

Is There a Future for Jews in South Africa?

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Dana Evan Kaplan

Although most American Jews who take an interest in such things have focused their attention on the 1990 national Jewish population survey and are looking forward with interest to the 2000 survey, many quantitative and qualitative studies of Jews in other parts of the world have insights that may contrast sharply with the reality as experienced by American Jews. One such study has just been issued on the Jews of South Africa.

BARRY KOSMIN and three other researchers have released a fascinating new report on the Jews of the new South Africa that confirms long-held assumptions about the community while giving us new insight. The study was done as a cooperative venture between the Kaplan Centre for Jewish Studies and Research at the University of Cape Town and the Institute for Jewish Policy Research, an independent think tank in London. Entitled *Jews of the 'New South Africa': Highlights of the 1998 National Survey of South African Jews*, the report summarizes the key points of a nationally representative sample of a thousand adult respondents who were interviewed for the survey. 464 were men and 536 were women. They had a median age of 45, with 87 percent having been born in the country. 650

lived in Johannesburg, 250 in Cape Town, 50 in Pretoria, and 50 in Durban.

The Institute for Jewish Policy Research report has confirmed what many have long assumed – that more than 60 percent of South Africa's Jews do *not* see a long-term future for the Jewish community in that country. And yet, only around 12 percent of the total sample of the study report that they are very likely to leave the country over the next five years. A full 87 percent agree with the statement: "It is likely that most Jews under the age of thirty years do not see a future for themselves in South Africa." Only 5 percent disagreed. 61 percent disagreed with the statement: "There will still be a substantial Jewish community in South Africa in 20 years." Only 22 percent agreed.

AND yet, Jews today live in a time of unparalleled peace and prosperity. Anti-Semitism is at record lows. Despite this, the Jews of South Africa seem to be becoming increasingly unhappy. Rather than feeling more attached to their country of birth and culture, they appear less and less comfortable in “the beloved country.”

So why do South African Jews seem so uncomfortable? While only around 12 percent of the total sample reported that they are very likely to leave the

country within the next five years, this is a relatively very large percentage of the Jewish community of any country.

Further, those immigrating are disproportionately young couples under the age of 40. Also, one must take into account that whoever immigrates within the next five years will join the tens of thousands of South African Jews who have already immigrated. There is already talk that a majority of the Jews in Perth, Australia are native South Africans.

THE migration patterns of South African Jews are important for a number of reasons. The South African Jewish community, which numbered a little under 120,000 people at its height, has been an important community politically and financially for the Jewish people. Regarded as the most Zionist community in the world, South African Jews have supported Israel to a far greater degree than American Jews. In earlier years, many South Africans made *aliyah*, although both the percentage and the total number moving to Israel have declined in recent years. The largely Lithuanian community brought to South Africa a very strong and traditional sense of Jewish identity. That vigorous ethnic

identity was reinforced by the apartheid governments, which encouraged ethnic as well as racial groups to retain social distinctiveness and separateness. This policy had the inadvertent impact of reinforcing a national, traditional form of Jewish identity and making it unlikely that substantial numbers of Jews would assimilate into the general population, since there *was* no “general population.” There were whites and blacks, of course, but among the whites, there were Afrikaners, British, Greeks, Portuguese, Jews, and so forth. The country was a very comfortable place to live, but it was like a cocoon. People minded their own business, they didn’t mix too much with people from other backgrounds, and if they were smart,

they kept their noses out of whatever it was that the government was doing. If they wanted to be socially progressive, there were certain avenues for helping poverty-stricken blacks without overly endangering themselves. Those who stepped over the line became known as dangerous revolutionaries and went into exile or were imprisoned.

All of this has changed, of course. The new South Africa is a country that is constitutionally committed to the equality of all men and women, whites, blacks, and all other peoples. The constitution includes the guarantee of the protection of the rights of gays and lesbians, one of the very few such documents in the world to do so. Yet our coreligionists in South Africa are not happy. The

fact that they are not puzzles us.

JEWS are not so worried about anti-Semitism, which might have been their chief preoccupation. While only 8 percent believe that anti-Semitism has decreased in the past five years and 35 percent believe that it has increased, nevertheless most respondents “tend to believe that it is more of a problem elsewhere than it is in their own country.” Whereas only about 20 percent of those polled believe that anti-Semitism is a “major problem” in South Africa, almost 50 percent believe it to be a major problem in the world generally.

Their major concern is a strong unease about the direction that the new South Africa is taking and what place they as whites may or may not have in the evolving new order. 63 percent disagreed with the statement: “The ‘new South Africa’ has benefited me,” while only 16 percent agreed.

What is a bit more surprising is that 52 percent disagree with the statement: “The ‘new South Africa’ has benefited the people of South Africa as a whole.”

The most important reason for this response is the rise in crime. When respondents were asked to rate South Africa in terms of personal safety, an overwhelming 90 percent majority rated South Africa as either “poor” or “very poor.” And these respondents understand that this crime does not just affect the Jewish community. Indeed, the poor may be far more vulnerable to theft, assault, and even murder.

But this doesn’t mean that middle-class or even upper-class people – white or black – are safe. For many the transformation has been traumatic. Used to a quiet life of what appeared to be stability and security, many have had great difficulty adjusting to the dramatic changes taking place all around them.

THERE are other concerns as well. Affirmative action has been accelerated, giving preference to previously disadvantaged groups, especially black people. This policy has been justified on the grounds that, since the formal establishment of apartheid in 1948, and long before that, blacks and other disadvantaged groups

were heavily discriminated against in both education and employment. Therefore, the unemployment that is so rampant in the country is a direct result of these policies, and the only way to correct this is to allow those previously discriminated against to be given opportunities and assistance.

Unemployment in the late 1990s was officially calculated at around 33 percent of the adult population, but the Reserve Bank has estimated that the actual formal unemployment rate was more than 40 percent. This is socially as well as economically catastrophic.

According to a study done by University of Durban-Westville researchers, there are as many as 7 million squatters living in the country today. These squatters are destitute, living in tin shacks with no water or electricity. Even if this estimate turns out to be on the high side, there are, without a doubt, millions of people living in desperate circumstances, with no hope of achieving a minimal quality of life.

But while the vast majority are concerned about the fate of those who suffer from such

deprivation, their primary concern remains themselves and their families. And most believe that the terrible poverty makes it inevitable that crime will remain at very high levels or even increase further. When the researchers asked whether respondents agreed or disagreed with the statement, "The quality of my life in South Africa will improve over the next five years," 65 percent disagreed with the statement. In addition, 59 percent of the respondents believe that people are less willing to help each other than they were five years ago.

This increasing social isolation may be the root of one of the most fascinating findings of this study. Contrary to our experience in the United States, where we are experiencing higher rates of assimilation and a dramatic increase in the percentage of intermarriages, the Jewish community of South Africa is very insular and is becoming much more so. Socially, most South African Jews continue to socialize with other Jews. 56 percent report that all, or nearly their entire group of friends, is Jewish, while an additional 23 percent report that a majority are.

The researchers compare these percentages with those of British Jews and, to no one's surprise, discover that far more South African Jews are likely to have predominantly Jewish social network. The same trend is true with intermarriage rates. In South Africa, an amazing 93 percent of couples are intramarried in comparison with 77 percent in Britain and 72 percent in the United States.

EVEN more interesting, the South African Jewish community is becoming more religious. 14 percent of all South African Jews regard themselves as strictly Orthodox and 61 percent consider themselves traditional. Traditional generally means that they belong to an Orthodox synagogue, share Orthodox attitudes and beliefs at least to some degree, but are not strictly practicing observant Jews. Thus, it is consistent with this finding to discover that South African Jews have a much more conservative theological perspective than do Jews in either Great Britain or the United States. When asked whether they believe that

"the Torah is the actual word of God," 36 percent of the respondents said that they did, in comparison to 15 percent in the UK and 13 percent in the U.S.

The same pattern holds true down the line. 40 percent will buy meat only from a kosher butcher, whereas only 7 percent would consider buying pork or bacon. 92 percent refrain from working on Rosh Hashanah, and 91 percent claim that they fast on Yom Kippur. A full 71 percent respond that they prefer to stay home on Friday night, rather than go out to a play or a movie, or a similar non-Sabbath activity. 30 percent go to synagogue on most Sabbaths, or even more frequently. An additional 10 percent attend about once a month and 31 percent go on at least a few occasions in addition to the High Holy Days. Only 11 percent had only gone once or twice in the preceding year, with 9 percent admitting that they had not attended synagogue at all. In comparison with these numbers, the survey done in Great Britain indicated that 28 percent had not attended synagogue at all in the previous year.

SINCE a very high percentage of South African Jews have affiliated as Orthodox, there has not been a pronounced shift over the past decade. The last study had been done by Professor Allie Dubb for the Kaplan Centre in 1991. Dubb found that 78.5 percent of respondents regarded themselves as Orthodox. Kosmin found that 79 percent were currently affiliated with an Orthodox synagogue, 0.4 percent with Lubavitch, and 1 percent Sephardi, for a total of 84 percent Orthodox synagogue affiliation.

What these numbers don't indicate is the tremendous change in the religious environment of the South African Jewish community. South African Jews are turning to Orthodox Judaism with a passion and devotion seen nowhere outside of Jerusalem and a handful of other centers. Young couples whose parents had driven to synagogue are now making sure to buy condos (the security is better than private houses) within walking distance of

one of the many *shtetls* popping up through the northern suburbs of Johannesburg. The *Baal Teshuva* movement has been growing exponentially. *Ohr Somayech* has several study and prayer centers in Johannesburg alone. *Aish Hatorah* has recently opened as well. Orthodoxy in South Africa has succeeded in putting across a message that traditional Judaism can provide logical as well as emotionally satisfying answers to the problems of everyday life.

THE religious dynamics of the community reflect the unusual and indeed downright bizarre nature of life in the new South Africa. Amid tremendous optimism about the future in theory, one senses a deep feeling of pessimism about how things will actually work out for the whites of the country in the long term. Journalist Immanuel Suttner told me that "if I had to give a psychological profile of the Jewish community, I'd say there is a lot of fear and insecurity – partly of physical attack, but just of

options being shut down, of existence now becoming less and less viable, of distrust that the experiment can work, or the rhetoric about a rainbow nation." South Africa is an experiment and it's an experiment that the Jews of the country are unwilling to put all of their bets on. While many Jews will remain in the country for the foreseeable future, others will continue to immigrate. This immigration will have a dramatic impact on Jews in other Diaspora communities, including that of the United States. The sad reality is that the 21st century will see the consolidation of world Jewry into fewer and fewer places, and South Africa will hold less and less of them.

Dana Evan Kaplan is a research associate at the Center for Jewish Studies, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, and rabbi of Congregation Emanu-El B'ne Jeshurun. His article, "Politics and Piety in the 'Religious Marketplace'" appeared in the July/August issue.

