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Sh'ma שמע

A City's Sprawl:
Blurred Boundaries and Insular Lives

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Daniel Sokatch: Los Angeles is a place where some of the more traditional notions of what constitutes suburban and urban are blurred. When I first moved to L.A., I was driving on the freeway toward Compton, and I saw these pretty little pastel-colored single family bungalows with a canopy of palm trees over them. To my East-coast eyes, it looked like something totally other than what I knew it to be by reading the newspaper. That experience introduced me to Los Angeles as a city that belies notions of what constitutes not just urban and suburban, but also inner city and economically vulnerable and prosperous communities. Observing these communities from the freeway, which is where we spend a lot of time, they look very similar.

Here, urban and suburban communities have a different set of meanings. By this I mean that what would be understood as an "inner city" neighborhood in other cities is, in L.A., just as likely to be a place that looks a lot like what the rest of the country thinks is "suburban." The toughest places in L.A. are often "suburban" in appearance. And suburban doesn't necessary have the same connotations as it may have elsewhere. It doesn't refer to a set of physical or geographical characteristics. What is the relationship, Josh, between the class and economic conditions in neighborhoods in terms of the Jewish community and in terms of creating Jewish community? What does it mean to be Jewish in Los Angeles and what does it mean to be in relationship with the other communities that blend and blur into the Jewish community?

Josh Kun: Traditionally, terms like *urban* and *suburban* refer to areas that are racialized in some form. In the 1950s and '60s, the city core was typically seen as black. Suburban space, on the other hand, considered the new frontier of urban life, was generally understood to be open and available for white folks who were fleeing from the city core. But L.A. messes up that logic in so many different ways; it's hard to assess L.A. suburbs according to this traditional model, along this white/black, suburban/urban matrix. So many neighborhoods here challenge familiar ways of indexing and labeling places. For example, there are numerous emergent suburban areas in Los Angeles — perhaps the suburbs of the L.A. future — that are predominantly Latino and Asian and therefore refute antiquated notions of the "vanilla suburbs." This is one of the challenges the city might face in the future — how to get a grip on new ethnic and racial formations that are taking shape on the suburban margins of city sprawl.

When you talk about Jews and their role in these conversations, we need to ask the always vital questions: Who is a Jew and how does that affect how we map where Jews live? And what counts as a Jewish community? When I hear the phrase, "a Jewish neighborhood," I think about the Fairfax area, or Pico-Robertson, or the so-called Rabbi Row, the places where Orthodox Jews live. There's a visual placement for me of seeing religious Jews building a community by necessity that has to be walking-friendly. It has to be built around neighborhood shuls. But how do we talk about a Beverly Hills or a Mar Vista or a Santa Monica, neighborhoods where plenty of Jews live, but that aren't typically considered Jewish neighborhoods. Take the great narrative of Jewish flight that is so often told about Boyle Heights — the ultimate story of Jews who left the multiracial multiethnic world of Boyle Heights for an upwardly mobile flight west, reinventing themselves in West Los Angeles. This story is often told as an example of how Jews became white in L.A. — they moved across town, and into whiteness. Yet this narrative only works for secular Jews. It leaves out the story of say, Pico-Robertson — a neighbor-

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hood of religious, unassimilated Jews where cultural difference is still a prominent feature of community identity. These are radically different stories that impact how we talk about Jewish place and community. How do we talk about a Jewish neighborhood or community in L.A. that is secular and assimilated? It's certainly not the same way we talk about a religious neighborhood.

Sokatch: In the San Gabriel Valley [an area to the northeast of downtown L.A.], which has become the home to the nation's largest Chinese immigrant community, we're just now watching some of the same loop playing between Asians and Latinos as played between Latino and Jewish, and Black and Jewish, in other areas of the city.

But just because there are neighborhoods next to each other or communities living intermixed, where newspapers might be lined up on the same street corner, doesn't necessarily mean that there's interaction between those worlds.

Even in the religious Jewish communities that you named, there are significant differences. Pico-Robertson became a religious area when secular Jews moved out to the more suburban parts of the city. This is an increasingly religious neighborhood and yet voted for a liberal, progressive, African-American Democratic Assemblywoman to be their representative.

My office is situated right at the juncture of two big Jewish neighborhoods, and a few blocks to the east begins Koreatown. To the south, the neighborhood becomes very Latino and ultimately African-American closer to the freeway. Where people live, the boundaries separating communities, is blurring. But we don't yet know how to help the communities interact. We have a lot of work to do to build bridges to other communities — Muslim, Korean, or Latino.

Kun: I'm just trying to imagine this emergence of new, working-class neighborhoods growing up next to each other as new immigrant groups come into the city. You have the *Jewish Journal* next to a Korean paper next to a Oaxacan paper. On the one hand, we can point to these mixtures with some degree of multicultural utopianism. But just because there are neighborhoods next to each other or communities living intermixed, where newspapers might be lined up on the same street corner, doesn't necessarily mean that there's interaction between those worlds and doesn't necessarily mean that there's even political coalition or social understanding between those worlds. Just because Jews live side by side with other groups doesn't mean they learn from each other. What has long troubled me about contemporary Jews in Los Angeles is that for the most part the Jewish community's response to multiculturalism in the city has been fairly inward-looking. And very — perhaps with real historical reasons — self-preserving. What does multiculturalism mean for us?

Sokatch: While Jews might be mingling block-by-block with other emerging immigrant groups that are working their way into the middle class, the Jewish community, as a whole, is not. It is insular. But then, so is Koreatown and many other communities. The vastness of the city, and the insularity of the many different neighborhoods, tends to mitigate against creating multicultural coalitions. Even within the Jewish "neighborhoods" there is insularity and the "luxury" of feeling that they need not connect to the larger city because of its size. But this is a dangerous illusion. Every few decades Los Angeles experiences riots, and they don't necessarily occur where the rioters live. This should starkly drive home the fact that everyone is connected in this city, even if it doesn't always feel like it.

Kun: When we talk about "the Jewish community," does that include Russian Jews and Persian Jews? My sense is that these groups operate self-consciously within insular neighborhood structures so that their Jewishness almost drops out and they are simply a Russian neighborhood or a Persian neighborhood. Their immigrant status, their cultural and national difference, often trumps their Jewishness. Or in the case of Persians, their connection to non-Ashkenazic Jewry turns them into a kind of Jewish "other." When I was growing up in West L.A. among liberal Jews who grew up in the shadow of the Civil Rights movement and who generally consider themselves liberal or progressive, the most permissible form of racism was anti-Persian. It has a lot to do with whiteness, claims to whiteness. On L.A.'s west side, there is an economic and class security, but then along comes dark-skinned Jews who have as much money, if not more.

Sokatch: It goes deeper than that. It has to do with the very real cultural differences between Ashkenazi Westside Jews and Persian Jews, whose folkways and culture and the way they talk and the way they act in the supermarket and the way they decorate their homes simply violates for some a sense of how to act Jewish (too gaudy, loud, and ostentatious). In this sense, some local streets are not unlike neighborhoods in Israel — yes, everybody (or almost) is Jewish but that does not serve as a unifying factor except in times of communal crisis. In L.A., the large Persian Jewish community has created a communal infrastructure that is largely separate from that of the rest of the Jewish community. And while there are certainly synagogues with mixed membership, there are also largely separate religious communities. Neither "side" puts a very high premium on reaching out to the other to bridge the divide.

Kun: Do you think there is evidence of a living, multicultural, Jewishly-involved urban space? A place where we can find traces of Jews living and working alongside other groups, picking up ideas here and there, making hybrid cultural forms? I'm thinking, admittedly romantically, of a place like the Phillips Music Store in Boyle Heights in the 1950s, where Jewish records and Mexican records were sold to Jewish and Mexican customers.

Sokatch: There is a synagogue in Boyle Heights that fell into disrepair after the Jewish community moved and was kept up by Latino folks who now live in the area. The Jewish Historical Society has recently helped to transform it into a commemoration to Jewish life in those neighborhoods, but it's also going to serve as a community center. But my favorite example is Langer's Delicatessen right near MacArthur Park, on the western edge of downtown Los Angeles, in a neighborhood that is mostly Salvadoran and Guatemalan. And it is extremely poor and considered by some to be one of the dangerous sections of Los Angeles after dark. But, because of the new subway, the deli is always full and bustling at lunchtime. So here is a Jewish deli in a neighborhood that looks and smells like San Salvador or Managua. The tables reflect the neighborhood and the city — Filipino post office workers and Latino union officials and people from the Diocese eating next to old Jewish guys from City Hall. It's my favorite place to eat lunch in Los Angeles, not only because of the great food but also because it is, like the Phillips music store, a glorious meeting of many cultures in this 21st-century city.

Susan Berrin: What happens to creating social networks in a place like Los Angeles, where it's so spread out? Recent studies indicate that young Jews connect to Judaism through informal social networks, so how does that happen in a place like L.A.?

Sokatch: While there's no one core of Los Angeles, nor of the Jewish community, there is a flourishing of independent Jewish life. L.A. is the great pioneering city where we have half a dozen of these giant synagogues that try to be everything to all of the people who utilize the synagogues. At the same time though, there is a very refreshing ability in Los Angeles to invent a network and start something on one's own. For example, IKAR, fueled by the efforts of 20- and 30-year-olds, is a model of a compelling synagogue where the community and rabbi are wrestling with ways to connect to the larger city. In other words, we're not trying to create an inward-looking, one-shop-stop, full-service Judaism but rather a spiritual community that is connected to the city around us. There are myriad opportunities in Los Angeles for somebody who wants to connect Jewishly, and there's lots going on — under the communal radar screen.

Kun: I grew up and continue to live as someone who doesn't have a relationship to the phrase, "living Jewishly." It makes me cringe. I have a built-in resistance to community based on belief or spirituality or synagogue. Within contemporary Jewish culture, for example, there is a resurgence of young Jewish culture, the whole Jewish hipster scene. In many cases, it's a secular, pop cultural world of young Jews that has become the basis of social networking, and it's not based on spirit or prayer.

Berrin: How does place impact that cultural connection for you personally?

Kun: L.A. — and Hollywood specifically — has been, and is, a place where Jews go to become secular, turn a relationship to place into an industry, and sell it to the world. The way that L.A. is synonymous with using mass culture to mediate cultural and/or religious identity had a great influence on me. I was raised in a family for whom being Jewish in a traditional or religious way was vexed. So

when I got older, I didn't rebel against Judaism; I just left it by the wayside. It didn't feel useful to me. It wasn't speaking to the contemporary urgency and relevance of what was going on in the city and in the country.

I recognize now, though, that being Jewish means nothing and also means everything. I've gone back to read rabbinical stories and talmudic essays and debates about what it means, historically, to be Jewish, and at the core is a sense that Judaism is "multiple," it has always meant change. It's always meant more than one thing. And while that openness obviously creates room for debate, turf battles, and gate-keeping, it also creates possibilities for newness and for people to figure out and reinvent identities. And, we're a people on the move, a nomadic people, a Diasporic people, a migrant people, a refugee people. Jews cannot be *a* community. That's impossible. A staid community belies the very essence of what being a Jew means.

Berrin: Talk a bit more about where you go for culture and if *community* isn't the right word, what about *neighborhood*? Does neighborhood impact the way you think of yourself?

Kun: Neighborhood has never been the dominant factor in how I think about place, but location in the city certainly has, in the sense that I grew up on the west side. And that means real things in this city. It means that the way I understand myself as a member of Los Angeles is skewed. For someone growing up in East L.A., that is the capital of their city, the ground zero for their entire world. At the same time, that person also tends to have a very broad sense of the city — he or she knows where the west side is and what it means, where the east and west begin and end, because your place in the city has been, historically, racially marked. The skewed geography of westsiders is to think that anything east of La Cienega Blvd. is East L.A. To grow up in West L.A. is to live according to an almost mythic map of the city, one that can often distort social reality.

Sokatch: The default culture in New York is Jewish culture; everything from *Seinfeld* to bagels shows the export of Jewish culture — the "symbolic ethnicity," as sociologist Herbert Gans explains, of New York City is Jewish. And the "symbolic ethnicity" of Los Angeles is becoming Latino. How will that "symbolic ethnicity" impact Jewish Los Angeles or Jews in L.A.?

Kun: Jews are experiencing immigrant amnesia, where assimilated immigrants forget the path that brought them here and abandon the migrant consciousness that is at the core of who they are. The big challenge facing Jews and everyone in the city right now is how to get back to a sense of migrancy as a way of life. And by that I mean both traveling in migrant paths but also tapping into an immigrant consciousness or a migrant consciousness. That involves an openness to hybridity and to history, and also an openness to conflict and the expectation that conflict and clashing are going to be part of how a society changes and grows and works itself out.

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