

**Rabbi Ady Assabi and the Development of
Conservative Judaism in South Africa**

Dana Evan Kaplan

The Conservative movement has developed an extensive network of congregations in various countries outside of the United States. Canada, of course, has a strong Conservative movement with very traditional leanings, and Rabbi Marshall Meyer pioneered a more liberal form of Conservative Judaism in Argentina. Various other countries have similarly developed Conservative or Mesorati movements, most recently Great Britain under Rabbi Louis Jacobs. But until recently none of the English-speaking countries of the Southern Hemisphere— Australia, New Zealand, or South Africa—has developed a Conservative movement.¹

South African Judaism² was exclusively Orthodox until 1933 when Rabbi Moses Cyrus Weiler was sent by the World Union for Progressive Judaism to Johannesburg. Because Weiler kept the Progressive movement to the right religiously, as well as for other reasons, no Conservative movement ever developed in the country. Weiler avoided the most extreme positions of American classical Reform Judaism, particularly the men not wearing yarmulkes during the service and the almost total elimination of Hebrew. By having men wear yarmulkes and using a reasonable amount of Hebrew, he was able to keep Reform Judaism in South Africa within the consensus of what was considered normative Judaism. Clearly there would still be a sizeable number of opponents who would hate Reform Judaism no matter what. However, the general Jewish communal leaders and organizations, who in most cases would not join Reform themselves, were able to look at it as a system of beliefs and practices that was not so foreign to their sensitivities and sensibilities that it was outside the pale.

¹ 1. For an excellent overview of the structure of world Jewry, see Daniel J. Elazar, *People and Polity—The Organizational Dynamics of World Jewry* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989); on the Southern Hemisphere see pp. 234-261.

² 2. For a recent overview of Jews in South Africa, see Dana Evan Kaplan, “Judaism and the Jewish Community in the New South Africa,” *Judaism*, Summer, Volume 45, Number 3, 1996, pp. 350-360. My thanks to Professor Murray Baumgarten for his careful reading and suggestions for improvement of that article.

This situation changed recently when Rabbi Ady Assabi of Congregation Shalom in Johannesburg began overseeing the withdrawal of his congregation from the Southern African Union for Progressive Judaism (SAUPJ) and repositioned the Kehilla as a traditionalist, Conservative-style synagogue. This paper looks at Assabi's theology and Halachic approach and attempts to evaluate the importance of Assabi's influence in Johannesburg, influence that has created what could be called a “religious revolution.”

The emergence of Conservative Judaism in South Africa began in 1985 when Temple Shalom on Louis Botha Avenue, one of four congregations forming the United Progressive Congregation of Johannesburg, invited Rabbi Assabi to officiate at High Holy Day services. Assabi, who was born in Israel and emigrated to Germany with his parents, studied at Leo Baeck College in London and served the Jewish community in Germany in a shared synagogue arrangement. One of the synagogues was an Orthodox one, where he served for about a year. Later he led a Reform congregation in Netanya, Israel, where he simultaneously served for several years as Executive Director of the Israeli Progressive movement.

Strictly speaking, Assabi was not the first rabbi to introduce Conservative Judaism and not the first conservative rabbi. Rabbi Nissim Wernick was the first to introduce Conservative Judaism into South Africa in the 1980s shortly before Assabi's influence began to be felt. Rabbi Wernick, who had received his rabbinic ordination from the Jewish Theological Seminary, adhered pretty much to the mainstream beliefs and tenets of Conservative Judaism. He had at one time been a member of the Rabbinical Assembly (RA).³ Wernick tried to create a Jewish Theological Seminary in South Africa, which was listed in all the official materials on the Jewish community of Johannesburg for a number of years but saw very little activity. He also had a serious problem with his Reform congregation in Pretoria, and he left that congregation and tried to set up his own independent Conservative congregation in Johannesburg, which failed.

³ 3. He is no longer a member of the Rabbinical Assembly. Inquiry from the author to the Rabbinical Assembly, May 1998.

So, Assabi is credited with establishing a more substantial Conservative movement in South Africa. Following his stellar pulpit presentation at Temple Shalom, the congregation offered Assabi a rabbinic position with them, which he accepted. Shortly thereafter American Reform Rabbi Norman Mendel left Temple Emanuel in Parktown, Johannesburg, to return to the United States. Being familiar with Rabbi Assabi's charisma, Emanuel tried to hire Rabbi Assabi away from Shalom, offering a large increase in salary as well as other benefits. But Assabi was in the middle of leading Shalom through a religious transformation process, and so refused to leave the congregation. Instead, he offered to allow Emanuel to join Shalom and participate together with Shalom in forging a new religious vision and making that vision a concrete reality. The result was Imanu-Shalom Congregation.⁴

Imanu-Shalom began in 1986 as a Progressive congregation with two temples under the rubric of one congregation.⁵ According to the congregation's newsletter the congregation numbered 1350 families,⁶ including a number of wealthy and influential business people and Jewish lay leaders. Rabbi Assabi served as Senior Rabbi, rotating Shabbat to Shabbat, from Shalom to Emanuel. An assistant rabbi, Michael Datz, officiated at the temple site where Assabi was not present that week.⁷ When Datz returned to the United States, Assabi hired a lay cantor, Roy Steinman, to assume the same function. Writing in 1993, Cantor Steinman stated that "...In the absence of a second rabbi, Rabbi Assabi and I split the services between us. When I am at the one site, Rabbi Assabi is at the other. We both have choirs that follow us and we alternate

⁴ 4. Interview with Ady Assabi, Summer 1995.

⁵ 5. Susanne Belling, "Dissidents Call Special Meeting of Jo'Berg Reform," *The Herald Times*, October 3, 1986, no page listed. From Temple Emanuel Archives. My thanks to Mrs. Carole Standfield for allowing me access to the archives.

⁶ 6. *Or Chadash Congregational Newsletter*, Summer 1990, p. 34. Other estimates placed the combined membership as high as 1600 units.

⁷ 7. Interview with Michael Datz, November 7, 1997.

weekly. On Shabbat we have two Shacharit services (one at each venue) and a mincha service with an Oneg Shabbat and study session.”⁸

By 1991 Assabi's religion transformation had resulted in a dramatic transition from a Reform-style service to a traditional, Conservative-style tefillah. An original draft of a prayer book was being used in place of the Reform Gates of Prayer, and other Conservative-style ritual innovations were in place.

The congregation—particularly the Shalom side—responded enthusiastically to these changes. Many simply loved Rabbi Assabi; others believed that in a South Africa dominated by Orthodoxy, Conservative Judaism would be more spiritually appealing than Reform. (Before Assabi's influence came to be felt, between 85 and 90 percent of South African Jews had an Orthodox affiliation, even if they did not practice; the remainder were Reform.) Many others were apathetic and uninvolved and regarded the religious changes with complete disinterest.

In 1991 Imanu-Shalom, led by President Carol Alexander, decided to suspend its membership in the Southern Union for Progressive Judaism (SAUPJ). The congregation urged the Progressive movement to confront the religious challenges of contemporary South Africa by adopting a greater degree of tradition. Should the SAUPJ fail to meet the conditions of Imanu-Shalom, the congregation would completely withdraw as a constituent member. Rabbi Assabi wrote, “There are two major reasons why we have suspended our membership of the SAUPJ. First, because we don't wish to take the criticism for what they are doing or not doing—it is hard enough to be responsible for what we do or fail to do. Secondly, because we need to progress. Whenever, during the last five years, we have done or said anything, we had to contend with more destructive criticism from our own movement than from anybody else.”⁹

⁸ 8. Correspondence from Roy Steinman to the author, February 8, 1993.

⁹ 9. A. E. Assabi, *The Renewal of the Old and the Sanctification of the New—The Path of Imanu-Shalom* (Johannesburg: Imanu-Shalom, 5752), p. 12.

Among many other issues, Rabbi Assabi had invited future President Nelson Mandela to speak at his synagogue very shortly after release from prison. Many criticized Assabi for this invitation, particularly those from within the Reform movement.¹⁰

Relations between the SAUPJ and Imanu-Shalom did not improve, and 18 months later Imanu-Shalom broke completely with the SAUPJ, citing its refusal to adapt a more traditional approach to Judaism.¹¹ Representatives from the SAUPJ and SAAPR (South African Association of Progressive Rabbis) state that there were only two issues of contention. The first was ritual immersion for converts, which Rabbi Assabi wanted and the Reform movement had not previously required. On this point the Reform movement was prepared to accede. The second issue was *hatafat dam brit*, the taking of a little blood from the penis of an already circumcised convert as part of his conversion. On this issue the SAAPR stood firm in its refusal to accept. Therefore, from the point of view of the SAAPR the only issue that remained unresolved was that of *hatafat dam brit*, which in their view was a very minor point that would hardly merit breaking up the whole movement over.

However, according to Reform representatives, the Jewish journalist Brenda Solomon, who was not at the meeting, reported Assabi's version of the negotiations, citing irreconcilable differences too numerous to mention. Yet from the point of view of the Reform leadership, the controversies were not the focus of the problem; rather, it was Assabi's determination to take his

¹⁰ 10. Carol Lazar, "Mandela Speaks Out on PLO, Zionism and Peace," *The Sunday Star*, September 16, 1991, no page listed; from the Temple Emanuel archives. Also, "Replace hysteria with a hand of peace, says Rabbi," *The Jewish Voice*, September 7, 1990, pp. 1-2. For a critical view see A.L. Hatchuel, "Temple is for Worship—Not Political Speeches," *The Herald Times*, September 28, 1990, no page listed; from Temple Emanuel archives. For the attack by Rabbi Arthur Seltzer, then chairperson of the South African Association of Progressive Rabbis (SAAPR), see "Zionist Federation, Reform Rabbis Reject Views of Temple Shalom Rabbi," *The Herald Times*, September 28, 1990, no page listed, from the Temple Emanuel Archives. Also, Simone Kaye, "Rabbi Assabi Damaged Image of South African Jewry," *The Herald Times*, October 5, 1990, p. 1. Attacks also appeared in the *Star*, *The Citizen*, and other general circulation papers.

¹¹ 11. Interview with Marlene Bethlehem, National Chairperson, South African Jewish Board of Deputies, November 7, 1995.

congregation out of the SAUPJ. Here, as with other issues relating to this whole conflict, each side has very different views on what happened and why.¹²

At this point a small faction based among former Emanuel leaders formed a “Temple Emanuel Survival Committee.” This group hoped to re-split the two temples and reconstitute Emanuel as a Reform congregation. Imanu-Shalom's board refused this request, and a lawsuit was filed by the faction. Eventually a settlement was reached in which the Emanuel building was returned to the Reform group in exchange for their assumption of much of Imanu-Shalom's debt. Shalom remained—and remains to this day—under the religious leadership of Rabbi Assabi, and since 1994 has been affiliated with the Conservative/Masorati movement.¹³ The affiliation is a loose one.¹⁴

To put these events in context, it is important here to point out that South African Progressive Judaism is much more traditionalist than American classical Reform Judaism. South African Reform congregations use about half Hebrew and half English in the liturgy, sometimes even a higher percentage of Hebrew, especially in Johannesburg. Nevertheless, South African Progressive Judaism is Reform in both theology and practice. University of the Witwatersrand Professor Jocelyn Hellig writes that “observers often gain the mistaken impression that Reform Judaism in South Africa is no different from Conservative Judaism in America.”¹⁵ *Africa*, edited by Martin Prozesky and John De Gruchy (Capetown: David Philip Publishers, 1995), p. 167.

¹² 12. Correspondence with Southern Union for Progressive Judaism leadership, March 13, 1998.

¹³ 13. Interview with Rabbi Benjamin Kreitman, Executive Director, World Council of Conservative Synagogues, October 30, 1997.

¹⁴ 14. The congregation calls itself “The Shalom Independent Congregation,” but a subtitle on its newsletter states that the congregation was “affiliated to the World Council of Conservative/Masorati Synagogues.” See, for example, *The Congregational Newsletter* of November 1994. More recently this claim has ceased to appear on the newsletter. See, for example, the March 1997 issue. The newsletter is now called *The Shalom Independent*. My thanks to Mr. Lionel Slier, Editor of the congregational newsletter, for providing me with recent copies.

¹⁵ 15. Jocelyn Hellig, “The Jewish Community in South Africa,” in *Living Faiths in South*

Hellig adamantly rejects this view. She states that unlike Reform Judaism “Conservative Judaism regards the Halachah as binding but permits greater flexibility with regard to its interpretation than does Orthodoxy. South African Reform, like Reform everywhere else, emphasizes the ongoing nature of revelation, seeing Judaism as dynamic and growing.”¹⁶ Hellig argues that Conservative Judaism may be confused with South African Reform only if one looks only at superficial ritual similarities, but the theological approaches to revelation and other religious concepts differ profoundly, as do their approaches to Halachah and religious practice generally. Rabbi Assabi provides a fascinating case study for evaluating Hellig's thesis.

Assabi has attacked South African nonobservant Orthodox Jews for being ignorant of Judaism and fundamentalist at the same time. He writes that “the paradox is that, despite...non-observance and general ignorance..., the theology of most South African Jews is as fundamentalist as it could possibly be.”¹⁷ Assabi was determined to build a South African Judaism that was based upon observance of Halachah, interpreted in a flexible manner, as well as a deep knowledge of Judaism as understood from a liberal theological perspective.

On the second day of Rosh Hashanah, 5752 (1991), Rabbi Assabi first publicly articulated his lecture of his vision for Imanu-Shalom. He later published the lecture as a small book.¹⁸ Assabi begins by attacking the hypocrisy of the Orthodox rabbinate in South Africa. He stated that the Orthodox rabbinate has had to compromise Orthodoxy in order to retain total power over the Jews of the country. The Orthodox rabbinate, Assabi writes, could not survive if it depended exclusively on observant Jews. Rather, it draws most of its support from the “non-observant Orthodox.” And in order to maintain its power, the Orthodox rabbinate maneuvers between two main strategic concerns: the political and the ideological.

¹⁶ 16. *Ibid.*

¹⁷ 17. Ady E. Assabi, “Catharsis and Rebirth—The Judaism of the Future,” *Jewish Affairs*, Volume 50, Number 3, Spring 1995, p. 81. The article appears on pp. 81-86.

¹⁸ 18. Assabi, *The Renewal of the Old and the Sanctification of the New*, *op. cit.*

On a political level Assabi believes that the South African Orthodox rabbinate is trying to do everything in its power to prevent “an American-type situation” from evolving in South Africa. He is referring to the fact that in the United States Orthodoxy is a small minority of the American Jewish community and that the Orthodox rabbinate has relatively little influence on communal policies. Assabi believes that Orthodoxy has become a small minority of American Jewry precisely because Orthodoxy in the United States did not compromise. In contrast to what Assabi portrays as American Orthodoxy's consistent insistence on its standards, even at the expense of membership and therefore communal powers, he sees South African Orthodoxy as hopelessly compromised.

He writes that "... in this country it has become perfectly all right to lead a totally secular life and consider yourself to be 'Orthodox.' The ideological compromise is amazing. The reason the rabbis permit it is purely political, and based on an instinct for survival. In a strange way, what Reform did in America is what Orthodoxy is doing here.” To survive and retain some kind of Judaism, Assabi states, American Reform rabbis perform intermarriages.¹⁹ “For the very same reason, Orthodox rabbis here pretend that one can be a nonobservant 'Orthodox' Jew. What a ridiculous contradiction-in-terms.”²⁰

Assabi implies that South African Jews were able to live so comfortably with such blatant contradictions in their religious lives because the whole country was living with the horrible contradictions of Apartheid. “The local system,” Assabi said, tongue in cheek, “seems to have rubbed off on the South African Jewish Community. One learns very quickly to close one’s eyes and be content in pretending that one does not know, or that what one sees, is not really there.”²¹ Assabi's linkage of nonobservant Orthodoxy and Apartheid society is perceptive, and there is

¹⁹ 19. Forty to fifty percent of American Reform rabbis will officiate at an intermarriage. Each rabbi sets various conditions on his or her officiation. Assabi does not explicitly differentiate between those who do and those who do not officiate.

²⁰ 20. Assabi, *The Renewal of the Old and the Sanctification of the New*, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

²¹ 21. *Ibid.*

clearly a strong connection between them. It does not, however, take into account the fact that the South African Jewish communal structure is based upon the British system, and that other British Commonwealth countries, such as Australia and New Zealand, have similar Orthodox establishments.²²

Assabi attacks South African Jewish society for placing form over content and for reducing synagogues to gathering places of varying social prestige. He writes that “people are naturally eager to belong to the 'right' place and to be seen in the 'right' environment. It goes hand in hand with living in the 'right' neighborhood, driving the 'right' car, going to the appropriate club—that is all the synagogue has become—a club. Except when you want to belong to a prestigious golf club, the least you must do is to take up golf. In a synagogue-club, you are not required to take up Judaism; it is pretended that you do. All that is left for you to do, is to pay your dues.”²³

Assabi believes that in the past the individual Jew had to conform to the demands of his religious community, and the religious community had to adapt to the conditions of time and place. In contrast, today the religious community conforms to the needs of the individual by compromising the very principles it upholds to be sacred. Assabi labels this approach to religion as “secular Orthodoxy” and states that it turns Judaism into “a rare museum piece that is a most valuable curiosity but totally useless.”²⁴

Assabi's views on Reform Judaism are as critical as his views on Orthodoxy.²⁵ He believes that Rabbi Moses Cyrus Weiler founded the Progressive movement in South Africa based on the principles of American Reform Judaism and that American Reform could never

²² 22. Elazar, *People and Polity*, *op. cit.*, pp. 234-261.

²³ 23. Assabi, *The Renewal of the Old and the Sanctification of the New*, *op. cit.*

²⁴ 24. *Ibid.*, p. 8.

²⁵ 25. Assabi, *The Path of Imanu-Shalom*, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

flower in a South African context.²⁶ He writes, “We have taken American Reform Judaism with all its virtues and vices, and moved it from New York and Cincinnati to Johannesburg, Cape Town and Port Elizabeth. The liturgy we use is American Reform. It contains prayers for the 4th of July and Thanksgiving Day. It is directed at the American predicament and the American community. The English is spelled in American, the Hebrew is paraphrased and not translated.”²⁷

In addition to being an American import, South African Progressive Judaism has become, Assabi claims, “Reformodox.” He argues that “in its entire existence, it has neither progressed nor has it regressed or moved at all, for that matter.”²⁸ Assabi asks, “What are the basic principles of the ‘Living Judaism’ we so often talk about? What of our vaulted progressiveness?”²⁹

Assabi writes as a former member of the Reform movement of South Africa. It should be noted that it is clear from his comments that Assabi objects vehemently to a number of policies and, indeed, the general direction of the American Reform movement. He uses the term “Reform movement” in the South African context in order to implicitly compare it to the American Reform movement, implying that they have the same policies on many issues. The SAUPJ had begun its movement in the 1930s by calling itself “Reform” or even “Liberal.” The term Liberal has fallen away because during the apartheid years being a liberal anything was unpopular.

As attacks mounted from various parties, such as traditionalists and later from Rabbi Assabi and others, the leadership began to prefer the term “Progressive,” which allied the South African Reform movement with the World Movement for Progressive Judaism. Thus the South

²⁶ 26. *Ibid.*, p. 9.

²⁷ 27. *Ibid.*, p. 10.

²⁸ 28. *Ibid.*, p. 9.

²⁹ 29. *Ibid.*, p. 9.

African Reform leadership did not break with the World Reform Movement but distanced itself from the American Reform movement, which had passively acquiesced to rabbinic officiation of intermarriages and in other matters that would not have been perceived of favorably in South Africa.

It is important to keep these points in mind when examining Assabi's pronouncements on the Reform movement. He writes that Reform Judaism has not developed one indigenous institution or produced one worthwhile publication. "If anyone wants to know what we stand for, we have little to show. We stutter about our own identity and by doing so, continuously verify the negative stigma we have in this community. We speak the language of a diluted American Reform Judaism. The word 'progressive' that we adopted is most meaningful. However, you dare not call yourself 'progressive' and have the audacity to become more static all the time."³⁰

Writing before the election of the first democratically elected government in the history of the country, Assabi asserts that as a progressive movement, Reform Judaism has not dealt in any significant way with the unique South African situation, in which social justice is one of the most important contributions a Jewish community can make."³¹ It is in the area of social justice that South African Reform has failed most. Assabi writes, "... this is where we have even diluted American Reform. When the march on Alabama took place, Martin Luther King was accompanied by Reform rabbis on each side. They may not have been the greatest traditionalists, Jewish ritual might not have been that important to them. However, the social injustice of the community in which they lived—couldn't be ignored by their Jewish conscience."³²

³⁰ 30. *Ibid.*, p. 10.

³¹ 31. *Ibid.*

³² 32. *Ibid.*, pp. 10-11.

Assabi strongly believes that if progressive Judaism has failed in the sphere of social justice, then the movement has absolutely nothing to distinguish it. Further, some Reform leaders had not even tried to be decent to individual blacks working for them. However, many in the SAUPJ feel very strongly that Assabi's criticism of Progressive Judaism in the sphere of social justice is unwarranted, citing among other activities the tremendously successful outreach work performed by the United Sisterhood in Johannesburg for more than 60 years. Further, Rabbi Hillel Avidan, Chairperson of the SAAPR, states that in terms of rabbinic leadership, "Amongst those who spoke out courageously against apartheid was the late Rabbi Arthur Saul Super...he was probably the most outstanding rabbi to have ever served our movement."³³

Assabi writes, "Even in this unique area [social justice], we [the Reform movement] have not been different to the rest of the local Jewish community."³⁴ Assabi tells how he once was quoted as saying that the Jewish Board of Deputies³⁵ had not made any statement against Apartheid in 40 years.³⁶ He writes that he received a letter from the executive director of the Board of Deputies correcting him: "It's not true. It's not that we haven't said anything for 40 years, we haven't said anything for 26 years."³⁷ Assabi finds this correction irrelevant. "Whether

³³ 33. Correspondence from Hillel Avidan, Chairperson of South African Association of Progressive Rabbis, March 4, 1998.

³⁴ 34. *Ibid.*, p. 11.

³⁵ 35. The equivalent of the Jewish Federation in the United States.

³⁶ 36. *Ibid.*, p. 11. The executive director Assabi refers to was probably Seamer Capillus.

³⁷ 37. Atalia Ben Meir has recently completed a Ph.D. dissertation on this topic. Atalia Ben Meir, *The South African Jewish Board of Deputies and Politics 1930-1978* (Durban: University of Natal, 1995). The broader historical debate over the role of the Jewish community during the Apartheid years is just beginning. See the fascinating articles in *Jewish Affairs: The South African Jewish Studies Journal*, edited by Professor Joseph Sherman of the University of the Witwatersrand, in a special volume on "Jews and Apartheid," Volume 52, Number 1, Autumn 1997.

40, 26 or 10, the organized Jewish community as a whole, maintained a roaring silence for far too long.”³⁸

Assabi insists that if Reform Judaism were going to abrogate the ritual realm and claim superiority in the ethical sphere, it is absolutely essential for the movement to be able to show concrete accomplishments in the area of social action. He states it was not the Orthodox rabbis who over the years taught their members that prophetic social justice takes preference to the literal word of ritualistic law. Rather, “we taught that, just as the American Reform movement does, only the relationship between what we taught and what we did was purely imaginary. And yet, based on this very teaching, we took the liberty of undermining the importance of ritualistic observances, without creating a meaningful substitute.”³⁹

Assabi does commend two rabbis for their activism. He praises Rabbi Benjamin Isaacson, who was trained as an Orthodox rabbi and became Reform because of his strong commitment to social justice. Eventually Isaacson became disillusioned with Reform and returned to Orthodoxy. Assabi also praises Reform Rabbi Richard Lampert, who was subjected to a police search of his home and eventually emigrated to Sydney, Australia, where he today serves as senior rabbi of Temple Emanuel North Shore. However, Assabi neglects to mention Rabbi Andre Unger, a Holocaust survivor who served in Port Elizabeth and who had to leave the country when his visa was not renewed due to his very aggressive attacks on Apartheid. Since Unger went on to serve as a Conservative rabbi in New Jersey with distinction and was a leading civil rights proponent in the U.S. during the 1960s, he could have served as a model for Assabi.

³⁸ 38. At a 1996 academic conference, “Jewry at the Frontier,” held at the Kaplan Centre for Jewish Studies and Research at the University of Cape Town, Claudia Braude created an uproar with her aggressive condemnation of the South African rabbinate under Apartheid. The audience, mostly scholars from South Africa and abroad, were divided in their response to the thesis that few rabbis have done their utmost to undermine Apartheid. See Claudia Braude, “South African Rabbinic Writing Under Apartheid,” paper presented at “Jewry at the Frontier” Conference, August 11-14, 1996.

³⁹ 39. *Ibid.*, p. 11.

One can only assume that because Unger had left South Africa 20 years before Assabi's arrival, Assabi felt that mentioning a rabbi he had never known would serve no useful purpose in making his argument.

Assabi further argues that the Reform movement has not answered the challenge of the religious needs of the individual in South Africa, nor has it fulfilled the spiritual needs of the South Africa Jewish community. Neither has it offered a viable alternative to the then-unique South African Jewish predicament of living as religious beings under a repressive government.⁴⁰

As proof, Assabi argues that as of the early 1990s, the Progressive movement constituted about 10 percent of the South African Jewish population, which at that time was estimated to be between 90,000 to 100,000. Thirty years ago it was exactly the same percentage of the Jewish population, and 40 years it was almost the same percentage as well.⁴¹ Assabi asks, “Does that mean that all we can ever aspire to is less than 10% of South African Jews? Well, if that is the case, maybe we're not needed—maybe this community can do as well without us—as seems to be the case.”⁴²

Assabi writes that one indicator that the Reform movement has been a failure is that not only has it not grown, it has actually diminished in numbers.⁴³ He states that it is only because of the large number of conversions done by the Reform movement that the movement has not diminished even more.⁴⁴

Having thus criticized both Orthodox and Reform Judaism in South Africa, Assabi has gone about developing his own Conservative-style movement. The author uses the term

⁴⁰ 40. *Ibid.*, pp. 11-12.

⁴¹ 41. *Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁴² 42. *Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁴³ 43. *Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁴⁴ 44. On Reform conversion in South Africa, see Dana Evan Kaplan, “Jewish Religious Conversion in South Africa Today,” *CCAR Journal*, Fall 1997, pp. 58-68.

“Conservative-style” because Assabi’s idiosyncratic views and approach have permeated every aspect of his work. One of the areas in which Assabi adopted a Conservative rather than Reform approach is in the training and education of conversion students. The Reform conversion process in South Africa is widely viewed as minimal in education requirements and very lax in personal observances.⁴⁵ Assabi was determined to create a more serious education program, as well as a system that would take personal ritual observance much more seriously. According to Cantor Steinman, their conversion program was part of an ongoing education program aimed at Jews by birth and prospective converts alike. After an initial interview by either Rabbi Assabi or Cantor Steinman, the couple (if there is a couple involved) commit themselves to a basic Judaic course that runs once or twice a week for a period of 12 to 13 months; lectures run for 2 hours, including a half hour lesson in Hebrew reading. In addition, they undertake to complete all written projects required and attend all religious services and congregational activities.⁴⁶

This was certainly a far stricter policy than that which typified the Reform conversion process in South Africa. Even if one takes into account that Assabi and Steinman were probably unable to fully enforce the requirement to attend all services, the desire to hold prospective converts to such a standard was exceptional for a non-Orthodox congregation.

Steinman also writes that “they are tested periodically and face a final written examination at the end of their course. We are also planning a practical, oral-type examination to test their proficiency in the more practical aspects of Jewish observances.”⁴⁷ Again the stress on ritual observances was highly unusual. Steinman writes that if prospective converts pass the examination and wish to become Jews, they then undergo an interview with a *beit din*.

Uncircumcised men must submit themselves for circumcision, men already circumcised for

⁴⁵ 45. This view is widely held in the general Jewish Community. It is a view I agree with, although obviously many in the Reform movement would dispute this assertion.

⁴⁶ 46. Correspondence from Roy Steinman to the author, February 8, 1993.

⁴⁷ 47. *Ibid.*

hatafat dam brit. Reform policy in South Africa requires circumcision but not hatafah. Finally, all candidates require tevilah, where Reform policy offers it as an option. Assabi's conversion policies are, therefore, much closer to those of the Conservative movement than to South African Reform.

Another area in which Assabi takes a basically Conservative approach is Halachah. The issue of Halachah will be discussed at depth here because it is the key factor in demonstrating that Assabi has moved out of the Reform movement ideologically as well as institutionally and has embraced Conservative approaches and values. Because Assabi does not want to accept the definitions of either the Orthodox or Reform movements, he creates his own. The issue of Halachah will be discussed in depth here because the importance of Halachah in Assabi's thinking shows that he has moved from the Reform camp to the Conservative. Curiously, although Assabi wants to create a Judaism that takes Halachah very seriously, he states, "I am a proud non-Halachic Jew, and I never pretended to be anything else—even in my early 'Orthodox' days. I love Halachah. I have the highest respect for it. I teach it; I practice some of it."⁴⁸ Assabi writes that South African Jews mistake Halachah for Jewish folklore. "Halachah does not know about chopped herring or gefilte fish: only Lithuanian Jewish cookery does. It is not an ambivalent theophosophy. It is not concerned with what is 'good.' It does not deal with personal salvation nor with pleasing divinity. There is nothing altruistic about Halachah nor is it intended to be used as a tool of authority."⁴⁹

Further, Assabi does not believe that the institution of the South African Chief Rabbinate is in the spirit of Halachah. "The position of 'Chief Rabbi' is as foreign to Halachah as bacon and eggs is to Jewish functions," he writes. According to Assabi, Halachah demands unreservedly that children suffer for the mistakes made by their parents (mamzerut) and that

⁴⁸ 48. A. E. Assabi, "Halachah and the Modern South African Jew," *Jewish Affairs*, May 1992, p. 30. The article appears on pp. 27-30.

⁴⁹ 49. *Ibid.*, p. 28.

equality between the sexes not be practiced under any circumstances, no matter where and when. It demands that one does things for no other reason but unquestioning acceptance of the absolute yoke of the mitzvot.

Further, “reason” does not even enter the parameters of Halachic thought, Assabi writes. “You shall not murder” is of equal importance with the prohibition against mixing wool and linen in one's clothing. “Visiting the sick” is incumbent upon every Jew even if the sick person is a total stranger or even an enemy. “Morality” is also a nonHalachic concept. “According to Halachah it is as moral to bar a divorcee from marrying her lover because he cannot prove that he is not a Cohen, as it is moral to feed the poor or to insist upon distinctions between Jews and non-Jews in inter-personal relations,”⁵⁰ Assabi writes.

Assabi acknowledges that Halachah is a complicated system of law and, like any other legal system, cannot be qualified. “Civil law is not always reasonable, it is certainly not moral, and for many it is highly objectionable,” he writes. “All the same it is the law, and that is all it is. It need not be good, bad or indifferent, it just needs to be.”⁵¹ The only difference between Halachah and civil law lies in the fact that when one breaks the civil law, one can be caught and expect some form of social punishment. This is not so when breaking an Halachic law (other than in Israel, where Halachic law operates in some areas, such as family status)⁵²—at least the punishment is not administered by man. Halachah, according to Assabi, demands self-discipline to the extent of total submission to the law no matter what it says and no matter whether one believes that there will be both reward and punishment at the end of days or not.

“Viewed in this light,” Assabi asserts, “it is surely becoming obvious that the relationship between Halachah and the modern average South African Jew is in most cases non-existent, and

⁵⁰ 50. *Ibid.*, p. 28.

⁵¹ 51. *Ibid.*, p. 28.

⁵² 52. Avidan, *op. cit.*

in some cases purely imaginary.”⁵³ Assabi goes on to say that the most difficult concept for modern South African Jews to come to terms with is that Judaism does not know how to distinguish between different kinds of Jews. “As far as Halachah is concerned one is either a Jew or one is not. No matter what you do or do not do, a Jew is a Jew is a Jew.”⁵⁴

Assabi then makes the rather extreme statement that according to Halachah there can only be Halachic Jews and nonHalachic Jews. “All other adjectives, prefixes and suffixes such as Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist, secular, observing, believing, nationalist and what-have-you, are of no consequence whatsoever. They may indicate an organizational affiliation; they may even point out one's potential aspirations; more often than not, they prove how wrong one is in one's self-appraisal. They say absolutely nothing about what kind of Jew one is.”⁵⁵

Assabi believes that Halachic Jews are those for whom the total, uncompromising acceptance of every particle of Halachic law is not a matter of choice or convenience, but a matter of life and death. They cannot embrace Halachah in theory only and still consider themselves to be Halachic Jews. A great many Jews observe the bulk of the requirements of Halachah but reject only some seemingly insignificant parts of it. They are not Halachic Jews, Assabi says, for again by definition, nothing in Halachah is insignificant or of lesser importance than anything else.

Further, Assabi says that Halachah cannot be practiced by proxy. Belonging to a shul ministered to by an Halachic rabbi does not automatically make one Halachic. “The futile attempt to equate 'Orthodoxy' with the Halachah is the worst Jewish fraud of our time,” he writes, “it is the expedient ploy of 'kashering' nonHalachic Judaism and legitimizing public and

⁵³ 53. *Ibid.*, pp. 28-29.

⁵⁴ 54. *Ibid.*, p. 29.

⁵⁵ 55. *Ibid.*, p. 29.

private discretion of Halachah under the guise of 'Orthodoxy' which turns out, in 'Halachic' terms, to be a spineless and deceptive compromise."⁵⁶

Assabi says this phenomenon came about because if "Orthodox" shuls were to serve Halachic Jews, as a few who refuse to call themselves "Orthodox" really do, they would have no following in the secular society in which they live. Their survival depends on compromise, and indeed by compromising, they certainly retain within the "fold" Jews who would otherwise be totally lost. "Orthodox" rabbis could, if they so wished, only serve communities made up of Halachic Jews. If indeed the equation between "Orthodox" and Halachic were correct, the prerequisite for joining an "Orthodox" shul would not just be the ability to prove that one is a Jew, but the ability to prove that one is a Halachic Jew. "The only reason this is not done is that 'Orthodox' shuls would lose the majority of their members overnight were they to accept in practice what they avow in theory. There are very few Halachic Jews in this country,"⁵⁷ Assabi writes.

Assabi adds that followers of Jewish "secularism" or "humanism" are therefore as Halachic as followers of "Orthodoxy," with one difference. Humanists or secularists would not, he writes, have the audacity to sit in judgement on the practice and belief of other Jews, and would not persist in pretending to be what they are not. Neither would genuine Halachic Jews. "For the Neturei Karta in Jerusalem, 'Orthodoxy' as you know it, is a macabre joke."⁵⁸

He concludes by thanking Orthodox Synagogues in South Africa for their constructive and instructive work. But, he says, "I only wish that South African Jewish lay leaders would have the courage and intellectual integrity to free themselves from the yoke of their own self-deception. Some of their rabbis may be Halachic; the vast majority of their members are not. If the liberties already taken were used to establish a creative Jewish alternative for the twenty-first

⁵⁶ 56. *Ibid.*, p. 29.

⁵⁷ 57. *Ibid.*, p. 29.

⁵⁸ 58. *Ibid.*, p. 29.

century, we would all be able to stop defending the outcome of the unfortunate events of the nineteenth century.”⁵⁹

Among his own attempts to “establish a creative Jewish alternative for the 21st century,” Assabi put together the first experimental siddur in South Africa; it has now been printed in a formal edition called *Siddur Chadesh Yameinu*. It attempts to be more traditional than *The Gates of Prayer*, the American Reform Siddur used by the Progressive movement in South Africa, and at the same time be theologically more liberal than the standard Orthodox prayerbooks. He has also edited texts for special services, such as a Yom Hashoah service.⁶⁰

One of Rabbi Assabi's most important priorities was to renovate the sanctuary, removing the classical Reform style from the Bimah and building a more traditional central Bimah. This work was done over time from 1994 to 1996.⁶¹

Despite these accomplishments, Assabi has attracted few followers outside of his congregation, and he has not been able to draw financial or intellectual support from outside. He has had other failures as well. For example, he attempted to start a day school, named after his late wife, Yael, that was intended to be a nonracial school for Jews, non-Jews, whites, and nonwhites.⁶² But the school, built on the principles of Conservative Judaism, failed to attract enough students and had to close its doors.

Concerning a related issue, it is true that Reform Judaism has failed to hold young people after their Bar Mitzvahs. In some of the larger South African Orthodox synagogues there are large social networks of teenagers and/or young adults present on Shabbat. Shalom has not,

⁵⁹ 59. *Ibid.*, p. 30.

⁶⁰ 60. Arvit Le-Yom Hashoah, *A Yom Hashoah Service*. Compiled and edited by Rabbi A. E. Assabi. No publication details listed.

⁶¹ 61. *Shalom!* Semi-monthly newsletter of the Shalom Independent congregation, November 1994. Kislev 5755, p. 1. See also the *Shalom Independent*, June 1997, p. 10.

⁶² 62. “First Open Progressive Jewish Day School in South Africa,” *The Jewish Voice*, February 1991, p. 13.

however, been able to draw these age groups in any substantial numbers. As Paula Slier, aged about 21, wrote in 1994: “Looking around shul one notices that there is a stark lack of people in their late teens and early twenties. This observation has confused me as one would imagine university studies would be attracted to Shalom's ideology encouraging young people to think for themselves and to move away from the rationalist approach to Judaism. The hypocrisy in the South African Orthodox community is blatantly obvious and it never ceases to amaze me how thinking individuals seem contented to live with it.”⁶³

But young adults may be flocking to Orthodox synagogues for social conformist reasons rather than ideological intellectual ones. Louis Hurwitz, the Congregational unofficial shammash and ex-treasurer, touched on this reality when he commented that he was confident that the “...problem of our dearth of young adults will be alleviated gradually as the social side of the shul's activities increases,” beginning with the development of a coffee club for young adults.⁶⁴

Just as Reform Judaism has found it difficult to communicate its ideology successfully, so, too, has Conservative Judaism had great trouble in transmitting its values. As Paula Slier states, “Young Jews today are being attracted to groups like Ohr Sameach which provide a tight and fundamental religious framework within which they can learn and develop. The young Jew of today is searching for answers in a time of political uncertainty and at a time in her or his life when the path ahead is still being forged. In this context it perhaps makes sense that an interpretation of Judaism like that of Conservatism is unappealing and frightening as it is not clear cut in its answer and forces the individual to take more persuasive responsibility for him or herself.”⁶⁵

⁶³ 63. Paula Slier, “Young Shalom Women,” *Shalom! Semi-monthly Newsletter of the Shalom Independent Congregation*. November 1994, Kislev, 5755, p. 8.

⁶⁴ 64 *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁶⁵ 65. Paula Slier, *Ibid.*, p. 8.

One persistent problem was that congregants came only when Rabbi Assabi officiated at services. Just as the vast majority of congregants followed Rabbi Assabi from temple to temple when Imanu-Shalom was a two-building congregation, so, too, did congregants come to Shalom when Rabbi Assabi was there and stayed when he was away. Colin Plen, then editor of the newsletter, wrote in 1994, that when Assabi was away for 3 weeks to attend the nuptials of his older son in Israel, Friday night attendance dropped drastically. Plen joked, “We naturally assumed that all the absentees had accompanied him to Israel to give him moral support.”⁶⁶

Clearly morale at the Synagogue has dropped over the past year or two. In the March 1997 newsletter the editors write that “...in the past the shul was the center of a community's social and spiritual life. It seems now that it plays very little part in our life because we want to devote so little time to it.”⁶⁷ In April 1997, newsletter editor, Lionel Slier, wrote, “The Shalom Congregation reaches this Pesach with a certain amount of uncertainty. We are just two years short of our 50th year anniversary and there is a major attitude problem that can be summed up in one word—apathy....”⁶⁸

This apathy can be attributed to several factors. First, the building of a Conservative Congregation in isolation from a Conservative movement is deeply problematic. The lack of other congregations with which to exchange experiences creates a closed-in atmosphere in which it is very difficult to truly thrive.

In addition, Conservative Judaism in South Africa faces all of the same problems that Reform Judaism faced and faces in terms of being seen as illegitimate and inauthentic. The greater degree of traditionalism attracts people in theory, but in practice Jews will cling to Orthodoxy, which has more prestige socially. As long as Orthodox affiliation remains of a higher social status, nonOrthodox Judaism will remain a fringe phenomenon. At the same time,

⁶⁶ 66. *Ibid.*, p. 1.

⁶⁷ 67. Lionel and Paula Slier, *Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁶⁸ 68. *Ibid.*, p. 1.

Rabbi Assabi's relatively strict standards on conversion—Halachic, education, and attendance—have closed off the main reservoir of new members for the nonOrthodox movements.

It also appears that Assabi's influence is waning. Because he failed to maintain the Imanu-Shalom structure, many outside observers believe that Assabi has failed to achieve the leadership of South African nonOrthodoxy. "Rabbi Assabi has lost," stated Rabbi Jack Steinhorn, spiritual leader of the Green and Sea Point Orthodox Congregation, the largest congregation in Cape Town. "He could, and should, have become the leader of a whole movement, and now all he has is one, medium-sized congregation."⁶⁹

Perhaps in recognition of this, Assabi has repeatedly expressed his determination to return to Israel, ostensibly to be closer to his family. When the author shared with him the opinion that a Reform-trained rabbi such as himself would have limited employment prospects in Israel, he responded, "I will find a position there."⁷⁰

Regardless of what his personal future holds, Assabi is optimistic about the future of Judaism. He disputes the pessimists who claim that Judaism will not survive in the 21st century. He says that these predictions are based on the Jewish experience as we know it today, and he agrees that the current expressions of Judaism will not survive for long. But that does not mean that Judaism is doomed. He points out that none of the past experiences of Jewish communities survived in their entirety. "Any student of Jewish history knows that the secret of Jewish survival is its unique ability to adapt to new surroundings and conditions only in expression and form, without losing or jeopardizing its very essence," he writes. "Judaism will survive into the twenty-first and any future centuries because its expression will continually change and its original essence will constantly rejuvenate."⁷¹

⁶⁹ 69. Interview with Rabbi Jack Steinhorn, August 1996.

⁷⁰ 70. Interview with Rabbi A. E. Assabi, Winter 1996.

⁷¹ 71. Ady E. Assabi, "Catharsis and Rebirth—The Judaism of the Future," *Jewish Affairs*, Spring 1995, p. 85.

Assabi believes there are other practical reasons why Judaism must and can be made to survive. For one, he says, Judaism has never been anything other than a human attempt to seek a truth and a purpose. “The twenty-first century will need a great deal of truth and purpose as we begin to rectify the damage caused by the folly of our progenitors in our relationship with the environment, with each other, and with God,”⁷² he writes. Second, Judaism will survive because the local “kikhel-and-chopped-herring Judaism” has for too long obscured and minimized the collective Jewish experience. Assabi writes, “This experience is so rich and fertile, so filled with wisdom and depth, so versatile and unique, that it must be rescued from the obscure embrace of ignorance and bigotry; it must be rediscovered and implemented in the new world.”⁷³

Third, Assabi believes Judaism will survive because of the unbroken chain of values and spiritual fixtures handed down from generation to generation, which is more holy and sanctified than anything else in Judaism. Which ever way one chooses to keep or ignore it, shabbat is a renewal of the human spirit: “Whether commanded by God or evolved by men is not nearly as relevant as the fact that shabbat was sanctified by lives and deaths, and that it remains the legacy and essence of our intrinsic being.”⁷⁴ Fourth, it will survive because Judaism has a universal apocalyptic vision of a better world that is exceptional. “Once unwrapped from its external, albeit important particularistic layers, it speaks of a brotherhood of humankind in the here and now for which it is worth living and striving.”⁷⁵

⁷² 72. *Ibid.*, p. 86.

⁷³ 73. *Ibid.*, p. 86.

⁷⁴ 74. *Ibid.*, p. 86.

⁷⁵ 75. *Ibid.*, p. 86.

Endnotes