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## Inside A Fuller Diaspora

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Essays by **Kate Craddy,**  
**Martine Cohen &**  
**Andrew Goldstein**

Once, not that long ago, it seemed that the contemporary Jewish world was essentially split between the United States and Israel with, of course, Soviet Jews eager to leave Russia and to move to one or the other location. How different the world now looks — in part, because of globalization and a more porous notion of boundaries, but also because of the splitting apart of the old Communist world and the heightened vibrancy of Jewish communities across a more significant, if fragmented, Diaspora. This issue of *Sh'ma* begins to explore why the Jewish world now feels so much larger and more complicated. In short vignettes, Jews from around the world share their stories — short takes on communities thriving or barely surviving. Of course, the United States and Israel remain the dominant spheres for Jewish life, but they are far from the whole story. That being so, we include a roundtable featuring leading Israeli and American Jewish intellectuals and cultural figures speaking about the current state of relations between Jews in Israel and the United States. —S.B.

## A Border-Crossing People Living in a Borderless World

JOSHUA ELLISON

There is nothing that makes me feel as alive as walking the streets of a new city — with a notebook, a map, and a camera — waiting for a portrait to take shape out of color and sound, clamor and empty space, concrete and stone and sky. A city is, first and foremost, a rhythmic organism: It takes a lot of patience and attention, and many miles on foot, to be open enough to hear the particular music of a place, and to feel how a city situates itself uniquely on the earth.

I have spent the past several years traveling — to places like Bosnia, Argentina, Russia, Hungary, Mexico — exploring these cities' communities, trying to understand better what it means to be a Jew in different parts of the world and, just as importantly, what it means to live in the world as a Jew. What started as a way to explore my own identity has become the central act of expressing my identity. I have discovered myself, Jewishly and otherwise, as a visitor and a stranger in cities all over the globe.

Jews and cities have a special relationship. Cities are open-ended places and, like Jewish culture, can't be fully described according to

geographic boundaries. The great Hungarian novelist George Konrád wrote: "Those Jews who lived in Budapest or Berlin or Belgrade or Bucharest were certifiably at home there. To what extent they were Jews, Hungarians, Germans, Serbs or Romanians is an open question." In other words, even if a Jew can't completely claim citizenship to a country, that Jew can feel fully at home in his or her city. Urban spaces are integrated, porous, works-in-progress. Nations exclude, but cities embrace. And just as Jews have made their mark on cities, the ethos of cities has left indelible imprints on us. The survival skills of urban life have become our

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cultural hallmarks: education, translation, innovation, mediation, and adaptation.

One must be willing to leave a new city as a slightly changed person. If you're not open to that possibility, then you haven't really travelled, not in the profound sense that demands so much more than just stepping onto an airplane. Jewishness and travel are inseparable for me because they make the same moral demands:


curiosity and empathy. We are border-crossing people living in an increasingly borderless world.

Last fall, at the Brooklyn Book Fair, I stood for many hours at a table selling copies of *Habitus: A Diaspora Journal*, a Jewish magazine of international literature and arts that I founded. The issues were spread out on the table, and a sign with our name and logo faced out toward the thousands of people who streamed past. Something amazing, something I hadn't expected, happened because of one word on that sign: "Diaspora."

Over and over, I watched people pass by and engage, even briefly, with that word. The faces couldn't have been more varied in type or shade; this word was obviously not the exclusive domain of any group. The word "Diaspora" stopped them in their tracks, held their gaze, and quietly called out to them. They didn't know exactly what it was doing there, but they knew it had something to do with them. The word conjures an entryway to a shared society of transplants and transients. It is a familiar code for people who have started in one place and ended up in another.

That day at the book fair, I was more convinced than ever that this sense of Diaspora was key to something both profoundly Jewish and urgently modern. "Diaspora" is a Greek word, of course, adapted from biblical Hebrew. It means to scatter people, like seeds. For Jews, this is deeply rooted; it is inscribed in our very name and language ("Ivri," in Hebrew, is "to cross." Our passage to Canaan was so transformative it gave us our collective identity). But it is also something that connects us to many other people, too, and to an experience that has become a defining one in today's world.

"Diaspora" is a process of creating proximity and intimacy over great distances and, as such, it is primarily an act of imagination. It is a creative feat to see ourselves as part of something larger than what we can see and feel and touch. To be truly at home in the contemporary world is live in a complex web of longing and belonging.

The ability to project oneself beyond borders and limitation is the real genius of Diaspora culture. As Jews and modern people, it's the currency in which we trade — and it's our only true and lasting birthright. 

Joshua Ellison is the editor of *Habitus: A Diaspora Journal* ([habitusmag.com](http://habitusmag.com)). *The Jewish Week* of New York named him on its "36 Under 36" list of "forward-thinking young people who are helping to remake the Jewish community."

## Multiple Identities and Coexistence

## Mexico

EMILIO BETECH ROPHIE

Jews have lived in Mexico for hundreds of years, since the Spanish Colony in the 16th century, but as an established entity, the Jewish community here is just shy of 100 years old. Here, briefly, are the essential details: We are more or less 40,000 Jews with a handful of major congregations (two Conservative, the rest Orthodox), the typical ethnic divisions (Syrian Mizrahi, Sephardi, and Ashkenazi), strong religious and cultural institutions, and an easy, limited assimilation into Mexican society. Though proudly Mexican, we maintain one of the lowest levels of interfaith marriage. Antisemitism is inconsequential, and our government is a friend of Israel. Although Jewish communal leaders busily attend to the challenges of the immediate civic future — specifically the growing dangers of Mexico's organized crime and the financial crisis — there is complacency in terms of maintaining Jewish relevancy within the community itself.

Here is a week in my life: On Monday nights, I host Mexico's only Jewish-themed

radio talk show, broadcast nationally. Ironically, 90 percent of my listeners are not Jewish, but Mexicans who are curious about Jews and their culture as well as the situation in the Middle East. Because a high percentage of Mexicans report some memory of arcane Jewish rituals that were observed in their families, they believe they might be descendants of Crypto-Jews from Colonial times.

On Thursdays, I participate in the meetings of the Mexican chapter of the international Jewish Salons project, a network of interactive events showcasing contemporary Jewish culture; I am a member of the project's global steering committee. I feel strangely happy sitting with a bunch of alternative 20-somethings, redefining and reclaiming our Jewish identity. We are funny, racy, irreverent, and wholly unsatisfied with mainstream Jewish institutions.

On Friday nights, I sit at my parents' Shabbat dinner table, and while I enjoy this secure and familiar tradition, it is as mainstream and ethnocentric as one might imagine.

Emilio Betech Rophie is co-creator and host of "El Aleph: La Voz Judia de la Radio," Mexico's only Jewish-themed radio talk show, and a member of the Jewish Salons project. A consultant on entrepreneurship, he is currently starting a preservation project for Jewish-Syrian religious music.