

# AFTERWORD

'Seek and you shall find,' said a legendary Jew.<sup>1</sup>

This book is different from other histories of people involved in the liberation struggle in South Africa because it seeks — and finds — the Jewish angle. A few histories<sup>2</sup> have devoted sections to the strong Jewish presence in radical organisations, but they paint a broad group portrait. This book starts where they leave off, exploring each interviewee's subjective relationship with their Jewishness, and how their Jewishness impacted on their activism.

It was these two commonalities — Jewishness and activism — which I chose as the threads connecting the lives of the people in this book. I did this knowing full well that these shared attributes are no more significant than the political and personal differences which separate them. Certainly there are two distinct political traditions represented herein: reformist liberalism and radical, revolutionary socialism, traditions which were frequently at loggerheads with each other.

There are other divides. People like Joe Slovo, Jack Florio or Ray Alexander arrived as penniless immigrants to South Africa from a situation of political or economic oppression, and their attraction to socialism did not require any acts of imaginative empathy. The Jewish activists of the seventies and eighties, such as the Colemans or Nathans, were mostly born into upper middle-class and frequently affluent professional families. Their initial commitment did not flow from a personal experience of discrimination or deprivation, but from an empathic identification with the directly oppressed, or else a conviction that they could not be free in a society where others were in bondage.

The spheres in which the people in this book were active — politics and trade unionism, development, philanthropy, law and culture — differed widely. Because their activities were so diverse, their positive qualities manifested in very different ways. The courage needed to commit to underground activities (Denis Goldberg or Ronnie Kasrils) and face jail, assault and assassination was not the courage needed to be a progressive member of parliament standing up to the bullying of Verwoerd, Vorster or P W Botha (Helen Suzman). Nor was the tenaciousness involved in

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1 St Matthew's Gospel, ch 7 v 7.

2 For example, *Against the Tide*, Joshua N Lazerson (Westview Press/Mayibuye Books, UWC); *Radical Community: The Yiddish-speaking Branch of the International Socialist League 1918-1920*, E A Mantzaris (in *Class, Community and Conflict*, Ravan Press, Johannesburg, 1987); and the excellent *Working Life, Factories, Townships and Popular Culture on the Rand 1886-1940 (Part Two)* by Luli Callinacos (Ravan Press, Johannesburg, 1987).

systematically challenging the laws upon which apartheid was based and facing glass ceilings in their careers (Arthur Chaskalson or Franz Auerbach) the same faith and commitment as that needed to articulate a new cultural vision (Johnny Clegg or Barney Simon).

Finally, their relationship with their Jewishness also differed greatly, from rejecting it, to uneasy or neutral coexistence, to celebrating it.

Clearly, the people interviewed in this book could not have been – geographically, temporally, vocationally and ideologically divided as they are – a self-conscious collective. Some did not even know of the existence of the others, or disagreed with their politics, or intensely disliked them.

Yet the shared characteristics I did focus on are not absurd or contrived. Their role as shaker-uppers is their single most obvious common feature, and – as will be discussed later – their Jewishness frequently acted as a subtle catalyst when making crucial choices about who they were going to be. The fact that Jewishness is a quality so universally subject to ignorance and dehumanisation on the one hand, and needless mystification on the other, strengthened my motivation to highlight and in some way clarify it.

### The interviewees' Jewishness

'Why are so many of the white detainees Jewish?' This was a question Baruch Hirson was asked by the Security Police during his initial 90 day detention period in 1964, and it was asked despite the fact that Jews were not particularly prominent in the National Council of Liberation (a tiny clandestine organisation Hirson was part of).<sup>3</sup> The South African Police and Prison Service's obsession with the 'Jewishness' of their charges was ubiquitous:

When I was detained the first time I think that being Jewish was as much a crime as being a communist. They were very obsessed with my being Jewish, absolutely obsessed. Because the two were equated: being Jewish and being communist. So that there was a high level of anti-Semitism. I remember one night they left me in the police cells as if they were going to leave me to rest, and suddenly you hear this hell of a noise: banging of car doors, saying that they're gonna come and *donner* this *fokken Jood*: fucking Jew. And so the Jewish part was very prominent in their thinking... It was relevant to the detainees. For the people who detained me my being Jewish was an essential element of criminality... (Raymond Suttner)<sup>4</sup>

When Harold Wolpe and Arthur Goldreich escaped from a prison cell in Johannesburg, it was front page news in the general press. An editorial in

3 Baruch Hirson, *Revolutions in my Life* (Wits University Press, 1995), p 329.

4 Keith Coleman and Denis Goldberg recall similar encounters in their interviews.

Party established to 're-educate' Jews), did everything in their power to smash both Zionism and traditional Judaism in the USSR.

In South Africa Jews on the left did not persecute other Jews – they were not in a position to do so – but they were either totally ignorant of, or actively hostile to, Jewish tradition and culture.<sup>7</sup> They derided Jewish concerns as parochial, and cared little for Jewish continuity. They gave their children 'Christian' names which bespoke their own unconscious or conscious desire to acculturate, and did not expose these children to any form of Jewish education. Often there was a great self-imposed silence around their Jewishness. Jews in the same organisation were often surprised to find out that a fellow member, long known, was Jewish. 'When General Van den Bergh said to me that all the whites arrested in the raid on Liliesleaf were Jews, I thought he was wrong because Bob Hepple<sup>8</sup> had also been arrested, and in fact I said, "No, you're actually wrong." He said, "No, I am right." Now I didn't know that Bob Hepple was a Jew . . . I mean it wasn't really important to me or anyone else. I think it's the same as being as uncaring about the fact that Nelson was a Tembo.' (*Arthur Goldreich*)

South African Jews on the left did not contribute towards South African Jewry's communal construction of meaning.<sup>9</sup> It is a chicken-and-egg question whether they disassociated themselves because of the reactionary nature of Jewish communal life, or whether Jewish communal life became increasingly reactive as those who might have shaped and fought for a progressive Jewish identity disengaged and poured their energy into 'the fields of strangers'. Whatever the case, their involvement with, and concern for, South Africans in general, earned them a reputation amongst other Jews as being unconcerned with the specific issues and well-being of the Jewish community.

This dynamic was not unique to Jews in South Africa – neither the disassociation from Jewish particularism, nor the condemnatory response to that disassociation. In a famous letter to Mathilde Wurm, a Jewish Social Democrat friend, Rosa Luxemburg<sup>10</sup> wrote from prison, 'Why do you come to me with your special Jewish sorrows? I feel just as sorry for the

7 Many of the interviewees make glaring mistakes when recalling Hebrew or Yiddish words, Jewish rituals or liturgy, and facts about Israel, Jewish youth movements, or even South African Jewry. Slovo, for example, recalls South Africa having the 'third largest Jewish community in the world', which it certainly never had.

8 Bob Hepple was the legal adviser to Nelson Mandela at Mandela's first trial.

9 Every generalisation has its exception. Eli Weinberg, for example, secretary of the Garment Workers Union, and administrative secretary of the ANC (before being jailed for five years in 1965), was also a professional photographer. For many years his photographs adorned the front covers of Rosh Hashanah editions of the *Jewish Times*. Often these showed Jews in ritual garb, holding Torah scrolls, or blowing a *shofar* (ram's horn, used on the New Year).

10 The revolutionary internationalist who led the Spartacus Revolt and was clubbed to death by a Vreikorps soldier in 1919.

wretched Indian victims in Putamayo (rubber plantations), the Blacks in Africa, with whose bodies the Europeans play a game of catch . . . I have no special corner in my heart reserved for the ghetto. I feel at home in the entire world wherever there are clouds and birds and human tears.'

By having no place for the ghetto, she had, in the eyes of those who held 'the ghetto' dear, defected. It is one of those tangled knots of irony that radicals like Luxemburg were hated and excommunicated by traditional Jewry, disowned their Jewish roots because they saw Judaism as being hopelessly parochial and reactionary, and yet were fiercely attacked as Jews by their political enemies, and constantly had their internationalism and communism conflated with their Jewishness.

This was true also in South Africa, where many South African communists were seen as Jewish by the authorities but not necessarily by their fellow Jews or by themselves: 'I didn't think of myself as Jewish. Because I just felt that I belong to the world. I'm internationalist, which is true.' (*Ray Alexander*)

Certainly many of the 'non-Jewish Jews' were Jewish not as an act of choice, but by the existential situation they found themselves in, where Jewish identity was thrust upon them. Yet the term non-Jewish Jews in itself implies that these people were still in some way Jewish, and perhaps not just in so far as they were born so, or that others were unwilling to stop regarding them as such. For people like Joe Slovo, Ray Alexander, and Ben Turok, the tongue they first heard, and often spoke — *die mama loshen* — was Yiddish. The networks of family and friends they moved amongst while growing up were largely Ashkenazi Jewish, and so they imbibed the fears, aspirations, strengths, and interpersonal modalities of that community and culture. That all this was internalised was arguably reflected later in both their questioning and in their analytical ability, in their drivenness, in their desire to programmatically implement basic intuitions about justice, in the food, music and humour they liked, in their professional aspirations and family dynamics.

Their awareness of the historical dehumanisation of the Jews was the experiential ground in which blossomed the conviction that no one else should be dehumanised. And their knowledge of themselves as 'Jew', as the heirs to a messy, painful and ongoing history of being the devalued 'other', made the new dichotomies of communism, like working class and owning classes, seem full of hope and possibility. A Marxist world view provided welcome relief from the wearying residual prejudices inherent in categories like Jew and Gentile. Communism, by locating all racism, including anti-Semitism, in economic conditions, allowed for far more optimism than those tired old discourses of both the oppressed and the oppressors which located Jew hatred, and racial stratification, as inevitable and metaphysically or biologically decreed.

Undoubtedly Jews who were prominent socialists or communists believed their new religion true, and were motivated by the dream of a better future.

But perhaps the new ideologies offered them something more personal than the collective redemption of humankind, namely, a way of escaping their 'Jewishness', of assimilating into a universalistic non-Jewish world, without going through the intellectual and moral betrayal that conversion to Christianity (or any other order historically hostile to Jews) entailed.

When theatre giant Barney Simon died, Rabbi Ady Assabi conducted his funeral. Just like the eulogy of Chief Orthodox Rabbi Cyril Harris at Joe Slovo's funeral, Assabi stated that Barney was a good Jew, in the deepest sense of the word. Barney remained Jewish all his life — if being Jewish means being compassionate and having the willingness to nurture and create.<sup>11</sup> He may not have outwardly resembled a traditional Jew, but then many traditional Jews do not resemble — internally — the Jewish humanist tradition which starts with the universal utterances of the Hebrew Bible and continues through the sayings of the Talmudic sage Hillel to the Martin Bubers, Avraham Heschels, Cynthia Ozicks and Michael Lerner of our own century.

Lionel Abrahams, the author and editor, wrote of Barney: 'His religion of humanity (of people rather — he didn't like abstractions) profoundly affected both the ways he related to individuals and the unique career he forged... his life seemed to become increasingly dedicated to the humanistic elements of the Judeo-Christian ethic. Utterly non-sectarian, he gave himself to all people — but I like imagining an invisible yarmulke on Barney's pate.'

### **The impact of their Jewishness on their activism**

When Avraham was growing up, says an old midrashic<sup>12</sup> tale, he was sometimes left alone to look after his father's idols. One day he decided to smash the clay and wood figurines. He took a mallet and broke up all but the largest idol. Then he carefully placed the hammer in the hands of this idol.

When his father, Terach, came home he was furious. 'Why have you smashed all of my gods?' he roared at Avraham.

'It was not I,' said Avraham, 'it was the big idol.'

'Nonsense. It must be you. The idols have no life in them, no power to create or destroy.'

'Then why,' asked Avraham, 'do you worship them?'

The people in this book are all idol smashers, people who refused to bow before the consensus. The aspect of Jewish tradition they link up to is the tradition of non-conformism, rebuke, and solidarity with the underdog; a tradition which manifested first in biblical stories which established the dissenter — Moshe killing the Egyptian overseer, the prophet Natan

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11 The Talmud defines Jews as being 'modest, merciful and charitable'.

12 Rabbinic exegetical literature which explains and elaborates upon biblical stories and themes.

scolding David, Mordechai refusing to bow before Haman — as the hero. If dissenting from the self-deception of the majority is a criterion for Jewishness, then the interviewees were more Jewish than their synagogue-going contemporaries, who often assimilated completely into white South African fears and prejudices. South Africa's non-Jewish Jews uncompromisingly continued a tradition of social concern, and criticism, articulated long ago by the Hebrew prophets.

Is this not the fast that I choose:  
to loose the bonds of injustice,  
to undo the thongs of the yoke,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
and to break every yoke?

*Isaiah 58.6-7*

Perhaps the Jewish role as harbingers and guardians of a unique social vision began with the ancient Jewish tribes who saw themselves as the bearers of monotheism in a poly- or pantheistic world. It was further entrenched when Judaism and Jews remained a minority amongst Christian or Muslim majorities. Communal dissent became a habit, one reinforced by anti-Semitism as much as by Jews. *Rabim beyad meatim*, the many given into the hand of the few, a phrase derived from the struggle of the Macabees against the Hellenistic Hasmonians, also found its place in the Jewish self-concept, as Jews, like 20th century revolutionaries, came to believe that the power and clarity of their vision would eventually be vindicated, and overturn a numerically greater, but morally bankrupt regime or religious-cultural hegemony.

This pattern, where in the broader society Jews served as an ostentatious marker of difference, if not of revolution, shifted post-enlightenment, when Jews began emerging from the ghetto into a wider community, and often assumed a transformatory role in that community.

Jews became intellectual revolutionaries, overturning old monopolies of the mind. Marx, Einstein and Freud are the most famous examples. They became cultural revolutionaries, joining or creating cutting-edge movements: Kafka and Proust in literature, Tristan Tzara and Marc Chagall in art, Gustav Mahler and Arnold Schoenberg in music. Paul Johnson described the reaction to Schoenberg's appointment to the Viennese Royal Academy of Music thus: '... it was the Jew as iconoclast that roused that really deep rage.'<sup>13</sup>

They became political revolutionaries. Generation after generation of European radicals and socialists contained large numbers of Jews in their ranks. From founding fathers like Moses Hess and Ferdinand Lasalle (who established mass-based socialism in Germany, and the first major German trade union federation) through the fiery anarchist Bernard Lazare, Rosa

13 *A History of the Jews* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1987), p 410.



Luxemburg (in Germany), Bela Kun (in Hungary), Victor Adler and Otto Bauer (in Austria), Kurt Eisner (in Bavaria),<sup>14</sup> Trotsky, Kamenev and Zinoviev in Russia, Manya Shochet in Palestine, through to Leon Andre Blum, France's first socialist premier (1936), Bruno Kreisky, Austria's first socialist premier (1970), and Danny 'the red' Bendit-Cohn, leader of the student component of the student-workers alliance in Paris (1968).

In the New World there were trade unionists like Rose Pesotta and Clara Lemlich; Rose Pastor Stokes, the poor Polish immigrant who married into an American WASP dynasty and then became a passionate spokesperson for socialism; and the anarchist Emma Goldman. In the 1930s and 1940s at least a third of American Communist Party members were Jews. In the fifties many Jewish 'fellow travellers' became the victims of HUAC (House UnAmerican Activities Committee) and McCarthyism, as did the electrocuted Rosenbergs.

The radical tradition continued in the sixties with the new left's Herbert Marcuse, Noam Chomsky, the large percentage of Jews amongst the leadership of Students for a Democratic Society, in the Weathermen group, and sixties Yippies Jerry Ruben and Abbie Hoffman. (That Jews have never been on one side of the barricades only is illustrated by the fact that Hoffman was tried in Chicago by a conservative Jewish judge, Julius Hoffman, and the judge who sentenced the Rosenbergs to death was also Jewish.)

There have been several attempts to explain the disproportionate presence of Jews in radical movements. Some researchers have seen their activities as a contemporary manifestation of an ancient longing for the messianic redemption. While such theories reflect the yearnings of these researchers at least as much as their object of study, they are not entirely implausible.

Historical Judaism has stressed that salvation is not achieved through faith in God, but by quantifiable good deeds. 'Everyone whose wisdom exceeds their good deeds — their wisdom does not last.'<sup>15</sup> In the Jewish demand for action as the benchmark by which the individual is measured can be found the direct predecessor of the Marxist formulation that 'The purpose of philosophy, is not to interpret the world but to change it.'<sup>16</sup>

Both systems postulate an end-time where 'the lion will lie down with the lamb'. Both are open-ended, sketching in the necessary conditions for their utopias, whilst being vague and non-committal about the details. Thus followers had some kind of end goal to motivate them, without getting stuck on whether that end goal was either achievable or really desirable.<sup>17</sup>

14 Eisner was assassinated by the German right wing in 1919. He wrote in that year that although he had no connection with Judaism in a ritualistic sense, he was proud to be a Jew.

15 See Pirkei Avot (The Ethics of the Fathers), Ch 3, Teaching 12.

16 Marx, *Theses on Feurbach XI*.

17 Of course there are major differences between rabbinic and Marxist eschatological visions. The Marxist utopia is based on economic egalitarianism, where human differences are no

'When I give bread to the poor they call me a saint. When I ask why the poor have no bread they call me a communist.' Helder Camara's polemical formulation unintentionally draws attention to the 'religious' base of communism, if religion means attempts to make compassion manifest in the world: secular humanist traditions — like Marxism — are really universalised religious positions, where inalienable 'God-given' rights originally reserved for an ingroup are now applied — with the same emotional fervour — to everyone. Many of the people in this book revolted against a particularist Jewish tradition, but imbibed from it visceral beliefs about the sanctity and value of human life. In this sense their values are atavistic religious values. Perhaps this is what Joe Slovo referred to when he said he had encountered only two sorts of people who were good: 'good Christians and good communists'.

It is understandable, therefore, that people like Rowley Arenstein, exposed in *cheyder* to Jewish ideas about the messianic age, found in Marxism a logical articulation of the same emotional content. Others, while not having had any formal exposure to Jewish ideas, still found it comforting — or truthful — to locate the source of one in the other:

I've always felt that my communist sympathies had their roots in the Jewish ethic, Jewish morality . . . Jewish life in the past had an outlook on life and a sense of justice which doesn't need any amendment or apologising for. And it can easily lead to what we now call socialism or fairness for all. (*Pauline Podbrey*)

In actual fact we're not aberrations of the Jewish community, we're not something unique or an accidental phenomenon thrown up by the community. These are individuals who are actually products of that community . . . I think every single one is actually a product of that humanistic tradition which I referred to. I think it's very strong and goes very deep. (*Ronnie Kasrils*)

Others, of course, do not see a clear or necessary correlation:

My concern and my support for the black struggle would have been the same whether I was Jewish or not . . . I don't think that the fact that Denis Goldberg and Joe Slovo and others who were Jews made them particularly sensitive to racism. Look at the other people who were not Jewish . . . There were many Jews who didn't do anything or indeed

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longer the vehicles for exploitation, and individual object-possessor relationships no longer exist. The rabbinic one is a world where a pax Israel is established, and the God principle becomes apparent to all. In some ways they are complementary. The rabbinic version(s) deftly avoids bread-and-butter issues but supplies the ultimate purpose — 'endless contemplation of God's glory'. Marxist version(s) are more prosaic, focusing on solving material problems, but leaving problems of meaning to be resolved by the individual.



either tacitly and in a few cases even quite actively supported the apartheid regime. (*Nadine Gordimer*)

But even those who felt comfortable with grounding their later choices in their Jewish roots could not embrace those roots fully. There was an ambivalence. And a recognition that while part of their tradition urged them on, another part had to be disowned and deconstructed if they were to engage meaningfully with South African problems and challenges.

The problem that I have with . . . Judaism has been a contradiction and this contradiction I also saw as a young Hebrew pupil at *cheyder*. On the one hand there's a universality, a universal God, a preaching of a universal God which is the major contribution of Judaism, as I understand it, and this is contradicted by something that as a young person I rejected, the chosen race, the exclusivity, and I find that a tremendous contradiction. (*Ronnie Kasnits*)

These two aspects converging in the same people, often in the same person, become a source of creative and dynamic tension:

I think that there is, in the Orthodox tradition, a very strong sense of a certain kind of internal justice for Jews only. And then, on the other side, you have the universalist rationalist tradition which is essentially trying to make the world [better] . . . There's got to be a balanced world. Fixing [things], and that fixing is a judicious fixing . . . Hitler said, and I think this is the way he phrased it: 'While Abe Cohen is in the boardroom promoting a policy of firmness against the workers, his brother Moishe is down amongst the workers fomenting strikes and labour unrest.' He was identifying this incredible aspect of the Jews articulating paradox, articulating contradiction . . . (*Johnny Clegg*)

This contradiction has expressed itself in Jews being idol smashers, but also, in various times and places, worshipping Baal, land, nationalism, tradition, status, expediency or other false 'gods' — false in the sense of limited. The striving to blend into the woodwork in order not to be singled out for punitive attack has on occasion made them loyal supporters of the political status quo, even when that status quo has been corrupt and unjust, as it was in South Africa: 'The Jews were staunchly loyal to duly constituted authority, for religious reasons and from plain self-interest: they were a minority dependent on the ruler for protection. They said regular public prayers for the health of the . . . ruler . . . and the rulers responded . . . they regarded Jews as an exceptionally law-abiding and wealth-producing element.'<sup>18</sup> This description is of Jews in medieval Islamic states, but it could just as well be describing Jews

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18 Paul Johnson, *op cit*, p 199.

in Germany for more than three hundred years, or Jews in South Africa since the turn of the century.

### **The political response of the identifying Jewish community to apartheid**

As I have shown above, the conflation of Jews with socialism and communism has had some historical basis.<sup>19</sup> But the frequently hostile conflation of all Jews with communism has not. According to the historian Ernest van den Haag '... out of one hundred Jews five may be radicals, but out of ten radicals five are likely to be Jewish. Thus it is quite correct to say that a disproportionate number of radicals are Jews but incorrect to say that a very great number of Jews are radicals.'<sup>20</sup>

This is certainly true of Jews in the South African context. Most non-radical Jews' degree of assimilation into broader patterns of South African white political and social behaviour was near total.<sup>21</sup> South African Jews, besides being Jewish, also participated in other identities. They were white, English or Afrikaans-speaking, urban or *platteland* (country) dwellers, working, middle or upper class. These identities and affiliations were often better immediate indicators of where a given Jew's political sympathies lay than his or her Jewishness. *Platteland* Jews living amongst rural communities were, for example, often more racist than their urban cousins. Professional, upper middle-class Jews voted as did most white, professional, English-speaking South Africans. And if they emigrated from South Africa they mostly went to the lands other white South Africans emigrated to — the USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, the UK — and not to Israel.

The fact that South African Jews functioned according to the particular social context they found themselves in, and not according to some overarching loyalty to other Jews or 'Jewish values', was already visible during the Boer War, when they fought on both sides.

Yet, at a deeper level, their Jewishness was often a reliable indicator of their moving into that educated, middle class and urbanised stratum which produced predominantly liberal sensitivities. And their responses to apartheid fell into a range of opinion that was particularly Jewish.

19 If the Jews are all revolutionaries and communists, then the corollary is that all communists and revolutionaries must be Jewish. Famous non-Jews labelled Jewish have included Lenin and even Stalin. In South Africa Jeremy Cronin had to convince his jailers he was not Jewish, as did Jock Strachan. The Nederduits Gereformeerde Church Moderator Johan Heyns (assassinated by an unknown gunman in 1994) was accused in a right-wing pamphlet of really being a Jew called Heinowitz.

20 Ernest van den Haag, *The Jewish Mystique*, second edition (Stein and Day, New York, 1977), p 96.

21 In *The Book of The Righteous*, a medieval guide to manners and morals attributed to Rabbi Yehuda Ha Chasid is written 'as the Gentiles do, so do the Jews'.

That range of opinion, concerning not only whether Jews are obligated to fight injustices against others, but also what constitutes injustice, can be traced back to the period of Mahatma Gandhi's activities between 1906 to 1914, when he fought in South Africa against discriminatory laws aimed at Indians. His closest white associates were Jews,<sup>22</sup> who railed against the failure of other Jews to champion the Indians' immigration rights. Indeed, from 1902 to 1906, and again in the 1930s, Jews suffered from similar racist legislation, when the Immigration Restriction Act, the Quota Act and the Aliens Act were passed to keep Jewish refugees out of South Africa.

In the early decades of this century most Jewish immigrants to South Africa were working class. While being working class did not guarantee socialist sympathies, many had been exposed to socialist ideas in their countries of origin, often via the Bund.<sup>23</sup> These socialist ideas expressed themselves in numerous organisations they established in South Africa, such as the Bundist aligned 'Friends of Russian Freedom Society' (established in Johannesburg in 1905), a Yiddish-speaking branch of the International Socialist League (established in Johannesburg in 1917), the Jewish Socialist Society of Cape Town and the Jewish Socialist Society (Poalei Tziyon) of Johannesburg. Most of these organisations were still centred around socialism in Eastern Europe, but a few began to explore its implications in South Africa, and to express a solidarity with the exploited black proto-proletariat.

The Jewish Workers Club (JWC), established in 1929, supported the Communist Party, the Friends of the Soviet Union, the Left Book Club, and Ikaka Laba Sebenzi (the Workers Shield, a fund for supporting working-class activity). It closed after the war and, until the formation of Jews for Justice in the 1980s, was the last significant Jewish organisation through which Jews would express their activism. By the time the children of working-class immigrants became involved in South African politics — people like Wolf Kodesh, Baruch Hirson, or Helen Suzman — they did so in the framework of general South African organisations such as the COD, CPSA, ANC, and the United Party.

Jewish immigrants, as they acculturated and became more affluent, tended to move away from radical sympathies and align themselves with what were — from a white perspective — liberal or centrist parties. In the thirties and forties most Jews voted for Smuts's United Party. A smaller number voted for the Labour Party. The National Party (NP), with its strong Nazi element, was not an option. This pattern remained essentially unchanged in the fifties, until the creation of the liberal Progressive Party, which attracted most Jewish votes throughout the sixties. A tiny minority voted for the more radical Liberal

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22 His secretary Sonja Slesis, and close friends Henry Polak and Hermann Kallenbach, see Gideon Shimoni, *op cit.*

23 The Bund: see Glossary p 629.

Party (established 1953), which advocated abolition of apartheid and its replacement by a multiracial democracy.

By the mid-1960s there were many Jews who, while uncomfortable with the cruelties of apartheid, easily understood Afrikaner fears of being engulfed in a sea of non-Afrikaners, paralleling the situation of white South Africa with that of the embattled state of Israel. An article, which appeared in the Jewish press shortly after Harold Wolpe and Arthur Goldreich's escape from jail in 1963 says as much:

I will not pretend that the names of Arthur Goldreich and Harold Wolpe are unknown to me... We have to explain these two young men to ourselves... I have been told that Goldreich was once in the Haganah, and fought in Israel's War of Independence. I will not disown him now that he is in trouble and reviled... but I must be permitted to question whether the right to sovereignty which Goldreich saw as the need of his own people, is also not the need and right of other peoples — the Afrikaner people, for instance, a right of which they can be robbed by any system of one-man one-vote?<sup>24</sup>

In the 1977 elections, the Progressive Federal Party (PFP), the new incarnation of the Progressive Party, still drew the most Jewish support, but the increasingly conservative community also had a significant minority of its members voting Nat. (From 1974 English-speaking support for the Nationalists rose greatly.) In the Bez Valley constituency, the stereotypes of the Jewish liberal and the Afrikaans right winger were ironically reversed, as Abe Hoppenstein stood for the NP and was narrowly defeated by Japie Basson, an Afrikaans candidate for the PFP who had earlier been expelled from the NP.

Jews, like other South Africans, found themselves increasingly polarised in the eighties. Many were still loyal to the PFP, although a good portion of these voters 'voted Prog and prayed the Nats would get in'. A few Jews even began representing the NP. Theo Aronson was the first Nationalist Jewish MP, gaining his seat by default in 1982. Israel Pinshaw was placed on the State President's Council in 1984. The first Jew to be elected to parliament for the Nationalists was Sam Bloomberg, in the 1987 elections. Two Jewish PFP candidates — Helen Suzman and Harry Schwartz — were also voted in. This 1987 election was the last all-white national election, and it saw the drift of whites rightward.

Jewish members of Nusas (National Union of South African Students) and SAUJS (South African Union of Jewish Students) accused Jews who stood for the Nationalists of betraying Jewish ethics, and tore their election posters down. Jews involved with the extra-parliamentary UDF (United

<sup>24</sup> Henry Katzew, *Apartheid and Survival* (Simondium Publishers, 1965), p 105. The actual article first appeared in the *Zionist Record* of 6 September 1963.

Democratic Front<sup>25</sup>) or union work boycotted the all-white elections as altogether irrelevant. At the same time young Jewish males were serving as conscripts in the South African Defence Force, doing 'camps', or acting as police reservists, where they frequently landed up policing the townships.

In 1985 the UDF-aligned Jews for Justice (JFJ) in Cape Town, and Jews for Social Justice (JSJ) in Johannesburg, emerged. While these two organisations remained relatively small, their importance as a specifically Jewish presence in the mass democratic movement cannot be overestimated. Members of Jews for Social Justice faced a great deal of hostility from conservative Jews and received threats — in one case from a synagogue committee — that they would be beaten up, or arrested by the security police.

In June 1989 The Five Freedoms Forum (an organisation which worked to prepare whites for democracy) took a delegation to Lusaka to meet with the still banned ANC. Amongst this delegation were a number of Jews, including Barbara Buntman (then vice-chair of Five Freedoms), Franz Auerbach (chairperson of JSJ), Ann Harris (a lawyer and wife of the Orthodox Chief Rabbi), and Ronnie Bethlehem (an economist for the Johannesburg Chamber of Industry). They formed an unofficial sub-delegation, and clarified with the ANC how the Jewish community would be treated under an ANC government.

Much of the Jewish community responded to the rapid pace of change by clinging to the past. When JSJ organised a meeting to report back after the Lusaka trip, its organisers received threats from other Jews, as did Ann Harris for having gone and, for that matter, as did Rabbi Ady Assabi for hosting Nelson Mandela in his synagogue in 1990, shortly after Mandela's release.

It is impossible to know exactly how individual Jews voted in the March 1992 all-white referendum, which F W de Klerk called to gauge whether there was sufficient white support for his policy of negotiating with the ANC, SACP and others. However, based on historical voting patterns, it is likely that more than 70 per cent of Jews voted for continuing the negotiations.<sup>26</sup> Equally impossible to assert with certainty, but equally probable, is that in the 1994 elections which formally ended apartheid, the reconstituted National Party received the largest Jewish vote ever, perhaps even the majority of Jewish votes.<sup>27</sup> Like most whites — who overwhelmingly voted Nationalist

25 The UDF was a loose alliance of 400 church, sports, trade union and civic bodies which spearheaded internal opposition to apartheid through much of the 1980s.

26 More than 66 per cent of all whites voted 'Yes' to change in the high turnout referendum.

27 In previous constituency-based elections voting patterns could be worked out according to the known demographics of the area. With the proportional representation system this is not possible. But communal leaders like Mervyn Smith, then National Chairperson of the South African Jewish Board of Deputies, and Orthodox Chief Rabbi Harris both made informed guesses — based on data in their immediate environments — that the Nats got more Jewish votes than any other party. Political analysts estimate that only 2 per cent of whites voted for the ANC.

— Jews feared for their future and wished to see a strong opposition to the ANC established. The Democratic Party (DP) received the rest of the Jewish vote, with a small percentage voting for the ANC.

In these 1994 elections there were a number of Jewish candidates (both national and regional) in the DP list, but the majority of Jews who stood for office were from the ANC. Most of those Jews eventually elected to parliament were from the ANC — Joe Slovo, Ben Turok, Max Coleman, Raymond Suttner, Gill Marcus, Ronnie Kasrils, Brian Bunting and Janet Love. There was one Jewish MP from the Democratic Party (the articulate Tony Leon), one from the Nationalists (Esme Chait), and a Senate member from Inkatha (Ruth Rabinowitz).

In the Gauteng regional elections (where 60 per cent of South Africa's 100 000 plus Jewish population is concentrated), four Jews were elected from the ANC, and two from the DP. In the local elections in 1995, it seems the DP regained many Jewish votes, winning back such seats as the traditionally DP Houghton, which still has a significant Jewish population.

If we turn now to the response of the representative institutions of the community, there is only one worth examining — the South African Jewish Board of Deputies. The Board is a 'representative' body of South African Jewry by default. It has frequently expressed its funders' agendas more than any kind of grass roots community sentiment, but since it has no rivals, it gets the title.<sup>28</sup>

Since its inception in 1912 (the same year the ANC was constituted) the Board understood its role as a defensive one, specifically to challenge attacks on the Jewish community, of which there were many. Perhaps it believed it represented a community too small to impact on issues of national policy, for it rarely acted as an advocacy body like AIPAC (the American-Israel Public Affairs Committee), or attempted to affect government on broader issues 'not directly influencing the Jewish community'. The fact that many of the Board's members did not see apartheid as directly affecting the nature and quality of the Jewish community is in itself an indication of the paradigms within which they functioned.

The nature of the Board's response to apartheid was always hotly debated in its own congresses, with many urging for an unequivocal condemnation, and others warning this would end the Afrikaner/Jewish rapprochement which had been proceeding since 1948, and hence end the inclusion of Jews amongst the privileged. In the end the only basic consensus reached was as to the wisdom of a policy of communal silence.

Throughout the forty years of Nationalist rule, the Board consistently claimed that Jews participated in South African public life as citizens of South Africa, and had no collective 'Jewish attitude' towards a society run

<sup>28</sup> The SA Zionist Federation, once a dynamic communal body, had become a moribund and ineffective organisation by the 1980s.



along racial lines. It therefore held that all Jews should engage in political activity according to their individual convictions. Its claim would have been more convincing had it not spoken in the name of all Jews when it wanted to distance the Jewish community from the pronouncements of radical opposition.

When the government acted against leftist Jews there were few protests, and often covert or overt approval. The day after Harold Wolpe and Arthur Goldreich made their famous escape from Marshall Square police station, the *Rand Daily Mail* reported that Yigal Allon, then Israel's minister of Labour, had said Jews could not be citizens of a country that proclaimed racialism as the law. The response of the Board of Deputies was also printed: 'Those may be the views of Mr Allon. They are not shared by the South African Jewish community.'

Of course the implication of Allon's statement was that all 100 000 South African Jews should instantly pack their bags and leave, or else declare war on the other 3,5 million white South Africans. The Board was also aware — perhaps with hindsight inappropriately aware — how revolutionary Jews in other countries, by fuelling the identification of all Jews with revolution, had brought down disasters on the heads of their co-religionists. The White Russian armies, for example, seeking to destroy the Soviet regime, killed more than 70 000 Jews in their pogroms. Moscow's Chief Rabbi Mazeh is reported to have said to Trotsky — whose original name was Bronstein — after the latter refused to help Jews caught in the civil war, 'The Trotskys make the revolutions and the Bronsteins pay the price.' Indeed, Trotsky's father lost everything in the revolution and died of typhus. Fuelling the Board's fears was the memory of attacks on Jews during the Second World War by John Vorster's Ossewa Brandwag and the Greyshirts. More recently, Israel had voted against South Africa in the United Nations between 1960 and 1963, and the then prime minister Hendrik Verwoerd publicly threatened the South African Jewish community for this.

It was self-preservation which motivated the Board to strengthen its 'understanding' with the National Party in 1948, and exactly the same reason motivated it to draw close to the ANC post-1990. This was also partly the reason why the Jewish establishment suddenly began to lionise — at least in public — prominent Jewish freedom fighters it had previously shunned. After its unbanning, attempts by the Board to strengthen links with the ANC were conducted with great urgency. But the Board had had to be nudged into its initial contacts with democratic organisations.

In June 1989 one of the Board's central figures refused a proffered place in the Five Freedoms delegation which went to Lusaka. The Board waited until November 1989 to meet for the first time with Mass Democratic Movement, UDF and Cosatu representatives, and then only at the prodding of JSJ. Not that the UDF was always open from its side, and there were elements within it who refused to meet with a 'Zionist', mainstream Jewish organisation for fear

of antagonising The Call of Islam and other Muslim components of the UDF. But the Board was short-sighted in not pressing on, despite these difficulties, and opening channels of communication with the democratic movement earlier than it did.

The Board's policy was a diaspora Jewish response. It was cautious, prudent, equivocal and tortured, a function of an insecure minority wanting first and foremost to ensure its safety, secondly not to lose its comfortable privileges, and thirdly, not to shorten the rare experience of not being the prime 'other'. The Board's deliberate silence was informed by Jewishness — not Jewishness as an ethical system, but Jewishness as a sociological location, an awareness of vulnerability, and an awareness of having recently 'moved up' from being regarded as 'white kaffirs' and not wanting to return there.<sup>29</sup>

If a clear anti-apartheid message only emerged from the secular leaders of the Jewish community in 1985 (when the Board passed a resolution explicitly rejecting apartheid), it was never to emanate from the rabbinate. Most of South Africa's rabbis were Orthodox, and most of these quietly accepted the status quo, tending to disengage from the affairs of the broader community as 'not our business'.

This policy of non-involvement often translated into de facto support for the status quo. Thus, at a time when troops were frequently killing people, including children, in the townships, Rabbi Casper (Orthodox Chief Rabbi from 1963 until 1987) ruled conscientious objection was halachically impermissible, and stated that 'the major purpose of the existence of the armed forces is a defensive one'.<sup>30</sup> His various statements on the role Jews should play in South Africa were a manifesto for self-imposed irrelevancy.

Ben Isaacson, a rebel rabbi whose pronouncements frequently evinced a great deal of anger, both because they were impulsive and judgemental, and also because they contained more than a grain of truth, described the contradiction thus: 'These are the people who say that Judaism is all-pervading, a way of life, that there is no sphere of life which Judaism doesn't have something to say about. When you get up in the morning and go and wee, Judaism has something to say about it. But on the treatment of black human beings in South Africa, Judaism has nothing to say?'<sup>31</sup>

The world view of the Orthodox rabbinate found the conservatism of the apartheid milieu reassuring. A society which banned pornography, abortion and the Beatles as immoral (while busy destroying people's homes and

<sup>29</sup> Jewish refugees fleeing persecution in Europe were kept out of South Africa under legislation similar to that used to keep Indians out. Between 1937 and 1951 Jews were not allowed to join the Transvaal National Party. And various forms of social discrimination (exclusion from clubs, schools and leadership positions) were prevalent before the post-war period, particularly amongst English-speaking South Africans.

<sup>30</sup> See Tzippi Hoffman and Alan Fischer, *The Jews of South Africa, What Future* (Southern Book Publishers, 1988), p 327.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*, p 347.

dumping them in rural backwaters to starve or sicken) had a certain congruence with those who wished to preserve 'moral values', and felt uncomfortable with the free market of ideas modernity represented. Many rabbis, like their congregants, never went beyond the unthinking and crass infantilising of blacks which was normative across white South African society. They spoke privately of 'the shvartzes' being unfit to govern. Some, like several Christian churches, found it convenient to theologically underwrite '*baasskap*'. They pointed to the biblical curse on the descendants of Cham, placed upon them by Cham's father, Noah. 'Cursed is Canaan, a slave of slaves he will be to his brothers' (Genesis 25,9). Canaan was supposedly black people. In addition many fundamentalist rabbis saw apartheid as the hedge keeping assimilation at bay. Indeed, Jewish-Gentile intermarriage in South Africa was much lower than in Europe and the New World, as were all forms of contact between groups.<sup>32</sup>

In general, the more Orthodox a rabbi, the more likely he was to agree and acquiesce with the white South African construction of the black as 'lesser'. The source of Orthodox rabbinic positions on apartheid was not the halacha, a supposedly timeless, transcendent and immutable benchmark for morality detached from contemporary fashions and concerns, but rather the unconscious assimilation of local conditions, events, and socio-economic context they found themselves in, filtered through their particular conceptual framework.

Reform rabbis tended to be more outward looking, and to adopt more liberal positions, but they too were usually unwilling to step beyond the invisible boundaries their congregations, or white society in general, established. The government's withdrawal of Reform Rabbi Andre Ungar's work permit (in December 1956) — because he publicly condemned the Group Areas Act as an 'abomination' — had the intended intimidatory effect, especially on other rabbis who were also not South African citizens, and who might risk their livelihoods by speaking out.

32 It was this ethno-religious particularism, fixated on groups remaining whatever they supposedly intrinsically were, which caused so much stagnation in South Africa, including in the Jewish community. The South African Jewish community is a competent and caring one, and its communal welfare institutions and day-schools have served as models for Jewish communities around the world, as well as for fellow South Africans. But the Jews of the community have arguably excelled as professionals, as business people, as politicians, occasionally as artists — not as Jews. South African Jewish identity has offered, as ways of being Jewish, only an increasingly sterile fundamentalism or, for the once-a-year Jew, donating money to Jewish and Israeli charities. The community has produced almost no great Jewish thinkers, writers, movements, no significant internal debates regarding Jewish culture, none of the evolution of various Judaisms one sees in America, England and Israel. How could it have? It believed — like many others in South Africa — that it should devote its energies to preserving its traditions in formaldehyde, rather than living and exploring them.

The failure — particularly during the eighties — of the rabbinate to provide a clear ethical assertion caused Jews who wanted to contribute to change in South Africa as Jews to look for guidance elsewhere. The fact that the halachic process was rarely applied to uniquely South African issues, was again largely a sociological, rather than an ideological, function. Unlike some Christian and Muslim religious leaders, whose communities were directly affected by apartheid legislation, rabbis and their all-white congregations had no immediate self-interest to motivate involvement. But whatever the reason, the rabbinic response to the challenge posed by apartheid was one which, on the whole, emptied their 'light unto the nations' discourse of any substantive content.

Notwithstanding, there was a handful of rabbis who could have been included in this book, people who took public stands regarding institutionalised racism because they believed such a stand proceeded directly from Jewish ethics, and who were prepared to pay a price for so doing, either at the hands of the government, who harassed and deported them, or their own congregations, who fired them.

Orthodox Chief Rabbi L I Rabinowitz (who served from 1945 to 1961) was a pioneering and outspoken critic of apartheid, as were his protégés Ben Isaacson and (to a lesser extent) Rabbi Abner Weiss, who left the country after the 1973 Yom Kippur war. Rabbi David Rosen, subsequently Chief Rabbi of Ireland, and Rabbi Selwyn Franklin spoke out during the seventies and eighties. Franklin was particularly active, sharing platforms with UDF activists, and coming under police fire at Crossroads squatter camp. He was also a founding member of Jews for Justice in Cape Town. His contract at the Sea Point Hebrew Congregation was not renewed, almost certainly because of his politics. Gavin Michal is a contemporary Orthodox rabbi notable for a willingness to address broader concerns. Cyril Harris, a British rabbi who became South Africa's Chief Orthodox Rabbi in 1988, has displayed both sensitivity and a willingness to engage with the broader community and inter-faith activities, not merely as a public relations exercise, but as an essential part of being meaningfully Jewish.

Several rabbis affiliated with Progressive (ie Reform) Judaism were active. Arthur Saul Super (confined to a wheelchair) regularly participated in anti-apartheid protests. Rabbi Richard Lampert, of Johannesburg's Temple Emanuel, preached the need for social change at a Yom Kippur service in Johannesburg in 1976, adding to the traditional *vidui* — a moving prayer of confession — the words 'for forgetting we were oppressed.' He was pulled off the pulpit by members of his congregation. Three days later his house was raided by security police. Ady Assabi (who arrived in South Africa in 1985) visited detainees frequently during the eighties, urged his congregants to adopt fair employment practices, was involved with Jews for Social Justice, and was the first rabbi to invite Mandela to his synagogue after Mandela's release from jail.

When considering that several churches actively supported and underwrote apartheid,<sup>33</sup> and that even the religious 'leaders' of communities directly discriminated against by apartheid were often passive or co-opted,<sup>34</sup> the achievement of the few rabbis who did stand up to be counted becomes all that much greater. Against their own class interests, often against their own congregations and colleagues, against the delicate balances and the fear of rocking the boat, they chose not to turn a blind eye when they saw evil being done under the sun. The fact that organisations like the Jewish Board of Deputies only took a grudging anti-apartheid stance late in the day, and that the rabbinate never took a clear stance at all, testifies that the individuals who constituted those bodies were struggling, like most mortals, without the benefit of a guiding moral vision which transcended expediency or context. Had there been such a thing as unambiguous and clear Jewish values existing independently of the personalities of the people who claimed to live by those values, there might have been less room to debate the right response. But there never identifiably was.

Yet while there are no overarching Jewish values which unite all Jews, there are perspectives and qualities which are uniquely Jewish. Jews who came to South Africa brought with them a heritage which included saying no to dominant doxies, and the experience of persecution. (The two are not the same thing.) They, more than almost anyone else, had to do an enormous amount of forgetting if they were to sit around the supper table and discuss 'kaffirs'. The fact that so many individual Jews stepped outside the white consensus is an observable fact whose meaning will depend upon the interpretation of the observer.

### **'A place and a name'**<sup>35</sup>

I did not want to complete this Afterword without recalling a few South African Jews mentioned only in passing in the book, or not mentioned at all. They are all people who strove for a fairer dispensation in South Africa over the last sixty years, and who came to my attention while researching this

33 South African Christianity has many of the divides that Christianity in Latin America has. While the South African Council of Churches (SACC), and radicalised Catholics or Anglicans were often in the forefront of the Struggle, the Dutch Reformed Church provided the theological underpinnings of political apartheid. Many US-linked Evangelical churches like Rhema, with their gospel of prosperity, and their predominantly white congregations, supported minority rule until the last minute. Jerry Falwell, whose brand of theology seemed remarkably similar to American imperialism, came out with strong messages of support for P W Botha in the mid-eighties. Jimmy Swaggart Ministries, operating in Zimbabwe in 1985, channelled aid to Renamo and contributed to the destabilisation of Mozambique. Shekinah Ministries (also in Zimbabwe), an offshoot of White Assemblies of God Church, raised considerable funds for Renamo. Frank Chikane, general secretary of the SACC when detained, was tortured by white security police who were members of the Apostolic Faith Mission Church (to which Chikane, ironically



book. The list is by no means comprehensive. The first group consists of 'politicals' such as Arthur Goldreich, Harold Wolpe, Rusty Bernstein, Tilly and Julius First (Ruth First's parents), Baruch Hirson, Issy Heymann (who attempted to commit suicide in prison after being tortured), Eli, Violet and Sheila Weinberg, Lionel Foreman, Wolfie Kodesh, Hilda Bernstein, Harry Snitcher, Ike Horvitch, Esther and Hymie Barsel, Michael and Ray Harmel, Sue Rabkin (David Rabkin's wife — see interview with Raymond Suttner), Amy Thornton (born Rietstein), Issy Wolfson, Vic Finkelstein, Ben Turok, Jack Tarshish, Bernard Gottschalk, and Norman Levy (whose brother Leon is listed below), all of whom played prominent parts in extra-legal groupings such as the African National Congress, the South African Communist Party, Umkhonto we Sizwe, the African Resistance Movement (ARM) and the Congress of Democrats. Almost all of them were jailed, banned, or went into exile to avoid the former two.

Some, like Sam Kahn (the only communist member of parliament, elected as a 'Native' Representative) who denounced apartheid in brilliant speeches before a hostile parliament back in 1948, were the sole voice of legal opposition. Leslie Rubin, Native Representative in the Senate from the Liberal Party, falls in the same category.

Trade unionism was inseparable from political work in a country where most political activity was illegal. Indeed most of the people listed below were also SACP members at one time or another. Issy Diamond (Textile Workers Industrial Union, and the communist-aligned African Federation of Trade Unions), Solly Sachs (Garment Workers Union), Ben Weinbren (co-founder with T W Thibedi, in 1928, of the Non-European Trade Union Federation), Fanny Klennerman (Women Workers Union), Max Gordon (Joint Committee of African Trade Unions), Morris Kagan (Tram and Bus Workers Union), Leon Levy (Food and Canning Workers Union secretary, and later president of Sactu), Rose Schlachter (who took over from Leon

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enough, also belonged). For a far more detailed exploration, see Paul Gifford's book *The Religious Right in Southern Africa* (Baobab Books and University of Zimbabwe Publications, 1988).

34 As with the Jewish community, most Muslim activists of the fifties, sixties and seventies were secular (like the Communist Party's Dr Yusuf Dadoo) while the clergy and identifying Muslims remained silent. The Muslim Judicial Council (MJC) did not unequivocally condemn apartheid until the mid-eighties, when it opportunistically jumped on the UDF bandwagon. When Iman Abdullah Haroon was murdered in police detention in 1969, the MJC ignored it, some imams claiming 'he deserved what he got'. Other organisations like The Call of Islam did, however, play a very significant role in the Struggle during the eighties.

35 'Even unto them I will give in my house, and within my walls a monument (*yad*) and a memorial (*vashem*), better than sons and daughters, I will give them an everlasting memorial that shall not be cut off' (Isaiah, 56, 5). The literal translation of the Hebrew words *yad vashem* is 'a place and a name'.



Levy when he was banned, until she herself was banned for ten years, organised the Laundry Workers Union, and the National Union of Distributive Workers), John Copelyn (general secretary of the Southern African Clothing and Textile Workers Union), Bernie Fanaroff (Cosatu, National Union of Metalworkers), David Lewis (General Workers Union in Cape Town), all had significant – and sometimes central – roles in building the trade union movement in this country.

Then there were those activities, both of individuals and organisations, aimed at challenging the legislation maintaining white supremacy. Sydney Kentridge, Joel Carlson (who was involved in many cases where prisoners had been 'sold' to white farmers in what amounted to slavery), Shulamith Muller, Raymond Tucker (who gave a great deal of time and unpaid service to the Legal Aid Bureau), and Jules Browde defended apartheid's opponents, both great and small. Jules Browde also founded Lawyers for Human Rights, an organisation which provided legal services for ordinary people whose lives had been rendered impossible by senseless apartheid laws. Pauline Lipson did much the same over forty years as director of the Legal Aid Bureau, which was founded in 1937 by the South African Institute of Race Relations (SAIRR). The Bureau's first and second directors were also Jewish women, advocate Mary Kuper, and the attorney Ruth Heyman, a Liberal Party member. Joel Joffe was Mandela's attorney during the Rivonia trial. (He subsequently became an insurance magnate and funded the ANC while it was banned. He also, along with other Jewish entrepreneurs like Ben Rabinowitz, put up the money for *The Weekly Mail*, South Africa's premier alternative newspaper.) Geoff Budlender, currently director general of land affairs, could also be mentioned for his ongoing contribution to public law.

A fourth field of endeavour was the strengthening of civil society – all those service-providing organisations outside of business and government. In South Africa, the needs of most of the population were not catered for, and civil society was frequently their only resource. Hundreds of Jews were involved in non-profit service provision long before the eighties, when civil society evolved into a major alternative to government.

The Mayibuye night schools, which provided adult education to illiterate blacks in the 1940s, were founded by, amongst others, Ike Fanaroff (trade unionist Bernie Fanaroff's father) and Dolly Zwarenstein. In 1948 Mildred and Morris Canin began an innovative farm school in Kempton Park, the Blue Gill Waters School (now called the Mehlereng Community School). Offering free education, the school has impacted positively on thousands of children in its fifty years of existence. Doctors Sidney and Emily Kark initiated South Africa's first primary health care project in Palela, Zululand back in the early 1950s. Dr Bill Hoffenberg chaired the Defence and Aid Fund (established for the 1950s treason trialists) until he was banned. Ellen Hellmann at the South African Institute of Race Relations did much early research into the living conditions of urban blacks.

Work done over decades by Ethel Walt and Beulah Rollnik (volunteer Black Sash workers in that organisation's advice office) also touched thousands of lives. Selma Browde, as first Progressive Party city councillor in Johannesburg (from 1972), and provincial councillor (1974), used these platforms to attack apartheid legislation. She was also co-founder of the Hunger concern programme which laid the foundations for Operation Hunger. Helen Lieberman, a 'single-woman organisation' based in Cape Town, has spent thirty years working with the most ignored and marginalised communities, and facilitated, or raised funds for, the establishment of hundreds of crèches, study halls and self-help projects in Guguletu, Langa, Lusaka, Miller's Camp and other informal settlements. Miriam and Bill Hepner, veteran SACP and COD members, maintained a lifelong involvement in the Struggle. Miriam was still working for the Detainees' Parents Support Committee (DPSC) in her late seventies.

Lastly, there were those who busied themselves with challenging the invisible legislation in people's heads, not always because they set out to, but simply because their unfolding lives brought them to a place where for them what was natural had been decreed unnatural by South African society. One such person was Ian Bernhardt, who was a mainstay of Dorkay House (a centre for black jazz) in the 1950s, when resources for black artists were simply non-existent. Bernhardt, together with Leon Gluckman and Harold Bloom, produced *King Kong*, the jazz opera which showpieced Todd Matshikiza's music. Bernhardt also produced all of Athol Fugard's early plays, and supported the multiracial Phoenix Players during the bleak seventies, touring with them and other black artists to almost every township on the Rand. Writer and journalist Ronald Segal (*Africa South*) also falls into this category,<sup>36</sup> as does the *Rand Daily Mail's* Benjy Pogrud, Jack Halpern, and *Sunday Times* journalist Charles Bloomberg who, in 1963, first exposed the secret Afrikaans organisation, the Broederbond, and forced the then Broederbond chairman, Piet Koornhof, to resign.

### 'Cohen was here'

Identity as inheritance, identity as construction, identity as memory, identity as biology. Most of the people in this book were chiefly concerned with South Africanness, or with fairness, or with finding a common humanity. I have been chiefly concerned with their Jewishness, because I believe it helped motivate their preoccupation with the former three. In addition, their Jewishness was an aspect of them frequently distorted or even hidden, sometimes by themselves, sometimes by observers. I was disturbed at seeing

<sup>36</sup> Segal drove Oliver Tambo over the border to Bechuanaland and safety in 1961. See Hilda Bernstein, *The Rift* (Jonathan Cape, London, 1994), p 7.

Joe Slovo eulogised as a 'good Christian' by the homogenising of experience to the point of annihilating the nuances people bring with them into history.

There was also a third impulse, related to the other two, behind this book. South Africa's new dispensation is based not only on non-racialism, but also on 'non-groupism' — the idea that individual human beings should be judged on their own merits or demerits, not as branch offices of some collective essence. Historically the branch office idea has been misused to justify most organised exploitation of one group by another (eg 'All blacks partake of black stupidity', 'All Jews partake of Jewish dishonesty').

The advantages of 'non-groupism' are clear. Its logical conclusion is that no individual can be either damned or praised for the actions of another. Where it is implementable it would mean the end of all group-based prejudice. But a world without groupism would also be a world where no one could connect his own self-esteem with the achievements of others, or delight in the glory of his heroes' achievements. No highs for South Africans when 'we' win a gold at the Olympics, no extra dignity for our own lives generated by the Chris Hanis or Yitschak Rabins of this world.

The possibility of partaking in the successes of our collective may impel us towards emphasising our group identity — as whites, blacks, businessmen, gays, Hindus, whatever. But the desire to avoid being persecuted for partaking of the supposed negative attributes of those selfsame collectives may bring us to demand we be evaluated first and foremost as discrete individuals.

This book reflects that ambivalence. On the one hand I have stepped outside the parameters of the 'branch office' discourse, insisting that Jews, like everyone else, function and make their significant choices as individuals, not as clones of some corporate identity. That there are no overarching values which inform all Jews is reflected historically in the diverse positions Jews have taken around every debate in every society they have found themselves in, including apartheid South Africa.

Yet, paradoxically, *Cutting Through The Mountain* asserts that broad patterns are discernible, and that the range of positions Jews assumed around a given issue is a particularly Jewish range. In Nationalist-ruled South Africa most Jews were left of grand apartheid but right of one human, one vote. A minority of Jews, proportionately larger than from any other subsection of the white community, 'betrayed' their class, colour and privilege to throw their lot in with the oppressed majority. By celebrating the activism of this minority, and in claiming it as the positive manifestation of an essential Jewish preoccupation with 'making right' the world, I have colluded with the branch office idea in order to reassert my own value as a Jew.

There is nothing new in this response. 'Jewdocentric' books have appeared proving that everyone who was anyone was Jewish or had some major Jewish connection. Even people who were excommunicated, converted, or baptised

at an early age, such as Spinoza, Disraeli, Marx or Mendelssohn are readily cited as examples of Jewish genius ie Jewish 'worth-full-ness'.

Black consciousness, and later Afrocentrism, are parallel attempts to distance both possible attack and internalised self-hatred. It is difficult to be part of a maligned group and still emerge with one's self-esteem intact. The individual may choose to promote the group — the extended 'I' — as a path to his or her own psychological healing. Whether such strategies effectively heal the massive self-doubt produced by victimisation is, of course, debatable.

Negative images of the Jew were originally imported into South Africa along with the other cultural baggage that white settlers brought. At times when there was significant Jewish immigration into the country, or economic or social instability, these dormant stereotypes were ready to be enlarged upon and given uniquely South African interpretations.

The word 'Jew', when used pejoratively, came to occupy a few major locations in South African discourse: 'Peruvian' (coarse, amoral alien who gravitates towards criminal activities), 'Hoggenheimer' (wealthy capitalist, parasitical, exploitative), 'Bolshevik' (troublemaker, *kaffirboetie*, importer of subversive ideas) and, more recently, 'Kugel' (empty headed and excessively selfish and materialistic).<sup>37</sup>

Initially these stereotypes existed almost exclusively amongst the white population. Most blacks saw the Jews as whites, not as a special subsection thereof. But the spread of Christianity, and its acceptance by the overwhelming majority of South Africa's black population, has provided firm cultural foundations for the belief that 'the Jews' are inherently guilty of something or other. In addition, as black South Africans increasingly partake of the discourses of the broader world, they reflect these discourses (including anti-Semitic ones) in their thought. Thus language (and the unquestioned assumptions behind the language) originating in medieval European perceptions — 'to Jew someone', 'as rich as a Jew' — can be heard in South Africa today, not just amongst the white right, but also amongst the new black business, political and professional elite.

By the mid 1990s, images of the Jew as exploiter or as inordinately selfish or powerful seem to have gained broad acceptance in some sectors of urban black society. In 1995, Jocelyn Hellig, a professor of Religious Studies went on Radio Metro, a South African station with a predominantly black listenership, to talk about anti-Semitism and an exhibition concerning Anne Frank. Most of the calls she received heaped vituperation on Jews as a group, for crimes ranging from 'owning the stock exchange' to emigrating from South Africa.

A well-known journalist recently claimed 'the Jews' were behind the controversial ejection of a black academic (because of supposed irregularities

37 Interested readers are referred to Milton Shain's book, *The Roots of Anti-Semitism in South Africa* (University Press of Virginia, 1994) and Marcia Leveson's work, *People of the Book, Images of the Jew in South African English Fiction* (Wits University Press, 1996).

in his curriculum vitae) from his post of deputy vice-chancellor of the University of the Witwatersrand. The journalist wrote that 'the Jews' control the university, and that the leading administrators at the university are Jewish which, as it so happens, is untrue.<sup>38</sup> 'If the Jew did not exist,' wrote Jean-Paul Sartre a half century ago, 'the anti-Semite would invent him.'<sup>39</sup>

The worrying aspect about this creative writing in the service of resentment is that the journalist attributed a unity of purpose and opinion to 'the Jews'. While this would be laughable to anyone who cares to know how fractured South African Jewry — and, for that matter, world Jewry — is,<sup>40</sup> such Protocols-of-the-Elders-of-Zion-like cant sets off real fear in the guts of most Jews.

Historically, sustained talk about the power or inordinate influence of 'the Jews' has been the preface to acts which paradoxically have emphasised Jewish powerlessness — from 'minor' ones like the desecration of graveyards and synagogues, or the ousting from trades, professions, universities and living areas, to major ones like forced conversions, pogroms, gas chambers and crematoria.

*Cutting Through The Mountain* therefore also emerged in response to contemporary voices in South Africa expressing thousand-year-old canards about 'the Jews'. I wanted to rebut accusations that Jews are either 'not involved enough in South Africa'<sup>41</sup> or else, paradoxically, 'are too involved, ie overly influential'. Of course, there is nothing new in these attacks, except that some of them are now emanating from black South Africans who have suffered from the abuse of groupism and racism in their own lives.

If there is in this book a perpetuation of the group idea, a claiming of the hard work, moral fibre and courage of certain individuals as the inheritance of an entire collective, it was done not for the sake of 'the Jews', which only exists in the abstract, but for the sake of the real, breathing people who make up that collective. Done for that reason it does not lessen my desire to honour and acknowledge all human beings for the best that is in them.

38 See *Living Africa*, May 1996, p 62, 'The lynching of William Makgoba' by Jon Qwelane.

39 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Portrait of the Anti-Semite* (later republished as *Anti-Semite and Jew*) (Secker & Warburg, Lindsay Drummond, London 1948).

40 Ironically enough, the only thing which ever bridges the rifts evident in the Orthodox-Progressive Judaism split, or between the competing world views in Israel which led to the assassination of Yitschak Rabin, are attacks of the sort by Qwelane. So he too, from the vantage point of someone who sees the reactive unifying of Jews against a perceived threat as something positive, has done 'the Jews' a good turn.

41 For example, Kaizer Nyatumba (on 18 July 1994) wrote in his One in Your Eye column in *The Star*. 'I would like to see South African Jews worried more about this, their country, rather than about that far-off country called Israel.'



## The power of doubt

In a volume about how people from one group — ‘the Jews’ — interacted in a struggle between another group — ‘the blacks’ — and a third group — ‘the whites’ — the whole question of how we align ourselves with other human beings naturally emerges. Many questions posed by the interviewers examine why collective identities are so enduring, resurrecting themselves in both the inane and the profound, at rites of passage and in joke-telling, in creating meaning and a sense of belonging, and being easily subverted into prejudice and exploitation.

What are people doing when they define themselves or others with labels like Jew and Gentile, black and white, fundamentalist and secularist? Perhaps more than recognising that certain people share a particular essence, it is our desire to categorise which is central to the process of group creation. This categorisation, and the tensions it creates, is part of a very basic process — how we know the world we live in. The amount of information in the environment is overwhelming, so we organise people into groups, accentuating the similarities within a group, and exaggerating the differences between groups.<sup>42</sup> The labelling of someone as anything is an ideological act, and serves either to claim them as being of the ingroup, or to place them amongst the outgroup, the other.

Often the group ‘differences’ used to motivate conflict or persecution have to be scrupulously invented. Indeed, the most bitter conflicts frequently involve people who originally came from the same biological or cultural ‘stock’. The Hutu and Tutsi share the same language, taboos and traditions, and both displaced earlier inhabitants of the area (the Twa people). At the beginning of this century these two groups could have been described as a caste system. The Tutsi were largely cattle owners, and the Hutu were farmers. But by the time first Germany and then Belgium had finished transmuting the different social classes into racial entities, in keeping with the racial theories of the colonial powers (the Hutu were patronised because they were more ‘European’), two new and warring identities had virtually been created.

In the same way, black nationalism in South Africa, the transcending of tribal identities for a more inclusive South African identity, comes about because a terrible and idiotic racism ‘forced’ a unity upon disparate language and cultural entities. And anti-Semitism has long been suspected of being the strongest glue holding Jewish identity together.<sup>43</sup> Whenever Jews exist in a milieu where anti-Semitism is minimal, both wide-ranging assimilation, and articulations of Jewishness impossible under oppression occur.

42 See Cheryl de la Rey, *Intergroup relations: theories and positions*, in *Social Psychology in South Africa* (edited by Don Foster and Joha Louw-Potgieter, Lexicon, Johannesburg, 1991), p 43.

43 As well as the thing which perhaps most stunts the evolution of Jewish identity.



Of course the thesis is simplistic. Certainly the formation of identity, for both the individual and the group, is not purely a reactive process. Judaism evolving through the ages has created its own sophisticated tradition, very little of which emerged simply because of persecution. In a similar way, gay culture has developed an ethos all of its own, even though this culture may well have been born out of the prejudice gays encounter in the heterosexual world. But if we cannot claim oppression as the sole creator of group identities, we cannot easily disclaim its seminal role in maintaining and reinforcing them.

The process of categorisation affects everyone, from the anti-Semite seeing 'the Jews' as the root of all evil to the revolutionary romanticising 'the proletariat'. This need to know the world by sorting it persists, and only becomes harmful when we turn our relative categories into absolute truths. As has been frequently pointed out, the greatest atrocities in history have all been performed in the name of absolute certainties about what 'we' are, and about what others are not. Doubt has rarely created holocausts and ethnic cleansings. If there is an original sin, it is allowing our fears to blind us to the humanity of those who appear different from us, because we see the noises in our heads rather than the people in front of us.

### **Remembering brings redemption<sup>44</sup>**

A few of the interviewees in this book believe that the Jewish community's response to apartheid was morally inadequate. As I see it, the community's response was certainly out of synch with some of the claims it has made about itself. I believe this gap between the 'idealised self' and the 'actual self' comes about because Jewish vulnerability as a frequently attacked minority has led to an avoidance of grappling with how we are, as opposed to how we are perceived.

'Jews,' writes Jerome Rothenberg, 'have tended in their self-presentation (whether to themselves or others) to create an image that would show them in the "best light" and with the least possibility of antagonising their oppressors . . . In the process many came to confuse the defensive or idealised image with the historical and to forget that the actual history of the Jews was as rich in powers and contradictions as that of the surrounding nations.'<sup>45</sup>

An idealised self-presentation makes it difficult to own and integrate the human, the imperfect, the mistaken. This book has been an attempt to grapple with that. I believe any collective will ultimately be strengthened by

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44 A saying attributed to the Baal Shem Tov, the founder of the Hasidic movement: 'Forgetfulness leads to exile, remembering brings redemption.'

45 Jerome Rothenberg and Harris Lenowitz, *Exiled in the World* (Copper Canyon Press, Washington, 1989), p 7.

acknowledging its diversity and complexity rather than silencing its internal debates in the name of a fictitious unity.

If Jews wish to champion a recording of events which is transparent, which strives not to hide anything, we might as well start with our own history. The abomination of allowing anyone to selectively rewrite history so as to expunge a complicity is too great. If we wish the Holocaust, the murder of millions of Jews, Russians, Gypsies, Poles, Czechs, Serbs, homosexuals, socialists and others to be owned by the world who watched it, and the Germans and their fellow travellers who executed it, we Jews can do no better than to bear witness to the suffering and humiliation of other people, and own our part in it, as bystanders and, where relevant, as perpetrators. Not in order to provide others with fuel for their ongoing resentments, but as part of respecting the truth of what was and is. Remembering without forgiving is not to allow for the possibility of change. But forgiveness without memory is a mockery.

Despite the healing work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, a collective white accounting for apartheid — an owning of it — has not yet happened. Perhaps — as with the perpetrators of the Holocaust — it never will. Nor has black complicity in black oppression been psychologically dealt with. Apartheid would not have lasted as long as it did without the Matanzimas, the Joe Mameselas,<sup>46</sup> the spies, informers and askaris. Even in directly oppressed black communities activists were, for much of apartheid's history, in the minority. If South Africans do not wish to see apartheid denial forty years hence, it would be helpful for each community — and ultimately for each individual — to own his or her 'unattractive' parts, the parts which do not jell with the way we present ourselves to the world.

A truthful recording of history also allows us to acknowledge our strengths and virtues where they occur, to pat ourselves on the back for the good we have done, and to celebrate where our uniquenesses have emerged. I wanted this book to bring out the enriching, non-exploitative side of ethnicity, and the valuable and ongoing contributions of Jewish and South African identity to each other.

All identity is symbiotic.<sup>47</sup> The activists in this book could not be who they are without the coalescence of several identities which nurtured each other. It would be absurd to claim they became what they are solely because of their Jewishness — as absurd as the claim that their Jewishness was irrelevant.

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46 George Matanzima, puppet head of the Transkei Bantustan installed by the South African government. Joe Mamesela, security police operative who killed more than thirty people.

47 And all identity is steeped in paradoxes. The ironies of discrete identity are everywhere. Take, for example, two symbols identified with two different collectives. The swastika was once a Jewish symbol, used to decorate synagogues in the Galilee. The Magen David (Shield of David) was first used as a Jewish symbol only in the 12th century, and is not of Jewish origin. Quintessentially 'Jewish' names like Schwarz, Klein, Edelstein, Rosenthal

Certainly their Jewishness, their status in the broader white community as outsiders helped to make them more sensitive to the huge flaws in the South African status quo. But their activism was paradoxically only possible because of acculturation into a broader South Africanness. Ghetto people could not have produced activists because ghetto people simply did not speak the language — both verbal and non-verbal — of the surrounding society.

### **‘The truth of the matter — they cannot be separated’<sup>48</sup>**

Particularistic identity is about focusing on the things which differentiate — not necessarily divide — us one from the other. The tensions between particularism and universalism are ever present, because there is something arbitrary about the boundaries we establish to separate ourselves from others. At crucial turning points in our lives, perhaps a personal tragedy or triumph, we may touch upon how our group loyalties are not enough to anchor us in the great tide of beginning and ending which all human beings are swept along with. The communist dream of a world where people have chosen to put aside the things which prevent heart from knowing heart was an incarnation of something mystics of all faiths and traditions have got in touch with: in some place, in some way we are one.

Yet to constantly forget this is also part of who we are. In the hurly burly of passions and pain, we lose sight of that fundamental unity time and time again. We create the binary opposites we need to give us meaning, define ourselves by our struggle and by our enemies, by our past and by our future. The desire to differentiate ourselves as individuals is well served by groups, which become the vehicles for our attempts to establish value and meaning. All of this is the stuff of life, serious and yet transient, heavy and terrifyingly real, and somehow, in the end, insubstantial. But the depth, tenaciousness and creativity of particularistic identity cannot be underestimated. It is a force which, as many times as it is dissolved by recalling our pan-human fate, resurrects itself in protean fashion. It is a force which is here to stay.

At the end of this century, as a unanimising consumer-oriented secularism battles with various fundamentalisms and ethnic identities for the hearts of

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were slapped on Jews by German and Austrian tax officials. The names of the Hebrew months, and indeed the letters of the modern Hebrew alphabet originated in Babylon. The first printing of a complete edition of the Talmud was done by a Christian printer, Daniel Bomberg, in 1519. And so on. During the editing and writing of this book I discovered it impossible to make statements like ‘the Jews are such and such’ without the exact opposite immediately presenting itself to me. In matters of identity the seemingly clear divisions between ‘them’ and ‘us’ are a lot more permeable and relative than the way we relate to them in the daily round. And the nature of the ‘us’ also shifts the more we examine it. What I learned in the end is the wisdom of abandoning such attempts to over-formulate reality.

48 Chayim Nachman Bialik, *Chevlei Lashon (The Difficulty of Expression)*.

people around the globe, it becomes increasingly clear that really both approaches need each other, and both are deficient in and of themselves. The challenge of finding this balance between particularism and universalism (being for the individual and also for the group, being for the group and also for other groups) is neatly presented in a famous aphorism of Hillel: 'If I am not for myself, then who is for me, but if I am only for myself, then what am I?' It sums up the forces which impel us to embrace both sides of an apparent contradiction.

Since the beginning of this century, the internal South African Jewish debate as to what constitutes injustice, and what a Jewish response to injustice should be, has never substantially altered, surviving the demise of statutory apartheid in 1994. There are still two broad swells of opinion, each one grounded in a different emotional reality, each one expressing a side of Hillel's equation. The one focuses on 'If I not for myself, then who will be for me'; the other, on the 'if I am only for myself, then what am I?' Each sees the other as missing a crucial element. The left accuses the right of not seeing holistically, the right accuses the left of being naive and not taking the 'lessons' of history into account.

In South Africa, the location of left Jews relative to the Jewish community, as insiders becoming outsiders, made a relationship of mutual ambiguity inevitable between them and that community. Their status in the broader community, as outsiders becoming insiders, helped to sensitise them to the injustices they saw around them. That they acted on that sensitivity is first and foremost to their own honour, and also to the honour of all who sustained, encouraged and struggled with them.

And I always thought the very simplest words  
must be enough: When I say what things are like  
Everyone's heart must be torn to shreds.  
That you'll go down if you don't stand up  
for yourself  
Surely you see that

*Bertolt Brecht, written shortly before his death*

If I am not for myself, then who will be for me,  
and if I am only for myself, then what am I,  
and if not now,  
when?

*Hillel, Ethics of the Fathers, Chapter 1, Teaching 14*

אם אין אני לי, מי לי ?  
וכשאני לעצמי, מה אני ?  
ועם לא עכשיו,  
אימתי ?

הלל, פרקי אבות, פרק א משנה יד