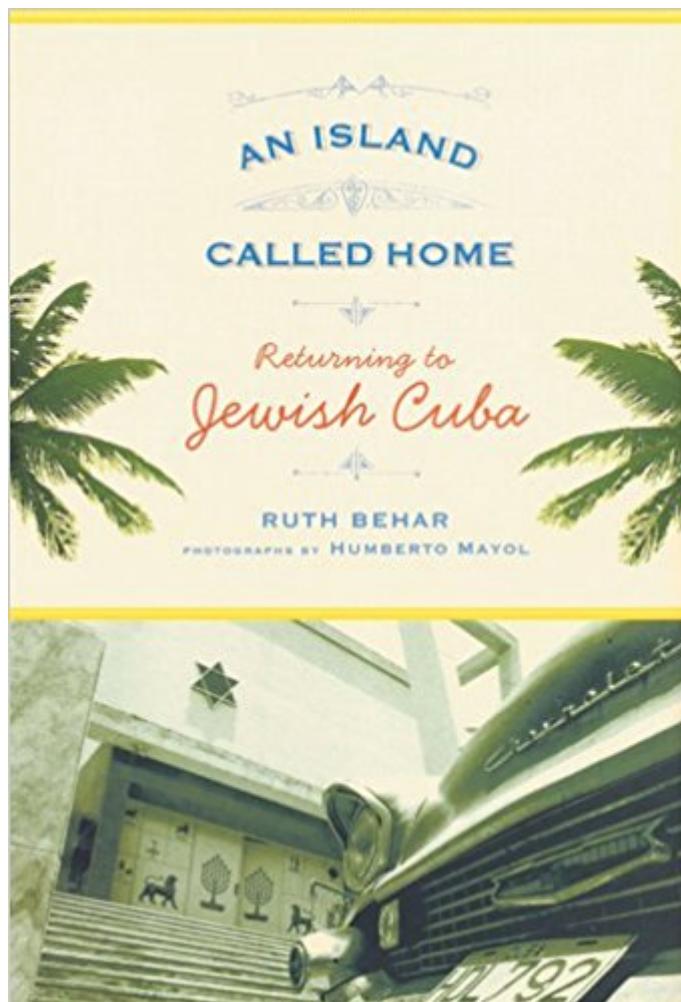


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# An Island Called Home: Returning To Jewish Cuba



## Synopsis

Yiddish-speaking Jews thought Cuba was supposed to be a mere layover on the journey to the United States when they arrived in the island country in the 1920s. They even called it "Hotel Cuba." • But then the years passed, and the many Jews who came there from Turkey, Poland, and war-torn Europe stayed in Cuba. The beloved island ceased to be a hotel, and Cuba eventually became "home." • But after Fidel Castro came to power in 1959, the majority of the Jews opposed his communist regime and left in a mass exodus. Though they remade their lives in the United States, they mourned the loss of the Jewish community they had built on the island. As a child of five, Ruth Behar was caught up in the Jewish exodus from Cuba. Growing up in the United States, she wondered about the Jews who stayed behind. Who were they and why had they stayed? What traces were left of the Jewish presence, of the cemeteries, synagogues, and Torahs? Who was taking care of this legacy? What Jewish memories had managed to survive the years of revolutionary atheism? *An Island Called Home* is the story of Behar's journey back to the island to find answers to these questions. Unlike the exotic image projected by the American media, Behar uncovers a side of Cuban Jews that is poignant and personal. Her moving vignettes of the individuals she meets are coupled with the sensitive photographs of Havana-based photographer Humberto Mayol, who traveled with her. Together, Behar's poetic and compassionate prose and Mayol's shadowy and riveting photographs create an unforgettable portrait of a community that many have seen though few have understood. This book is the first to show both the vitality and the heartbreak that lie behind the project of keeping alive the flame of Jewish memory in Cuba. Reader Guide ([http://rutgerspress.rutgers.edu/pages/behar\\_reader\\_guide.aspx](http://rutgerspress.rutgers.edu/pages/behar_reader_guide.aspx))

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

A professor at the University of Michigan, Behar seeks a better understanding of her roots and of the Jewish experience in her native Cuba. Traversing the island, Behar becomes a confidante to myriad Jewish strangers. Through one-on-one interviews and black-and-white images taken by her photographer, Humberto Mayol, she uncovers the diasporic thread that connects Cuban Jews. Familial stories of wandering beginning in the 1920s tell of displaced Polish and German Jewsâ "escapees from anti-Semitism and Auschwitzâ "opening mom-and-pop shops in La Habana Vieja, becoming peddlers, replacing Yiddish with Spanish and settling into Latino life only to be uprooted within decades. An estimated 16,500 Jews lived in Cuba in the late 1950s, when a mass exodus to Miami and New York took placeâ "a reaction to Castro's budding communist revolution. This diligent recounting and pictorial collage of interviews with adolescents, the aging, the impoverished and the political by Behar preserves in memory the people and places that make up Cuba's Jewish story. (Nov.) Copyright Â© Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

"Traversing the island, Behar becomes a confidante to a myriad of Jewish strangers. Through one-on-one interviews and black-and-white images taken by her photographer, Humberto Mayol, she uncovers the diasporic thread that connects Cuban Jews....This diligent recounting and pictorial collage of interviews with adolescents, the aging, the impoverished and the political by Behar preserves in memory the people and places that make up Cuba's Jewish story." (Publishers Weekly)

Part memoir, part travelogue, part anthropological study, and all heart, Ruth Behar returns to Cuba where she was born and left at 5 years old in 1959, after the Revolution. She returns a number of times, between 2002-2006, in search of her roots and the stories of the Jews who remain in Cuba. Her vignettes, coupled with Humberto Mayol's black and white photographs, capture the back stories of a cross-section of those who remain as part of the Jewish community and the reasons why they stay in Cuba, as why so many are still emigrating to the States and Israel. Along the way, Ruth Behar finds a piece of her identity that was missing before she set off on her personal and professional quest. The one draw back is that her stories and observations end in 2006, and the reader would like to know what is happening in and to the Jewish community today, as well as to

Cuban society as a whole.

Very engaging, well written, unique photographs to complement the story. I read the book on my Kindle while I was considering a tour to Jewish Cuba. The photographs might have shown better in an actual book. The author engaged us first through her personal perspective, her seeking people and places that she might have known when she was a young child before her family immigrated to the US. She then brought us along as she learned more about the Jewish experience in additional locations and over time, introducing us to diverse and interesting individuals and families, their stories, countries of origin, decisions to leave or stay,, mixed marriages, dedicated converts-- the roles that they came to play in the evolution of the Jewish Community as the political situation and world events changed. As a scholar, an anthropologist, the author provided detailed references for further reading. I felt as though I had made the trip and was motivated to learn more.

The way the book is written was quite a surprise. The interviews carried out by Ms. Behar were warm, compassionate, joyful, touching. I come from Cuban descent from a family that apparently originated in the Canary Islands with a Jewish background. After reading this book, I am anxious to explore my background. Ms. Behar has awakened in me a feeling of belonging that is hard to describe. Reading "An Island Called Home" has been a wonderful experience. I will certainly read more books by this great author, and I hope she keeps them coming.

A must read for anyone Jewish who is planning on traveling in Cuba in the near future. Fascinating information, accounts, and stories about the culture, history of Jews in Cuba, particular individuals of significance, photos, their roles in present day jewish culture today. Paints a colorful picture of Cuban way of life.

I read it before traveling to Cuba with the Texas Jewish Historical Society. It gave me a lot of insight into the history of the Jews of Cuba. It was a treat that we got to meet two of the people who were interviewed in this book!

Interesting autoethnography.

So happy to read this book and wished I had read it before my trip to Cuba. Recommending it to my book club!

I read this as I toured Cuba and its Jewish community. Told the whole story

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