

ISSUES FACING THE SOUTH AFRICAN JEWISH COMMUNITY

The Challenge to Jewish Professionals

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The South African Jewish community is well organized and cohesive, and about two-thirds of its children attend Jewish day schools. However, South Africa is a society in transition, with rampant crime and major change in governmental and welfare institutions. Emigration, particularly of the young, is accelerating the aging of the community and contributes to a sense of defeatism and insecurity. Yet, the Jewish community remains vibrant.

There are approximately 95,000 Jews living in South Africa, out of a population of 38 million. About 85 percent of them live either in Johannesburg (58,000) or Cape Town (21,000), with the remainder mostly in Durban (3,250), Port Elizabeth, and Pretoria. Smaller communities exist in East London and Bloemfontein.

The size of the population has declined somewhat during the last few years because of emigration, largely caused by an ongoing crime problem in the country that the State has not yet succeeded in reducing significantly. It is difficult to obtain precise figures on Jewish emigration but it probably amounts to approximately 1,500 individuals per year. The most favored country of destination for 1997 was Australia, with nearly 50 percent of all emigrants choosing to live there whereas some 20 percent made aliyah.

As the younger generation is the majority of those who leave, this emigration has reinforced the existing trend of a rising proportion of aged people in the community.

The community has a sophisticated and well-organized infrastructure and is relatively cohesive. It has a highly developed network of educational and welfare institutions. The total approximate budget of the community during 1997 was about \$50 million. The major fund-raising institution in the community is the Israel United Appeal (IUA)/United Communal Fund (UCF). Nearly two-thirds of Jewish children attend Jewish day schools.

With somewhat diminishing resources, there have been calls and efforts to consoli-

date institutions and fund-raising activities. At present, a great deal of duplication of activities is taking place, constituting an unnecessary drain on communal funds.

RELATIONS WITH GOVERNMENT AND THE WIDER SOCIETY

The South African Jewish Board of Deputies, the community's umbrella body established in 1902, has been successful in maintaining good relations with the new government, which has a firm commitment to non-racialism and has also maintained an open and friendly attitude toward the Jewish community. In fact, more Jews hold positions of leadership—in Cabinet and Parliament, in the judiciary, and in the Public Service—than at any time in the past.

Although the government is willing to listen to any concerns expressed by the Board on behalf of the Jewish community, consensus is not always achieved. Issues of concern raised within the past year or two include the crime problem, anti-Semitism, Israel-South African relations, Muslim-Jewish relations, and the government's friendly relations with Iran and Libya, two countries hostile to Israel.

Jewish-Muslim relations in South Africa tend to fluctuate with the progress or retrogression of the Middle East peace process. There are some 600,000 Muslims in South Africa, probably more than half of them in the Western Cape. However, following clearly anti-Jewish demonstrations by sections of the Muslim community in Cape Town and

Pretoria during 1997 and an attack on Jewish property, there have been successful efforts to initiate ongoing dialogue between Jewish and Muslim citizens in Cape Town. These efforts culminated in an address to the Board of Deputies' Cape Congress in September by a prominent Muslim religious leader. Similar contacts in Johannesburg and Durban, though less high profile, are nevertheless ongoing. The Board is also participating in the developing interfaith movement.

In its monitoring of anti-Semitic incidents and expressions, the Board has found that, apart from the Muslim incidents and hostile letters by Muslims in the daily press (mainly but not only concerning events in Israel/Palestine), anti-Semitic incidents in the country have remained static over the past two years. The formerly regular anti-Semitism of the white right wing has subsided significantly as that constituency lost much of its power and influence. Holocaust denial surfaces periodically, but also has a low profile.

Both the worldwide and local threat of attacks by the militant wing of Muslim society and the internal insecurity arising from the activities of criminals have led the South African Jewish community to set up its own Central Security Organization, staffed in the main by volunteers but sustained by a few full-time professionals. It provides security to Jewish congregations and institutions and at communal functions and also regular training in security matters.

As most Jewish organizations are affiliated with the Board of Deputies, the Board also acts to coordinate activities. For example, regular meetings of Jewish professionals in Johannesburg, at which matters of common concern are discussed and presentations made by relevant speakers, have been organized for years.

A few years ago the community set up Tikkun, an organization with the mandate of stimulating and coordinating programs undertaken in the Jewish community to help the disadvantaged people and communities in South Africa. While it has not grown as much as one might wish, it has become a significant endeavor that continues to expand.

SOCIAL AND DEVELOPMENT SERVICES

Family Life

In the general South African community, social ills, such as a high divorce rate, substance abuse problems, family relationship difficulties, a growing single-parent population, increasing evidence of domestic violence, and problems related to financial difficulties, are common. Although the South African Jewish community is largely middle class, some members who belong to the lower socioeconomic group exhibit concerns similar to those in the general community. Such problems as substance abuse and domestic violence are often denied by sections of the community.

In response to the divorce problem, now as high in the Jewish community as the national average, a Jewish Divorce Commission has been set up in Johannesburg, and there is a very well-established and creative Marriage Preparatory Program under the auspices of the Beth Din.

IMPACT OF SOCIOPOLITICAL CHANGE IN SOUTH AFRICA

There have been many positive results of the process of change in South Africa, and many Jewish South Africans are contributing to the rebuilding of the country. However, the more negative changes have had a severe impact on the community. The spread of crime and violence has meant that many members of the community—as is the case with all sections of South African society—have been victims of crime directly or indirectly. Eight Jews were murdered in Johannesburg in crime-related incidents during 1997.

The rampant crime has inevitably caused trauma of an immediate and post-traumatic stress nature. It has also meant that many people are now fearful of moving about after dark, and as a result, the social habits of many people have been adversely affected.

These experiences, as well as reports of governmental mismanagement and corruption, especially on a local level, have induced

feelings of depression and pessimism. It is not an exclusively Jewish phenomenon, but it does affect the Jewish community. High emigration rates also no doubt contribute to a sense of defeatism and insecurity.

Problems of Aged People

As has been mentioned, the community is an aging one, a widespread phenomenon made worse in South Africa by the fact that those emigrating tend to be young families and singles. Those left behind are often elderly parents, who are left without the financial and emotional support of their children and who feel a sense of loss, particularly when emigrant children have failed to keep adequate contact with those left behind. Jewish Community Services has developed a program called "Second Innings" for older people, many of whom have found it an outlet for these feelings of loss.

In addition, the country's welfare system is undergoing significant restructuring. Where resources were previously restricted mostly to whites, distribution of resources on racially and geographically equitable lines has now become policy and practice. As a result our nursing homes have suffered a reduction in government funding.

Community-based services have largely retained their government funding, but these funds must be used to support services that are also delivered beyond the Jewish community. This remains a matter of debate within Jewish social services, and it would be of help to learn about experiences of Jewish communities elsewhere in the world that have dealt with the question of exclusivity in relation to funding and other issues.

Yet, our welfare services continue to function well, and the transformation of welfare with the new focus on community-based rather than institutionalized services has been a very valuable process.

RELIGIOUS ISSUES

Although the majority of South African Jewry are Orthodox, a relatively smaller percentage are *Shomrei mitzvot*. Nevertheless, the com-

munity has extraordinary high levels of synagogue attendance and religious practice. The Reform community probably comprises less than 10 percent of the population. Fortunately, South African Jewry does not suffer from the tensions between Reform and Orthodoxy, as is the case in other parts of the world. Orthodox and Reform rabbis and volunteer leadership are almost always engaged in joint partnerships throughout community structures.

Religious facilities, such as the availability of kosher food, remain at a high level; one can also report that there has been an increase of interest in religious observance among a substantial sector of the Jewish community, particularly the youth. A relatively recent development has been the mushrooming of small *shtieblach* all around Johannesburg as a growing alternative to the traditional big synagogue center.

Intermarriage rates, while showing some increase, continue to be low relative to the experience of other Western countries.

The decrease in population numbers has led to calls for greater rationalization, including the amalgamation of synagogues—a difficult problem in any community. Even within the urban areas, the gradual demographic shift of Jews from one part of the city to another has caused many formerly thriving congregations to struggle to survive. The relocation to the main urban centers, quite apart from emigration, has led to the virtual demise of once-thriving country communities. To help these communities, the Jewish Board of Deputies uses the services of a Country Communities Rabbi who pays regular visits to the remnants of these communities and thus strengthens their ties to the general Jewish community.

Those who draw spiritual leaders largely from abroad have found some difficulty in attracting candidates, but most pulpits remain filled.

JEWISH EDUCATION

The Jewish community has developed an excellent system of Jewish day schools, most

organized under the South African Board of Jewish Education. In mid-1997, there were some 5,050 pupils enrolled in Johannesburg, and 1,650 in Cape Town Jewish schools, with about 40 percent of that number in Jewish high schools. It is estimated that this enrollment constitutes about two-thirds of Jewish school-aged children in Johannesburg and Cape Town. There is also a Jewish day school in Port Elizabeth, though a substantial percentage of those attending it are not Jewish. Former day schools in Durban and Pretoria are no longer functioning as Jewish schools.

A fair number of parents who previously sent their children to public schools have now changed to the Jewish schools. This transfer has to a large extent made up for the decrease in enrollment caused by ongoing emigration.

The day schools strive to provide a good Jewish education. Both Hebrew and Jewish studies are offered at matriculation (school-leaving) level, and there are also thriving informal Jewish education programs. In Johannesburg, 18 campuses offer Jewish education to school-going students. Torah education is provided by a number of Yeshivot of various religious orientations. The excellent academic results achieved by all the schools add to their powers of attraction.

The Jewish day schools also strive to inculcate a sense of idealism and loyalty to Jewish values and tradition in their pupils. This is all the more necessary in light of the rampant materialism, decline in moral values, and general sense of cynicism that are currently plaguing society.

However, the schools have experienced severe funding problems, partly because, as with welfare services, state subsidies for private education have been declining. The need for scholarships is therefore increasing.

The Board of Jewish Education has embarked on a program of leadership training for the professional staff of the schools in order to ensure that there will be an ongoing supply of educational leaders drawn from the teaching profession in South Africa.

For Jewish pupils in public schools, some schools are employing additional teachers to

handle Jewish religious education where the number of Jewish pupils justifies it. This is a welcome change from the previous dispensation where such "internal" teaching was not allowed and Jewish authorities provided Jewish educational material for such pupils from outside the school, obviously a less satisfactory educational method. This new trend is especially noticeable in a number of primary schools with substantial Jewish enrollments.

PROFESSIONAL COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP

South African rabbis and Jewish professionals in the fields of rabbinics, Jewish education, and communal service have been in high demand in Israel, the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom and Australia. For example, the two largest day schools in Australia are headed by ex-South African professionals. This has left a huge void in the community as schools and communal institutions struggle to fill positions of responsibility. Three professionals who have been trained at Brandeis University and another two who have been on the Jerusalem Fellows program are currently employed in senior leadership positions. Professionals, generally, tend to have stable periods of employment.

CONCLUSION

South Africa is a society in transition. As on previous occasions of social turmoil, we are witnessing an ongoing emigration trend, which has the effect of accelerating the phenomenon of an aging community. These issues cause strains on Jewish professionals in their tasks of serving a community under some measure of stress. However, the South African Jewish community remains a vibrant one with substantial communal institutions.

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