

Dear friends,

I love Cuba. I've been to the island some twenty times, maybe more. I used to joke that I could do the tour schpiel better than my tour guide could (even though it wasn't true). I found the economy, society, the people fascinating. And I loved spending time with the Jewish community and learning about their challenges and hopes.

By the middle of the Mission you're going to feel a bit overwhelmed. We'll have shown you synagogues, maybe the Guanabacoa Jewish cemetery, you'll have met some local Jewish leadership, and gotten a sense of Jewish identity and Cuban economics. You'll also feel a little bombarded by the sights, smells and tastes of a culture that seems familiar-yet-different.

When you hit that metaphysical wall, I want you to remember this:

(1) What you'll see in the Cuban Jewish community directly relates to **the empowerment of local leadership**. We weren't in this kind of situation ten years ago. Leadership in Jewish Cuba isn't what we see in North America. It's a dynamic process, not an on-off switch, where you either have leaders or you don't. Leadership in Cuba emanates from the community, which is what we see our partners' role as enhancing. So in a certain way, where you sit determines where you stand. You'll see some good examples of that in the different sectors of the Jewish community.

(2) There's some **competition between leaderships**, especially in Havana - and that's a good thing. Not all leaders represent all elements of the community. We don't yet have leadership that thinks about the shadow of the future, or (necessarily) the needs of the provinces. But it'll come. And it's our partners' job, inspired by Federation values, to work within that process and give guidance and support. For example: we wouldn't generally fund a cemetery renovation, but we would find a way to support a synagogue expansion if it doesn't compete with existing necessary programs, it complements their expansion programs, and they have the vision and structure to implement it.

(3) Remember why we wanted you to come and **what a Jewish Federation Mission is 'about'** - and why it's not like the multiple other Jewish tourist trips you'll see on the island. There's a lot we won't show you from time constraints. Plus there are things we're careful and sensitive about doing, like home visits, that we wouldn't hesitate to do in other places. But think about the fact that you're going to Shabbat services on Friday night, which, like all the synagogue services are run by local leaders. Several years ago we sent a trained chazzan (cantor), who essentially worked himself out of a job by teaching local leaders how to lead Shabbat and Holiday services. You can extrapolate to some forty or fifty other basic "tasks" of our partners on the ground here in which the intent is to phase down once each project is strong, autonomous and responsible. Not

to diss those other trips that aren't with us, but you should notice that we have probably the best guide on the island for you, the quality of the briefings and staffing, the support for the community, and more. Just saying.

(4) You'll hear a lot about "**El Joint**" in the community, the local name for our main partner on the ground. Remember that for Cuban Jews it's less of a name, and more of a concept. The concept is us, and the support we give them. The recognition is for you.

(5) You'll hear so much about the past. About community organization and challenges and the new regime changes. But you're also going to see **a vision of the future** which will be exciting, memorable and challenging to all your preconceptions.

Fidel's death is an opportunity – but it's also a warning. And let's be careful about the one-dimensional and hate-filled political eulogies and expectations. The real world is far more complicated than a single statement about whether or not someone was 'good' or 'not good.' I've seen some – frankly ridiculous – attempts to associate Castro as evil just because he was photographed hugging Yasir Arafat, and some equally unhelpful portrayals of his messianic qualities.

Many of our American Jewish missions and trips, when they visit Cuba, fell into a cognitive trap. "If only," I called it. If only Castro would die, and the regime would [overnight] become capitalist, then all the worries and troubles of the poor downtrodden Cuban people would suddenly ease.

I have one word for you to remember: Russia.

Look at the hopes and expectations we had for Russian society and its people in 1990. And then compare that to the massive drop in living standards, economic well-being and social stability for the poor and vulnerable in Russian in the thirty years since. Ask elderly Russians in the street who remember the Communist period and they will undoubtedly tell you that things were better then and worse now. I'm not being an apologist for the brutality and evil of the Communist regime. Rather, I'm soberly aware of the greed, corruption and nepotism that arose very quickly as that regime collapsed. And who suffered the most since then.

Since Fidel stepped down from Cuba's presidency in 2006, his brother Raúl made significant changes and reform in the centrally planned economy. Over half a million Cubans now work in some form of private small businesses. The Economist reported last week that the share of state-owned enterprises in economic output has fallen to 71%. We know that the pace of reform slowed significantly because of Fidel's opposition to Raul's changes, especially the opening to the United States. So, for the

optimists among us, Fidel's death removes that single greatest obstacle to political and economic change.

But here's what keeps me worried: the example of Russia. The Cuban economy under Fidel did a half-decent job at keeping vast numbers of people alive and just above hunger-levels. It did it badly, it was repressive, it was brutal. But it replaced (many would say) a far-worse and murderous regime before it, under which American multinationals and corrupt dictators bled the Cuban people and stole their assets. And these past few decades no one starved in the street in Cuba, their life expectancy was greater than ours, and their health care system – though shoddy, corrupt and crumbling – still left no one without coverage or dead from not being able to afford treatment.

We're not examining apples to apples when we compare our situation as American Jews to the Cuban people. Not even to the Cuban Jewish people. The second the so-called coming liberalization begins ... watch out for reports of hunger, starvation, disease, plummeting living standards and more.

I've travelled all over the Jewish world and one thing seems to be a constant. In all of these places, in all of these dramatic changes, it's always the weakest, the poorest, the most vulnerable, who suffer the most. It's always the Jewish Federation system and our partners on the ground who step up quickly, quietly and efficiently, to care for those in need, to build the communities, and to save and rescue.

It's because of you.

Good luck. I'm really looking forward to hearing about the mission when you get back.

Warmly,

Dov