Days of Awe and the Jewish Experience of a Cuban Exile: The Case of Achy Obejas

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From its title, Cuban American writer Achy Obejas’ novel Days of Awe alludes to the period of introspection, repentance, and atonement for sin that the Jewish tradition calls Yamim Noraim. During these days the individual is meant to evaluate the actions made in the last year as preparation for being judged by God. They are the ten days between the New Year’s holiday (Rosh Hashana) and the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur). The days of repentance, Days of Awe, are not part of the Hebrew calendar: they are in fact out of time, or are part of a time outside linear, normal time, an intermezzo for reflection and personal evaluation between one year and the next. The Days of Awe are a borderline separating past from present, old from new. They are an ambiguous and complex territory for personal, interior exile. Obejas chooses this space as a metaphor of diasporic Cubans and explores it as a conflictive but enriching place where the multiple elements that constitute identity can become integrated.

In Days of Awe, a novel published in 2001, author Achy Obejas chronicles the saga of the San José family of Sephardic crypto-Jews; Jews who carry on their religious faith in private in spite of their public conversion to Catholicism. (In Hebrew they are called “Anussim” and in Spanish, from medieval times, they were known as “marranos,” literally meaning “pigs.”) The story told is that of the last four generations of the San José family—the grandfather Ytzak, his son Luis and his grandson Enrique, who is the father of Alejandra, the narrator. The family is continuously moving. From the Oriente region in Cuba, a rural zone in the countryside, they move to Havana, and then the younger members migrate to the United States. All of them are doubly exiled: the first members of the San
José family arrived in Cuba after being expelled from Spain; the last ones go to America fleeing Fidel Castro’s regime. Because of political circumstances, both share the fact of being part of a certain diaspora.\(^1\)

Alejandra, the protagonist, is part of the Cuban American San José family. From the United States she travels three times to Havana, first for a job, and then because she starts to feel involved with her family history. The third trip coincides with the celebration of the Days of Awe, which is crucially important among Spanish and Portuguese Jews (Sephardic Jews in general) since medieval times, as an affirmation of the Jewish faith among those forced to convert to Catholicism. The protagonist herself explains the importance of the Days of Awe: it is a time “to ask God to forgive and annul promises not kept. It was designed specifically to reconcile those Jews who converted to other faiths under threat of violence or death and, having survived wished to return. It is a necessary preamble to atonement” (354). Initially, Alejandra thinks of herself only as an American. The novel traces back, or rebuilds, the long-obliterated links to her Jewish faith and her Cuban origin. The Days of Awe will become not only the traditional and religious time out of time, but also a more secular version: a time to reflect on identity in terms of culture, history, nation, and even sexuality.

Each historical moment marks the San José family in a different manner, many times through traditional heritage. In the fragmental diary that is the text of the novel, intertwined with historical research, Alejandra recounts the five hundred years of persecution by the Inquisition in order to explain the formation of the first community of crypto-Jews in the Oriente province of Cuba, one of whose members was her great-grandfather Ytzak. Everyone there had a double life: publicly Catholic and privately Jewish. “Historically,” the novel explains, “Jewish presence in Cuba was illegal because Jews were never allowed in Spanish Colonies. Thus essentially illegal, formally nonexistent, survival required compromising the most basic aspect of their souls: to survive as Jews they had to pretend to be otherwise” (121). The Cuban Revolution in 1959, the year in which Alejandra is born, forces the family (Enrique, the father; Nena, the mother; and the newborn Alejandra) to migrate to Chicago. The first years of the Revolution are in general hard on religious manifestations, and that explains why the crypto-Jews who remain in Cuba keep on hiding their faith, something they had been doing anyway during the six decades after the Cuban independence from Spain, never believing that historical prejudice could cease due to a political change. What happens to Enrique and his daughter, Alejandra, the narrator of the novel, is quite interesting. They settle down in Chicago, apparently free of either religious or political persecution and prohibition, but Enrique decides never to tell Alejandra that they are Jewish. He becomes another sort of crypto-Jew: one whose Jewishness is primarily hidden from his child, and