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SOUTH AFRICAN ORTHODOXY TODAY: TRADITION AND CHANGE IN A POST- APARTHEID, MULTIRACIAL SOCIETY

INTRODUCTION

A number of scholars have studied Orthodox Judaism from either a sociological or a sociohistorical perspective. For example, Charles Liebman has pioneered the study of Orthodoxy in America as well as in Israel.¹ Jeffrey Gurock has done a number of fascinating historical studies of Jewish society during the Eastern European immigration period from 1800 to 1930, as well as more recent studies of Jewish institutions, such as Ramaz School and Yeshiva University.² Daniel Elazar has, perhaps more than any other single individual, pioneered the comparative study of Jewish societies and, as an Orthodox Jew himself, has paid a considerable amount of attention to Orthodoxy.³ In addition, a number of Israeli and American sociologists have focused their studies upon Haredi society. These include David Landau, the editor of *Ha-Aretz* newspaper;⁴ Samuel Heilman, who has looked at Orthodoxy in America and Israel from a sociological perspective;⁵ and Jenna Weisman Joselit, who has written on American Orthodoxy in the early 20th century.⁶ There have also been a number of theologically focused analyses of Great Britain, particularly those written by the British Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks.⁷ In Australia, John Levi has recently published a biography of Rabbi Jacob Danglow, a prominent Orthodox rabbi of the last generation.⁸

In general, however, the study of Orthodoxy in other English-speaking countries has been neglected and, considering its importance to Judaism in general, the scholarly output on the subject is comparatively meager.⁹ Even more to the point, much of the research has focused on three or four specific areas, such as ultra-Orthodoxy in Israel

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today or the biographies of leading rabbis. There continues to be a need for additional research on Orthodox Jewish societies, particularly from a comparative perspective across cultures. This article attempts to address this need by providing an overview of Orthodox Judaism in South Africa, focusing in particular on the renaissance of religious activity that it is currently experiencing.

The emphasis of the article is on the post-Apartheid period, which began in 1990 when then-president Frederik W. De Klerk gave his famous speech unbanning the African National Congress (ANC) and announcing that Nelson Mandela, head of the ANC, would be released from prison. Mandela was subsequently elected president of South Africa in the first general election, held in April 1994. The article traces the conditions that positioned the South African Orthodox community for the current renaissance of activity. It also addresses the origins of the dichotomy that exists between the highly centralized structure of the Chief Rabbi and *bet din*, and the grass-roots movements that include *shtetls* and *ba'al teshuva* groups.¹⁰

THE ORTHODOX COMMUNITY TODAY: OVERVIEW

The South African Jewish community has been relatively unaffected by immigration since the early years of the 20th century. Unlike Melbourne, Australia, for example, where the Orthodox community was invigorated by the arrival of many Orthodox Holocaust survivors after World War II, in South Africa comparatively very few arrived at that time. Thus, today the community is much more South African born than the Australian Jewish community is Australian born.

The Orthodox community in South Africa, unlike the United States, constitutes the vast majority of the Jewish population of the country. In the most recent comprehensive socio-demographic survey, conducted in 1991, Professor Allie Dubb found that 78-80 percent described their religious orientation as Orthodox. In Johannesburg, 90.1 percent of all those affiliated with a synagogue were affiliated with an Orthodox one.¹¹ Chief Rabbi Cyril Harris stated that he believed 91 percent of Johannesburg's Jews were Orthodox by affiliation.¹² The Orthodox affiliation rate for Pretoria was 89.1, for Cape Town 84, Port Elizabeth 75.4, and Durban 73.4. Overall, 86.8 percent of all affiliated Jews were Orthodox by affiliation, an extremely high percentage.¹³

The high percentage of Orthodox affiliation, however, does not show just how active the Orthodox community is, and how much more

so it is today than it was twenty years ago. In a 1974 sociological study by Dubb, 50 percent of all respondents stated that they had attended 7.6 or more synagogue services in the previous year, and 50 percent stated that they had attended less than 7.6 services during the past year. In 1991 the median frequency was 7.8, only a very slight increase.¹⁴ Dubb states, however, "This apparent stability is, however, misleading: by 1991 . . . the proportion of very frequent attendance had increased significantly."¹⁵ For example, the percentage of those who attended services during the week had increased from 2.5 percent to 8.4 percent, and those who attended at least one *Shabbat* service per week had increased from 14 percent to 21.7 percent.¹⁶ This trend toward greater involvement is very pronounced among the young. Dubb's two younger age groups, ages 18 to 29 and 30 to 44, attended synagogue about twice as frequently as their 1974 counterparts had. In contrast, the median attendance of the oldest age group, 65 years old plus, had dropped in 1991 to half its 1974 levels.

In Dubb's 1991 socio-demographic study 14.3 percent of those answering rated themselves as highly observant, 74.4 as moderately observant, and 11.3 as being low in observance.¹⁷ Ninety-two point four percent always have a Passover Seder,¹⁸ 90.8 percent fast on Yom Kippur, and 74.3 percent always light Shabbat candles.¹⁹ These percentages are extremely high, and reflect the very traditional nature of South African Jews.

Nevertheless, other observances have lower percentages of participation. The study indicates that only 45.1 percent always light Hanukka candles,²⁰ 40.6 percent have separate meat and dairy utensils,²¹ and 37.7 purchase only kosher meat.²² One marker of Shabbat observance is whether people handle money on Shabbat. Seventeen point seven percent do not, which is a few percentage points *above* the 14.3 percent who had rated themselves as highly observant. A measure of even greater concern with a halakhic lifestyle is fasting on the minor fast days: 8.3 percent report that they observe these fasts.

OBSERVANCE LINKED TO GEOGRAPHY

The trend toward greater observance is also highly geographically centered. Seymour Kopelowitz, national Director of the South African Jewish Board of Deputies, and Chief Rabbi Cyril Harris have substantiated that there are 80,000 Jews plus Israelis, currently living in South Africa. Their estimate is based on the number of Jewish students in

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Jewish as well as public schools, marriage statistics, and various other documents.²³ Johannesburg, the economic center of the country and the city with the largest Jewish population, with as many as 55,000 Jews,²⁴ has seen a dramatic rise in synagogue attendance. In contrast to this, the other Jewish communities, particularly Cape Town, have seen a general decline.²⁵ This probably reflects the fact that most young Jews live in or move to Johannesburg, which tends to be the city of choice for those most interested in Jewish study and observance.

All of this is in spite of the fact that Johannesburg is an extremely dangerous place to live; according to one recent report, it has now overtaken Moscow as the world's most violent crime capital.²⁶ In one month alone,²⁷ 14,410 violent crimes were committed in Johannesburg, excluding Soweto, the most crime-ridden township in the area.²⁸ This reality has made most Johannesburg Jews very frightened. As a result, Jewish religious life in Johannesburg has shifted out of the city center and to the northern suburbs. A striking symbol of the Jewish desertion of the city is the fact that the Wolmarans Street Shul, until recently Johannesburg's central synagogue, is deserted and up for sale. The Shul is located in Joubert Park, once a thriving Jewish neighborhood.

Journalist Adam Levin remarks that "Driving through central Johannesburg today, past the tin shacks on Twist Street, the countless hawkers' stalls and 'To Let' signs, it is difficult to picture the city in its prime. Yet 30 years ago Johannesburg was young, keen and gleaming with optimism."²⁹ At around that time the city's railway station had just been renovated, and the newly redone building was "as sleek and futuristic as a spacecraft."³⁰ South African Airways' new terminal, just across the Queen Elizabeth Bridge, "heralded the country's conquest of the skies like a flying saucer come in to land."³¹

Joubert Park, site of the Wolmarans Street Shul, had become one of the most densely populated square miles in the world, and was particularly attractive for young, single Jewish professionals "enjoying the freedom and convenience of their carefree urban lifestyles."³² But today the only Jews who remain are elderly and poverty stricken. Many are religiously devout, but they fear walking on the streets of Joubert Park, even on Shabbat morning when it is light outside. Two thousand and thirty-five violent crimes were reported in Joubert Park in one month alone—over 60 a day!³³

Parallel with the decline of the Wolmarans Street Shul is the fact that one of the consequences of the ongoing northward movement of Johannesburg Jews to the suburbs—which one observer calls their ongoing "northward flight"³⁴—is that Yeoville, once the nerve center of

Orthodox Jewish life, is now in the final stages of disintegration. In the recent past three Jewish bookstores, two Jewish bakeries, two kosher delis, and a Jewish restaurant have all either closed down or moved out. In addition, nonprofit Jewish organizations are moving out. For example, the *bet din* itself has already sold its building and moved. These changes are significant because Yeoville was South Africa's first truly Haredi community. Today most of its founders and their children are living outside of South Africa.³⁵

ANGLO-LITHUANIAN TRADITIONALISM

Most South African Jews continue to see Orthodox Judaism as representing the only legitimate expression of historical Judaism. By seeing the Jewish past as a monolithic, traditionalistic one, they therefore have a need to maintain the traditional rabbinate as the source of religious authority for the community. This allows the Orthodox rabbinate, in particular the Orthodox Chief Rabbi and the *bet din*, to exercise power over a wide range of issues, such as conversion, *kashrut*, and synagogue standards, which would not be considered even a remote possibility in more open Jewish societies, such as that of the United States.

Professor Jonathan Webber of Great Britain has commented that the average South African Jew wants his Jewish identity to be authentic. In this case "authenticity" means adhering to a Lithuanian Orthodoxy that has been tempered by British Jewish formality. The average South African Jew chooses to emphasize certain elements from history, forgetting, however, that his ancestors, when they came from Lithuania two or three generations ago, transformed themselves extensively. In moving from the traditional society of the *shtetls* into the relatively open South African society, they became very Anglicized. Most gave up their halakhic commitments while at the same time maintaining their institutional loyalty to Orthodoxy. Thus, their perspective on history obscures the fact that Orthodoxy as it is practiced in South Africa is so altered that it would be unrecognizable in Lithuania, past or present.

As Webber describes it, ". . . the mode in which people construct their past says a great deal about their self image in the present and their expectations for the future. References to authenticity, for example, is one commonly used technique whereby justification for action in the present often embodies a reading of the past, a reading which of course is highly selective and obscures the fact that much of the past has been largely forgotten."³⁶

For South African Jews, that reading of the past is one of Jews immigrating from Lithuania, joining smaller numbers of English Jews already in the country, and together building a South African Orthodox Judaism. The South African Jewish historian Gustav Saron termed the Lithuanian Jewish integration into British models as “pouring Litvak spirit into Anglo-Jewish bottles.”³⁷ This “Litvak spirit” is still very much in evidence and provides the conceptual basis for the power of the Orthodox rabbinate.

Further, there is little debate on the need to question assumed values and/or to initiate changes. This has resulted in an atmosphere in which the Orthodox rabbinical authority is extremely secure. As Webber writes, the “. . . sensing of a need for change is an attribute of the collapse of traditional sources of power and authority in the Jewish world. Control of the past was a key feature of that power, indeed, the sheer weight of history was often heavy enough as to block any perception of new events altogether, or at least to render them irrelevant in the context of a longer view of the group’s identity.”³⁸ In other words, as long as traditional sources of power are extant, people do not sense the need for change. This is especially true in the South African Orthodox community today. And since the Orthodox rabbinate’s reading of the past is consistent with that of most Anglo-Lithuanian Jews, they maintain their loyalty to Orthodoxy despite carrying out few Orthodox practices. This “feeling of authenticity” helps preserve the unity of the Jewish community.

Chief Rabbi Cyril Harris observes that it is commonly recognized that the majority of Lithuanian Jewish immigrants to South Africa were traditional and Zionist, and that the standards of Orthodoxy were not high. “Those responsible for the *baalei teshuva* movements of the past two decades would certainly deny that the movements’ impetus stemmed from a misreading of the past as being genuinely Orthodox; rather, the movement is considered a great innovation.”³⁹ Thus, it is important not to misread the early Lithuanians as having been more Orthodox than they were. Although the traditional Orthodox and the *ba’al teshuva* movements are not incompatible, the latter is clearly an innovation.

THE “*SHTIBLIZATION*” OF THE ORTHODOX COMMUNITY

The impact of the Israeli *yeshiva* world on South African Judaism has begun to be felt in South Africa in a number of ways. One of the most important was what has been referred to as the “*shtiblization*” of the

Johannesburg Orthodox community in the last decade. As Rabbi Bernhard writes, “As young South African men and women began returning home after various periods of study in Yeshivas overseas, the guardians of South Africa’s Anglo-Litvak religious establishment registered alarm, and the remonstrance resounded throughout “big *shuls*” all over the Republic: ‘Don’t turn this *shul* into a *shtibl*!’”⁴⁰

Bernhard reports that today, however, South African Jewish perspectives have altered dramatically. He emphasizes “How attitudes have changed! *Shtibl* is no longer a dirty word among acculturated Western Jewries.”⁴¹ He writes that most of the many young people who have had that interest kindled by one of the *ba'al teshuva* groups springing up all over the northern suburbs of Johannesburg. There has been tremendous growth of *ba'al teshuva* groups such as Ohr Samayach and Aish Hatorah, as well as other *shtibl*-style communities such as Kollel Yad Shaul, Keter Torah, Yeshivah Gedolah, Yeshivah MaHarShA, and the various Lubavitch *shtibls*.

A brief discussion of the history of *ba'al teshuva* groups will put this trend in context. Ohr Samayach and Aish Hatorah and similar *ba'al teshuva* groups began in Jerusalem in the 1970s primarily as study centers to introduce Orthodox Judaism to college-age and slightly post-college-age students, most of them Americans. Groups for young Jewish men were established first, with women’s divisions slightly later. In the case of Ohr Samayach these were called Neve Yerusalayim.

Many, if not all of these young adults were from non-Orthodox backgrounds and had been exposed to little or no Judaism of any kind. Many came to Jerusalem to explore their roots and were drawn to the study centers. In the last two decades both Ohr Samayach and Aish Hatorah have expanded their function and have opened centers around the world, particularly in areas where there is a high concentration of Jews; thus, they have strong potential for encouraging traditional Jewish study and observance. Centers have opened in such cities as Toronto, New York, Los Angeles, London, Melbourne, and Johannesburg.

The principal inspirers of the *ba'al teshuva* movements in South Africa are the Lubavitch and Ohr Samayach. In addition, the Bnei Akiva youth group movement has been instrumental in attracting non-Orthodox young people to Orthodoxy. Several key rabbis who have had considerable impact on the younger generation include Rabbi Mordechai Fachler of Waverley and Rabbi Yossy Goldman of Sydenham. (Aish Hatorah is only about a year old, so it cannot be considered a significant force at this point).⁴² In fact, the Orthodox revival has been mirrored by the impressive growth of the Bnei Akiva movement. There are

now five Bnei Akiva *minyanim* in Johannesburg, and late in 1998 a Bnei Akiva *kolel* will be opening. Bnei Akiva today is easily the largest and most active of the Jewish youth movements, having overtaken its traditional rivals, Habonim and Betar, some time ago.⁴³

These *ba'al teshuva* organizations have tremendous potential in South Africa. On the one hand, the community is already strongly sympathetic to Orthodoxy; on the other, most children have been raised in homes where there was more sympathy for Orthodoxy than knowledge of it. Thus, many of these young adults are candidates for a more intensified version of Orthodox Jewish belief and practice.

Furthermore, South African parents typically encourage and are proud of their children's greater involvement in and allegiance to Orthodoxy. This is in distinct contrast to the United States, where, for many nominally Jewish parents, their children's trend toward Orthodoxy can be traumatic because the parents feel their beliefs and lifestyle are being repudiated. This is not the case in South Africa. Even those South African parents who practice virtually none of Jewish law nonetheless generally accept the legitimacy and authenticity of Orthodox belief and practice. This makes them much more willing to accept their children's decision to embrace Orthodoxy. This is the type of Orthodox community that is attracting the young South African adult, to a degree comparable only to the religious "scene" in Jerusalem or the Upper West Side of New York City.

But whereas Jerusalem and Manhattan Orthodoxy draw from all over America and beyond, Johannesburg *shtetl* life draws almost exclusively from the Johannesburg Jewish community, and therefore its impact is felt to a far greater degree. As Bernhard writes: "By this stage, every family has been touched by the resurgence of Yidishkayt in South Africa. Everybody knows somebody who is *frum*—at university, or in their immediate or extended family. Just about everybody who is anybody attends *shiurim*, lectures or discussion groups. It has become quite fashionable to be *frum*."⁴⁴

Jocelyn Hellig, Professor of Religious Studies at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, has categorized South African Judaism as "an expression of Conservative Traditionalism."⁴⁵ She writes, ". . . Judaism in South Africa conveys a picture of a community of diaspora—Jews very different in essence from any other, its characteristic feature being its conservative traditionalism."⁴⁶

Writing in 1986, she states, "The past ten to fifteen years have witnessed a remarkable revival of Jewish religious life, which is particularly apparent in Johannesburg, while certain of its suburbs have proved to

be amazingly fertile ground for the proliferation of splinter groups of Orthodoxy.”⁴⁷ If Hellig saw “a lively Renaissance” of Orthodox religious life taking place in the 1980s, this flowering is far more developed today.

Hellig further remarks that a significant indication of the tremendous religious vitality of Orthodoxy can be observed in the emergence of strong and growing ultra-Orthodox groups such as the Kollel and Lubavitch as well as informal “house synagogues,” or *shtiblakh*. These tend to develop under the leadership of individual learned and often “charismatic” rabbis who gather groups of dedicated Jews under their helms.⁴⁸

One technique that has helped foster interest in Judaism is inviting overseas visitors to speak in South Africa for one or two weeks. Sponsored by the Union of Orthodox Synagogues, Ohr Samayach, and/or other Jewish communal organizations, such speakers have been successful at helping build loyalty to the sponsoring organizations. Frequently affluent donors can be found to subsidize much or even all of the cost of these study tours; other times admission charges help defray the costs.

Another contributing factor to the Orthodox religious revival has been the influence of American individuals and organizations. Many of the local Orthodox rabbis are American born and were trained at American-sponsored *ba'al teshuva yeshivot* such as Aish Hatorah, Ohr Samayach, or Lubavitch. Hellig remarks that “much of the religious revival in recent years can be attributed to the American influence. This is certainly the case with Lubavitch. It could be reasoned that a great deal (but certainly not all) of the recent ultra-Orthodox fervor is an American import and that, in essence, South African Jews are a conservative and extremely traditional group.”⁴⁹

THE ROLE OF CHIEF RABBI CYRIL HARRIS

Although the *bet din* has the final say on ritual issues, Chief Rabbi Cyril Harris has considerable influence on religious practices. Until about two decades ago, there were separate organizations, with separate Chief Rabbis, for Johannesburg and Cape Town. Under Chief Rabbi Cyril Harris and the current *bet din* these two structures were unified. In 1986 the two structures were combined into a national organization under Rabbi Harris' predecessor, Rabbi B.M. Casper, just before his retirement. This has allowed Orthodox Judaism in South Africa to oper-

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ate as an integral unit in its policies throughout the country and the Jewish community.

More recently, in response to the growth of the *ba'al teshuva* movement, Harris has taken a public role in trying to preserve tradition while at the same time showing sensitivity to the changing nature of society in the new South Africa. Immediately after the end of Apartheid he pushed the entire community to get involved in the country's now-defunct Reconstruction and Development Program (RDP). More recently he was one of the founders of a Jewish project called Tikkun to help the underprivileged. Tikkun is an attempt to facilitate Jewish organizational efforts for the promotion of social welfare projects consistent with the spirit of the RDP, including education, social relief, welfare services, agriculture, business, and economic development.

In addition, Rabbi Harris has taken a strong position on the moral issues of South Africa: "Our Jewish community is blessed with abundant talent and, in the current situation, it is vital that we play a vital role. We must do this, not because of any dividends that may be accepted by our community, not in order to avoid anti-Semitism, but quite simply because it is the right thing for us to do."⁵⁰

Rabbi Harris has also represented the Jewish community at controversial national occasions. For example, he spoke at the funerals of Chris Hani, the head of the South African Communist Party, who was assassinated shortly before the 1994 election, and Joe Slovo, also a Communist Party leader and first Minister of Housing. Slovo's funeral in particular was controversial because Slovo had been born a Jew in Lithuania and had declared himself an atheist, and he did not have a Jewish funeral. Harris nevertheless gave a glowing eulogy. Despite a number of attacks, Rabbi Harris has continued to push the Jewish community to get more involved in the surrounding society.

Harris himself adds that it is widely but erroneously perceived, primarily because of the press reports, that at Joe Slovo's funeral he said that "Slovo had been a more religious Jew than observant Jews who actively or even passively supported Apartheid were." Harris clarifies that the event he spoke at was a memorial meeting, not the funeral, because the latter was in a non-Jewish cemetery. Furthermore, he says his exact words were, "Let not those religious people who wrongly or passively acquiesce with the inequalities of yesteryear, let them not dare to condemn Joe Slovo, a humanist socialist who fought all his life for basic decency, to reinstate the dignity to which all human beings are entitled." Harris adds, "I actually had in mind when I said 'religious people' members of the Dutch Reformed Church and its allies, but

many—including Slovo’s daughters—interpreted my words as referring to the Jewish community. Immediately after the proceedings Archbishop Desmond Tutu gave me a hug, as he understood my words correctly.”⁵¹

CHANGES IN THE RABBINATE

The current resurgence of Orthodox vitality in South Africa can best be understood in the context of late twentieth-century Orthodoxy in that country. Orthodoxy in South Africa was slowly transformed during the 1960s and 1970s, when South Africa began to bring in a different type of rabbi and educator than had previously been the case. Until that time, the typical rabbi had been either a British-style trained minister or an American-style pulpit rabbi. These were professionals, individuals who combined a commitment to Orthodoxy with a moderation born out of an awareness of the realities of long-term congregational politics.

The British-style minister was a ritual functionary, someone hired by a board that retained control of all aspects of policy. This minister had ritual responsibilities such as conducting life cycle events, overseeing the proper conduct of services, interpreting holidays and giving sermons—but sermons narrowly focused on exposition of text. Broader interpretations were the province of the board. In comparison, the American-style pulpit rabbi had more responsibility for religious policy determination, such as the proper conduct of religious activities and observation of halakha. Although not a halakhic theorist, such a rabbi would provide basic halakhic instruction. Because this gave the rabbi a greater breadth of responsibility, the American-style model put more stress on secular as well as Jewish studies. Such an individual needed the broader perspective that would come with greater education and training.

In the 1960s and 1970s South African congregations experienced increasing difficulty in attracting such professionals, a direct result of the increasing ethical stigma associated with working under Apartheid. Serving in South Africa during the Apartheid years put rabbis in direct conflict with their religious duty to social justice, since it was difficult for them to make any significant changes. Potential candidates for South African rabbinical positions declined invitations to serve for fear of being implicit collaborators in a system that was blatantly racist and highly repressive to most people.

As a result, South African Jewish communities turned to Israeli Yeshiva-trained rabbis and educators. Rather than having been trained

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in professional rabbinic programs, these men were essentially *yeshiva bahurim*, either of the Bnei Akiva Religious Zionist variety or the ultra-Orthodox type. Either way, they were much more ideological and far more religiously extreme. They were also far less likely to be restrained by career interests, since most planned to return to Israel after three to five years on *shelihut*.

Today there is a new trend that is gaining momentum. An increasing number of South African rabbis have been trained in part or in full in South Africa, with little study in Israel. This, according to Chief Rabbi Harris, gives them “greater ability to relate to their communities.”⁵²

TRENDS IN EDUCATION

Another major factor to consider in understanding Orthodoxy in South Africa today is the Orthodox educational system. One of their greatest strengths is the almost universal attendance of Jewish children at Orthodox day schools, the only type of Jewish school in the country. The day school system began with the establishment of the King David School in Johannesburg in 1948; at its zenith in the late 1960s there were seventeen separate day schools.⁵³ From 1948 to 1994 it became increasingly common for Jewish parents to send their children to day school, but by the late 1970s, and certainly the 1980s, it was the rule rather than the exception. As Jews began to emigrate in increasing numbers after 1976, many of the government schools, which once boasted considerable Jewish numbers, began to lose their Jewish students. This, in turn, increased the feeling by Jewish parents that their children would feel more comfortable in a Jewish day school.

Today the growth of day school in terms of numbers has stopped, but the proportion of Jewish children attending day schools continues to rise. Currently at least 85 percent of all Jewish children attend an Orthodox day school. The largest campuses are the King David School in Johannesburg and Herzlia in Cape Town, both of which have several branches. Some believe that today there is almost universal attendance by Jewish children at Orthodox day schools, although this is probably an exaggeration. David Saks, of the South African Jewish Board of Deputies, estimates that the current ratio of students at Jewish day schools as opposed to government schools is three to one. This includes the various private Jewish colleges, such as Crawford, which have sprung up in the last two decades.⁵⁴

These schools present a tremendous opportunity to teach children about Orthodox Judaism. Until recently, however, that opportunity was not taken advantage of fully because the schools were attempting to compromise between the two strains in South African Jewish life: Lithuanian Orthodoxy and Jewish nationalistic identity. Chief Rabbi Harris agrees that while not all teachers at the schools are Orthodox, the ethos being taught is national/traditional, and non-Orthodox forms of Judaism are essentially ignored. He points out, however, that there is a tremendous difference between a more right-wing Orthodox school, such as Yeshiva College or Torah Academy in Johannesburg, and the King David schools, which still maintain a national-traditional orientation.⁵⁵ Yeshiva College, founded in Johannesburg in 1957, was founded as the flagship school of modern/centrist Orthodoxy. The school's term for itself was National Religious Zionist. The King David and Herzlia systems call themselves "broadly national/traditional," an important distinction. Over the years there were various interpretations of what it meant to be broadly national/traditional, which led to fierce clashes between secular and religious elements in these day schools. In the last number of years the more Orthodox religious adherents have gained influence.⁵⁶

Over the past decade and a half the national/traditional orientation has changed as Orthodoxy has become more assertive and Jewish national identity has faded, a trend that has been present not just in South Africa but around the world. As a result, the day schools, which previously balanced religious traditionalism and national identity, have moved to increase the religious content of their formal and informal curricula. One unintended consequence of this trend is a catastrophic impact on attendance at Hebrew Schools, as most parents who send their children to a day school do not see the need to also send them to an afternoon Hebrew School two or three days a week.

The type of teacher in the day schools changed in the 1960s and 1970s as well, similar to the changes in the rabbinate. During this period more Israeli Orthodox-trained teachers were being brought in to teach Judaic studies. This increase paralleled a greater concern for halakhic observance in the schools, in particular the King David Schools in Johannesburg in the 1980s and the Herzlia Schools in the 1990s. These schools, founded on a vague platform of National Religious Zionism, began to take their educational role as propagators of Orthodox observance much more seriously.

As Rabbi Norman Bernhard reported, "With the large-scale recruitment of strictly Orthodox, Yeshiva-trained rabonim and educational

personnel from overseas in the 1960s and 1970s, the modern Torah revolution and *Ba'al Teshuvah* Movement spread to South Africa.”⁵⁷

THE END OF THE “BIG SHUL” ERA?

To strengthen dwindling resources, many Jewish communal leaders have tried to urge the consolidation of various institutions, including synagogues. Nevertheless, the leaderships of declining synagogues are not usually eager to consolidate, having developed strong emotional attachments to their *shul*. For example, in Cape Town the city bowl, or center city area, had three synagogues that had thrived until about twenty years ago. Many Jews in the area have moved away, particularly to Sea Point, which looks and feels a great deal like Miami Beach. Others have emigrated or moved to the southern suburbs of Cape Town.

Until recent years religious life in South Africa was organized around large, Orthodox synagogues, in a social structure based upon that of British Jewry. Even though eighty-five percent of all South African Jews immigrated from Lithuania, beginning at the end of the 19th century, the new arrivals were attracted to these large and prestigious British-style synagogues. As Bernhard writes, “For the new immigrants from der heym, joining such a ‘Big Shul’ was a proud step into New World sophistication and social acceptance.”⁵⁸

Consequently, the proliferation of *shtiblakh* is the most important religious change in Johannesburg over the past two decades. In many cases, although not all, a group of younger and more religiously intense congregants in a “big *shul*” request permission to set up a “youth *minyan*,” and this leads to a separate group.

Most of the Orthodox rabbis now serving are strictly *yeshiva* trained and have little advanced secular education. Of the older-style, modern Orthodox rabbis, American Rabbi Jack Steinhorn of Cape Town is the most high profile of the half-dozen centrist Orthodox rabbis in the country. Rabbi Norman Bernhard of the Oxford Synagogue in Johannesburg offers an interesting contrast; he came to South Africa from the United States with ordination from Yeshiva University but became an adherent of Lubavitch *hasidut*. Bernhard therefore has both a great deal of secular education—and the intellectual openness that such education brings—as well as a commitment to ultra-Orthodox Judaism. These exceptions aside, most of the rabbis serving Orthodox congregations today have a traditional conception of Judaism that does

not allow for pluralistic interpretations. They are more focused on models of the religious observance and ideology that they learned in Israel.

CONCLUSION

South African Orthodoxy today is declining numerically as a result of continuing emigration, caused by a lack of confidence in the political and economic future of the country under black majority rule. From the 1970s to today the number of Jews in the country has declined precipitously, from 120,000 to 80,000 or, as some estimates suggest, 70,000.

Yet ironically, the South African Orthodox community today is one of the most thriving Orthodox communities in the English-speaking world, and it shows signs of increasing vitality. This article has attempted to highlight some of the history of Orthodoxy in South Africa. It has explored why, as of the 1970s, the community was ideally positioned for a renaissance of Jewish religious activity and why that activity has blossomed at precisely the time the overall number of Jews in the country has declined.

What the future holds for Orthodox Judaism in South Africa is unclear. On the one hand, South African Orthodoxy is highly centralized, with one Chief Rabbi and *bet din*. Chief Rabbi Harris believes that big *shuls* will continue to occupy a central place in the South Africa Jewish community, as many Jews are not comfortable worshipping in a *shtibl*. "Many of the larger *shuls* have incorporated the alternative minyan on their own premises, including the big shuls in Glenhazel, Sydenham, Dadton, Oxford, and Waverley. The assumption that the Chief Rabbinate is somehow weakened by the proliferation of the *shtibl* is highly speculative. I give *derashot* and conduct *shiurim* in all of them, including the Kollel, and they participate in the events of the community."⁵⁹

Yet there is increasing religious momentum from the ground up, from both the *shtibls* and the *ba'al teshuva* groups. These strong grassroots movements have hardly been planned, organized, or promoted by the Chief Rabbi's office or the *bet din*. Furthermore, as more and more people have become involved in these movements, they are increasingly reluctant to take direction from any central person or institution about what they should and should not do in terms of Orthodox life.

Thus, there are two opposing forces in South African Orthodoxy: a highly centralized structure and autonomous movements that are becoming increasingly less controlled. This dichotomy creates both the

