

South African Jewry 20 Years Into Democracy

In December 2013, South Africa was once again the focus of international attention following the passing of its iconic former President Nelson Mandela. Tributes poured in for this remarkable freedom fighter and statesman, and in due course world leaders began streaming into the country to attend his funeral. Just under twenty years previously, they had similarly arrived from near and far to witness Mandela's inauguration as President of South Africa's newborn multiracial democracy.

Mandela's passing also placed the spotlight on South African Jewry, at least so far as international Jewry was concerned. For most of his career, he had been closely associated with members of the Jewish community, most notably in the struggle against the racially oppressive apartheid system. None of the country's other ethnic white communities came close to producing so high a proportion of individuals who had helped him to realize his goals. This in turn was part of the broader phenomenon of Jews, despite being part of the privileged white caste, producing a strikingly disproportionate number of those whites who did oppose apartheid.

Another, thornier, question concerning world Jewry was what Mandela's attitude had been toward Israel. The implications of this were of more than historical interest. Particularly since the collapse of the Oslo peace process, there has been a growing campaign to portray Israel as an apartheid state essentially no different from the despised white minority regime in South Africa. The comparison may be specious, but in a world where perceptions create their own realities, it has the potential to serious harm the Jewish State. In no small part, the demise of apartheid South Africa was hastened by the international boycott against it, and those who push the Israel-Apartheid equation believe that it likewise holds the key to Israel's demise. Had someone of the stature of Nelson Mandela, the man more than anyone else associated with the fight against apartheid, endorsed this canard, it would greatly boost the credibility of those who propagate it.¹

Mandela's attitude toward Israel and his relationship with South African Jewry have been alluded to because in many ways they capture the ambiguous position of Jews in South Africa

today. On the one hand, the awkward transition from a society based on entrenched white privilege to one of multiracial democracy has been eased by the fact that individual Jews did so much to bring about the new order. Certainly, it has helped the Jewish leadership to punch above its weight in terms of accessing government and having input into public policy. On the other the strongly entrenched culture of anti-Zionism, so typical of post-colonial African societies and for historical reasons particularly pronounced in South Africa, places mainstream Jewry at odds

The South African Jewish population is approximately 75,000, out of a total population of 52 million

with the government's standpoint and the views of their fellow citizens in general. The notion that Israel practices a form of apartheid and that the situation regarding Israelis and Palestinians largely mirrors the situation in pre-liberation South Africa is now widely regarded as fact. It has

naturally been assiduously propagated by anti-Israel activists, who in seeking to undermine the credibility of those who oppose them do not scruple to feed into the inevitable vein of anti-white racial sentiment within the black population. Hence, by taking a stand on behalf of Israel, Jews increasingly risk being seen as supporters of apartheid, and indeed are regularly labeled as such in certain quarters.

This overview will explore these and related questions, but at this point it must be stressed that

anti-Zionism and the struggle against it is only one component of the collective Jewish experience. Taken as a whole, in fact, the overall state of South African Jewry twenty years into democracy is remarkably healthy, arguably more so than at any time in the community's 175 year-old history. This may not be the case in bare numerical terms; the community reached its peak of around 120 000 souls in 1970,² and since then it has decreased by more than a third. It is certainly true, however, in terms of the high levels of Jewish identity, the correspondingly low rates of assimilation and intermarriage and the burgeoning of Jewish learning at all levels. Additionally, and despite the prevalence of anti-Zionist sentiment, South Africa has consistently recorded one of the Diaspora's lowest rates of anti-Semitism.

Demographics and Distribution

In global terms, the South African Jewish population is not particularly large. Nevertheless, it still constitutes the twelfth-largest Jewish community in the Diaspora and by far the largest on the African continent.³ Despite losses to emigration during the final quarter of the last century, it still comprises some 70-75,000 souls (out of a total population of 52 million). This figure has remained stable for at least a decade.

Prior to World War II, the Jewish population was more spread out than it is today. While the majority were concentrated in the main urban centers – Johannesburg, Cape Town, Durban, Pretoria, Port Elizabeth, Bloemfontein and East London – a substantial minority lived in the

smaller country towns, and in scores of cases were sufficiently numerous to establish formally constituted congregations. The larger country centers also had active Zionist, women's, youth and welfare organizations. After the war, however, Jews began relocating to the cities, initially for economic and educational reasons, but with this exodus in due course generating a momentum of its own.⁴ Today, not only have most of the country communities closed, but even in the cities the Jewish population has declined sharply, sometimes by as much as 90%. According to the 2001 census and available communal records, two thirds of the Jewish community – an estimated 50 000 – live in Johannesburg and 20% in Cape Town (16 000). Durban and Pretoria together account for 3000 more, and around the same number are spread out in the remainder of the country.

In 1950, the SAJBD appointed an itinerant rabbi whose brief was to pay regular visits to the declining pockets of country Jewry no longer able to employ a religious minister and teacher. This position has been held since 1993 by Rabbi Moshe Silberhaft, whose brief has been expanded to visit the small Jewish communities in such Southern African countries as Namibia, Botswana, Mauritius, Zimbabwe and Swaziland.⁵

A noteworthy feature of South African Jewry is that an estimated three out of four of its members have Lithuanian roots, the result of a huge influx from that country and neighboring territories in the period 1880-1930. This common heritage helps to explain what can be said to most characterize the community, namely its strong attachment to traditional Orthodox Judaism (albeit that the

degree of actual practice varies widely) and its strong support for Zionism.

In addition to the dominant Eastern European component, the community comprises a significant minority of German-Jewish origin, largely descended from refugees from Nazism who arrived in the 1930s. Since the war, additional diversity has been provided by Sephardi Jews originally from the Greek island of Rhodes, most of who had first gone to Northern and Southern Rhodesia (today's Zambia and Zimbabwe). Israelis, whether as permanent residents or transient workers, have likewise emerged as a distinct grouping within the community.

Because of the high rate of emigration by younger people from the mid-1970s, the profile of the Jewish community today is a relatively aged one. According to the 2001 census, 20% of its members were over 65, as opposed to just 5% nationally. The same proportion, however, were under the age of twenty, their numbers swelled by the typically larger families within the burgeoning religious sector. These age profiles vary from place to place. The median age in Johannesburg and Cape Town is lower than that of Durban and Pretoria, while in Bloemfontein, East London and Port Elizabeth, Jews over fifty now constitute the large majority.⁶

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Education

A striking feature of South African Jewry is how many of the youth are being educated within the Jewish day school system. Over 90% of those of school-going age are found in Johannesburg and Cape Town, and more than four out of five of these attend a Jewish school (the majority of the remainder attend private colleges). In Johannesburg the largest school system comprises the three King David schools, whose combined student body comprise just under 60% of those

As a result of the growth of Orthodox observance in Johannesburg, a wide array of religious schools has emerged

being educated under Jewish auspices. The United Herzlia Schools in Cape Town cater for over 80% of Jewish school-goers. The remainder by and large attend the more religiously focused Phyllis Jowell Jewish Day School and Sinai Academy or private institutions.

The ethos of the King David and Herzlia schools is officially defined as ‘broadly national-traditional’⁷, that is, that the specifically Jewish content of its curricula is a synthesis of Zionism (including the teaching of modern Hebrew language and literature) and traditional Orthodox Judaism. Regarding the latter, it has meant in practice that the outer forms of how the schools are run have been governed by Orthodox norms, such as in modes of daily worship and the observance of Kashrut, Shabbat and Yom Tov, but the degree to which students

and faculty members adhere to such precepts varies widely. While a non-coercive stance is maintained regarding different levels of religious observance, non-Orthodox and secular streams of religious instruction are rigorously excluded.

The SA Board of Jewish Education, the largest body of its kind in the Diaspora, is directly responsible for the educational and financial policies of the King David Schools. It has over 90 affiliates countrywide, including the United Herzlia Schools, Yeshiva College, Torah Academy, Shaarei Torah Primary and Hirsch Lyons in Johannesburg and Theodor Herzl in Port Elizabeth. The latter’s student body today is 90% non-Jewish, but a basic Jewish-Zionist education is provided for the city’s remaining Jewish youth. In Durban, whose Carmel Jewish day school had to close in the late-1990s, a new, more religiously focused school was established at the beginning of 2012.

As a result of the growth of Orthodox observance in Johannesburg, a wide array of religious schools has emerged. Ideologically, they range from the Ultra-Orthodox Johannesburg Cheder, where the greater emphasis is on *Kodesh* studies – exclusively so in the upper age groups – to the more Mizrachi and Zionist-oriented Yeshiva College, the second largest system after King David. Somewhere in between are Hirsch Lyons, Torah Academy (under the auspices of Chabad Lubavitch), Bais Yaakov, Yeshiva Maharsha and Shaarei Torah. With the exception of Bais Yaakov girls’ high school, all provide a Jewish and secular education from pre-school through to matric, for both boys and girls (who are educated separately from early primary school level).

That so high a proportion of the youth attends Jewish schools testifies to the robustness of the community's Jewish identity, but it is not the whole story. In large part, it is also due to the widespread lack of faith in the quality of government educational institutions. In addition to their Jewish content, the Jewish day schools also provide a high standard of secular education, as shown by their consistently impressive levels of academic achievement. Thus, the schools provide the best of both worlds – private school-quality secular education combined with a thorough exposure to Jewish religion, history, language and literature – but of course the financial pressures are formidable. When to this is added the cost of private health insurance and additional security one gets some idea as to the pressures that people are under to maintain First World living standards in a society where basic state services are increasingly inadequate.

Safety and Security

Nowhere has the inadequacy of state services been so pressing a problem as in the area of maintaining law and order. Since the political transition, South Africa's levels of violent crime, including murder and rape, have consistently been amongst the highest in the world. Statistics relating to car hijackings and home invasions have likewise reached unprecedented levels in the post-1994 era. A survey on attitudes within the Jewish community conducted in 1998 (see below) found that of 267 respondents indicating that they were fairly or very likely to leave South Africa within the

next five years, 211 cited 'personal safety concerns' as being the most, or one of the most important reasons for wishing to do so.⁸

There is little doubt that had this dire situation continued, the high rates of Jewish emigration prior to the turn of the century would have continued apace, imperiling the very existence of the Jewish community. What has been a critical factor in reducing the crime threat to manageable levels has been the extraordinary success of the Community Active Patrol (CAP) initiative. CAP provides supplementary policing in areas where Jews are concentrated through a partnership between the community and security professionals. Through this, vehicles manned by well trained and equipped security personnel constantly patrol specifically designated areas of Johannesburg 24 hours per day, reacting to every report of criminal activity or even suspicious behavior received by members of the public. CAP was instituted at the behest of the Community Security Organization (CSO), a Jewish civil defense body set up under the auspices by the SAJBD in 1993, with the involvement of the Chief Rabbi's Office. The original purpose of the CSO was solely to protect the Jewish community against anti-Semitism, but ten years later it was realized that it was predatory crime and not anti-Semitism that posed the greatest threat to Jewish well-

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being. One especially harrowing incident which helped to trigger the CSO's strategic shift into public policing was a home invasion where an armed robber calmly helped himself to food in the kitchen while the four year-old Jewish child he had just shot lay bleeding in the next room.⁹ CAP was first instituted in the heavily Jewish suburb of Glenhazel and adjoining areas in 2006. After the first year, violent crime in the area had dropped by 79%.¹⁰ The success of the model saw it progressively implemented in other areas where

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Jews were largely based, and with comparably impressive results. It would be no exaggeration to say that the success of the CAP initiative has transformed the position of Jews in Johannesburg, not to mention that of their non-Jewish neighbors as well, and given the community a new lease on life.

Communal Infrastructure and Finances

Even more than education, providing adequate welfare services for the growing number of needy members of the community has placed a formidable burden on the Jewish communal infrastructure. One of the ways in which the challenge has been met is through a rigorous process of rationalization and fiscal

discipline, involving cost-saving amalgamations of different organizations, the elimination of wasteful duplication of services and the pooling of resources such as sharing premises and administrative services. Thus, in Johannesburg, welfare now largely falls under the umbrella of the Johannesburg Jewish Helping Hand and Burial Society (Chevra Kadisha) which, in addition to its traditional charitable support for needy community members oversees the running of the Jewish aged homes Sandringham Gardens and Our Parents Home, the Arcadia Jewish Orphanage (now largely catering for children from broken homes), the Society for the Jewish Handicapped, Jewish Community Services and the Jewish Women's Benevolent Society, amongst other, smaller, organizations. Organizations responsible for the civil rights, security and Zionist side of communal life as well as for services of a more cultural or research nature are based at the Beyachad communal center. They include the SA Jewish Board of Deputies, SA Zionist Federation, Israel-United Appeal-United Communal Fund, Women's International Zionist Organization-SA (WIZO-SA), Union of Jewish Women, SA Union of Jewish Students and the CSO.

Rationalization initiatives have been implemented with similar success in Cape Town, Durban, Pretoria and Port Elizabeth. Fundraising in Cape Town largely falls under the United Jewish Campaign. Similarly, the local branches of the SAJBD, Zionist Federation, WIZO-SA and CSO, together with various smaller organizations, share the same premises, in Hatfield Street, Gardens. Just across the road is the city's main Jewish

cultural and educational campus, housing the Cape Town Holocaust Centre, SA Jewish Museum and Jacob Gitlin Library. Also on site is the Great Synagogue, premises of the country's oldest Jewish congregation, the Cape Town Hebrew Congregation (established 1841).

An inevitable result of this downsizing has been that the Jewish communal service sector can no longer employ community members on the scale that it once did. In a country where the unemployment rate is at around 35%, this is no minor disadvantage. Previously, working for the community had provided a niche for a significant proportion of community members, particularly those without special skills or qualifications. That being said, the rationalization moves countrywide have resulted in huge savings for the community, and ensured the sustainability of the cradle-to-grave services provided by its communal infrastructure. In any case, the main reason for smaller staffs across the board is simply one of technological advances, which have rendered so many secretarial and such like positions obsolete.

Religious Affiliations, Zionism and Jewish Identity

In 1998 and 2005, two important surveys were conducted on Jewish attitudes toward, amongst other things, religion, Zionism, politics and the current state and future of South Africa.¹¹ The findings were based on responses to various questions received from one thousand community members drawn proportionately from Johannesburg, Cape Town, Durban and Pretoria.

So far as questions of Jewish identity and affiliation were concerned, the findings of both studies were encouraging. Over 90% of respondents saw their Jewishness as being either very or fairly important. In the religious sense, two-thirds classified themselves as 'Traditional', that is that they were not fully observant in the Orthodox sense but their affiliation was to Orthodox synagogues and modes of worship. Of the remainder, 14% classified themselves as 'Strictly Orthodox', 7% as Reform/Progressive and 12% as Secular/Just Jewish. Mirroring these attitudes was the low rate of intermarriage. 94% of respondents who were or had been married had been married to other Jews, i.e. those born Jewish or converts to Judaism whether via Orthodox or Reform.¹² 4% of the respondents were converts, the split between those converted under Reform and under Orthodox auspices being roughly 50:50.

Both surveys found high levels of attachment to Israel. Approximately 80% had close friends and relatives there and the same proportion had visited at least once. Just over half claimed to feel a strong and one-third a moderate attachment to Israel, which was also one of the top countries South African Jews would (hypothetically) immigrate to.¹³

In broad terms, Johannesburg is the hub of Jewish religiosity while Cape Town is characterized more

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by its active Jewish cultural and intellectual life. At the most recent count, there were just over sixty active Orthodox synagogues in Johannesburg, considerably more than at any time in the city's history, despite the Jewish population being much smaller than it was at its height. One reason for this proliferation is the phenomenon of 'shtieblization', that is, the establishment of small, independent congregations based in converted residential properties and sometimes just in a room or two in an office block. Ten of these congregations fall under the Chabad-Lubavitch movement alone,

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while others include traditional Lithuanian-style 'Mitnagdim', Israeli Sephardi and Mizrahi. This competition notwithstanding, the traditional 'big shuls,' with seating capacities of 500 and upwards, continue to hold their own. Over time, certain *shtiebls* (the original Ohr Somayach *minyán*, for example) have grown to the point where they are more or less on a

par with the larger mainstream synagogues.

In addition to places of worship, religious learning centers have proliferated. The Johannesburg Yeshiva Gedolah, established in 1974, has since produced a sizable proportion of the country's religious leadership (including the current Chief Rabbi Dr. Warren Goldstein). Other significant adult learning institutions include the Kollel

Yad Shaul, Emunah Ladies Beit Midrash, Yeshiva Maharsha, Lubavitch Yeshiva Gedolah, Bnei Akiva Beit Midrash and Ohr Somayach). 40% of Jewish youth attend one or other of the religious schools, which have a sizable Kodesh component in their curricula. The number of pupils enrolling in these schools, most of them products of large Dati households, continues to grow.¹⁴

Most Orthodox congregations are affiliated to the Union of Orthodox Synagogues, which maintains the Office of the Chief Rabbi and the Johannesburg Beth Din and whose Kashrut Department oversees the production and distribution of kosher products. The role of the Beth Din in Johannesburg and Cape Town includes dealing with questions of conversion, adoption, divorce and *Dinei Torah*.

Progressive (Reform) Judaism falls under the auspices of the SA Union for Progressive Judaism. Johannesburg and Cape Town both have three Progressive congregations while there is one each in Durban, Pretoria, Port Elizabeth, and East London. Only 7% of South African Jews now consider themselves to be Reform/Progressive. The Progressive community is also a relatively aged one. According to the 2005 survey, 71% of its members are over the age of 45 compared to the national average of 56% and 36% amongst the Strictly Orthodox.¹⁵ This in turn points to the central weakness of the Progressive movement in South Africa, namely its failure to produce its own educational institutions to match those established under Orthodox auspices. Nevertheless, there continues to be an active women's movement (the United Sisterhood, which maintains a proud tradition of charitable work in both the Jewish and general community), as well as a

Zionist youth group (Netzer).

Anti-Semitism and Anti-Zionism

South Africa has the unwelcome distinction of being associated with perhaps the most notorious display of public anti-Semitism in modern times, namely the 2001 World Conference Against Racism (WCAR). Held in Durban under the auspices of the United Nations, the NGO-component of this event was hijacked by radical anti-Israel groupings and turned into a vehicle for demonizing and de-legitimizing the Jewish state. It also, inevitably, spilled over into displays of more general anti-Semitism, such as in the distribution of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (a banned publication in South Africa).

Curiously enough, even the WCAR had little impact on one of the most encouraging aspects of South Africa today, namely its consistently low rates of anti-Semitism. As measured by actual acts intended to cause harm – examples range from assault to verbal abuse, hate mail, the distribution of anti-Semitic literature and vandalism – the annual figures recorded in the country are strikingly low when compared with those of other major Diaspora communities. Since the beginning of the century, the annual total of anti-Semitic incidents jointly logged by the SAJBD and CSO has seldom exceeded fifty, as opposed to between 500 to well over a thousand in the UK, Canada, France and Australia. Aside from bare numbers, the relatively innocuous nature of anti-Semitic activity is noteworthy. Overwhelmingly, it is of a non-violent nature, usually taking the

form of verbal abuse or hate mail. This was true even in 2009, which as a result of the fall-out from Operation Cast Lead in Gaza was the worst year on record in terms of anti-Semitic activity in South Africa. Only three cases that could be classified as ‘physical harassment’ were recorded, and none of damage and desecration to Jewish property. By contrast, that same year in the United Kingdom, there were 79 recorded cases of violent assault and 63 of damage and desecration (including to 17 synagogues).

South Africa’s low anti-Semitism rates must in part be attributed to the country’s strong multi-cultural ethos and zero-tolerance attitude toward all forms of racial, ethnic or religious-based prejudice. Specific legislation and institutions have been set up specifically to protect groups and individuals from unfair discrimination on the basis of race, religion, ethnicity, gender or other such unreasonable grounds. These include the Bill of Rights in the Constitution, the SA Human Rights Commission, Equality Courts and media regulatory bodies that balance the right to freedom of expression against the Constitutional prohibitions against “hate speech”. It was largely as a result of the input and representations of the SAJBD, in fact, that the anti-hate speech clauses were included in the new, post-apartheid Constitution.¹⁶

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A second reason for South Africa's low anti-Semitism rates is the demise of the threat once posed by the extreme right wing of the white population following the transition to democracy. Prior to 1994, it was from this quarter that most anti-Semitic activity emanated and about which the Jewish community was most concerned. Now a marginalized fringe group, white rightists largely confine their activities to bewailing their lost cause via the Internet, in the course of which the downfall of the white man is routinely attributed

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to the pernicious machinations of Jewish communists/capitalists/liberals.

At the time of writing, South Africa is experiencing an unprecedented wave of virulently anti-Semitic invective, particularly in the social media, as a result of the conflict in Gaza. It remains to be

seen whether this ugly new discourse, which blacks are now almost as likely as Muslims to be guilty of spreading, is the harbinger of an altogether more dangerous new era for South African Jewry.

The mounting hostility to Israel in the mainstream political, academic and media culture has indeed become very troubling.

Much more troubling to the Jewish community is the mounting hostility to Israel in the mainstream political, academic and media culture. An early

warning that the transition to majority rule would mean the end of South Africa's close ties with the Jewish state was when Mandela met with Yasser Arafat shortly after his release from prison in 1990. The Palestine Liberation Organization had been a stalwart ally of the ANC during the struggle era, and the subsequently published photograph of the two leaders warmly embracing sent shock waves through the already jittery ranks of South African Jewry. Jews had now to adapt to the reality that the likely future government had close ties with Israel's most implacable foes and negative attitudes toward Israel itself. Exacerbating the situation was the uncomfortable reality that Israel and South Africa had had close ties with one another, including in the military sphere.¹⁷

Two factors shielded the Jewish community to a large extent from the implications of this historical legacy during the 1990s. One was the impressive proportion of its members who had fought against apartheid, often at a heavy personal cost. This had created some awkward moments for the Jewish leadership during the apartheid era, with pointed questions being asked in high places about where Jewish loyalties lay, but after 1990 the community has to a great extent shared in the reflected glory of those who had taken a stand. (To illustrate this, government representatives who have spoken at SAJBD congresses, including all four post-1994 presidents, have never failed to make some mention of these contributions).

A second reason why anti-Israel sentiment in government circles remained largely dormant during the early transition years was the Oslo peace process, which had been launched just

before the first democratic South African elections and which many believed would yield in due course a similarly successful negotiated settlement to the one that had been achieved in South Africa. So long as the two sides seemed to be making progress toward reaching this goal, official criticism of Israel was muted. However, whenever the peace process ran into difficulties, as was the case during Binyamin Netanyahu's first term of office, the stance unfailingly adopted was that it was Israel that was to blame.

Jewish leaders thus found that their relationships with government were to a large extent hostage to the ebbs and flows of the Middle East peace process. This was not so bad so long as there was a peace process, but all this changed with the launch of the so-called "Second Intifada" in September 2000. Since then, the South Africa-Israel relationship has been cool at best, and the Middle East issue has been a continual bone of contention between the ruling party and the Jewish leadership.

A second way in which the demise of Oslo negatively impacted on the Jewish community was in how what had once been an asset, namely the many Jews who had fought against apartheid, in many ways became a liability. Jewish anti-apartheid activists had fallen into two broad categories – traditional liberal and hard left. The former, who generally campaigned against apartheid from within legally permissible parameters (such as in Parliament), were supportive of Zionism or at least neutral about it. Jewish leftists – and overwhelmingly, these tended to be committed Communists – were by contrast

almost all to some degree anti-Zionist.

While South Africa's own transition was still underway and a parallel process apparently taking place on the Israeli-Palestinian front, it was rare for 'Struggle' veterans to come out in public against Israel. A year into the Second Intifada, however, this situation changed when Ronnie Kasrils, a senior member of the ruling party's armed wing in exile and at that time a Cabinet Minister, launched what came to be called the 'Not in my Name' campaign during a parliamentary debate on the Middle East. The initial aim of this movement was to persuade "South Africans of Jewish descent" to endorse a 1200-word Declaration of Conscience which blamed Israel almost exclusively for the conflict. South African Jewry as a whole was stunned by this unprecedented attempt, emanating from the highest level of government, to divide the community into 'good' and 'bad' camps over the Israel issue. They were also shocked by the sheer virulence of the invective employed by Kasrils, a flamboyant, in many ways unstable personality whose reaction to the community's outrage against him was to become progressively more abusive.¹⁸ The petition campaign attracted only a few hundred signatures, but the list included many well-known figures from the freedom struggle. The extent

Efforts have been made to divide the community into 'good' and 'bad' camps over the Israel issue

to which this has undermined the effectiveness of efforts to counter the country's culture of anti-Israel bias – and in particular, the equating of Israel and its policies with apartheid South Africa – cannot be overstated. A perception has been fostered that Jewish dissidents against Zionism are equivalent to white Afrikaners who, for reasons of conscience, took a stand against the apartheid system even if it meant being cast out as traitors by mainstream Afrikanerdom. Ever since, anti-Israel groupings in South Africa – they include movements like BDS-SA, Stop

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the Jewish National Fund, Open Shuhada Street and the Palestine Solidarity Committee – have exploited to the maximum the presence of anti-Zionist Jews within their ranks, not least because of the alibi they provide against accusations of anti-Semitism.

Anti-Israel groupings have of late become more aggressive in their determination not just to malign the Jewish state but to sabotage all forms of interaction between South Africans and Israelis, be it in the academic, cultural, economic or political sphere. More recent boycott initiatives include: campaigning against a water purification research partnership between the University of Johannesburg and Ben Gurion University; the disruption of a recital by Israeli-born pianist

Yossi Reshef at Wits University, led by members of the Student Representative Council; a nationwide boycott against a Jewish-owned toy store chain because of its support for the Jewish National Fund; a boycott campaign against Ahava cosmetics, which in part operates in the West Bank and an attempt to prevent the Cape Town Opera company from performing in Israel. While these and other initiatives have to date resulted in more noise than concrete achievements, there is a danger of their creating an environment where any engagement with Israelis, no matter how innocuous, will be seen as being simply not worth the trouble by those otherwise uncommitted on the whole question.

A concerning trend is the increasing readiness of BDS activists to exploit anti-white feeling within the black population as a way of smearing those Jews who oppose them. The rhetoric adopted against Israel now largely mirrors the protest rhetoric that characterized the popular discourse against apartheid. In this scenario, Jews emerge as the modern-day equivalent of the racist and oppressive white establishment of yesteryear, people who were complicit in propping up the former regime and who now support the same hateful system against the Palestinians. How far this thinking has penetrated was shown by the chanting of the notorious 'Struggle' song 'Shoot the Boer' by black demonstrators at Wits University in August 2013, only with the wording changed to *Dubula e'Juda* – 'Shoot the Jew.'¹⁹

Working with limited resources in a generally hostile milieu, the Jewish establishment has

fought hard against the boycott and had some success. Notably, after extensive lobbying and multiple submissions to the relevant parliamentary committees, it persuaded government to overturn a Cabinet decision regarding how Israeli products originating in the West Bank were to be labeled. Previously, it was required that such goods be identified as “Products Originating from Occupied Palestinian Territory”, wording so politicized as to constitute a virtual government *hechsher* for boycotting those products. The final wording adopted was the essentially descriptive and politically neutral “West Bank: Israeli goods/ East Jerusalem: Israeli goods”.

Understanding just where South Africa stands on the question of maintaining relations with Israel is further bedeviled by the contradictory messages in that regard being put out by government spokespeople. It sometimes appears that there is a tug-of-war underway between those who in favor of maintaining the status quo and those agitating for ties to be severed altogether. The controversy over the so-called ‘travel ban’ illustrates this well. It emerged in early 2013 that Deputy Minister of International Relations Ebrahim Ebrahim had issued a memorandum prohibiting government representatives from visiting Israel until such time as progress was made in ending its occupation of Palestinian territory. For some time prior to that, attempts to get even lower level political representatives to visit Israel had been stymied, in certain cases at the last minute. Minister of International Relations Maite Mashabane assured the SAJBD in

a meeting in June that there was no such travel ban, but subsequently contradicted this when addressing the virulently anti-Israel Congress of SA Trade Unions. The ensuing controversy was fanned further by Avigdor Lieberman’s ill-considered comments that SA Jewry faced an imminent pogrom and should hasten to make Aliyah.²⁰ Cabinet has since issued a statement stating unequivocally that no ‘travel ban’ is in force, but events on the ground contradict the official position. Theoretically, South Africa still has full diplomatic relations with Israel with a South African Embassy in Tel Aviv, but in reality there has been very limited interaction in this sphere for at least a decade.

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Jews and the Wider Society

At the time of writing, South Africa is shortly to hold its fifth general elections since the transition to democracy. In the inaugural elections in April 1994, the Jewish vote was divided between the liberal Democratic Party (56%), the National Party (31%) and the eventual winners, the African National Congress (11%).²¹ Since then, Jews have voted almost entirely for the Democratic Alliance (DA – the successor to the Democratic Party), which, under the leadership of the charismatic

Jewish lawyer Tony Leon, became the Official Opposition in 1999. Ten Jews served as MPs in the 400-seat National Assembly in the first post-apartheid parliament, mainly as members of the ANC. That number dwindled steadily until only one remains, the veteran anti-apartheid activist Ben Turok (who has since announced his imminent retirement from politics). However, for the first time this century, at least two new Jewish MPs are likely to take their seats after the election, as representatives of the DA. One of them, Michael Bagraim, is a former national chairman of the

Apartheid resulted in enormous socio-economic inequalities; Jewish leaders have taken on the challenge of redressing those imbalances

SAJBD. It remains to be seen whether this heralds a renewed era of Jewish involvement in political affairs.

The ruling African National Congress, which currently controls a fraction under two-thirds of the 400 seats in the National Assembly, will almost certainly win this year's elections

comfortably once more, but most likely with a reduced majority. Popular discontent over multiple cases of public corruption, nepotism, poor service delivery and wastefulness by government representatives has grown in recent years, often manifesting in violent protests. It remains to be seen whether the DA can capitalize on this by making meaningful inroads into the ANC's mainly black support base. The reality is that South African politics largely reflects

the racial divisions in the population, with the minority white, Asian and mixed-race groups overwhelmingly supporting the DA whereas blacks support either the ANC or other, smaller, black ethnic parties. There is also an increasing tendency by some ANC leaders to exploit the legacy of anti-white resentment to shore up their power base, something that would have been unthinkable during the Mandela years.

There has been a much stronger emphasis on charitable and social upliftment work outside the confines of the Jewish community in the post-apartheid era. Apartheid resulted in enormous socio-economic inequalities between the privileged white minority and the rest of the population, and Jewish leaders, from the late Chief Rabbi Cyril Harris²² through to business magnates, communal professionals and existing social outreach organizations have taken on the challenge of ensuring that Jews do their part in redressing those imbalances. In addition to organizations like Afrika Tikun, which were founded specifically as Jewish-led initiatives aimed at redressing the imbalances in society caused by apartheid, most of the traditional Jewish communal bodies – they include the SAJBD, SA Zionist Federation, youth movements, Jewish National Fund and women's Zionist groups – have included general social outreach amongst their ongoing activities.²³

Once it became obvious that the unraveling of the apartheid system was irreversible, South African Jews in the main welcomed the change and sought to play a constructive part in bringing about the new democratic order. This commitment

to participating alongside their fellow citizens in nation building, social upliftment and the safeguarding of the institutions of democracy continues to underpin how the Jewish leadership sees its role today, twenty years since the transition to majority rule. South Africa, its many problems notwithstanding, remains a politically and economically stable democratic society, where diversity is respected, minority rights protected essential human rights and freedoms strictly upheld. For the Jewish community, it has provided a safe, tolerant environment in which Jewish life in all its richness and diversity has been able to thrive, while at the same time allowing Jews as individuals

to participate fully in the affairs of the wider society. The future, as ever, is uncertain. Many fear that the endemic corruption and mismanagement, not to mention racial polarization and popular anger, that has come to characterize so much of public life today is a harbinger for South Africa's being just another failed African state in the not-to-distant future. That being said, South Africa has confounded the doomsday predictions of the naysayers many times in the past. With its robust economy, resilient democratic structures, rich natural resources and sophisticated First World infrastructure, there is every reason to hope that it will continue to do so as it begins its third decade of multiracial democracy.

Endnotes

1. Essentially, Mandela was a “two-state solutionist” who recognised the legitimacy of both Jewish and Palestinian national aspirations. This writer’s book *Jewish Memories of Mandela* (SA Jewish Board of Deputies-Umoja Foundation, 2011) discusses these issues.
2. Dubb, A A, *The Jewish Population of South Africa – The 1991 Sociodemographic Survey*, Kaplan Centre for Jewish Studies & Research, Cape Town, 1994, p7. The table provides figures showing the growth and decline of the Jewish population according to official census figures for the period 1880-1991.
3. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jewish_population_by_country#Countries
4. The phenomenon of small-town and rural Jewry relocating to the larger urban centres is, of course, not unique to South Africa.
5. Rabbi Silberhaft’s work is the subject of a unique piece of contemporary Jewish travel literature, *The Travelling Rabbi – My African Tribe* (Moshe Silberhaft, with Suzanne Belling, 2010).
6. ‘The Current State of the Jewish Community’, presentation by David Saks, Associate Director of the SA Jewish Board of Deputies at the 43rd biennial conference of the SAJBD, 28 August 2005.
7. Shimoni, Gideon, *Jews and Zionism – The South African Experience, 1910-1967*, Oxford University Press, Cape Town, 1980, p182.
8. *Jews of the ‘new South Africa’: Highlights of the 1998 national survey of South African Jews*, Institute for Jewish Policy Research, in association with the Kaplan Centre for Jewish Studies & Research, JPR Report No 3, 1999, p20.
9. Marks, Monique, Steinberg, Jonny, ‘The Labyrinth of Jewish Security Arrangements in Johannesburg: Thinking through a Paradox about Security’, in *British Journal of Criminology*, Vol. 53, No. 6, November 2013.
10. Ibid.
11. The first conducted by the Institute for Jewish Policy Research, in association with the Kaplan Centre for Jewish Studies and Research in Cape Town, and the second by the Kaplan Centre alone.
12. Bruk, ‘The Jews of South Africa’, loc. cit.
13. Ibid. The number of Jews from South Africa who have made Aliyah is believed to be between 20-25 000.
14. ‘Rise in Jewish day-school enrolments’, *SA Jewish Report*, 18/5/2012
15. Bruk, Shirley, ‘The Jews Of South Africa: Highlights of the 2005 Attitudinal Survey’, *Jewish Affairs*, Vol. 61, Rosh Hashanah 2006.
16. Kessler, S, ‘The South African Constitution and the Input of the Jewish Community’, *Jewish Affairs*, Vol. 56, No. 2, Winter, 2000.
17. See in this regard Polakow-Suransky, Sasha, *The Unspoken Alliance: Israel’s Secret Relationship with Apartheid South Africa*. Random House, 2010.
18. For a full account of this episode, see Pollak, Joel, *The Kasrils Affair: Jews and Minority Politics in Post-Apartheid South Africa*, Juta Academic, Cape Town, 2009.
19. “Fury at singing of ‘Shoot the Jew’ at Israeli musicians concert”, *Pretoria News*, 3/9/2013. Boer’ is a common term for white Afrikaners.
20. <http://www.jpost.com/Diplomacy-and-Politics/Liberman-hits-back-at-South-African-FM-says-her-comments-were-anti-Semitic-330475>
21. *Jews of the ‘new South Africa’: Highlights of the 1998 national survey of South African Jews*, Institute for Jewish Policy Research, in association with the Kaplan Centre for Jewish Studies & Research, JPR Report No 3, 1999, p23.

22. Rabbi Harris' booklet 'Jewish Obligation to the Non-Jew' (Tikkun Publications, No 1, 1996) was primarily aimed at encouraging Jewish social outreach in the wider society.
23. The SAJBD has published two books on this subject, *Reach – Jewish Helping Hands in South Africa* () and *Jubuntu* (2013).