

FINDING COMMUNITY IN CUBA

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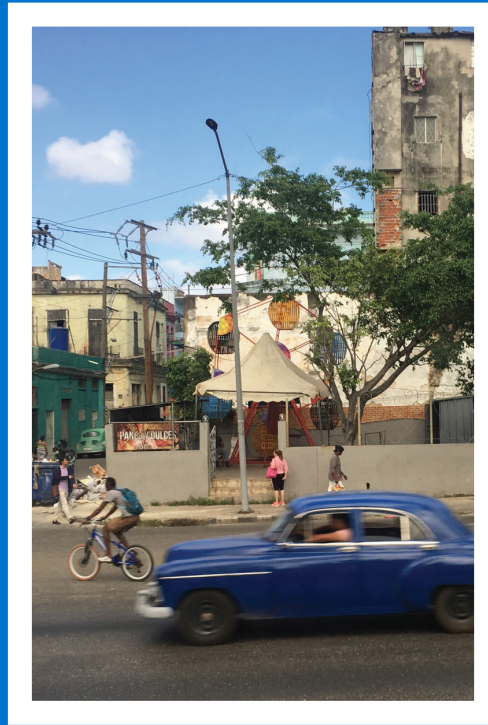
This past winter, my family visited Cuba on a person-to-person cultural exchange. We toured Havana and its environs, spent time with local residents, and learned about the Cuban way of life, culture, arts, history, tobacco industry, and outsized passion for baseball.

Much in Cuba is not quite what I expected. The US embargo – which Cubans call the “blockade” – is an ever-present reality, but if you look closely you find exceptions. For example, you can find American food products there. Our guide explained that in 2002, Cuba was hit with

a devastating hurricane. American companies were granted an exemption from the embargo to supply food and medicine to the island. That 2002 exemption is still in place, allowing for familiar American brands to reach Cuba’s shelves. I wasn’t expecting to find Pepsi and Pringles in Havana, but there they were.

I also wasn’t expecting to find private home ownership in the socialist country, but I learned that many families own their apartments. At the time of the revolution in 1959, families were allowed to purchase the individual apartments they lived in, but no individual could own the buildings themselves. On occasion we would spot a drab building with one section of the exterior beautifully restored; our guide explained that a tenant likely had wealthy relatives abroad who had sent money for repairs. These surprise patches of color were a perfect match to the brightly colored 1950s vintage American-model cars that still cruise Havana’s streets.

The most delightful surprise came toward the end of our trip. Our guide asked if anyone had an interest in



visiting one of the few synagogues in the country. A small group of us said yes, and we were dropped off at the doors of Temple Beth Shalom. There we were greeted by the synagogue’s longtime president, an engaging woman in her 80s named Adela Dworin. Like many of the Jews of Cuba, Dworin’s family came to Cuba from Poland in the 1930s to escape the pogroms, intending to stay in Cuba temporarily on their way to the United States. By the 1950s there were some 15,000 to 25,000 Jews in Cuba. Then came the revolution, and the vast majority of Jews emigrated to neighboring countries.

The remaining Cuban Jewish community survives on donations – both money and supplies – from abroad. Many Jewish travelers to Cuba bring medicine and basic staples to stock a small pharmacy operated at the synagogue. Visitors also bring books, including PJ Library books from our Spanish series. It was heartwarming to find PJ Library books in the synagogue library for all to enjoy.

We sent word back to our tour group that we would not be joining them that evening; we would be staying for Friday night services and Shabbat dinner. The service was led by two Cuban teenagers, and the dinner was served by the temple’s youth group. We followed along as best we could in Spanish and Hebrew, but we didn’t need to catch every word to connect with the many people we met that evening. We felt the embrace of a welcoming community, and we left hopeful that those teen leaders would carry the Cuban Jewish community forward.