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South African Jews and Apartheid

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In his autobiography *Long Walk to Freedom* Nelson Mandela notes, “I have found Jews to be more broad-minded than most whites on the issues of race and politics, perhaps because they themselves have historically been victims of prejudice.” As a law student at the University of Witwatersrand, Mandela met Harold Wolpe, Ruth First, and Joe Slovo who would become lifelong friends and then comrades in battle. After graduating, it was Lazar Sidelsky who would give him his first job as an articled clerk at a time when few white firms would hire a black. Sidelsky was also “involved in African education, donating money and time to African schools.” In fact, among whites it was Jews who would offer Mandela the greatest support and encouragement; those who hid him when he was forced to go underground; those who, as lawyers, defended him at trial; those who, as journalists, supported the anti-apartheid cause; and those politicians, like Helen Suzman, who made it their mission to see that Mandela and other political prisoners received the best treatment possible from a legal and penal system structured to humiliate and degrade black prisoners. There were even relatively apolitical Jews like Nadine Gordimer who did their part on Mandela’s behalf; Gordimer secretly helped edit the famous speech Mandela gave in his defense at the Rivonia trial, and donated all the prize money from her 1991 Nobel Prize for Literature to the Congress of South African Writers, an organization aligned with the ANC. And Mandela’s relationship with Jews was by no means exceptional; the same can be said of other “historic” black ANC leaders, such as Walter Sisulu, Oliver Tambo, and Moses Kotane.

Along with non-whites, Jews in the struggle against apartheid were assassinated, tortured, mutilated, and imprisoned. Ruth First was
killed by a bomb planted by the South African security forces; Albie Sachs, targeted by the same state agents, lost an eye and an arm in a failed assassination attempt; and Rowley Arenstein was banned longer than any other South African during apartheid, thirty-three years. Joe Slovo, Ray Simons, and Raymond Suttner served on the ANC’s National Executive Committee. Ronnie Kasrils was head of intelligence for the ANC’s military wing, Umikhonto we Sizwe. The list gets still longer as one descends from leadership to ANC staff positions, especially during the period in exile.

Numbers are revealing. More than half the whites charged at the famous Treason Trial in 1956 were Jews, as were all the whites initially charged in the 1963 Rivonia Trial that would send Dennis Goldberg to prison for life, along with Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu, and Govan Mbeki. In literally every aspect of the anti-apartheid struggle—political, military, legal, cultural—Jews in substantial numbers were conspicuously present. This from a group which accounted for approximately 2.5% of South Africa’s white population, and .3% of South Africa’s total population. There were other whites, to be sure, but what makes Bram Fischer stand out, in part, was how few fellow Afrikaners were part of the movement, or, in the case of George Bizos, how few Greeks.

Yet, despite this thick crust of Jewish participation in the good fight, it is nevertheless true that the Jewish establishment and the vast majority of South African Jews were inwardly focused on specifically Jewish issues, remaining distant from the central South African issue of racial injustice. As was the case elsewhere, in Europe and in the United States, while perhaps one Jew in ten might be an activist, out of ten activists, five or six would be Jewish. In South Africa, it was only after 1985 that the Board of Jewish Deputies formally condemned apartheid and encouraged the genesis of Jewish civil rights organizations, such as Jews for Justice in Cape Town, and Jews for Social Justice in Johannesburg. Though some heroic rabbis spoke out against apartheid earlier, despite threats from the security forces as well as from their own congregations, only after 1985 did the rabbinate in general begin to condemn apartheid from the pulpit. The fact that Jews were overwhelmingly overrepresented in the struggle but, at the same time, that Jews, in the main, appeared initially indifferent to apartheid, has led to renewed interest, especially after the great changes of 1994, in critically reflecting upon South Africa’s “peculiar institution” and the role of Jews in South Africa’s tortuous history. Two recent publications, in
particular, highlight the complexity and inner conflict which has emerged from this charged debate within South Africa’s Jewish community, one that has been described by an American Jewish participant as vacillating between self-congratulation and self-flagellation. The first is a mammoth 635 page volume of interviews with South African Jewish activists entitled *Cutting Through the Mountain*; the second is a special issue of *Jewish Affairs*, official publication of the South African Board of Jewish Deputies, devoted to the theme Jews and Apartheid. Before turning to the contested issues, however, some understanding of the history of the Jewish community is in order. Without this context it would be impossible to fully comprehend how South African Jews acted, or failed to act, in the face of apartheid.

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The first point to be made is the relative isolation of Jews from virtually all other groups and subcultures. Though Jews had “white status” within the apartheid racial scheme, they faced social exclusion from English-speaking South Africans and, at times, vicious antisemitism from the Afrikaners. Leaving a history of persecution in eastern Europe, Jews arrived in South Africa not as “whites,” but as “Jews,” Christian Europe’s “eternal other,” objects of Europe’s original and most enduring racism. In other words, Jews were at best a suspect minority within South Africa’s oppressive white minority. There were few illusions about integrating into South African society, as was the case in the United States and Western Europe. With whom could they integrate? On what terms? And what might that have meant in a place like South Africa? Instead, they constituted a separate Jewish identity, constructing a rich nexus of schools, youth movements, cultural organizations, publications, and welfare institutions. Compared to Jewish communities in the West, those in South Africa tended to be far more inward looking and homogeneous in terms of origin (roughly 70% came from Lithuania), religious practice (overwhelmingly orthodox), and continuity, especially regarding intermarriage which, among South African Jews, was practically unknown. Moreover, some 50–60% of the community’s children attended Jewish day schools, rather than public or non-Jewish private schools. Faced with the competing South African nationalisms (black nationalism and Afrikaner nationalism), neither of which identified at all with Jews, they became overwhelmingly Zionist and deeply attached to Israel, so much so that
being unsympathetic to the Jewish state was commonly regarded as a sign of self-hatred.

No account of South African Jews could overlook the trauma of the 1930s and early 1940s. In eastern Europe, where they left both deep roots and extended families, the Holocaust had all but erased all traces of what had been an essential Jewish presence. Barney Simon, the creative driving force behind Johannesburg’s progressive Market Theater, recalled the most tragic day of his youth when, at synagogue, the mostly Lithuanian congregation learned of the violent destruction of the Vilna ghetto and wailed with insurmountable grief at details of the murder, rapes, and carnage. He offers, “I know that experience somehow made me a Jew. It’s something that has always stayed with me and was very important to me in terms of understanding my mother, my family, the destiny of my people.” Meanwhile, in South Africa, Afrikaner leaders openly manifested a venomous, Nazi-inspired form of antisemitism, while new political movements (the League of Gentiles, the Greyshirts, and the Ossewabrandwag) raised the specter of a domestic “Jewish threat.” This led to new restrictions on Jewish immigration from eastern Europe, effectively closing the door on family members who had nowhere else to turn. It was only three and a half years after the end of World War II that apartheid was put into effect by the same Nationalist leaders whose record of antisemitism led some Jews to believe that they, too, along with blacks and coloureds, would be afforded some subordinate non-white status, perhaps as “East Europeans,” the status that had already singled them out for immigration restrictions. Fear of state-sponsored antisemitism promoted by an avowedly antisemitic party, combined with uncertainty over what stance the new Nationalist government would adopt toward the newly-created state of Israel, led the Jewish establishment to adopt a quietistic, conciliatory policy toward the Nationalist government, fearing that it could be easily provoked into promoting policies hostile to the Jewish community and Israel. As one noted South African Jewish writer put it:

Caught on the horns of a dilemma, the South African Jewish Board of Deputies—whose chief functions were, and remain, to protect the civil and religious liberties of the Jewish community, to act as its official spokesbody, and to monitor and deal with antisemitism—was keen to foster the new relationship and was careful not to do anything that would undermine it. This resulted in a policy of communal non-involve-
ment in politics. Jews were to make political decisions individually and without communal pressure. This strategy, also motivated by the belief that Jews were so small a community that could not make a difference, was a characteristic minority group phenomenon of self-preservation.8

Returning to the Jewish debate on apartheid, the central issue at first appeared deceptively simple: had South Africa’s Jews done enough? But quickly matters became more complex with the obvious follow-up questions: how much would have been enough and relative to whom? Defenders of the Jewish record note that in South Africa minorities have always tended to look out primarily for their own interests. They point out that if Jews had displayed “moral blindness” toward the black African majority, this was not at all unique to the Jewish community. During its formative period, the Muslim Judicial Council adopted a similar nonpolitical stance. Though the great humanitarian Mahatma Gandhi certainly sympathized with the plight of blacks during his time in South Africa, he worked exclusively for Indian rights and never proposed a broader alliance. Incidentally, many of his closest white associates were Jews (Sonya Schlesin, Henry Polak, Hermann Kallenbach) who railed against the failure of other Jews to champion Indian rights.9 Jews never do enough... again.

Defenders of the Jewish record note that, unlike Christian denominations that had black co-religionists, there were no black Jews in South Africa to whom religious solidarity could have been extended. Skin color has never been an obstacle to such solidarity, as the history of Israel demonstrates. A substantial number of Israelis would have been designated “coloureds” in South Africa, and the Ethiopian Jews that Israel rescued from warfare and persecution would have been designated as “black.” Defenders of the Jewish record also note that the South African Board of Jewish Deputies, in fact, began attacking apartheid well before the famous 1985 condemnation. At its 1965 Congress, the second after the Sharpeville killings, the Board stated “the fundamental racial problems of South Africa concerned the Jewish community as vitally as all other sections of the population.” Arthur Suzman (Helen Suzman’s brother-in-law), then Chairman of the Public Relations committee of the Board, referred to pressure on the Board to take a specific position on the doctrine of apartheid and the discriminatory laws of the present regime. He stated that while the Board
might not be able to speak with one political voice, “we might rightly be expected to speak with one moral voice.” He then proposed a resolution, substantially reaffirming one that already had been passed at the 1962 Congress.

Every Jewish citizen should promote understanding, goodwill and cooperation between the various races, people and groups in South Africa in accordance with the moral teaching and precepts of Judaism, and towards the achievement of a peaceful and secure future for all the inhabitants of the country, based on the principles of justice and the dignity of the individual.\textsuperscript{10}

In 1972 the Board’s Congress passed the following resolution:

Whilst recognizing that, in regard to the racial and political problems of the Republic, there is a diversity in outlook in the Jewish community as there is among our fellow South Africans, we share with all those who dwell in our country the great challenge and opportunity involved in establishing, on ethical foundations, a just, stable and peaceful relationship between all races and groups in South Africa, which acknowledges the right of all to live in dignity and security, to maintain their group identity and distinctive culture, and to exercise the opportunity to advance in all spheres. Congress therefore calls upon every Jew to make his contributions to these ends, in accordance with the precepts and teachings of Judaism, in his personal attitudes and dealings, and in the particular sphere of life and activity in which he is engaged.\textsuperscript{11}

A more direct criticism, made in a face-to-face situation, was a speech given in 1976 by the Board’s President D.K. Mann, on the occasion of a banquet in honor of the Prime Minister, who had just returned from a visit to Israel. Prime Minister Vorster had earlier been Minister of Justice and responsible for introducing some of the most repressive laws of the apartheid period.

I believe that there is a new sense of urgency abroad in our land, a realization that we must move away as quickly and effectively as is practicable from discrimination based on race or colour, and that we must accord to every man and woman respect, and human dignity, and the opportunity to develop their fullest potential.\textsuperscript{12}
The Board’s 1980 resolution continued its previous critique of apartheid:

While recognizing recent reforms, Congress believes that unless more meaningful and more significant changes in our social, economic and political structures are initiated, the ever-mounting external and internal pressures may well erupt into violence and bloodshed. Congress accordingly urges all concerned, in particular members of our own community, to cooperate in securing the immediate amelioration and ultimate removal of all unjust discriminatory laws and practices based on race, creed or color.\(^{13}\)

Reflecting the sentiments of the Board, its new President Arthur Suzman observed, “when the voice of legitimate protest goes unheeded, the bombs would be heard.” He noted that both the future of Jews and of the other white groups in South Africa ultimately “depended on the maintenance of harmonious race relations in a multiracial society.” It was this problem that “overshadowed all else in Southern Africa.”\(^{14}\)

Beyond the Board’s activities, many efforts made by Jewish individuals, women’s organizations, and local groups have gone largely unacknowledged. Ina Perlman founded an organization called Operation Hunger, which reached over two million South African blacks.\(^{15}\) The South African Union of Jewish Women (UJW) maintained extensive outreach programs in the black townships, particularly in the areas of teacher training and preschool development, applying techniques developed in Israel. The UJW even sponsored select black South African teachers on visits to Israel to see these programs in action. It also established a multiracial youth group, and participated in the Women’s National Coalition.\(^{16}\) Individual synagogues, like Johannesburg’s renowned Oxford Synagogue and Cape Town’s Temple Israel, worked with the townships in numerous ways: assisting black nurseries, running medical clinics and adult education programs, and providing legal aid for those who ran afoul of apartheid laws.\(^{17}\)

As significant as these efforts were, for some Jewish critics they were clearly not enough. Though some have argued that Afrikaners, not Jews, were the villains and exploiters of the non-white majority, and that Jewish mobility and affluence throughout the West indicates clearly that Jews had little need of apartheid’s privileges at the expense of non-whites in order to flourish, others reply that it is all too convenient, if not patently unethical, for Jews to use Afrikaners as a scape-
goat to excuse their own inaction. This would be tantamount to blaming the perpetrator while sharing in the fruits of his transgressions. Given the nature and circumstances of apartheid, perhaps no quantity of effort would have been "enough." But this quantitative concern takes us too far from the moral dilemma facing South African Jews: how could they, at the same time, promote and protect their interests in a relatively inhospitable context, and fully support the oppressed non-white majority, support which would have certainly provoked retaliation against the Jews whose loyalty to South Africa already was suspect? Jewish moralists claim that what was at stake was a fundamental Jewish ethical standard: to treat the oppressed as brethren. They maintain the standard was either met more formally than substantively, or was simply violated by the Jewish establishment and by the vast majority of Jews. Beyond a clear moral commitment, deeply rooted in Jewish theology, there was the recent experience of the Holocaust, which should have made Jews all the more sensitive to the consequences of indifference when certain groups are targeted for official humiliation, degradation, and exclusion. After all, apartheid was enacted a mere three and a half years after World War II had ended. Jews never hesitated in condemning the moral responsibility of the numerous Christian bystanders, as well as the guilt of the less numerous Christian perpetrators. As the Jewish philosopher Abraham Heschel, whose entire Polish family perished, put it:

Indifference to evil is more insidious than evil itself: it is more universal, more contagious, more dangerous. A silent justification, it makes possible an evil erupting as an exception becoming the rule and being in turn accepted.18

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Jewish moralists, like all moralists, always hold the trump card in making such arguments, for rarely are they charged with public responsibility. Yet, as Max Weber argued in his famous essay “Politics as a Vocation,” in public life there is always a conflict between an ethic of ultimate ends and an ethic of consequences, or responsibility. In retrospect, it is clear that those charged with communal leadership, in an imperfect world, tried to balance one against the other. They never totally abandoned a commitment toward the oppressed nor forgot that their primary responsibility was defending Jewish interests, interests
which in South Africa clearly needed defending, interests which
would have been defended by no one else.

Turning from the Jewish establishment and the Jewish majority to
those Jewish individuals who distinguished themselves as anti-
apartheid activists, two analytic distinctions need to be made,
although, like all analytic distinctions, it should be kept in mind that
the reality is a good deal more complex. First, there is a distinction
between those who were frontally against the system and engaged in
armed struggle against it, as opposed to those who sought to reform
the system from within. Here the prototypes would be Joe Slovo,
leader of the South African Communist Party and later member of the
ANC’s National Executive Committee, as opposed to Helen Suzman,
long-term liberal member of parliament and civil libertarian, who
championed anti-apartheid reforms and served as the patron saint for
two generations of political prisoners. The second analytic distinction
is generational: roughly speaking, those who were born before World
War II and were politically active before the suppression of opposition
political parties and associations during the early years of apartheid, as
opposed to those born after World War II, who came of age in
apartheid South Africa when the primary anti-apartheid organizations
were already in exile, and whose formative political experience would
take place after the Soweto uprising of 1976. Generally, the younger
generation came from backgrounds of relative affluence whereas the
older generation, paralleling the history of South African Jews, tended
to come from immigrant, working-class backgrounds. These distinc-
tions should not be overstated, however, since ultimately there were
more commonalities than differences. As pointed out earlier, they
tended to work together whenever they could in fighting apartheid,
even though there were disagreements over means, tactics, and ends.
They all tended to describe themselves as secular, nonobservant Jews,
though most had traditional Jewish educations, participated in Jewish
youth organizations, and claimed Jewish history and morality as fun-
damental in the development of their political convictions, even in the
case of self-confessed atheists. Some had a keen sense of Jewish scrip-
ture, particularly the passage in Leviticus, about loving thy neighbor
as thyself, but even more pointedly Moses’ final speech in Deuteronom-
y, “The stranger in thy midst shall be as thy brother.” For Ina Perl-
man, this signified that Jews had a higher standard to meet, for the
“stranger,” unlike the neighbor, is someone with whom one might
have no preliminary community of interest.” Treating the “stranger”
as a brother extends to “others” who are different and unfamiliar. For others, like Rowley Arenstein, Jewish ethics were less abstract. “Do unto others as you expect others to do unto you. That is the essence of the Jewish religion. The rest is commentary. That’s what my mother said to me. That is something I never forgot.” For the communist Pauline Podbrey, a higher standard of morality was to be expected from Jews, recalling the ironic observation of her non-Jewish husband, “Why do you expect the Jews to behave as if they are the chosen race when you deny that they are?”

The older generation of Jewish revolutionaries almost all had backgrounds in one or another form of East European socialism, from labor Zionism to the communist party. They either brought this experience with them to South Africa, as well as Yiddish language and culture, or acquired it soon after arriving. As children, they attended cheyder (Hebrew School) and joined the Habonim (a Zionist socialist youth movement). At an older age, they joined the Hashomery Hatzair (a kibbutz-oriented movement on the extreme left of the Zionist spectrum, banned in South Africa in the 1950s). Though some would shed religion and Zionism as they drifted toward communism, they retained a strong Jewish identity and deep affinity for Jewish culture. The “atheist” Joe Slovo (born Yossel Mashel Slovo) was regarded as a classic Jewish comedian and raconteur in SACP and ANC circles, always ready with a Jewish joke or a sentimental lullaby (Tumbalalaika or Roshinkes mit Mandlen). Slovo never forgot Obelei, the shtetl in Lithuania he left as a young boy, the place where his remaining family and the entire Jewish community were murdered by Lithuanian nationalists in October 1944. Yossel Slovo, the Jew born in Obelei; Joe Slovo, the freedom fighter buried in a plain box just outside the black township of Soweto.

This older, radical generation had their lives severely interrupted by banning, exile, or imprisonment by the apartheid regime. At the intersubjective level, this group forged bonds of deep friendship and mutual recognition with non-whites that eluded the other groups of Jewish anti-apartheid activists for whom revulsion against social injustice was motivation enough to struggle. For red-diaper babies like Albie Sachs, blacks were family friends and honored guests. Moses Kotane, for whom his mother worked as a typist, was Uncle Moses. For Ron Kasrils, Walter Sisulu was tata (father). Helen Bernstein and Alberta Sisulu were the closest of friends. For this group of older radical activists and their children, there was a strong affinity between
Jewish culture and African ubuntu (the interconnectedness of all human beings, a common sense of belongingness). Ron Kasrils notes, "‘Motho ke motho ka batho babang’ (A person is a person because of other people) sums up the meaning of ubuntu in our country.”

The older liberal generation of activists was well established professionally before the underground opposition was formed. Helen Suzman, for example, had been a professor of economics at the University of Witwatersrand (where Joe Slovo had been one of her students) for eight years before beginning her thirty-six year career in parliament in 1953. She, and anti-apartheid lawyers like Isie Maisels, were committed liberals and civil libertarians, altogether hostile to socialism and violence, though both recognized the fact that it was the South African regime which actually promoted violence by making democratic opposition to apartheid all but impossible. They elicited greater sympathy from the Jewish community than the radicals, both because their political stance was closer to the sentiments of the Jewish majority, and because they, like the community at large, were more supportive of Israel.

The younger generation of Jewish anti-apartheid activists were generally less ideologically split than the older generation. They came of age at a time when the ANC, as well as the communist and liberal parties, had been suppressed, both for espousing programmatic commitments to nonracialism and to democratic, majority rule. More than anything else, this generation’s commitment was to civil rights and social justice, especially after the Soweto uprising. The South African equivalent of the New Left, they were active in student politics before forming groups such as Jews for Justice and Jews for Social Justice. Many were arrested and detained for activities connected with ANC front organizations like the United Democratic Front, and later for membership in the ANC itself. Until 1985, whites in South Africa were not permitted to become members of the ANC, though whites had been able to join the ANC in exile since 1969 (not surprisingly, the first white members in exile were Jews). Coming from relatively affluent, progressive families who tended to support their political activities, their arrests and maltreatment further politicized their parents who became active in groups such as Detainees’ Parents Support Committee (DPSC). A representative family would be the Colemans. Neil was a UDF activist in the 1980s, then a trade union activist with Cosatu. His brother Keith was detained because of his involvement with the student newspaper SASPU National. Their parents, Max and Audrey, co-
founded the DPSC with twenty or thirty other parents of detainees in 1982. After the state of emergency was imposed in late 1985, the number of detentions increased dramatically, and the DPSC grew to a national movement which sent delegations to the U.N. and to the U.S. and Europe, informing government leaders and public opinion about the nature and level of repression in South Africa.24

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Is there a strand in Jewish thought that reconciles religious belief and social commitment, a common thread which finds resonance both in the established Jewish community and among the Jewish activists like Joe Slovo and Helen Suzman, who both claimed that they acted not so much as Jews but as communists or liberals? I would suggest that this strand exists as the Jewish commitment to the *tikkun olam*, to the redemption of the world. Shlomo Avineri and Jurgen Habermas have argued that redemption became a central Enlightenment theme, thanks to Jewish thought.25 It should be remembered that long before Marx had studied economics, he had considered proletarian revolution as a redemptive act. In his *Introduction to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*, Marx speaks of the need to find a class with radical chains which already represented the living negation of established order. Only such a class, by overthrowing that order, could be the requisite agency of true emancipation. What drove the young Marx’s emancipatory dialectic was not economic rationality — that would come much later—but rather redemption. Habermas argues this Jewish redemptive dimension also marks the distinctive contribution of contemporary Jewish theorists such as Herbert Marcuse, Gershom Scholem, and Ernst Bloch. What Marx had secularized and universalized was the traditional Jewish commitment to *tikkun olam*, a Promised Land for all humanity. Perhaps this is why the break radicals made from Judaism was never complete and irreversible. When Ron Kasrils’ father died, he was in Dar es Salaam on ANC business. He went to the Israeli embassy to find someone who could help him read *kaddish* (prayer for the dead) in Hebrew; the communist son recited *kaddish*, as would any dutiful Jewish child. Albie Sachs’ mother, a life-long communist who broke with the religious conventions of her parents, spent her last years in Highlands House, a Jewish old-age home. Redemption...
Notes

2. Ibid., 71.
5. Immanuel Suttner, ed., *Cutting Through the Mountain* (London: Viking Penguin, 1997); and *Jewish Affairs*, Autumn 1997. I have drawn freely and extensively from these sources, as well as from interviews with Albie Sachs (October 21, 1999) and Keith Gottschaulk, Professor of Political Science at the University of the Western Cape (January 19, 2000).
6. Suttner, 121.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
15. Suttner, 403. Ina Perlman was the only white woman ever given the honor of being made *Mmabatho* (“Mother of the People”) by an African tribe, the Morota-Maredi. She was given a special necklace that could be worn only with the Chief’s permission, the necklace Ina Perlman wore at the inauguration of President Nelson Mandela.
17. On synagogue outreach programs, see the essays by N.M. Bernhard and David Sherman in *Jewish Affairs* (Autumn 1997): 71–75.
20. Ibid., 373.
21. Ibid., 69.
22. Ibid., 287.