

---

# The Aftermath of the Elian Gonzalez Affair: A Jewish Perspective

---

By Dana Evan Kaplan

Printed in part first in Congress Monthly, September/October 2000

Considering all that has transpired, it is hard to believe that it has been less than a year since two fishermen found Elian Gonzales floating in an inner tube off the Florida coast. Americans have endured an unbelievable barrage of news stories and commentary about this episode, and most of us are thankful that it finally reached a conclusion.

Elian's return to Cuba may have upset many of the anti-Castro activists in the Florida Cuban-American community, but polls show that a solid majority of Americans throughout the rest of the country supported the reunification of Elian and his father. In Cuba the sentiment is not all that different. On several recent visits I witnessed Cubans react in mock horror whenever the name "Elian" was mentioned on TV or radio. "No more," they begged me. "No more! We can't bear to hear any more about Elian."

Despite their "Elian-fatigue" most Cubans support the Communist regime on this issue. Although they are having a very tough time economically, it only seems logical to them that Elian should be returned to his father. Even Juan Miguel Gonzalez' determination to return to Cuba does not surprise them. He is, after all, one of Fidel's faithful. "He's going to be a star here!" one Cuban told me. Another made the motions of a beard-their symbol for President Castro-and told me "He's already offered Juan Miguel a number of high-ranking positions." Furthermore, Juan Miguel has family in Cuba and he genuinely likes living in the country. Whatever his motivations, most Cubans seem to feel that if he wants to live in Cuba that's his choice, and if he wants his son to live in Cardenas with him, that is also his prerogative. Many Cubans continue to bemoan their country's economic plight, but a substantial number have increased their support of the Castro regime as a direct result of this episode.

The entire issue has certainly focused more of our attention on Cuba. In addition to the Elian affair, there have been a number of trade missions, several prominent defectors, a possible spy, cultural and artistic exchanges, and even a series of baseball games. All of this attention has led to curiosity about the Jewish community on the island, and dramatically increasing

numbers of American Jews are participating in UJA Federation (now called the United Jewish Communities) missions to visit the Cuban Jewish community firsthand, bring food and medicine, and participate in religious and cultural activities. B'nai B'rith and a number of other organizations, headquartered not only in Miami but also in Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, San Francisco, and elsewhere, also sponsor such missions.

The missions have attracted quite a bit of controversy in their own right. The Forward, always looking for a sensationalist angle, published a front-page article and an accompanying editorial in April 2000 attacking the frequency and wisdom of the missions. Reporter Melissa Radler wrote that there were no fewer than 30 missions to Cuba planned by local federations over the next four years. In addition, the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee spent \$142,800 in 1998 to help the 1500 Jews "it says live in Cuba". Radler cites the 1999 American Jewish Yearbook estimate that puts the island's Jewish population at closer to 600. She writes, "Although the missions aren't subsidized by the Jewish charities, the cost of travel and accommodations for the 30 groups headed for Havana dwarfs the amount the Joint is spending there."

The editorial was even harsher. The writer, presumably then-president and editor Seth Lipsky, wrote that all of these missions are "enough to make one wonder whether the reason for all this is merely to help the 600 Jews trapped in the Communist country. Or will the backers of the biggest American Jewish charitable structure emerge with those pressing for a soft line on the Communist regime during the twilight years of its dictator, Fidel Castro?" But having visited Cuba a number of times in the last several months, I can state with certainty that not all the Jews in the country feel "trapped," and I witnessed first-hand the wonderful work being done by the Joint. The money being spent is certainly substantial, but it covers a full-time community coordinator brought in from Argentina, programming costs, and other more concrete forms of aid.

In June the same newspaper printed a lengthy letter from Rabbi Emanuel Viñas of the Bronx. Rabbi Viñas wrote, "As a Cuban Jew and rabbi living in America, I feel a personal and professional duty to express my support for much of what you wrote... Jewish organizations should not be visiting Cuba as often as they are. Fidel Castro uses each of these visits to improve his chances of having the embargo lifted, which would allow him to continue enslaving the Cuban people at an even greater profit than at present." Strong words, and by no means atypical for a Cuban American, Jewish or Christian.

But this is certainly not the view of many of those left in Cuba. It is important to realize that the vast majority of the Cuban Jewish community emigrated in the five or six years immediately following the 1959 revolution, and by 1965 only about 10% remained. While Fidel Castro originally had a tremendous amount of support from virtually every sector of the population, and was careful to avoid any overt identification with the Communist Party or Communist ideology, actions that he took in the first several months of his rule made it clear that his government's policies were contrary to the interests of the middle and upper classes, as well as to foreign business concerns. A mass exodus of the upper and middle

classes began by early 1960. The few Jews who remained did so for many reasons, only one of which was ideological sympathy with Fidel's form of communism. It is not at all certain that the majority of those who stayed were ever Communist, and many of those in the community today either were not born at the time of the revolution or were small children, and so never made a conscious choice at all to stay in the country. Nevertheless, it is clear that after living in Cuba all of these years the Jews have absorbed many of the attitudes expressed by the government, which is the only public position that one can hear on Cuban TV, radio, or newspapers. But many people still continue to think independently, despite the efforts made to push the party line.

It is interesting to see how the Cuban Jewish community expresses itself on the Elían issue, as opposed to how many Cuban Americans view the same incident. During the controversy the Cuban government held huge rallies in front of the United States interests section, the unofficial "embassy" housed in a large building directly on the Malecon and rented from the Swiss government. In the early weeks first Dr. José Miller Fredman, the president of the Patronato, and shortly thereafter Alberto Zilberstein Toruncha, the president of the Adath Israel Orthodox congregation in old Havana, spoke at the public rallies. Both emphasized that Elían should be reunited with his father. Both stressed the desirability of Elían's return to Cuba. Miller in particular went beyond the minimalist position—that Elían's father should be the one to decide where the family should live—to suggest that Cuba could provide a more wholesome and less violent atmosphere for his upbringing. This position went beyond even that taken by the Catholic Church in Cuba, which argued that Elían should be reunited with his father, and that his father should then make all further decisions.

That both Miller and Zilberstein were asked to speak is but one indication of the close, mutually beneficial working relationship between the government and the Jewish community. Despite the strongly anti-Israel position that the Cuban government adopted in the aftermath of the Six Day War, and despite the break in Cuban-Israeli diplomatic relations shortly before the Yom Kippur War, the government has always gone out of its way to be friendly to the Jewish community. This sympathetic approach is even more remarkable in light of the government's policy of discouraging religious affiliation and activity. Until the 4th Cuban Communist Party Conference of 1991, religious believers were prohibited from becoming members of the Party; obviously in a one-party state such as Cuba the path to the most desirable positions was through the Communist party only. Nevertheless, the government allowed the Jewish community to keep five synagogues functioning in Havana, even after the community had shrunk to perhaps 10% of its former size. It offered to rent sections of two of the synagogues, and attempted to assist the Jewish community in numerous other ways. More recently el Líder Máximo himself visited the Patronato during Hanukkah of 1998. After sitting through several dances and songs, and an introduction by Dr. Miller, Castro spoke at length with those gathered together. In an informal manner typical of his speaking style on such occasions, Fidel asked the group to explain certain facts about Hanukkah to him, and then carried on an animated dialogue with them. There was no question that the president charmed the audience. There seemed little question that Fidel had a warm spot for Cuba's Jews and they could not help but respond.

There has been much speculation exactly why Castro seems to have adopted such a strongly pro-Jewish policy. Some suggest that in the aftermath of World War II Castro came to believe that the moral worth of any government could be determined by how it treated the Jews. Others have suggested that Castro adopted and maintained such a sympathetic policy as one way of showing that despite his alliance with the Soviet Union he remained an independent force and could take positions dramatically different from his Russian sponsors. Others have argued that he may believe that he is descended from Marranos on his father's side of the family, or from a Turkish Jewish immigrant on his mother's side. Whatever the reason, no one has suggested that the Castro government was ever antisemitic, and virtually no one has attempted to argue that they ever adopted an anti-Jewish position. Nevertheless, the anti-Israel position consistently taken by the Cuban government has upset many Jews. While this policy has been softened in recent years, it has not been entirely done away with.

The question of Cuba's policy toward Israel was addressed by a delegation from the American Jewish Congress, led by president Jack Rosen, which met with President Castro during a six-hour dinner held at the presidential palace in July 1998. Members of the delegation expressed their disappointment that Cuba was the only country in the Western Hemisphere to vote against rescinding the United Nations "Zionism is Racism" resolution. President Castro responded that he had no knowledge of the vote. Speaker Ricardo Alarcón, the Cuban representative at the United Nations who actually cast the vote, was present at the dinner. Not surprisingly, Alarcón did not offer to field the question. Other Cuban officials informally told Rosen that the vote was to be expected considering the fact that the State of Israel votes against Cuba on virtually every matter.

Now Elian is back in Cuba the issue is no longer active. Nonetheless the residual impact of the case will continue to reverberate for months and possibly years. For the Cuban Americans--particularly those with more hard line positions--it will be a time of reflection and reevaluation. They have repeatedly expressed frustration that most of their fellow Americans did not understand (in their view) or sympathize (according to a less charitable interpretation) with their position. Many Americans saw them as shrill, hysterical, and fanatical-characteristics that helped neither them nor their cause. Few disagree that President Castro is a dictator and that the government of Cuba has unjustly confiscated businesses and generated mass migrations from Cuba, but it seems a great leap from that to the position that a group of relatives who had previously met the child only once should receive priority over Elian's own father. They picked the wrong cause and they fought the propaganda war in the wrong way.

A number of news reports suggested that the Cuban government was claiming victory in the propaganda war with the Cuban exiles, but it seems more likely that the exiles lost the battle all by themselves. Many of their spokespersons made inaccurate, exaggerated or blatantly false statements on TV, which didn't help their cause either. I heard respectable representatives argue, for example, that Cuban parents have no rights over their children in Cuba, but rather that the children were the property of the state. While this of course has a

basis in the idiosyncratic Cuban Communist ideology, the way that it was presented was so distorted as to make it unrecognizable.

Elian was a symbol for both the Castro government and the conservative segment of the Cuban American community. For the conservative Cuban Americans the little boy represented freedom, specifically their struggle to leave Cuba as it became increasingly Communist and non-democratic. Most had their businesses confiscated and they felt betrayed by the revolutionary government, which many of them initially supported. For Castro, Elian Gonzalez represents an opportunity to proudly reassert the Cuban commitment to Cuban sovereignty. Castro has always been able to combine Cuban nationalism with loyalty to his own form of revolutionary government. The issue was ideal, because most Cubans could easily support the cause of returning Elian to his father to Cuba whether or not they were supporters of the regime, whether or not they were Communist sympathizers, and whether or not they felt the country was being managed competently.

Many American rabbis discussed Elian in their sermons. Most are on the constant lookout for topics that their congregants will be able to relate to, and that they can conceptualize with a Jewish religious context. The Elian episode fit very nicely.

Richard J. Shapiro of Congregation B'nai B'rith in Santa Barbara, California, argued that "there are many appropriate and moral ways in which we can express our disagreement with the government of Fidel Castro, but holding a 6-year old boy hostage is not one of them (1)." Shapiro writes that he supported the federal government decision to forcibly remove the little boy from the home of the "Miami relatives":

"I have never been more proud to be an American: proud that President Clinton and attorney General Reno decided that upholding the law was more important than playing to the crowds. It would have been very easy to grant young Elian asylum here, to grant his extended family custody of a motherless child and leave it at that. But this is a country of laws, and this child also has a father. We may detest the political system of Cuba; we may even believe that we have a right to work for its overthrow. But that isn't the same thing as denying a father and son their god-given right-absent any evidence of abuse or neglect-to be together. Juan Miguel Gonzalez has a right to raise his son, and if that means doing so in Cuba, as much as I might believe they would both be better off herein the United States, then so be it. I am proud that once again we can be seen in the eyes of the world as a nation of laws, not of political expediency."

An interesting aspect of the lengthy debate on Elian was the comparison that was all too frequently made between Cuban migrants to the U.S. and holocaust refugees. Both politicians and commentators made this comparison, directly or indirectly, a comparison that is of course ridiculous. It is not necessary to add which side was using this polemical tool. New York Mayor Rudolph Guiliani stated that the federal troops that took Elian from his relatives' Miami home were "storm troopers". Senator Bob Smith of New Hampshire called the Wye Plantation in eastern Maryland--where Elian stayed with his father-a

"concentration camp". One of Smith's aides later said that the Senator had meant to say "re-education camp" rather than "concentration camp." (2)

Aviva Slesin, who was a "hidden child" in Lithuania during the holocaust, has compared the Elian Gonzalez case with Jewish children hidden from the Nazis during World War II. She writes that former hidden children describe the psychological ramifications of their traumatic separation from their parents, the bonding process that occurred with their rescuers, and the difficulties that occurred once they were reunited with their parents. Although she admits that the historical and political context is radically different, Slesin argues that the psychological stages and events that the hidden children went through are parallel to those that Elian has and will experience.

Slesin writes that having suffered the forced separation from her parents during World War II, she and other hidden children that she knows felt that in Elian's case it would be highly beneficial to him to be reunited with his father as soon as possible. She wrote that during the holocaust some Jewish parents were able to give their children to sympathetic gentiles as their only possible way of saving those children from virtually certain death. Despite the urgency of the situation, the children felt abandoned. Once they were living with their new family most of the children quickly transferred their loyalty to their adopted family. In the cases where the children's birth parents survived and returned for them after the war, it was by no means always a happy reunion. According to Slesin many of the children didn't want to go back with their parents, and felt that they were being abandoned yet again. She therefore believes, based on her own experiences, that it would have been far better if Elian had been returned to his father almost immediately. The extended period of time that he spent with the "Miami relatives" meant that like Jewish hidden children he will now have to reestablish loyalty to his father and he might possibly feel guilt at "abandoning" his foster family.

The Elian Gonzalez affair is on one level a family custody case. On another level it is a manifestation of a propaganda war between Cuban communists and capitalists, the latter in exile. But on yet another level it is a story filled with religious themes. Elian has been depicted as a messianic figure; many Miami Catholics have told and retold the story that dolphins saved him at sea. The concept of dolphins as saviors has a Christian basis, but those Christian sources may have borrowed it from a Midrash on how dolphins saved some Israelite children who lagged behind during the parting of the Red Sea. Interestingly, it is not just the Catholics who interpreted the Elian saga in religious terms. One of Elian's main lawyers is Spencer Eig, an Orthodox Baal Teshuva who frequently put the fight to keep Elian in Florida in the context of the child's right for religious freedom. Eig compared the Gonzalez case to that of "a Jew from communist Russia making it to Israel and then having to be sent back." (3) Eig appeared frequently on TV with his large black yarmulke, an identifying symbol that none could miss. At the same time, we all understand that Eig's position on Elian is not the only stance that American Jews are likely to take.

Now that Elian is home in Cuba, the American Jewish community may disagree profoundly on what our government policy should be toward Cuba. As relations between the countries continue to thaw, many of us may have the opportunity to visit Cuba and to draw our own conclusions. While few are likely to come away from the experience demonizing Fidel Castro, neither are we likely to see the revolution as a success. Cuba's unique history has created a society unlike that of any other country in the world. Beset by economic crisis, the Cubans are hungry, frustrated, and waiting for change. Nevertheless many retain a certain fondness for what the revolution has done for them, and have ambivalent feelings about what the future may bring. As Jews and as Americans we have an obligation to help these wonderful people to build a future of hope and of peace.

---

1. Richard J. Shapiro, "From the Rabbi", Congregation B'nai B'rith Bulletin, volume 72, number 9, (May 2000), p. 4.
2. "Apology is Asked over Elian Imagery", Jewish Bulletin of Northern California, (May 12, 2000), p. 20A.
3. "Elian's Lawyer: Why an Observant Jew is Fighting to Keep Him Here," Chicago Jewish News, (January 28, 2000), p.3.