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Blessed is the peacemaker: Bernardo Benes | Opinion

By SYLVIA GURINSKY
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Sylvia Gurinsky. (Sylvia Gurinsky/Courtesy)

Bernardo Benes once handed me a business card that featured a picture of him

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It was surprising – not your everyday meeting, after all – and yet it was not surprising.

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It was in his character to reach out – across religion, across countries, and, most risky, across political ideologies.

Bernardo Benes died Jan. 14, but left a long legacy worth following.

In 1961, he was re-establishing himself in South Florida with his young family after leaving Cuba the year before. With three other Cuban Jews – Enrique Kalusin, Felix Reyler and Oscar White – he founded what long-timers still call El Circulo and the community knows as Temple Beth Shmuel – Cuban Hebrew Congregation.

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During the 1960s, his work at Washington Federal Savings and Loan in Miami Beach enabled the growing El Circulo to use the auditorium in the bank building at 1244 Washington Ave. for *Shabbat* and High Holy Days services. Benes was later the congregation president.

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He also rose in local banking as a co-founder of Continental National Bank during the 1970s. He helped numerous immigrants from Cuba and was one of the bridge builders between the exile community and others.

But he had bigger goals – and dollars and cents had little to do with those goals.

His banking and community work had enabled him to rub shoulders with high-level officials in Washington. By the 1970s and 1980s, that included Presidents Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan.

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Such connections brought him to the attention of Cuban intelligence agents, who saw him as a possible go-between. With Carlos Dascal, who had co-founded Continental Bank with him, Benes returned to Cuba.

They met a man whom Benes had last met in 1959 – Fidel Castro. At that time, Benes had received a Havana Bar Association award from Castro.

Two decades later, the potential prize for the meeting was much bigger. There would be other meetings.

The first result, in 1978, was the freeing of 3,600 political prisoners by the Castro government. Other results included the increased ability of exiles to visit family in Cuba.

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In 1980, Benes and others from the Cuban Hebrew Congregation went to El Patronato, the main synagogue in Havana, and returned to South Florida with a Torah scroll and various artifacts.

But in the eyes of many in Miami's Cuban community, Bernardo Benes had committed the grave sin of talking to Fidel Castro to achieve those ends. He was vilified on Spanish-language radio and shunned by many in the exile community. There were death threats. There were protests at Continental Bank – then a bomb blast in 1983.

To coin a phrase used in a different context: Nevertheless, Benes persisted in trying to move forward even when both Cuba and U.S. hard-liners were still moving in the opposite direction.

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In 2001, Robert M. Levine, then director of the University of Miami's Center for Latin American Studies, wrote "Secret Missions to Cuba," about Benes' saga. Even the preparation of the book brought problems, with thefts of Benes' car and Levine's briefcase.

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A personal note: Besides being a family friend, Bernardo Benes was kin; his wife, Raquel (maiden name Gurinsky), is my father's distant cousin. My parents and I usually saw them at shul. During the years I worked at this paper full-time, Bernardo would usually ask me about covering one thing or another. The last time I saw him was around 2012.

By the time President Barack Obama opened up official relations between the United States and Cuba in 2015, Bernardo's health was failing. I suspect he had strong hopes about the events of that time.

Today, it's not fashionable to reach out. Witness the government shutdown and the increasing number of Americans held hostage to a political squabble over a wall.

Witness the Trump Administration rolling back the progress of the Obama Administration on Cuba.

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That makes the example Bernardo Benes set, and the courage he showed, all the greater.

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The phrase "Blessed are the peacemakers" comes from the New Testament. But it applies to a man who stuck to the Jewish standard of

tikkun olam.

Bernardo Benes acted to repair at least a small corner of the world.

Gurinsky is a writer who resides in Davie.

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