The Double Journey of a Jewish-American Academic

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The Jewish community of South Africa today is variously estimated to range between 59,000 people (the number of people who identified themselves as Jewish in the 1991 census) and 106,000, with a general consensus of around 90,000. This means that Jews constitute under 2% of the "white" population and about 0.5% of the total population of the country. It remains a close-knit, relatively prosperous, educated, and remarkably homogeneous community, most of whom are, at least nominally, Orthodox, though not particularly observant.[1]

As is the case with all South Africans, the South African Jewish community finds itself in the midst of a period of introspection, trying to come to grips with the past at the same time as it is struggling to predict and understand a future that seems simultaneously exciting and frightening. Jews are attempting to make sense of their place in the new South Africa in the context of two separate dynamics: first, the dynamic of a wider Jewish history that constructs some of its meaning on the basis of a non–South African experience, and, second, in the context of the rapidly changing situation within South African society. This double dynamic is made even more complex by the fact that both of these histories, the Jewish one and the South African one, are themselves in the midst of tremendous flux.[2]

The dual nature of the debate within South African Jewry was reflected in my own experience as a visiting Jewish-American academic. Though, like many white Americans, I had vaguely followed the developments in South Africa for many years, I was well aware of how spotty was my own knowledge and understanding of what was "really" going on there. I fully expected, therefore, that my first visit to South Africa would be a voyage of discovery and an encounter with

the new and unfamiliar. In this I was not entirely wrong, but I was also struck by how the situation of the Jewish community in South Africa could only be understood in the context of a wider Jewish history. I encountered a community that was very familiar to me in many respects, not only in terms of Jewish custom and ritual, but also in the context of a non–South African history that I have come to know well. The discussions that I "dropped in on" were not unlike ones I have heard both in the United States and in Britain, though with a particularly South African twist. It was painful to realize, however, that, if current trends continue, these discussions may come to an end in the foreseeable future. For while, on the one hand, the official spokespersons of the Jewish community express great optimism about the future of the new South Africa,[3] and the small number of Jews I had the opportunity to meet also expressed at least a guarded optimism, it is difficult not to discern within the community as a whole a somewhat more pessimistic vision of the future.

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The ambivalent attitudes toward the future are fully matched by ambivalent attitudes toward the past. More, I suspect, than any other segment of the white community, the South African Jewish community has been engaged in an internal debate over its own past and its relationship to the apartheid regime. Though it has become a commonplace that virtually no one can now be found who admits to having been a supporter of apartheid before 1990, Jewish traditions and history almost assure that the discussion of the Jewish role in apartheid will be painful and bitter. A stark example of this debate can be found in the pages of *Jewish Affairs*, the quarterly journal published by the South African Jewish Board of Deputies, the communal organization that sees itself as representing the Jewish community to the non-Jewish world. *Jewish Affairs*, which is a serious publication aimed at a general non-academic audience, devoted its Autumn 1997 issue to the topic "Jews and Apartheid." In a series of seventeen articles with titles like "Apartheid Injuries and Diaspora Privileges," "Jewish Modes of Opposition," "Do We Apologize? South African Jewish Community Responses to Apartheid," "The Moral Repudiation of Apartheid in Jewish Classical Sources," and "What Does It Mean to be a Young Jew in South Africa Today?," authors ranging from the Chief Rabbi of South Africa to academics and community activists to a recent univer-

sity graduate debated the moral responsibility that the Jewish community bore toward the apartheid regime and its implications for the future. As the author of the introductory article pointed out, there are two polar views within the South African Jewish community. "One," he wrote, "is self-congratulatory; the other is self-flagellating."[4] The self-congratulatory view is that Jews did more than other whites to fight apartheid. The self-flagellating view is that "Jews were complicit participants, enjoying the fruits of apartheid while conveniently avoiding, if not shirking, the moral responsibility of opposing it."[5] The articles in *Jewish Affairs* represented almost every point along this spectrum.

It is beyond the scope of this essay to examine this debate in detail, though the troubled soul-searching that accompanied it is very familiar to anyone who has followed similar Jewish debates over such things as the role of Jews in race relations in this country. Like the American debates that it resembles, the South African Jewish debate is remarkable, in part because of the fact that the tiny size of the South African Jewish community makes the internal debate largely irrelevant to anyone outside the community. On the one hand, it is certainly true that many of the most prominent white activists in the anti-apartheid struggle were Jews, though there is also an ongoing debate over the significance of these activists' "Jewishness."[6] Even beyond this relatively small set of activists, Jews had, on the whole, voted overwhelmingly for liberal parties, though few Jews actively advocated armed struggle.[7]

On the other hand, it is equally true that the official spokespersons for the Jewish community were notably silent on the subject of apartheid until almost the last days of the system, and many individual Jews were clearly uncomfortable with the presence in their midst of the vocal anti-apartheid activists. Even today, a book review in the *South African Jewish Report*, the most widely read national Jewish newspaper, could refer to them as "a small radical fringe, which put its faith in ideology rather than in the Jewish instinct to survive."[8] Although this "small radical fringe," which included such individuals as Joe Slovo and Albie Sachs, has, in recent days, been embraced by the Jewish community and presented as the authentic voice of Jewry, there can be little doubt that during most of the apartheid regime they were seen as an embarrassment and a danger by many within the community.

Most members of the South African rabbinate and the official voices within the community had refused to condemn apartheid. As a resolution of the 1959 Congress of the Board of Deputies stated,

> Congress reaffirms the view expressed at previous Congress of the Board of Deputies, namely, that Jews participate in South African public life as citizens of South Africa, and have no collective attitude to the political issues which citizens are called upon to decide. Jews share with their fellow citizens of other faiths and origins a common interest in and responsibility for our country's affairs, and participate in them according to their individual convictions.[9]

Whatever might be said about the moral strength of the South African Jewish community during the years of apartheid, it is important to understand the reactions of the community in the context of the broader concerns that Jews believed they had learned from their history. As the 1959 statement from the Board of Deputies suggests, one of the most important of those lessons for many Jews was the lesson of liberal individualism. It was generally believed that the rights of Jews everywhere depended on Jews being seen as individual citizens, not as members of a corporate body. As individuals, this theory held, Jews should have the right to live where they wished, engage in trades and professions, and participate as citizens. In the famous words of the deputy Clermont-Tonnere during the debate over the emancipation of the Jews during the French Revolution, the Jews "should be denied everything as a nation, but granted everything as individuals."[10] While it is easy to see the appeal to individualism as the self-serving rhetoric of a cowardly Jewish establishment, it would be a mistake to see it solely this way. As Jews everywhere struggled since the end of the 18th century to become a full part of the wider society, the replacement of a Jewish corporate self-identity with a liberal individualistic one was seen as one of the most important paths to full citizenship. It is one of the great ironies of South African Jewish history that Jews sought individualism in a society that was, in fact, based on a highly stratified racial corporatism.

A second long-standing historical factor behind the refusal of the organized Jewish community to take a stand on apartheid is the tradition of *shtadlanut*, or intercession — the tradition that the main task of the communal leadership was to defend the interests of the Jewish community. It is important to remember that in the years preceding

the Second World War, the National Party (the party that was to come to power in 1948 and introduce the formal apartheid system) was vocally antisemitic. In 1939, for example, D.F. Malan, who was to become the first Nationalist Prime Minister in 1948, addressed a rural audience with the words:

> We have . . . the Jewish problem, which hangs like a dark cloud over South Africa. Behind organized South African Jewry stands the organized Jewry of the world. They have so robbed the population of its heritage that the Afrikaner resides in the land of his fathers, but no longer possesses it.[11]

Although the National Party was to abandon its public antisemitism after coming to power, the persistence of unofficial antisemitism and the specter of government antisemitism may well have convinced at least some communal leaders that the defense of the Jewish community demanded remaining on good terms with the government, something that would have been endangered by vocal opposition to apartheid.

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This brief account of the ongoing debate is not meant either to condemn or excuse Jewish activities during the apartheid years, but is intended both to explain why some Jews acted as they did and to set the stage for a discussion of the way that Jews see their situation in today's South Africa.

How, then, do the members of the Jewish community understand their place in the new South Africa? To try to answer that question, I examined the Jewish community press and other written sources and spoke to several members of the community. South African Jews have long supported a Jewish community press. This press, like the community it serves, is shrinking but still vital and a careful reading of it reveals a great deal about the community.

The fears and aspirations of the community are also illuminated by an extensive survey that was conducted in 1998. The survey team was headed by Barry Kosmin, who had undertaken similar surveys of the Jewish communities of the United States and the United Kingdom. Although a full report has not yet been published, an abstract of the

survey results was published in late 1999, just several months before our arrival in South Africa.[12]

For a visiting American Jew, reading the South African Jewish press is a strangely familiar and yet sometimes disorienting experience. The elements that make up the Jewish press in the U.S. and the U.K., the two places with which I am most familiar, are all to be found in the South African equivalent. On the one hand, there are stories of purely local community interest, like the opening of a new synagogue, that would not be out of place in any community newspaper, Jewish or not. On the other hand, there are stories that reveal a community that, over one hundred years after its founding, still betrays signs of insecurity and a strong need to reassure itself that all is well with South African Jewry.

There is, for example, the familiar concern with antisemitism and an almost obsessive desire to seek it out, despite the fact that it does not, at the present, seem to be a particularly pressing problem in South Africa. Reactions to statements made on a talk-radio program by a visiting American militia leader, for example, were featured in two successive issues of the *South African Jewish Report*, and the host of the program was accused of colluding in antisemitism despite the fact that the remarks were beyond her control.[13] The Holocaust remains an issue of great concern, though it is often given a particularly South African twist. Reviewing the opening of the new Cape Town Holocaust Center, the *Pretoria Jewish Chronicle* found several clear morals for South Africa:

> South Africa's involvement in Nazi history is also depicted — from the refusal by Prime Minister D.F. Malan to allow Jewish refugees into the country, to photographs of Hendrik Verwoerd and John Vorster — the men who "perfected" apartheid.
>
> The Centre is not another stuffy museum, it is a living memorial to those who died in the Holocaust. A signpost to show South Africans, who have emerged from a past steeped in bigotry and intolerance, what can happen when racism and prejudice are allowed to run rampant. The Centre will help to reconcile our rainbow nation. Although it is a memorial to the six million Jews who died, it is also a living memorial, a place of learning to teach people about the effect of prejudice and hatred. In the first days of its inauguration 300 teachers from Western Cape were involved in seminars on the implications of the Holocaust.

> The Centre has particular relevance for that part of Africa, which is struggling to reconcile and come to terms with its own heart of darkness. Before we can talk of the advent of the renaissance, there are lessons to be learnt. This is an important place, where a start can be made.[14]

The attempt to "South Africanize" the meaning of the Holocaust, so reminiscent of the attempts made in this country to "Americanize" it, is, of course, an attempt to link the Jewish past to that of the majority population of the country.

Partly, perhaps, because of the ambivalent feelings about the place of the Jewish community in the apartheid period, and partly because of a long-standing Jewish nervousness about the place of Jews in the midst of a newly nationalistic community, there is also a clear searching for any signs that the political leadership of the new South Africa recognizes the place of the Jewish community within the new "rainbow nation." *The South African Jewish Report*, for example, gave front page coverage to Nelson Mandela's kind words about the Tikkun Project, a Jewish social action project, and delightedly quoted his remarks about his own "deep roots" in the Jewish community.[15]

Coverage of Israel also has a particularly South African twist. Because of the uncomfortable relationship that had existed between Israel and the apartheid regime, South African Jews are especially eager to find signs that the new South Africa and Israel can find ways to reconcile, particularly because those signs can also be interpreted as positive statements about the place of Jews in South Africa. The extensive coverage of then-President Mandela's trip to Israel did not only include accounts of the specifically Middle Eastern implications of the visit. Special attention, for example, was given to the visit that President Mandela made to the son of the Johannesburg lawyer who had employed him in the 1940s and to the President's remark on encountering the Chief Rabbi of South Africa in Israel, "Now I feel at home, my rabbi is here." Mandela, himself, clearly understood the symbolic importance of his trip for South African Jews and highlighted it with his statement that "one of the reasons I am so pleased to be in Israel is as a tribute to the enormous contribution of the Jewish community of South Africa [to South Africa]. I am so proud of them."[16]

It would be a mistake to assume, however, that the Jewish press is totally positive toward the government, which clearly does not have the enthusiastic support of most members of the Jewish community.[17] Though the *South African Jewish Report* was enthusiastic about Nelson

Mandela's trip to the Middle East, it nevertheless criticized his "naive approach" to Middle Eastern politics and called for "a more realistic approach with Mbeki thoroughly doing his homework in understanding the Middle East."[18]

Finally, as is the case elsewhere, the ambivalence of Jews about their own place in society is reflected by the love of the Jewish press to report on the prominence of Jews in stereotypically "non-Jewish" activities, such as sports. *The South African Jewish Report*, for example, proudly informed its readers that:

> Jonathan Kaplan of Durban, who matriculated at King David High School, Linksfield in 1984, is currently a referee at the Rugby World cup. King David is very proud that Jonathan's interest in rugby began at its school.[19]

The ambivalence that we find in the press is revealed even more strongly in the population survey of 1998. Fully 90% of the respondents reported feeling either "extremely conscious" of being Jewish or "quite strongly" conscious.[20] On the other hand, 54% of those surveyed also reported that they positively identified with South Africa, with 7% considering themselves "more South African than Jewish" and 47% as "equally South African and Jewish." This leaves, however, fully 45% of respondents feeling "more Jewish than South African," a clear indication of one mark of ambivalence within a community for whom the prospect of emigration remains a very real, though not always well articulated, possibility. It is estimated that 40,000 Jews have left South Africa since 1970, and emigration was a subject on the minds of the writers of the books and articles I read and the people with whom I spoke.[21] Although only 12% of those who responded to the national survey said that it was "very likely" that they would leave South Africa in the next five years, fully 61% disagreed with the statement that "there will still be a substantial Jewish community in South Africa in thirty years," and 87% agreed that "it is likely that most Jews under age 30 do not see a future for themselves in South Africa."[22] The gap between the percentage of those who say that they are thinking of leaving and those who say that the community has no future is a mark of the considerable ambivalence that exists within the Jewish community today. I would use the term "watchful waiting" to describe the current position of many within the community. While they hope for a positive future for the country, they have strong doubts about the possibil-

ity of achieving it and even stronger doubts about the place that Jews will have in the new South Africa.

The leadership of the community is, at least publicly, discouraging emigration, and this attitude can be found both among "secular" and religious leaders. Rabbi Michael Druin, a prominent Lubavitcher Hassid, for example, contributed an article to the *Pretoria Jewish Chronicle*, detailing fourteen reasons to stay in South Africa. The reasons ranged from the moral—"it is our responsibility [to stay]"—to the practical—"it's still easier to make six Rand than one dollar"—to the theological—the peaceful transition to democracy was a miracle and "G-d [sic] would not help us create a miracle in vain."[23]

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The South African Jewish community has long identified itself as Zionist.[24] The relationship between Zionism and the prospect of emigration is, however, a complex one. Discussions of emigration in the Jewish press and elsewhere generally revolve around emigration to Canada, Australia, and, increasingly, New Zealand, but not to Israel. In the aftermath of a well-publicized bomb incident outside a Cape Town restaurant in late 1999 in which one of the most severely injured victims was a young Jewish woman, Cape Town Chair of the Board of Deputies, Michael Bagrain, assured the public that the bombing would not "distract from the Jewish Community's faith in South Africa, and we intend to continue with our same principles that people must stay in South Africa or go on *aliyah* [emigrate to Israel].'[25] Clearly, in the mind of Michael Bagrain and, I suspect, many other members of the Jewish community, there is a distinction between emigration, which symbolizes a flight from South Africa, and *aliyah*, which can be seen as a positive step toward declaring Jewish identity.

Interestingly enough, fear of antisemitism does not seem to account for the possibility of Jewish flight from South Africa. Although 34% of respondents believe that antisemitism is increasing in South Africa, 35% have never experienced an antisemitic incident, and, of those who had, only a tiny minority reported anything more serious than overhearing someone make derogatory remarks about Jews.[26] When asked why they might contemplate leaving, the most common answer was fear of crime, an issue that seems to dominate conversations among South Africans. Writing to the *Pretoria Jewish Chronicle*, a new resident of Australia put the matter starkly:

> Are those two gentlemen [rabbis who had written articles opposing emigration] aware that ex-pats living in my new hometown, Perth, and elsewhere in the world, often tell of horror stories and bear the scars of living in this so-called miracle. I have followed the age-old Jewish tradition of first and foremost ensuring the health and safety of my six children. Everything else is secondary to that.… Sure it is not easy to uproot and emigrate, but the safety of your loved ones is far more important than keeping a community going and thereby ensuring the jobs of the Rabbonim [*i.e.*, Rabbis].[27]

It is clear, however, that fear of crime is not the only issue. Uncertainty about the economic and political future of the country and of the place of Jews within it is also a consideration. Writing far more in sorrow than anger, Paula Slier, a recent university graduate who "accept[ed] a sense of responsibility for the oppression and discrimination practiced against the black majority in this country," nevertheless had to acknowledge both the fear of crime felt by members of her generation and their "profound concern about what one can actually *do* in South Africa."

> The sense of vulnerability and insecurity this violence creates in the lives of young people cannot be underestimated. Coupled to it are the necessary affirmative action policies currently being enforced in government service, business and university admissions. These policies obviously discriminate against young white Jews, many of whom leave university well qualified but unable to find a job. The question therefore asked these days on campuses is not "What are you doing next year?" but rather "Where are you planning to go?"[28]

It is easy to dismiss this kind of thinking simply as racism or as a refusal to recognize the clear advantages that Jews, who had been classified as white by the apartheid system, enjoyed under the previous regime. It would be a mistake to do so, however. South Africa faces a still uncertain future. Sadly, one lesson that Jews think they have learned from their history is that, in times of uncertainty, flight is often the most sensible course of action. Whether this lesson is an appropriate one for the Jews of South Africa remains to be seen. ◉

Notes

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1. Barry Kosmin, Jacqueline Goldberg, Milton Shain, and Shirley Bruk, *Jews of the New South Africa: Highlights of the 1998 National Survey of South African Jews*, Institute for Jewish Policy Research, Report #3 (September 1999). Hereafter referred to as *Nat. Survey*.

2. For a brief discussion of some of the changes both in Jewish and South African historiography, see Milton Shain, *The Roots of Antisemitism in South Africa* (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1994), 1–8.

3. The positive stance taken by the leaders of the organized Jewish community may be represented by the statements on the web site of the South African Jewish Board of Deputies, the most prominent body representing the Jewish community. "[The] South African Jewish community," they write, "has always been an integral part of the population of South Africa and it is with enthusiasm that the Board views the current dynamic changes in the country . . . and "The South African Jewish Board of Deputies welcomed the political changes in South Africa and the establishment of a non-racist, non-sexist and democratic government under the leadership of President Nelson Mandela. . . . The South African government is committed to a future wherein every citizen is equal and the rights of individuals is protected. The government's commitment to human rights has positive implications for the Jewish community, which is confident that its rights will be safeguarded." Web site of the South African Jewish Board of Deputies, [http://www.shemayisrael.co.il/sa/sajbd/sajbd.htm].

4. Todd Pitock, "Remembering and Renewing; By Way of an Introduction," *Jewish Affairs* (Autumn 1997): 17.

5. Pitock, 18.

6. I must say that I find at least some of this latter debate somewhat naive and dependent upon a very narrow and unhistorical view of what it means to be Jewish in the modern world. For a useful corrective to some of this narrow view, see Gideon Shimoni, "Zionism and the Apartheid Dilemma of South African Jewry, Some Reflections," *Jewish Affairs* (Autumn 1997): 41–42.

7. See the article by Harry Schwarz, a long-time member of the parliamentary opposition and South Africa's ambassador to the U.S. from 1991 to 1994, "Jewish Modes of Opposition," *Jewish Affairs* (Autumn 1997): 27–30. Also see, Franz Auerbach, "Do We Apologise? South African Jewish Community Responses to Apartheid," ibid., 31–35.

8. *South African Jewish Report* (November 19, 1999): 4.

9. Quoted in Solly Kessler, "The South African Rabbinate in the Apartheid Era," *Jewish Affairs* (Autumn 1995): 32.

10. Quoted in Jay R. Berkovitz, *The Shaping of Jewish Identity in Nineteenth-Century France* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989), 71.

11. Quoted in Jocelyn Hellig, "Antisemitism Then and Now," *Jewish Affairs* (Autumn 1997): 38. For the history of South African antisemitism, see Shain, *The Roots of Antisemitism in South Africa.*

12. *Nat. Survey*. Of the 1,000 people surveyed, 464 were male and 536 were female. The respondents also reflected the rough geographic patterns of Jewish settlement in present day South Africa. 650 of the 1,000 people lived in or around Johannesburg, 250 lived in or around Cape Town, and 50 each lived in Pretoria and Durban.

13. *South African Jewish Report* (October 22, 1999): 2 and (November 12, 1999): 1.

14. *Pretoria Jewish Chronicle* (December 1999): 9.

15. *South African Jewish Report* (November 19, 1999): 1.

16. *South African Jewish Report* (October 22, 1999): 1.

17. The *National Survey*, which was conducted before the most recent national elections, estimated that over 80% of South Africa's Jews would support the opposition Democratic Party.

18. *South African Jewish Report* (November 12, 1999): 6.

19.*South African Jewish Report* (October 22, 1999): 16.

20. *Nat. Survey*.

21. *Nat. Survey.* The emigration began during the apartheid regime but continues today. Several people with whom I spoke commented that "there is not a South African Jewish" family, some of whose members have not already left the country. Richard Mendelsohn, a historian at the University of Cape Town, told me that of the nine first cousins in his generation, only two remain in South Africa. Most striking is the fact that emigration has depleted the population of people between the ages of twenty and fifty, a fact that was apparent when I attended a synagogue service in Cape Town. Mendelsohn referred to a "lost generation."

22. *Nat. Survey.*

23. *Pretoria Jewish Chroncle* (September 1999): 5.

24. Gideon Shimoni, the leading historian of South African Zionism, speaks of "the remarkable prominence of Zionism, both as a communal institution and as a normative mode of Jewish identification" in South Africa. *Jews and Zionism: The South African Experience* (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1980), xi.

25. *South African Jewish Report* (December 3, 1999): 1.

26. *Nat. Survey.* Only 5% report having been "picked on" at work, 2% report having been refused employment, 1% report having been refused club membership, and 0.5% report having been refused a school or college place.

27. *Pretoria Jewish Chronicle* (December 1999): 23.

28. Paula Slier, "What does it Mean to be a Young Jew in South Africa Today?" *Jewish Affairs* (Autumn 1997): 78.