‘Belonging to Many Homes’:
Argentine Sephardi Youth in Buenos Aires and Israel, 1956–76
Adriana M. Brodsky

In 1956, a small number of young Argentine Sephardi men and women decided to ‘take over’ a building that belonged to Or Torah – the Congregation of Damascene origin in Barracas, a neighborhood in the south of Buenos Aires. One Saturday evening, they walked with enough supplies to last them a few days into a house used by older members to play dominos and cards. While one group remained in the building, a delegation walked around the neighborhood, including the coffee houses (the famous Bar de los Turcos among them) where many of the congregation’s leaders sat discussing the events of the week, and distributed printed flyers with the words: ‘We have taken over the club’. After spending the night in the building, and following a violent altercation with members of the communal leadership featuring flying chairs and the singing of the Hatikva (the Israeli national anthem), the youth group was granted permission to use the space for its own activities. ‘We introduced Israel, Israeli dance, culture, and much more [to the young members of Or Torah],’ said one of the rebels. ‘In fact’, another member recalls, ‘we succeeded – through the activities we devised – in bringing back to Judaism a large number of people who had stopped attending the synagogue services all together’.¹

What started as an act of rebellion against a communal leadership considered to be out of touch with the needs of young Argentine Sephardi Jews was transformed, in the following years, into a much larger movement that included young men and women from most Sephardi congregations in the city of Buenos Aires. Aided by support from the Jewish Agency, this group of young men and women developed a new framework that had several specific (and interrelated) objectives: to bring apathetic young Sephardim back into Judaism, modernize traditional Jewish practices, and instill the desire to migrate to Israel.²

Almost ten years later, a new cohort of Sephardi youth, members of Baderej, a self-identified left-wing Zionist youth organization, continued to
work in the same tradition, combining rebelliousness with a determination to keep the young faithful to Judaism. During the general strikes organized in Buenos Aires in May/June 1969, a leftist activist (who was not Jewish) was killed in a confrontation with the police. The exchange of gunshots took place very close to the Jewish Sports club Macabi, and M (a Baderej member) was a witness to the encounter. Politicized university students organized a meeting soon after the event; while some believed the police version of events, that the activist had first attacked the police and that the latter had only defended themselves, another group claimed that the victim had been specifically targeted and assassinated. Another member of Baderej who was a friend of M and was present at the meeting of university students claimed that he could bring witnesses who would testify to the falsity of the official version of events. The press conference took place, and the police arrested M the day after. He was jailed, interrogated and released after three weeks.3

In the meantime, the Jewish youth group Baderej held a meeting to discuss the situation brought about by M’s incarceration, and, after a tense meeting, they agreed that the objective of Baderej should be to bring about socialism in Israel, not in Argentina. A smaller fraction within Baderej, which had been advocating for a more extreme position regarding their political commitment in Argentine politics, and for whom aliyah (a term used to describe migration to Israel) was only a romantic distraction, lost out. The revolution, Baderej stressed, would only happen in the Promised Land.

Just as the young participants of the 1956 event viewed their actions as a step toward keeping Sephardi youth within the folds of Judaism, the young Zionist activists of the late 1960s and early 1970s continued to describe their objectives as saving Jewish youth from assimilation into Argentine society – in this case, radical activism in Argentine politics.4 Zionism and Israel, then, appeared as the solutions that would allow Sephardim in particular and Jews in general to remain Jewish. Yet, after many members of both groups made aliyah and settled in kibbutzim (collective farms), their Argentineness was not lost; in fact, it became quite central to their new identity. As one member of Baderej recalls, ‘while in Argentina, people called us Jews; in Israel, we became Argentines’.5

This chapter is situated in the theoretical context raised by recent studies of diaspora and transnationalism. Although it has been assumed that the Jewish diaspora is related almost exclusively to their expulsion from the biblical Israel and to the construction of an exilic identity that longed for that lost homeland, scholars have begun to demonstrate that Jews’ lived diasporic experiences were shaped by connections to the lands they inhabited. Scholarship that stressed the image of the wandering Jew, unattached and unwanted, has been supplanted by more nuanced works that emphasize the loyalties that Jews built to their chosen destinations. And in many cases, as I shall argue here, Jews moved out of those spaces, in the process giving birth to new diasporic movements.6 Homelands, then, multiply.7