THE EMIGRATION PHENOMENON AND ITS IMPACT ON THE SOUTH AFRICAN JEWISH COMMUNITY

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The long-term viability of the South African Jewish community is threatened by its high level of emigration, which creates a leadership vacuum and has a powerful psychological effect. However, it is still a very well-organized and cohesive community.

For some years now, the dominant perception of South African Jewry in international Jewish circles has been that it is a community in the throes of gradual disintegration, steadily undermined by an apparently inexorable process of attrition through emigration. It would be nice to confound this pessimistic analysis, but unfortunately there is a lot of truth in it. Although still constituting by far the largest concentration of Jews on the African continent, the community has long passed its peak in terms of numbers and is steadily shrinking as its members opt increasingly to resettle abroad. An estimated 80,000 Jews remain in South Africa today, down from just under 120,000 in 1980. Deaths are today exceeding births, and the annual net loss through emigration is believed to be in the region of 1,500.

Statistics, however, do not always tell the full story. In many ways, South African Jewry is experiencing a golden age, combining impressive achievements in the public realm with intensified Jewish religious and communal activity. Although comprising no more than 0.2 percent of the South African population, Jews continue to be over-represented in the highest echelons of the economic sector, public service, judiciary, and the professions. Tony Leon, Leader of the Opposition in Parliament, and Judge Arthur Chaskalson, Chief Justice, are just two of those who hold prestigious positions within South Africa's vibrant new democracy.

In terms of purely Jewish involvement, the picture is even more favorable. Most recent surveys reveal an intermarriage rate of under 10 percent and levels of Jewish identification and activity unsurpassed anywhere else in the Diaspora (Kosmin et al., 1999). Over 80 percent of Jewish children attend Jewish day schools, which is indicative, not only of the value even more assimilated Jewish parents place on Jewish learning but also, less positively, of the undoubted decline in the quality of public education in the post-apartheid era. In Johannesburg alone, there are ten different Jewish schools, four of which educate pupils of both sexes from kindergarten through high school. Most of the schools have an Orthodox religious focus and range in terms of pupil enrollment from a few dozen to several thousand. Jewish learning does not stop in high school, moreover. In recent years, Yeshivot and Kollelim have mushroomed, particularly in Johannesburg but also in Cape Town and Pretoria, with Mizrachi, Lubavitch, Ohr Somayach, Aish HaTorah, and various Haredi-oriented movements all contributing to a remarkable religious revival (Harris, 1999).

In addition to the vitality of its educational and religious infrastructure, South African Jewry has an excellent network of welfare organizations, which together provide a wide range of facilities for Jews in need, be these needs financial, employment-related, or psychological. Emigration, and with it the departure of the more financially successful members of the community, has certainly affected negatively the welfare community, but sensible rationalization initiatives and sound financial management has helped ensure that the situation, while difficult, is far from being a crisis.

Before moving on to the emigration phenomenon, several other points need to be made in order to provide a more balanced perspective of modern South African Jewish life. First, Jewish immigration to South Africa has by no means dried up, even if it is nowhere near the levels of a half-century ago. There is a large ex-Israeli population, and the burgeoning religious and educational infrastructure has further attracted a not insignificant number of rabbis, scholars, and educators from abroad, mainly the United States, Israel, and the United Kingdom. Second, recent research has shown that while many people are indeed emigrating, many ultimately choose to return. A 1998 survey conducted by the Institute for Jewish Policy Research in London, in association with the Kaplan Centre for Jewish Studies and Research in Cape Town, found that fully 13 percent of the 1,000 people interviewed were in fact returned emigrants (Kosmin et al., 1999). The crisis in neighboring Zimbabwe has also helped offset losses to emigration as the remnants of this once thriving community make their way south.

In summary, while South African Jewry is in decline, it is certainly not in collapse. Given the strength of its institutions, coupled with the fundamental soundness of the South African economy and the enduring political stability that characterizes Africa's most democratic and human rights-conscious state, it could even be reversed if the will is found to do so. Another very important factor is the relatively low level of anti-Semitism that exists in South Africa compared with other Diaspora communities. Only forth antisemitic incidents were recorded by the Jewish Board of Deputies in 2002, few of them of any seriousness. By comparison Australia, the favorite destination for South African emigrants, recorded 593 such incidents up to the end of September alone (as reported in *South African Jewish Report,* June 12, 2002).

All these positives aside, however, there is no doubt that the long-term viability of South Africa as a center of Jewish life is under threat as emigration continues apace. The departure of so many in the 18–35 age bracket has created a leadership vacuum, with fewer young members joining the ranks of established Jewish organizations. With the exception of the religious Zionist movement Bnei Akiva, youth movement membership is significantly down, and outside the main centers of Johannesburg and Cape Town, and to a degree Durban and Pretoria, youth activities as a whole have virtually ceased. Marriages outside Johannesburg and Cape Town have also become a rarity.

The psychological impact of emigration should also not be underplayed. It has undermined confidence in the future of the community among those who remain, precipitating further departures as the herd instinct factor takes hold. It has also introduced a certain pall of sadness. Few South African Jewish families today do not have close family members—children, brothers, or sisters—living overseas, and the decline of the South African Rand against other currencies makes it difficult to arrange visits. Indeed, the natural desire of parents to see their departed children and grandchildren has imposed yet another financial burden on the community as a whole since many potential donors have had to budget for overseas trips instead.

There has always been one kind of emigration that the South African Jewish community has welcomed positively, and that, of course, has been aliyah to Israel. The gratifyingly high number of South African Jews who chose to settle in Israel—an estimated 17,000 ex-South Africans now live there, with the late, Cape Town-born Abba Eban probably representing the community's most celebrated export—has always been a source of pride to those who chose to remain. Naturally, the departure of so many Jewishly committed members has weakened the community to an extent. One of the reasons why the local Zionist movement has declined is because it was a victim of its own success. A

high proportion of young leaders and communal professionals who had formed the backbone of Zionist activity in the country chose to take the culminating step of making aliyah, which naturally left a leadership vacuum. Even in these times, when concern over Jewish emigration is at a high level people are encouraged to consider making aliyah. The standard approach of the South African Jewish Board of Deputies to the emigration question remains, "Stay home or go home;" that is, stay in South Africa and make a difference or go home to Israel. This broadly echoes the philosophy of all the Jewish communal movements.

Unfortunately, the second half of the 20th century has seen emigration of a far less positive nature taking place, an outflux motivated not by the guiding ideal of realizing the Zionist dream of aliyah but by the political and more recent social and economic instability that has characterized South Africa in the modern era. Already by the early 1960s, a regular stream of individuals and families were relocating to other countries, mainly the United Kingdom. Since South Africa at the time was enjoying spectacular economic growth and, as a result of draconian security crackdowns on political dissenters, relative political quiescence, the majority of these tended to be left-leaning political activists. A fair number were effectively driven into exile by the security crackdown of the apartheid State, which ensured through such measures as bannings, detention without trial, and restrictions on freedom of movement that the lives of the more radical opponents of white minority rule would be constantly disrupted. One of those exiles who went on to play a major role in world Jewish communal service was Michael Schneider, past executive vice-president of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee. Schneider was in fact fortunate to evade arrest and the likelihood of a lengthy period of imprisonment for his activities in the African Resistance Movement and to escape abroad. Many of his colleagues, Jewish and non-Jewish, were not so lucky.

The flight of Jewish activists to safer havens nevertheless had little impact on the mainstream Jewish community, mainly because these activists had been minimally involved, if at all, in Jewish communal affairs. In the main they were staunchly communist in their sympathies, with all the denial of ethnicity, religious identity, and, of course, solidarity with the State of Israel that this allegiance entailed. However, a number of liberal-orientated Jews not necessarily committed to the communist fold also left during this time in protest against the system of racial domination and exploitation then in force.

In 1970, the South African Jewish population numbered just over 117,000, its highest level to date, and a decade later it had reached 119,000. However, according to natural increase, that second figure should actually have been considerably higher. The fact that the increase was so small suggested that something had happened to retard the community's growth, and that indeed was the case. In June 1976, a popular, spontaneous uprising against white minority rule sent shock waves throughout South African society. It was the start of a sustained period of popular resistance to the apartheid regime that no amount of suppression could extinguish and that would culminate in the demise of white minority rule some two decades later. As a result of the mounting unrest, which included rioting, mass detentions, and acts of terrorism, an increasing number of whites began leaving South Africa. This included a high proportion of Jews.

Another "push factor" was the introduction in the 1970s of compulsory military service for white males, eventually extended to two years plus an additional two years of reserve duty in military camps. From the mid-1970s, South Africa was embroiled in a low-level but frequently vicious war with the South West African People's Organisation (SWAPO) and their Cuban allies on the

Namibian-Angolan border, which finally ended with the attainment of Namibian independence in 1989. In addition to being required to keep order in the unruly black townships, where successive States of Emergency had been imposed, national servicemen also faced the possibility of having to spend time in the Operational Area in South West Africa. A number of Jewish recruits lost their lives in this pointless conflict, which, together with the prospect of prolonged military service in defense of an unpopular cause, persuaded many young Jewish males, and often their families as well, to relocate elsewhere.

Seeing so many of its youth departing was disheartening enough, but in addition the community seldom even had the satisfaction of seeing them choose to go to the Jewish homeland. On average, about 15 percent of emigrants chose to settle in Israel, but the most popular destinations were Australia (40 percent) and the United States (25 percent), with Canada, the United Kingdom and, to a much lesser extent, New Zealand, making up the balance. These proportions more or less hold true today.

For the above reasons, the South African Jewish population went into steady decline after 1980. A 1991 population survey (Dubb, 1994) put the number of Jews at between 91,000 and 106,000, the last an inflated figure admitted to be probably too high. The years immediately leading up to the transition to multi-racial democracy in April 1994 were particularly turbulent ones, with political violence, mainly among rival elements within the black population, accounting for the loss of close to 20,000 lives. This violence speeded up Jewish emigration further. Even the surprisingly smooth transition to majority rule in 1994 did not halt the outflow. An unprecedented upsurge in crime, often of the violent variety, perceived falling standards in public services, and affirmative action policies effectively discriminating against whites have all contributed toward the continued departure of Jews from South Africa. Additionally, while mainly young people are emigrating, an increasing number of the older members of the community are choosing to leave to join their children already living overseas.

The mainstream day schools of King David (Johannesburg) and Herzlia (Cape Town), which the majority of Jewish children attend, are being hard hit by this attrition, declining on average by 4 percent annually. Interestingly, the more religious day schools have been less affected, which can be attributed to the strength of the religious infrastructure in Johannesburg and the difficulties of reproducing it in other parts of the Diaspora. Another saddening aspect of emigration has been the number of elderly people left alone following the departure of their children. Since many of these are living in the Jewish aged homes, whose fees they are often unable to pay, this has increased the financial burden on the community as a whole. In recent years, former South Africans in the United States have begun raising funds for the maintenance of the aged homes.

Reliable figures regarding who is leaving and how many remain are notoriously difficult to arrive at in South Africa. What the available data suggest, however, is that over the past two years, the rate of emigration seems to have stabilized and even slowed down somewhat. No doubt the decline of the South African currency, which currently stands at around R10 to the $US, has had a great deal to do with this slowdown. Prospective South African immigrants know that when they arrive in their new country, they will be considerably poorer than they were in South Africa. However, an optimistic view might be that notwithstanding the problems South Africa faces and the question marks that hang over its future, given its location on a notoriously backward and troubled continent, South African Jews may be beginning to believe again, tentatively to be sure, in the country's prospects. They may

be recognizing, too, that from a strictly Jewish point of view, they are unlikely to find a community quite so well organized, cohesive, and committed as the one they would be leaving behind.

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