Para Hilá

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Fig. 1. Calle de los judíos (Judíos Street), next to Lima's cathedral, ca. 1910.
Photo credit: Carlos Ausejo, Repositorio PUCP.

Introduction

The Geography of Jewish Lima

There is little indication of Jewishness in Lima, the capital city of Perú. Yet, there are some rare and hidden traces of what could be recognized as Jewish *Limeño* elements in the city. Back in colonial times, for instance, there was a block—a stretch of one hundred meters (330 feet)—on a road, which was named Calle de los judíos (Jews), just by the cathedral in the Historic Center of Lima. Having been the seat of the viceroyalty of Peru, which was considered for a while to be one of the most important dominions of the Spanish Empire due to its vast mineral resources,[1] Lima had the questionable honor of having its own branch of the Tribunal of the Holy Inquisition. The block received its peculiar name because of a painting featuring Jews that was hung nearby. It is also said to have been the place on which the names of those accused of heresy (*judaizantes*) by the tribunal were written.[2] By the mid-nineteenth century, though, the colonial setting was replaced by a more modern, urban setting made of streets in which many continuing blocks shared the same name. Thus, Judíos became Jirón Huallaga, a more suitable name given the town's initiative to name each street after other provinces in the territory.

A few centuries later, by the 1990s, a new Jewish-themed street came about. This time around, the Jewish landmark would represent a position of power, as a couple of men who were involved in the Jewish community

1 See *New World Encyclopedia*, s.v. "Peru," accessed May 2, 2020, https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Peru#Credits. See also Santiago Belausteguigoitia, "Eso vale un Perú y un Potosí," *El País*, July 3rd, 1999, https://elpais.com/diario/1999/07/04/andalucia/931040545_850215.html.

2 Juan Bromley, *Las viejas calles de Lima* (Lima: Municipalidad Metropolitana de Lima, 2019, 281-282.

leadership found a way to rename a street in the well-off neighborhood of San Isidro.

Fruit Trees and Military Men

Rabbi Moshe Ben Maimon is one of the most famous rabbis and Jewish thinkers. As such, it is safe to say that he is definitely not a well-known figure among Peruvians. Why would he be? Judaism and Jews were not particularly visible or recognizable to most Peruvians until at least the early 1990s.

Perhaps the lack of visibility can be explained by the fact that intolerance to Judaism and other non-Catholic forms of religiosity were common at the time of the Conquest of Peru; or perhaps it was because Peru was a distant territory and unattractive to Jewish immigrants. Why, then, is there a street in the upper-class San Isidro district named after a North African, Jewish medieval thinker?

San Isidro is a very wealthy neighborhood in metropolitan Lima. Its development began in the 1920s, and the way the land was developed and eventually used shows how San Isidro was meant for the rich from the very get-go. Indeed, by 1925 there was a country club and a polo field. No other district in Lima has can boast of such things.

Even though the Jewish school, León Pinelo, was established in 1946 in the working-class neighborhood of Breña, the changing social composition of its pupils parallels the social trajectory of most Limeño Jews who, within a generation, moved out of the working—(Ashkenazi) and middle-class (Sephardi and Yekke) and into the upper-middle class. The first Jewish building to be built by the community—as opposed to buildings that were rented or purchased and then refurbished for Jewish-related use—was the Jewish school. The new building was strategically located in San Isidro in 1952 as a means to collective upward social and economic mobility, even though most Jews would not be economically able to move to the neighborhood for years to come. Yet San Isidro embodied the highest aspirations of a very small community made up of immigrants and their descendants. Moving to San Isidro and its bordering neighborhoods signified economic and social ascent.

The school was named after León Pinelo, a converso who served as the rector (chancellor) of Universidad de San Marcos in the seventeenth century. The name was suggested to the first Jewish law students in Lima

by their university professors, themselves Catholics. For the professors, Diego de León Pinelo, the descendant of a Portuguese Jew,[3] represented an anomaly: an allegedly non-Christian who became the most powerful person in the most prestigious academic institution in the viceroyalty. The name might also have meant something more contemporary—namely, a hidden, discreet form of Jewishness that would not stand in the way of social acceptance, economic prosperity and—to some extent—professional prestige. In other words, the professors regarded Peruvian forms of Jewishness in the same way as the first generation of Peruvian Jews—a generation who felt comfortable enough to create and invest in community institutions while keeping Judaism away from the public eye, just in case.

The school sits on Los Manzanos Street (Apple Trees Street), just a block away from San Isidro's exclusive golf club. It occupies a large portion of a *manzana* (an area contained by four streets—in the shape of a square), dominating one side of the sixth block of Los Manzanos and one side of the fourteenth block of Avenida Juan Pezet. There are several streets in the area named after trees: Los Naranjos (Orange Trees), Los Cedros (Cedar Trees), Los Sauces (Willow Trees), Los Pinos (Pine Trees), and so on. The surrounding streets and avenues are named after nineteenth-century generals and statesmen (Juan Pese, Pedro Portillo, Felipe S. Salaverry, Javier Prado). Strikingly, then, trees and a past defined by powerful military and political leaders are widely represented on the street map of that part of San Isidro.

By the end of the 1990s, most Jewish Limeños lived in San Isidro. And what better way to get a hold of such privileged space than by renaming a street after Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon? By their own initiative, two men who were community leaders decided on an intellectual figure for the street name. Whereas León Pinelo school was given the thoroughly Spanish name of a Jewish converso, this time the name would be that of an unambiguously Jewish figure and, more importantly, it would be chosen without any extra-Jewish influence. As I will argue throughout this book, the 1990s were the right time to claim the street for the Jewish community; perhaps it is simply a new version of the colonial Calle de Judíos, but this time Jews themselves owned the narrative.

3 See "Diego León Pinelo," Real Academia de la Historia, accessed on May 3, 2020, http://dbe.rah.es/biografias/35861/diego-leon-pinelo. Also, see Ricardo Falla, *Frondas peruanas: Salinas, León Pinelo, Meléndez. Inicios del discurso ensayístico* Lima: Fondo Editorial de la Universidad de San Marcos, 2012.

Los Maimónides

In 2020, I took a walk on Maimónides Street. It is a six-block street and each block seems to represent a different piece of the same puzzle. The first begins on Lima's longest avenue, Avenida Javier Prado, and ends on a quiet street, Norberto Eléspuru (a nineteenth-century general and politician). Blocks three and four are peaceful too, both in terms of business and contestedness: they either have a newer street sign, the kind that is now commonly used all over the city, or no sign whatsoever. It is in the fourth block that some form of tension arises: a newer street sign that reads "Ca. Maimónides—Cuadra 4" (Maimónides St.—Block 4) stands next to an older sign, the kind that was used until the end of the twentieth century (see fig. 2). The latter, a small wall of plaster or white-painted concrete reads "(Los Manzanos)"; that is, it shows the previous street name, Los Manzanos, in parentheses. Right above these words, there is a thick layer of white paint that unsuccessfully covers another, undesired word. The word appears to be "Maimónides" (see fig. 3).

On the next block, there is another small wall. It reads, "Calle Los Manzanos"—no parentheses, no room for another name. And finally, at the feet of the school building on the sixth block, another set of street signs remind the passerby of some dispute that few would even notice. There are now three street signs: the newer version of the sign which reads "Ca. Maimónides—Cuadra 6" and two small walls. The first one is attached to one of the school's external walls and the second stands at the end of the sidewalk. The first one reads "Calle Maimónides," while the second—about a meter away—is quite different. The original wall read "Los Maimónides—(Los Manzanos)," as if "Maimónides," the Greek version of "son of Maimon," were actually a tree. To fix it, it seems someone ordered a smaller portion of the same wall to be placed on top of the tree-version of the thinker and it now reads "MAIMÓNIDES," in capital letters, no "calle" (street) (see fig. 4).

This short, but meaningful, walk along this odd street in San Isidro leads to several observations. The first one is that Jewish culture is so unusual in Lima that the Limeño version of the most renowned Jewish philosopher ended up being a made-up tree. The second observation is that some Jewish men in the mid-1990s wanted to claim for their community the name of the street their Jewish school—the only one in the country—stood on and that their request somehow got approved by the municipality of San Isidro. The third is that the neighbors who lived in the area were not easily

Fig. 2. Altered Street Sign on the Forth Block of Maimónides Street, San Isidro

Fig. 3. Rivalrous New and Old Street Signs in San Isidro

Fig. 4. Old Street Sign with New Addition

to persuade into having their otherwise common San Isidro tree-themed street renamed after someone they had never heard of and did not care about. As noted above, some neighbors painted over the word "Maimonides" on one of the small wall-like signs; and then everyone went back to their usual business and the seemingly rivalrous street names stayed there, aloof, next to each other.

Invisibly there

Before San Isidro became the most desired neighborhood for Lima's Jews, a few upper-class Jews lived in Santa Beatriz, near the Historic Town Center. The Sephardi synagogue (1920-2010) was there, and right in front of it was Parroquia Cristo Rey, a Catholic parish. Rabbi Abraham Benhamu, who has served as rabbi at the synagogue for over fifty years even became good friends with the church's priest. In 2010, the congregation of the synagogue moved to a refurbished house near the school in San Isidro, less than one hundred meters (330 ft) from Parroquia Medalla Milagrosa, another Catholic parish. This spatial proximity suggests both peaceful coexistence and indifference. Unlike the church, which usually hangs large posters advertising services (Holy Communion, confirmation, mass), the synagogue is very discreet. The only thing to even hint that a synagogue is there is a line of metal bars surrounding the building to prevent car bombs, a vestibule accessed by a double door, and a mezuzah. Avoiding unwanted attention serves two purposes: physical safety and, perhaps just as importantly, to maintain a closed, exclusive, social system. Yet both buildings stand within feet of each other.

Other indications of proximity and complete unawareness abound. For instance, the Ashkenazi congregation, Union Israelita del Perú, used

to hold Yom Kippur services just steps away from a bakery, making it impossibly hard for people fasting to spend the day at the synagogue. In 1990, the congregation moved out of that building and held High Holiday services at the school. Unfortunately for them, there was a French bakery called La Parisienne right in front of the school, which also emitted the unparalleled scent of freshly baked baguettes at noon.

What does this simultaneous proximity, indifference, and apparent invisibility tell us about Jewish life in Lima? Is it representative and constitutive of Jewish experience in a postcolonial, developing nation? How do the city of Lima and Jewishness interrelate? Are there any links between these two concrete and imagined sources of identity? Is there a Jewish space in Lima and, if so, what does it mean to inhabit such a space?

In search of a Jewish neighborhood

This book contributes to two academic spheres: a) work on Peruvian minorities, particularly in the field or urban anthropology and sociology; and b) the field of Latin American Jewish studies.

In the 1970s, an interest in Peruvian immigrant ("ethnic") minorities emerged.[4] There were not many books or articles on the topic for a couple of decades, though; but then, in the 1990s, with the election of a first-generation Peruvian as president for the first time ever, the interest reemerged, usually with an apologetic tone. That is to say, publications would usually state that Peru was a backward country until the arrival of Italian/Japanese/Chinese/Arab or any other non-Spanish immigrants. Quite often, writers stressed the social, political, and economic experiences of immigrants and overlooked other elements such as the journey towards rootedness, interactions with other groups, and so forth.

Within the same forty years, there has been an increased interest in Latin American studies, particularly in North America and Israel, and scholars have written about Jewish Latin America from various points of view. They have usually concentrated on those countries that have large Jewish populations in the region, namely Argentina, Brazil and Mexico. They have also studied countries in which Jewishness and national politics have been intertwined, such as Cuba and, more recently,

4 Luis Millones, *Minorías étnicas en el Perú* (Lima: PUCP, 1973).

Venezuela.[5] Countries with smaller Jewish populations, like Peru, have commonly been overlooked.

Indeed, research on Jewish Latin America has usually:

1) studied Jewishness as an isolated phenomenon, independent of the historic narrative and the social fabric of the territory being considered (along the same lines of what was the case with the research devoted to Peruvian immigrant minorities);
2) taken Jewishness to be under constant threat, that is, stressing the experiences of exclusion and hatred in each country;
3) assumed an "exceptionalist" gaze, thinking about Jews as a group with fundamentally diasporic traits.[6] According to this view, being Jewish in Lima is comparable to being Jewish in Sao Paulo or Sydney.

Thus, this book is an attempt at bringing together these two strains of research by addressing Jewish Peruvian-ness as a process of negotiation between a national and a transnational dimension—a negotiation which is not exclusively Jewish, but which reveals the ways in which Peruvian-ness, in general, is conceived.

While considering the intersection between Jewishness and Peruvianness in Lima, one could perhaps ask wonder if there is a "Jewish neighborhood" in Lima. By doing this, instead of referring to actual geographic coordinates, the question aims at mapping out the aspirations and identity reconfigurations of Limeño Jewishness. With Jews being a predominantly urban minority, where does the articulation between Lima and Jewishness take place? And what rules organize this articulation?

The Jewish population in Lima has never been large, even though Lima is the biggest, most populated, and most important city in Perú, a mid-sized country. By all standards, it is a very small Jewish community, with less than five thousand members at its peak in the 1950s. Yet, by the 1930s there were as many as three congregations, each representing a subgroup of Jewish immigrants living in different parts of the city according to their social class and geographic and ethnic origins. The three subgroups, which

5 In addition to the exodus of Cuban and Venezuelan Jews, both Cuba and Venezuela broke diplomatic relations with Israel—in 1973 and 2009, respectively.

6 Jeffrey Lesser and Raanan Rein, "Challenging Particularity: Jews as a Lens on Latin American Ethnicity," *Latin American and Caribbean Ethnic Studies* 1, no. 2 (2006): 249-263.

will be addressed in detail in the following pages, are Ashkenazi, German-speaking or Yekke, and Sephardi.

If we take as a reference the history of Jewish buildings—that is, buildings either used by the Jewish communal organizations or built by the community to facilitate Jewish life in the city—the so-called "Jewish neighborhood" began as a series of enclaves. Lima's Jewish community was founded by immigrants, the first of which arrived in postindependence Peru from Western Europe during the second half of the nineteenth century. German-speaking, they were so successful at inserting themselves into the social fabric of nineteenth century Lima that their descendants ceased to set themselves apart as Jews.

These German-speaking Jews established the only exclusively Jewish cemetery and the oldest synagogue in the country. The synagogue is still operating in a building that was originally purchased from an English Christian church in the late 1930s. It is located in the upper-middle-class neighborhood of Miraflores, and was refounded by new German immigrants arriving in the 1920s and 1930s. The Sephardi, who came mainly from the Ottoman Empire, were also urban, middle-class immigrants and built their first synagogue in the upper-middle-class district of Santa Beatriz. In contrast, the Ashkenazi, who were the largest and most influential subgroup, came with few resources, fleeing mainly from Bessarabia and today's Poland under more precarious conditions than the other two subgroups. The Ashkenazi had more than one synagogue, and at some point they even held rival religious services, all of them in Cercado de Lima, near the Historic Center. They originally settled in the working-class neighborhoods of El Chirimoyo and Chacra Colorada.

By the 1950s, some members of the Ashkenazi community had significantly improved their lot. Some wealthy businessmen, wishing to signal their community's economic success, decided to build a synagogue, the only one to be ever constructed for that specific purpose. It was meant to be larger than the previous halls and homes they had rented or purchased before. Deciding upon the location of the synagogue was no trivial thing. The businessmen were making a statement on behalf of a community that had already learned how to interpret Peruvian social norms. They were faced with a difficult choice: Should they build the synagogue in the upper-middle-class neighborhood of Jesus María, where many Jews already lived, or place it in San Isidro, where only the very wealthy could live? Two prominent businessmen and community leaders represented each side

of the debate. One of them, who sympathized with Labor Zionism in the recently founded State of Israel, insisted on building the synagogue on Avenida Brasil in Jesus María, given that many families were moving there and it was still close to the working-class neighborhoods many Jews were still living in. The other leader supported center-right Zionism and wanted to build the synagogue in San Isidro. The Ashkenazi congregation ended up splitting for the next three decades, before they got back together in San Isidro, as had been predicted by one of the businessmen.

This decision was crucial given that Jews were still trying to adapt to a society in which being deemed "gente decente" (decent people, people of worth) meant having achieved a combination of social and economic status and race when trying to belong. Indeed, in a postcolonial country such as Peru, class and race are inevitably, and intimately, still intertwined. Given that by the second half of the twentieth century Judaism and Jewish culture were increasingly associated with advanced, postindustrial societies, Lima's Jews could claim a status above that of other Peruvian minorities.

Throughout this book, I will argue that Jewishness in Lima has been shaped by social transformations that took place in Peru throughout the twentieth century. Not long before the era known as "the decline of the oligarchy" in Peru (that is, the late 1960s), their identification with nations like the United States and Israel opened San Isidro—both symbolically and spatially—to the descendants of Jewish immigrants from various ethnic backgrounds and territorial origins. I will also argue that their integration was made possible by Peru's embrace of market economics, the accumulation of capital, and the logic of consumption as democratizing agents. This, combined with changes in the attitude of the Catholic Church, to other religions, and the vindication of minorities around the world gave Lima's Jews the social position of a "First World Minority."[7]

Nevertheless, Judaism and Lima have not integrated. The religion remains invisible in urban and public space in the city. The threats of international terrorism, such as the AMIA bombing in Buenos Aires in 1994, might also be a reminder that, despite Jews' social and economic situation, performing Jewishness in Lima is not as safe, thus confirming a minority status of sorts. These threats, though, have not stopped the Jewish population

7 Misha Klein, *Kosher Feijoada and Other Paradoxes of Jewish life in Sao Paulo* (Gainsville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2012), 201.

of Buenos Aires from organizing cultural activities in public spaces according to the Jewish festival calendar; nor has it prevented a Reform rabbi from becoming a public representative (diputado de la nación).

Studying Jewish Peru

In 1977, two researchers from Tel Aviv University wrote the following about Jewish communities in Latin America:

> The situation of Jewish communities in Latin America raises interesting questions about the Jews' ability to retain their individual, specific traits in a culturally homogenizing society with strong nationalist trends. . . . These questions are, however, of interest not only to the study of Jewish problems but also to the study of Latin American societies—especially the urban sector and the middle classes where Jews are concentrated.[8]

Using dictatorships and repressive nationalisms as contexts, the article claims that the descendants of Jewish immigrants to Latin America will face a serious challenge—namely, they will remain socially different while enjoying the perks of being fully-fledged citizens. According to the authors, first generation Latin American Jews had to resist "the temptations and pressure to assimilate."[9] By "assimilate," the authors mean Jews removing all traits of social differentiation, thus going through a transformation from one kind of perceived homogeneity, to another,[10] that is, assuming essentialist Jewish features implicitly understood by the reader at the time the article was published.

Forty years later, the political situations in most parts of the region are different, with the left and the right rising and falling in the wake of the Washington Consensus and other globalizing trends. The academic discourse on Jewish Latin America is different as well. Indeed, the debate on this topic is shifting in Israel, North America, and in Latin America from a focus on the experiences of antisemitism in the region and the hardships

8 David Schers and Hadassa Singer, "The Jewish Communities of Latin America: External and Internal Factors in their Development," *Jewish Social Studies* 39, no. 3 (1977): 241.

9 Ibid.: 242.

10 Rogers Brubaker, *Ethnicity Without Groups* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), 130.

related to Jewish self-preservation ("the weakening of Jewish identity")[11] to consideration of the ways in which Jews have become part of society at large, just like any other group. It is a move away from an "exceptionalist" stance,[12] in which Jewishness is viewed as a phenomenon isolated from the rest of the social world and instead regards Jewishness as rooted in local and national experience. In short, the latter blurs the barriers between the minority group and society as a whole.

This is the framework within which historians Jeffrey Lesser and Raanan Rein propose thinking about Jewishness as an ingredient of Latin American narratives since "Jewish-Latin Americans, like all other minority groups, are not *only* Diasporic but are national as well."[13] If earlier work on Jewish Latin America were keen on finding common elements among Jews in Argentina, Brazil, Chile and Uruguay, then, and sought to discover them in other Jewish communities in the region, the newer approach strengthens the notion that the unique, *national* experience of Jewish communities offers an opportunity to understand the way in which different groups in the region interrelate. It is in this framework that I found of use in the case of Limeño Jews.

Along the same lines, in the 1970s an interest in Peru's "ethnic minorities"[14] seems to have emerged. This interest peaked once minority Peruvians began occupying important public positions. The election of Alberto Fujimori in 1990, a first generation Peruvian, made this trend all the more visible.[15]

Some scholars devoted to these topics[16] have focused on minorities that are most noticeable due to the size of their populations (compared to other

11 Schers and Singer, "The Jewish Communities of Latin America," 242.

12 Lesser and Rein, "Challenging Particularity," 255.

13 Jeffrey Lesser and Raanan Rein, *Rethinking Jewish-Latin Americans* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 2008), 5.

14 This is the term used by possibly the first academic book published in Peru explicitly addressing immigrant minorities in Peru. See Luis Millones, *Minorías étnicas en el Perú* (Lima: Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú, 1973).

15 Leyla Bartet, *Memorias de cedro y olivo* (Lima: Fondo Editorial del Congreso del Perú, 2005), 175.

16 See Chikako Yamawaki, *Estrategias de vida de los inmigrantes asiáticos en el Perú* (Lima: Instituto de Estudios Peruanos and The Japan Center for Area Studies, 2002); Amelia Morimoto, *Población de origen japonés en el Perú: perfil actual* (Lima: Centro Cultural