part of the academic, artistic, professional, business, and financial world. It is rare, however, to find Jews in slums or prisons with common criminals. They are certainly a very beneficial immigration to the countries that host them. They create wealth, jobs, and add quality to the general standard of living.

Probably at the mid-twentieth century that was the general perception regarding Jews in Latin America: very positive. No wonder the creation of Israel as a Jewish nation, as stated by U.N. Resolution 181 and adopted on November 29, 1947, was possible, first, thanks to the vote of Guatemala and Uruguay, which tipped the scales in that direction within the committee drafting the proposal that divided the Palestinian territory into two and allocated a part of the territory to the Jews and the other to the Arabs. Second, thanks to the Latin American vote, in which thirteen countries of the region voted in favor, six abstained (abstaining actually favored passage) and only one, Cuba, voted against the resolution. At that time the Latin American bloc was the largest of the fledgling United Nations.

A Mutually-Beneficial Relationship

The history of Israel as an independent nation is thus linked to the Latin American will that sought to crystallize the aspiration of the Zionist Jews. Perhaps the pending issue now is the forging of closer ties between the region and that country of the Middle East, mainly because it is fair and conducive for both Latin America and Israel.

Let us analyze first an undeniable physical reality. Israel has approximately the size and population of the smallest country in Latin America: El Salvador. (Israel: 22,072 km² and 8 million people. El Salvador: 21,400 km² and 6.5 million people.)



Regardless of this physical reality, does it make sense for Latin American countries and Israel to strive in forging special strategic relationships? In my view, it would be mutually and highly convenient at least for the following ten reasons:

- In addition to the significant Jewish presence in Latin America, there is no doubt that there is a close relationship between Jewish culture and Latin America, where the dominant religion is Christianity, be it either its Catholic or Protestant versions. It is not false to say that Latin America's ethical vision fits into a very strong Judeo-Christian tradition. That link is no small feat. It has been said before: Every Westerner has two homelands; one's own and the one of Abraham, Moses, and Jesus, three exceptional Jews. One cannot understand a country such as Mexico without acknowledging the devotion to the Virgin of Guadalupe – the local depiction of Jewish Mary or Miriam, the mother of Jesus. Our definition of good and evil and the conception of the transcendent destiny of human beings held by a majority of Latin American believers emerge from that Judeo-Christian ethic. Today's Jewish spiritual world is represented by the modern State of Israel. We are somehow part of the same family.

- However, besides the obvious spiritual bond present in the Judeo-Christian tradition, in Israel there are significant Jewish Hispanic communities, mostly from Argentina, and in smaller numbers, from other Latin American countries. In other words, there is already a human link that should be used as a conduit in both directions. (In my capacity as a journalist, I remember having visited a Jewish-Cuban kibbutz during my first visit to Israel in 1972, due to a terrorist attack at Lod Airport carried out by a Japanese suicide commando squad. Jewish Cubans arrived in 1948 to participate in the defense of the newly-created country during the War of Independence that immediately broke out.)
- And, of course, the Sephardim, this important branch of the Jewish Diaspora from Spain, expelled in 1492 (about 200,000 people,) many of whose descendants still speak Ladino, the sole surviving Castilian dialect and vernacular language used by thousands of these people to communicate. Recently, Spain has offered them the possibility of acquiring Spanish citizenship without giving up their current one.
- Although it is a small country and, thus, with a consistent economic volume in regards to the size of its population, Israel has a GDP of about 273 billion, almost as much as the six Central American countries combined (population: 44 million), reaching an annual GDP per capita of \$ 36,200 at purchasing power parity. Obviously, Israel is a remarkable potential market for Latin American goods, since it annually imports close to eighty billion dollars.
- Israel can also be a supplier of medicines and medical equipment, as well as an investor. For example, the pharmaceutical company Teva, which operates in sixty countries including Mexico, Argentina, Chile, Brazil, and Peru, has forty factories that manufacture drugs and pharmaceutical products, gives employment to about 50,000 people and has twenty-one research and development centers. The country exports more than seventy billion dollars annually.
- It has been rightly said that Israel is the “Silicon Valley” of the Middle East. According to the bestseller *The Start-Up Nation*, the country has more companies listed on the NASDAQ, the premier stock exchange for technology, than South Korea, Japan, Singapore, China, India and



Europe combined. Israelis are the great entrepreneurs of today's world. Every technological company starting, or already operating locally, does it thinking about the world market, even if it is a tiny company with a dozen employees.

- The image of a country is very important in international trade. Israel's image in the technical and scientific realms is excellent. Therefore, economic and technological ties between Israel and the United States would be useful for establishing links among high-tech Latin American companies, such as those in Brazil, Uruguay, Chile, Mexico and Argentina, and Israel. This way is easier to gain access to venture capital that abounds in the United States, but it is in short supply in Latin America. It is also easier and

safer to reach the big tech companies if associated to Israeli companies. Google paid almost a billion dollars to an Israeli company for Waze, a social traffic app. That is more or less the same amount that the Japanese company Rakuten invested in the messaging app Viber. As we all know, the business world has a lot to do with connections and the ability to trade. In this regard, Israel has much to offer to Latin American entrepreneurs.

- We rightly say that we live in the age of knowledge. The countries that thrive are not those with more natural resources, as the case of Israel demonstrates, but those who take more seriously and intensely the normal process of development: First imitate, then innovate, and later on become capable of creating your own. However, all these processes take place inside the companies, and, if anything, today's Israel distinguishes itself as this small nation that is a true incubator of business initiatives. One of the challenges for Latin America is to learn that rich sequence from Israel.

- The State of Israel has dozens of generous aid programs for less developed countries and also enjoys long-term experience on how to convey that information to be effective. Israel's expertise on issues such as agricultural irrigation, water desalination, citrus growing, security, and a dozen other special areas is well known. In addition to the possible areas of cooperation, it is important to gauge how Israel produces goods and services. Since it is a small country with limited resources, Israel's knowledge, or know-how, is much better suited to the needs of Latin American nations.
- In the same way that cooperation with the State of Israel can be very fruitful due to its knowledge-transfer programs, an even more spectacular and diversified result can be achieved by establishing areas of cooperation with Israel's civil society. Universities, research centers, hospitals, and leading companies—in other words, the spots of excellence in the country—can be a significant source of knowledge acquisition. Fortunately, English is the *lingua franca* of the country; it is not necessary to speak Hebrew in order to communicate. Besides, many people also speak Spanish due to their Hispanic or Sephardic origins.

The Israeli Position

In all, Israel, which only yesterday was the foundation to forge the Judeo-Christian civilization, is today for Latin Americans a sort of extraordinary think-tank, an interesting market, and a source of economic partnership; we should explore together how to achieve various forms of academic and business cooperation for mutual benefit.

It is convenient for Israel to get along with the Latin American world and build some kind of strategic alliances for two obvious reasons:

- Because, as it happened at the time of its creation as a modern state, Israel needs political allies to help the country cope with the unfair international anti-Israel harassment.
- Because the large Latin American market of more than 500 million people is a business segment perfectly suited for the Israeli production pattern. While Latin Americans are generally commodity exporters, Israelis export complex products with high-added value.



Thus, it is time to get closer to Israel because it is, as I have said before, the only real democracy in that tortured part of the world; besides, and why not, it is also about time that our people, who endure so many shortages and suffer so many difficulties, benefit in a legitimate and lasting way.

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