



THE RABBI & THE DICTATOR

Rabbi Pynchas Brener, former chief rabbi of Venezuela, discusses his meetings and dealings with Cuban leader **Fidel Castro**

By
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and
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THE RABBI & THE DICTATOR

The death over the weekend of Cuban dictator Fidel Castro has generated reactions from across the globe, both from admirers of the Cuban revolutionary and from detractors, who have noted the numerous killings he and his followers carried out and the immense human suffering that he and his regime caused.

Castro had a radical youth, interspersing law school studies with participation in several uprisings in Latin America. In 1953, he organized a failed Cuban uprising against the right-wing government of Fulgencio Batista, which landed him in prison until 1955. From 1956 through 1959, he and his brother Raúl led a guerrilla war against Batista, eventually toppling him. Over the next few years, Castro both consolidated his control of the government and turned Cuba into a client state of the Soviet Union.

But Castro's communism, which faced immense opposition from the United States, outlasted the Russians'. Reportedly surviving over 200 assassination attempts, Castro remained a

of the way that Jews have suffered from Hugo Chávez and his successor, Nicolás Maduro, he also has long experience in dealing with the communist Cuba of Fidel Castro, and even met Castro several times in Cuba and once in Venezuela. His time with Castro gave him interesting and revealing insights into this leader who changed the world with his hand on the trigger of a gun.

AN ATTEMPT TO REUNITE FAMILIES

Rabbi Brener's first visit with Castro was around 1988. The purpose of that trip was to try to bring Jewish families back together.

"A number of people had left Cuba," Rabbi Brener said, "among them many Jews. A number of children came to Venezuela, but their parents remained in Cuba.

"I was tasked by a number of students from our school with seeing if I could do anything about getting the parents of these children to Venezuela. I asked them what they could possibly expect of me. It's not like I knew anyone in Cuba. I told them that I don't mind going to Havana, but what would I do when I get there?"

A couple of months later, the students returned, this time with a petition signed by over 500 students asking that the Jewish community do something about getting their parents out of Cuba.

"At this point I felt that even if I didn't know how to accomplish it, it was important to try to reunite these children with their parents. Additionally, I couldn't have people in the community thinking that when they needed something the community wouldn't respond.

"At the time I was the head of an association of Jews and Christians in Venezuela, so presenting myself in that position, I wrote a letter to Castro asking for permission to meet with him in Cuba to discuss the repatriation of some

people. I sent it through their embassy in Venezuela."

About three months later, Rabbi Brener received a telephone call from the brother of a politician in Venezuela, who was doing business with Cubans.

"He gave me the message that Castro had said to come," Rabbi Brener said. "I called the Cuban Embassy to arrange the trip, and I prepared to go together with a delegation from the Jewish community as well as a bishop who was the vice president of that organization.

"The night before we were scheduled to leave, I received a phone call from the Cuban Embassy informing me that Fidel had said that only the rabbi, his wife and the bishop would be allowed to come; no one else. Well, we didn't have any other choice, so that's what we did.

"We arrived in Havana, but we didn't know when we would be allowed to meet with him. In the meantime, someone was ordered to stay with us at all times, and even when he wasn't with us, we were constantly surrounded by microphones. They placed us in what would translate into English as 'Protocol House,' which were homes of the very rich who had left Cuba; they were used for VIP visitors to Havana.

"The following day he arranged to receive us in the evening, but he said that he was very busy, so he was only able to give us around 45 minutes of his time.

"When we came to the Palace of the Revolution, Castro apologized that he had to leave for a reception, but he said that he knew why we had come and he said that he would let them go because I had asked him for it and then we had a short conversation. We could see that he didn't live at all like a poor person; he had whiskey and cigars—he even gave me some cigars as a gift."

When they left Cuba, they took several additional people with them.

"We took out two physicians, a food production engineer and two elderly people—the father of one of the doctors and the mother of the other, because the doctors both said that they wouldn't leave without them.

"The plane that we arrived in only had enough room to take the people whom I had originally said that I would be taking and we were short by one seat. However, the pilot told me that if everyone would use the restroom before the flight, it could be converted into a passenger seat. That's what we did, and everyone was able to travel to Venezuela on the plane."

Rabbi Brener's first trip allowed him to see conditions in the local Jewish community, as well.

"While we were waiting to see Castro, I went to visit a *shul*, which is called El Patronato, and I brought them *siddurim* and *tefillin*. They were very thankful, but they also had a request. They had a Sunday school for 12 children, but they didn't have a way to transport them to the *shul*. They asked me to help them get a van that would be able to transport the children. I told them that I would do what I could to help.

"When I came home, I spoke to a number of different Cuban ex-pats about donating the vehicle, but they weren't really interested in having anything to do with the Cuban community. Eventually, I spoke to two of my non-Cuban friends and they each gave half of the sum necessary for the vehicle.

"The problem was that it was illegal to import a vehicle into Cuba on your own. If you wanted a car to be imported, you had to give the money to a company that was connected to the government and they would facilitate it for you. I gave them the money, but after a few months the vehicle had still not arrived, so the community reached out to me and said that they would never get it if I wouldn't go there to arrange for it to actually happen.

"So a year after my first visit, I returned to Cuba under a different pretext. When I arrived, I received a message from Fidel informing me that I couldn't just come to Cuba every year to take people out of the country with me."

But in fact, there were people whom Rabbi Brener had planned to try to get out.

"The wife of the Secretary of the Venezuelan Congress [which would eventually be replaced by the National Assembly, under Hugo Chávez] was from Cuba. Her family was stuck there and couldn't get out. I told them that it was different from getting Jews out, because as a rabbi it made more sense that I would advocate for them, but I would try to help anyway."

In fact, once Rabbi Brener had announced that he was coming, the Cubans released the van to the community before he even arrived. "I also was able to take out the non-Jewish in-laws of the Secretary of the Congress. Fidel originally wasn't so happy about it, because the secretary's brother-in-law hadn't yet served in the army, but I told him that reuniting a family is more important than that and he eventually agreed and let them out."

His visit allowed him an even longer audience with the Cuban dictator.

"This time we spoke for almost four and a half hours. It started just after midnight, and I wondered why he was so insistent on meeting us in the middle of the night. I don't know



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regional thorn in the side of Washington for over half a century, humiliating the superpower in the Bay of Pigs crisis and nearly bringing the US and the USSR to the brink of nuclear war. And he created several generations of refugee Cuban Americans who were nostalgic for their homeland, viscerally hostile to its leader, and highly influential in American politics. (Two American presidential contenders this last year, Ted Cruz and Marco Rubio, are children or grandchildren of Cuban exiles.)

To get a better understanding of the Cuban dictator, I spoke to Rabbi Pynchas Brener, the former chief rabbi of Venezuela, who now lives in Miami.

With a 44-year tenure that included time during the Chávez government, Rabbi Brener knows a good deal about living under a repressive regime. Not only does he have knowledge



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if this is the real reason, but I've heard that it's because he kept his schedule according to the time zone of Moscow.

"He was very impressive; he knew something about any topic you could possibly come up with. He went to a Jesuit school, so he knew about the Bible and so on. He wanted to hear from me about what was going on in Venezuela, although he knew better than I did. He probably just wanted to hear the reaction of someone who lived there.

"This was just prior to the reelection of Carlos Andrés Pérez as president of Venezuela, after he had been out of office for ten years. Castro said to me, 'Tell Carlos Andrés that if he's elected as president and he invites me, I'll come to the inauguration.' I told him that I didn't know if he was going to win or not, but according to what I had been reading in the newspapers it seemed that he would win. Then Castro said that if he would indeed come to Venezuela he wanted to eat at my house.

"When I returned to Venezuela I had the opportunity to pass the message on to Pérez while he was campaigning. He laughed, but when he won, he invited Castro to the inauguration.

"So I had a very nice relationship with Castro, even though I knew that he was responsible for countless deaths. He enslaved Cuba for a very long time, but at least I was able to do something to help the Jewish community, which was really my interest. I'm not a judge of what he did, but it's obvious that he was a dictator and had a lot of blood on his hands."

What was Castro's attitude toward Jews? Rabbi Brener describes them as complicated.

"In my conversations with Castro I once brought up the fact that he had broken off relations with Israel in 1967.

"I asked him, 'Why don't you reestablish relations with Israel? You know Cuba is an island surrounded by enemies (supposedly), and Israel is also like an island surrounded by enemies. It's a very small country and you have a lot in common with them.'

"He replied, 'Rabbi, I don't have anything against Israel nor against Jews in general, but we have a very important position in the Non-Aligned Movement [an organization of countries supposedly dedicated to not taking sides between the East and the West] and it wouldn't be convenient for me to normalize relations with Israel.'

"On one of the trips, I brought him a beautiful silver *mezuzah* with a base that he could put on his desk and I explained to him what it was. He was very appreciative and thanked me for it, but then he put it in his drawer, saying, 'If any Arabs come to visit me, it's probably better if I keep it in the drawer.'

"He was a very pragmatic fellow. The interests of his government came first and he felt that if he would be friendly toward Israel it wouldn't be good for him. There was never any real discrimination against Jews in Cuba; they just suffered the same way everyone else did. There wasn't any anti-Semitism, it's just that his politics were very different from the way Jewish politics usually are.

"He had no malice for Jews as far as I could detect. At one point Rabbi Yisrael Meir Lau, who was the chief rabbi of Israel,

expressed an interest in meeting with Castro. He was told that Rabbi Brener can get him to see Fidel Castro and I arranged for them to meet. Rabbi Lau brought an ornate *shofar* covered in silver, as an ornament for him. He wanted to know what it is, so I blew it for him and then we explained it to him.

"He had a very interesting conversation with Rabbi Lau. He asked him, 'How many Jews went out of Egypt?'

"600,000.'

"And how many were they when they came to Egypt?'

"70.'

"That's not possible,' said Castro. 'How could there have been so many in just 200 years?'

"He asked for a pen and paper and started making calculations and he kept on repeating that it's not possible. Rabbi Lau explained that six children were born every time, etc.

"The point of the story is that he showed a real interest in Judaism. He was very respectful of Rabbi Lau—and he was always very respectful of me as well—but on the other hand, I know that he oppressed the Cuban people for over half a century and had a bad influence on other countries as well. His dream of equality was very nice, but in the end it turned into oppression. Just as you see in most countries in the world where they tried to impose socialism and eventually it turned into oppression."

THE POLICE STATE OF CUBA

Rabbi Brener's visits to Cuba were not just those during which he met Fidel Castro. He described another trip he took to the island with a group of 80 young Jewish Venezuelans. "They never had such an amazing experience," he said.

"The young people who came with me were very appreciative of the trip, because they got to see the contrast between living in a free country, which Venezuela was at the time, and living under dictatorship, as they did in Cuba.

"When you fly over Cuba at night, you can't see the country because it's completely dark. There are no streetlights at night, because they conserve energy and don't want to waste it on that.

"Every block used to have someone representing the government who was in charge of the block. If your son didn't come to school for two days, on the third day he would come to your house to find out what's going on. You couldn't have more than five people in your house without permission for fear of an anti-government gathering. It was a real police state.

"While we were there, we had a Mercedes-Benz and a chauffeur waiting in front of our house 24 hours a day. These homes where we were put up each time were for very important visitors. My wife wanted to do something for the chauffeur so she gave him \$20. He thanked her, but then a few minutes later he came back and said, 'I really can't accept the money. What am I going to do with it? If they catch me with it, I'll go to prison; it's not worth it for me to have it. Rather than giving me money, please buy me a guayabera [a traditional pleated Cuban shirt] from the store that's reserved for diplomats.' I don't remember what it cost, but we bought it for him and he was thrilled with it. People lived from hand to mouth in very poor conditions.

"I met with the Jewish community a couple of times and they tried their best to show us that there was no special persecution against Jews—everyone was suffering the same. In fact, the Jews had somewhat of an advantage because Jewish communities around the world tried to help them. Cuba had a good relationship with Canada, which is where they got all of their goods from. Canada was very important for them and the Jewish communities there would send them food for Pesach, etc. I conducted some services for them and I brought them some *siddurim*, but they were a very poor Jewish community just trying to survive. At the time the head of the community was a physician and he tried his best to lead them.

"We literally left everything that we could possibly leave for the Jewish community there. We returned with the clothing we were wearing and that was it. We had also come with gifts, but we realized that anything extra we could give them was very precious to them.

REGIMES AND REVOLUTIONS

Rabbi Brener characterized the statement released by President Obama in reaction to Castro's death as "very unfortunate." He particularly critiqued the idea of "putting the past behind us" that Obama mentioned in his release.

"I think that one can very well argue that the boycott and embargo have not helped in toppling the Cuban regime, but I don't think that they're going to let you do anything about it. That country, like Venezuela and others, is controlled by a group that won't let



Rabbi Brener demonstrates a shofar, a gift from the chief rabbi of Israel, to Fidel Castro

"The inauguration took place in the largest theater in Venezuela and Castro did indeed come, with around 300 people, including his own cooks because he was in constant fear of being poisoned. As he was walking out of the theater he saw me and said, 'Hey, Rabbi, how are you? My security doesn't want to let me eat at your house. However, bring food to my hotel and we'll eat together.'

"I was given an appointment to meet with him in the middle of the night again. I came to the hotel with some brownies and other small things that my wife had made. He took them and thanked me and we had a nice meeting. I was his last meeting in Venezuela; right after I left, he flew back to Cuba.



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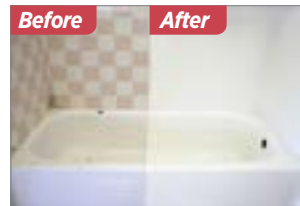
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CHIEF RABBI OF ISRAEL IN CUBA

By Shira Schmidt

As Rabbi Brener described in his interview with *Ami*, he had arranged for a visit in 1994 by former Israeli Chief Rabbi Yisrael Meir Lau to Cuba, where Rabbi Lau met with Cuban leader Fidel Castro. Rabbi Lau has mentioned some of the details of the trip in his autobiography, *Out of the Depths: The Story of a Child of Buchenwald who Returned Home at Last*, but the morning after Castro's death was announced, he shared with *Ami* some details about that trip that he has not previously discussed.

In pictures published in your book and elsewhere, you are shown meeting with Castro and showing something to him. What is it you are holding?

I am handing Castro the gift that the *rebbe* and I brought for him.

This is how it came about: Our two-day visit to Cuba in February 1994 was arranged by the then-Chief Rabbi of Venezuela, Pynchas Brener. I had volunteered to give some lectures in Venezuela under the auspices of Bar-Ilan University. They asked me how they could return the favor and I said that for many years I had a yen to visit the Jewish community in Cuba, and to see if I could be of any help there. Rabbi Brener arranged a two-day visit.



Rabbi Lau presents a shofar to Castro as Rabbi Brener looks on.

At first, no meeting with Fidel Castro had been scheduled. Nevertheless, the *rebbe* and I wanted to “be prepared” and we brought a shofar for Castro, just in case.

On the second day we got a surprise invitation to come to Castro's “palace”—a worn down one at that. In the photograph, I am explaining the inscription from the *Amidah* prayer: “*Teka b'shofar gadol l'cheiruteinu*”—“Sound the great shofar for our freedom.”

Did Castro understand the implications?

He was perspicacious, so he got the general message. There was a two-fold meaning in the shofar. One was to allow “family unification” for Jews in Cuba who wanted to reunite with families in Israel. To this his response was mildly positive.

And the second meaning of the shofar?

There is another *pasuk* related to shofar—about the *yovel* year—from which the English word jubilee derives. (*Vayikra 25*) “You shall sound loud the shofar... each of you shall return to his family.”

To what was the Rav referring?

As we stood by the elevator at the end of our meeting, I explained this to Castro. The meeting began at 10:55 p.m. and he escorted us to the elevator at 1 a.m. There we stood and I asked him to use his clout with various leaders of Arab states to find four Israelis missing in action, MIAs.

He said, correctly, that his friends, such as Saddam Hussein of Iraq and Hafez al-Assad of Syria, were our enemies. So I asked him to make a real effort through them to find four MIAs: Ron Arad, Yehuda Katz, Zechariah Baumel, and Zvi Feldman.

He put his hand on his heart and said, “*Gran rabino de Israel* [Chief Rabbi of Israel], do you really think they are alive, if they have not been heard from for at least 12 years? Prison is not pretty.”

So I responded that if, G-d forbid, they were not alive, then the parents deserve to at least have a gravesite to visit. They need to be able to say the memorial prayer so their names will not be erased... I didn't use the Hebrew term *Kaddish*, I used a general term, memorial prayer, and I explained the importance of a *matzeivah*, a physical memorial.

When he heard that he pointed with his finger and said, “You have made your point and I got it.”

Castro claimed that he would brook no anti-Semitism. Was that true?

You have to understand that he did not tolerate religious practice in general, Jewish or Christian.

He grew up in a well-to-do family and was educated in a monastery school. He told me that what he learned from some of his Catholic teachers was that Jews were like birds of prey. It seems that the teachers had an etymological problem and confused Jews sporting “beards” with “birds.”

So his struggle against anti-Semitism was part and parcel of his struggle against the Church and the Church's anti-Semitism. □

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go—and that includes the military and judiciary. These countries don't have separation of powers; one central government controls everything. Those at the top benefit together with their friends and cohorts, and they won't let go, because they know that if they do they'll lose all the benefits and end up in prison.”

Will Castro's death change anything for their partner in the region, Venezuela? Rabbi Brener is skeptical.

“Without Fidel Castro, Venezuela is going to continue in the exact same direction, because in reality he already hasn't been around for about eight years. We don't even know for sure if he really died just now or if he died a while ago. Even if he did just die, he hasn't been in power for years; it's his brother who has been in power and he is going to continue without any changes.

“His brother was with him from the very first day of the revolution and he was the minister of defense throughout all the years. He's not a newcomer. He's also not a youngster, he's already 85. He did announce that he's going to be giving up power in two or three years, but there's a whole group that controls the country and won't let go. I don't know what would get them to actually let go.”

Venezuela also remains a difficult place for everyone, including the Jews.

“I'm in touch practically daily. Many people continue to leave because they don't see an end to this regime, even though some people say that it may be coming to an end. The problem is that everyone is guessing and no one really knows what's going to happen. There's a glimmer of hope now, because the National Assembly is in the hands of the opposition. The problem is that the media is in the hands of the government, so people both in and out of the country don't fully realize what's actually happening—they only hear what the government wants them to hear.

“Right now there's supposed to be a dialogue between the government and the opposition and the Vatican is involved in trying to facilitate it, but I'm very skeptical. On the other hand, there's going to be a new government in the United States and a new American policy might have an effect on the future of Venezuela.”

Still, Rabbi Brener said, the history of Fidel Castro shows that the US influence on Latin America is complicated.

“Many Central and South American leaders admired Castro, not necessarily for his style of government but for his guts in standing up to the United States—the largest and most powerful empire in the world. It's very strange, because on the one hand they would all try to curry the favor of the US, but on the other hand people like to support the weaker side of a conflict.”

But in summing up his thoughts on the death of Castro, Rabbi Brener said that he does see it as a milestone, not just for Cuba but for the Western Hemisphere and perhaps the world.

“This is the last hurrah of the left in the Americas, because there has lately been a change in Brazil and Argentina. Castro was the symbol of confronting the United States. Perhaps the new administration in the United States, which will be more business-oriented than politically motivated, will help the Americas appreciate the concepts of free trade and capitalism and that you should be rewarded for the effort that you put in. Maybe they will somehow begin to admire the alternatives that are out there.

“I think that Castro's demise is symbolic of the demise of the left in the world, even though you still have North Korea, so there are still some vestiges left. The fact is that China is no longer a real communist country; the Communist Party still controls the population, but in their dealings they are becoming more capitalist than many other countries and they have really developed the country economically. The right wing resurgence that we're starting to see all over the world may be in answer to the left that was in control for so long.” □



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