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EDITED BY HELEN EPSTEIN

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EDITOR'S NOTE

FOR SEVERAL MONTHS NOW, I have been editing the papers of 24 women working in different fields and in different places throughout the world. These women also come from very different parts of the Jewish community and work in a variety of settings: some are academics; some are writers; some are social workers. All originally presented papers in 1997 and 1998 at the Hadassah Research Institute on Jewish Women located at Brandeis University. Reading their work, thinking about their ideas, and sometimes struggling to translate them into English has been an unexpectedly absorbing experience for me and I've wondered what it is, exactly, that I find so rewarding. I've concluded that spending time in the company of an international, interdisciplinary group of Jewish women begins to fill a most basic and persistent need in me: the need of human beings to see themselves sympathetically represented and reflected in their culture.

As a Jewish woman growing up in post-war America, I rarely saw any semblance of my reflection in the mainstream culture. Although I grew up in the middle of New York City where almost everybody in my immediate world was Jewish, representations of Jews were absent from the museums I visited, the movies I saw, or the books I read in school. Except for *The Diary of Anne Frank*, which I consider problematic reading for a young Jewish girl, there was no Jewish heroine in the books of my childhood. I identified with active, adventurous girls like Jo March, Nancy Drew or Cherry Ames and liked reading about the dramatic lives of European and English queens. I didn't then notice that none of the women I was reading about were Jewish, or that Archie and Veronica seemed to have no Jewish friends; that there were no Jewish Mouseketeers; or that there were no Jewish girls in *American Girl* or *Seventeen*.

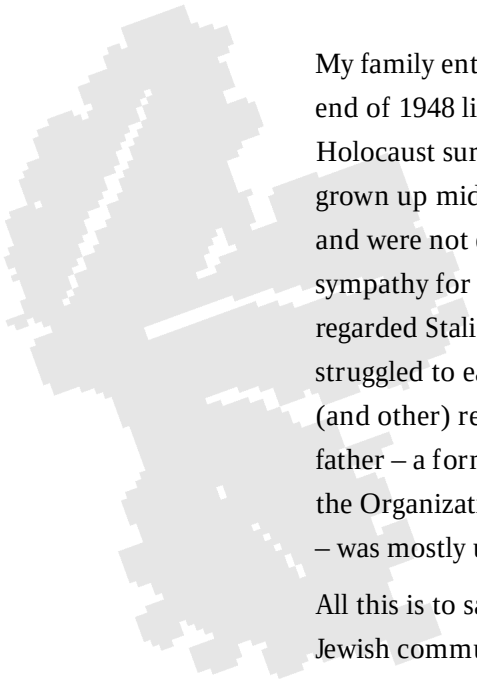
I was in my forties and listening to West Indian writer Jamaica Kincaid speaking at the Isabella Gardner Museum in Boston, when I suddenly perceived their absence (like Pnina Motzafi-Haller in her essay about *mizrahi* women in Israel, I applied the insight of an African-American woman to my own life). Jamaica Kincaid had done a brilliant and audacious thing: invited to choose her favorite painting at the museum and speak to a large audience about the reasons for her choice, she had beamed an old snapshot of her mother on the museum's large screen and talked about it.

All of us in the audience, of course, had been accustomed to viewing the parade of art history on such a screen – from the Greeks to the Renaissance masters to the Impressionists and Abstract Expressionists. We were accustomed to oil portraits and elaborately framed photographs. The effect of Kinkaid's snapshot was shocking and made the author's point more forcefully than her words: Had we ever seen the image of an ordinary West Indian woman on the walls of a museum? Had we ever contemplated her face? Her body? Her surroundings? Her life? How did we ascribe value to this snapshot when it was viewed in a private photo album, in a newspaper, or here, in the context of other portraits in the museum? We had all read or at least heard of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, but what about the invisible woman? In this case, what about an entire sub-culture usually hidden by the majority African-American minority culture?

I viewed many of these working papers as such snapshots that raised some of these and many other questions.

In addition to experiencing a kind of invisibility as a Jewish girl in America, I also felt an invisibility in the Jewish community as the daughter of Czech Jews (of *ashkenazi* descent on my mother's side; *sephardi* on my father's). We lived on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, where there were many Jewish refugees from Central Europe but where the definition of Jewish culture was determined by people who, like the majority of American Jews, were of Russian and Polish descent.

This particular group, I later learned, had jettisoned their working-class, Yiddish-speaking parents (as well as their working-class culture) in the Bronx, or Brooklyn, or Queens, or the Lower East Side. They were West Siders now, middle-class, highly educated, new Jews, who frequented the American – not Yiddish-language – theater and Lincoln Center, collected art, read the cultural sections of the *Times* and the *New Yorker*. The men worked as professionals; the women were delighted to be full-time homemakers in the image of Betty Crocker. Most were political liberals who had flirted with Communism or Socialism in college; they had friends or aquaintances who were blacklisted and were deeply affected by McCarthyism. They had also been deeply affected by the events of the second world war and were in every way invested in a prototypically 1950s American mainstream lifestyle.



My family entered this Upper West Side Jewish milieu towards the end of 1948 like creatures from another planet. My parents were *both* Holocaust survivors and political exiles from Communism. They had grown up middle-class, did not speak Yiddish, had never seen a bagel, and were not especially interested in Israel. Although they had no sympathy for McCarthyism, they were staunch anti-Communists who regarded Stalin as another version of Hitler. During the 1950s, they struggled to earn money and to adjust to America. Like many Jewish (and other) refugee women, my mother supported the family. My father – a former Olympic water polo player and sometimes officer of the Organization of Czech Sportsmen in-Exile-in-the Western World – was mostly unemployed until I was ten years old.

All this is to say that, as I was growing up, I felt as invisible in the Jewish community as I did in the American one. And when I had finished growing up, although I was counted as an American Jew, I still did not feel like American Jewish culture included me. G.B. could have been describing the Epsteins when she writes "Iranian Jews do not easily mesh with the majority Jewish culture. Those who live in North America feel marginalized: their experience has been that American Jews know nothing about them... The Iranian Jewish diaspora is triggering a re-examination of hegemonic notions of American Jewish identity. Iranian Jews with their own ethnic and cultural tradition are challenging the American Jewish culture that was brought from Eastern Europe and that is presumed to apply to all arriving Jews regardless of their background. This ashkenazi standard for Jews is similar to the WASP standard for assimilation to North American society."

The issue of cultural hegemony is addressed in an even more dramatic way by South African Sally Frankental."It is a truism to note that all Jewish communities, in all times and places, reflect the context in which they are located," she writes."In the South African case, the segregationist policies of the colonial authorities, the Boer republics, and the Union, followed by the apartheid system of the past fifty years, form the inescapable frame for all who live in South Africa... the disproportionate numbers who arrived from one region, Lithuania, gave the community an unusual degree of homogeneity relative to other diaspora communities. This was reflected in the virtual absence of Hasidism (until the 1970s), in the particular form of Yiddish

spoken, and in a variety of foods and customs particular to Lithuanian Jewry. In addition, the east Europeans' lack of exposure to Reform Judaism meant that Reform or Progressive Judaism was established in South Africa only in 1933, far later than in most diaspora communities." All this, of course, shaped the lives of South African Jewish women.

In reading these papers, I was struck by how many kinds of Jewish women there are, how profoundly we are influenced by our country of origin and the continuity or discontinuity of Jewish life within its borders, and by our experience of such factors as entitlement, dislocation, prejudice and outsider status. History, particularly this century's history, has not treated all Jewish women equally. In writing their papers, some authors – like Katalin Talyigas of Hungary – was reconnecting to and reconstructing the history of Jews in their country for the first time. Others, like Micaela Procaccia, who lives in Rome, is steeped in her history and writes with the surety of long immersion in the past: "In the year 1537, a Roman Jewish working class girl named Lariccia cried for days because of an unwanted match," begins her paper. "The day before the *qiddushin,* or betrothal, a washerwoman named Clemenza heard Lariccia saying to her father: "I do not like this man, nor do I desire him. I refuse him and reject him, nor do I want him." She declared herself to be "the unhappiest of all women," and on the next Shabbat, she told her father that she would not agree to let "the *qiddushin* become *nissu'in.*' Her father then hit her with the butt of a knife."

The biographical section of this volume itself makes for fascinating reading – as much for the wide geographical spectrum represented as for the facts each woman deemed important to include. As different as each woman is, I find much in common with her. It was easy for me to enter into her world.

Although this first HRIJW collection of writing by Jewish women around the world is inevitably uneven and incomplete, it is a respectable beginning. The authors represented here are, in some countries, part of a larger scholarly and cultural project of researching and writing about women's lives; in others, they are pioneers – the first of their kind. In some countries, they have been able to draw on a large body of data and literature; in others, they are themselves creating that data and literature. Ana Lebl from Split (now in Croatia) lives in an aging and relatively poor community of only 100 Jews

with scarce resources; Americans Riv-Ellen Prell and Pamela Nadell enjoy the support of Jewish Studies as well as Women's Studies departments at major American universities. Our Israeli and Latin American contributors bring both these realities into yet another perspective.

Some of the authors chose to spend time reworking their original presentations; others were content to have published what they originally presented. Many have struggled to express themselves in English – their second or third or fourth language. As a writer who has often had to communicate in foreign languages, I admire their pluck; as editor, I hope they forgive my journalistic bias, my many questions, and my inadvertent mistakes. Parts of all their work – even where it represents a starting point – moved and inspired me. I hope it will move and inspire you.

Helen Epstein
October, 1999

SOUTH AFRICAN JEWISH WOMEN

by Sally Frankental

It is a truism to note that all Jewish communities, in all times and places, reflect the context in which they are located. In the South African case, the segregationist policies of the colonial authorities, the Boer republics, and the Union, followed by the apartheid system of the past fifty years, form the inescapable frame for all who live in South Africa. The complex processes involved in the post-1990 unraveling of the apartheid regime constitute the country's current socio-political reality.

This paper is a preliminary attempt to situate the little that is known about South African Jewish women, in relation to the Jewish community and the wider society.[1]

The South African Jewish community is a highly organized,relatively affluent community that numbered approximately one hundred thousand Jews in 1991.[2] The two largest cities, Cape Town and Johannesburg,are home to eighty-five per cent of all Jews, with small and diminishing populations in Durban and Port Elizabeth, and tiny scatterings elsewhere. Despite these small numbers and continuing emigration, the South African community remains one of the ten largest Jewish communities in the world.

It resembles other (especially western) diaspora Jewish communities in many respects – in its relatively recent immigrant origins, in its pro-Israel stance, in its vigilance against anti-Semitism, in its concern to promote cultural continuity and to fight assimilation. It differs from other diaspora communities in several respects, for the most part in degree rather than substance. In addition to the particularities of the apartheid context, it differs with regard to its origins, its relative internal homogeneity and harmony, and the level of its Zionist commitment.

Two fundamental 'social facts' have underpinned the community since its inception. First was the heterogeneity that greeted the nineteenth and early twentieth century immigrants. The sheer linguistic, racial and cultural diversity of the local population provided a particular social space for minorities, a space which both facilitated and reinforced Jewish collective identity and identification. Second, by virtue of their skin color, all Jews – men and women – found themselves beneficiaries of asocial system built on race and exploitation. Despite a brief moment when their 'whiteness' was questioned, they were inevitably members

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[1] There is virtually no research on Jewish women in South Africa. The 2213 entries in the *Bibliography of South African Jewry* include only ten items under the heading 'Women' and seven are short journal articles (Belling, 1997:91). Well researched though these may be, none can be considered a major study. As a consequence, this paper was prepared for the IRIJW conference on the understanding that it could only be an impressionistic piece, based on intimate personal and professional knowledge of the community, and on a few telephonic interviews with key women.

However, the Kaplan Centre for Jewish Studies and Research at the University of Cape Town has rich, untapped primary source material in its archives and interested researchers are hereby invited to visit.

[2] Numerically, the Jewish population peaked at 118,000 in 1970, constituting 3.1% of whites; it had reached its highest proportion in 1936, at 90,645 or 4.5% of the white population. The 1991 survey (Dubb, 1994) estimated community size at between 92,000 and 106,000, constituting approximately 2% of whites and 0.5% of the total population. The report includes a discussion of the difficulties entailed in estimating the size of the Jewish population in South Africa. The Kaplan Centre has recently conducted a second comprehensive national sociodemographic survey but its results were not yet available at the time of writing.

of a 'pigmentocracy' – a minority, but privileged and part of the dominant class, an unprecedented experience for Jews.

Anglo-German Jews established the first congregation in Cape Town in 1841, and Jews were prominent among those who responded to the mineral discoveries of the 1860s and the 1880s. However, it was the arrival of some forty thousand east European Jewish immigrants in the three decades between the 1880s and the outbreak of World War 1 that consolidated the community. This wave of immigrants was certainly not monolithic – it contained the familiar array of socialists, pietists, Zionists, and Bundists to be found in many of the east European societies of the period. Despite this considerable internal diversity, however, the disproportionate numbers who arrived from one region, Lithuania, gave the community an unusual degree of homogeneity relative to other diaspora communities. This was reflected in the virtual absence of Hasidism (until the 1970s), in the particular form of Yiddish spoken, and in a variety of foods and customs particular to Lithuanian Jewry. In addition, the east Europeans' lack of exposure to Reform Judaism meant that Reform or Progressive Judaism was established in South Africa only in 1933, far later than in most diaspora communities.

A second difference from other diaspora communities is the very high level of commitment to Zionism and to Israel. The strength of the Zionist movement had been evident since the formation of the first *Chovevei Zion* Society in South Africa in 1896 and the resolution, in 1898, to establish the South African Zionist Federation (SAZF), just one year after the first Zionist Congress in Basel, Switzerland. It is noteworthy that the Zionists were the first Jews to create a country-wide organizational framework, preceding the formation of a representative Jewish organization to serve as a liaison with the authorities.[3] That the majority of recent South African Jewish emigrants have chosen to settle not in Israel but elsewhere in the diaspora has caused some disappointment among Zionists everywhere. Nevertheless, South African Jewry demonstrates higher per capita rates than most diaspora communities on a range of 'Zionist', or pro-Israel, indices: number of olim, proportion affiliated to Zionist organizations, financial contributions to Israel, number who have visited Israel and frequency of visits, and, at least until very recently, the number of youth involved in Zionist youth programmes.

A third difference of degree, clearly related to the previous two, is the high level of cohesion within the community. Overlapping organizational memberships result in relatively little organizational tension or competition. The deep divides between non- or anti-Zionists reported for many Jewish communities, whether from an earlier period or currently, has never been a major feature of Jewish life in South Africa. The overwhelming identification with Orthodoxy, measurable by affiliation irrespective of practice, and the correspondingly small proportion of Progressive Jews (still popularly called 'Reform' and estimated at 13%), together with the absence of any other Jewish 'denomination,' has also kept religious tensions to a minimum through most of the community's history. Although the religious profile of Johannesburg, the city with the largest concentration of Jews, has shown a significant increase in the number of observant Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox in the last two decades, it is still accurate to characterize South African Jewry as 'non-observant Orthodox', or 'three-times-a-year' Jews.

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[3] The South African Jewish Board of Deputies, modelled on the equivalent British body, is today the umbrella representative organisation of the community. It was founded in 1912 as an amalgamation of the previously separate Board for the Transvaal and Natal, created in 1903, and the Cape Board, created in 1904. By 1955, 327 different organisations were affiliated to the Board, of which 24 were women's societies (Saron & Hotz, 1955:396).

An additional feature that contributes to communal cohesion and distinguishes South African Jewry is the very high proportion of Jewish school-age children who attend private Jewish day schools – 85% in Cape Town and 70% in Johannesburg. The majority attend schools which are part of a national network that styles itself "national-traditional" or essentially Zionistic rather than Orthodox. Other well-established schools include the Orthodox Yeshiva College, and the ultra-Orthodox network of schools run by the Lubavitch movement.

One conclusion that can be deduced from the above is that South African Jews share a high degree of ethnic group consciousness and manifest strong Jewish identity. Yet the consensus, the cohesion and even the rise in levels of observance, are less a product of internal Jewish forces and impulses than they are a response, albeit not always self-conscious or acknowledged, to apartheid's threats and constraints. For example, the local diversity at the turn of the century might have been irrelevant for Jewish communal cohesion, indeed might have facilitated assimilation, were it not for the segregationist, and later apartheid, policies which actively and purposefully differentiated the general population and encouraged separate group identities and identification. Heightened ethnic consciousness thus acts as both cause and consequence.

An additional aspect, directly pertinent to women, is that South Africa is both a very religious and very patriarchal society.[4] Christianity is dominant, with many denominations represented among all classes and 'racial' categories. Years of relative isolation from world trends tended to exacerbate the existing tendency towards conservatism so that although there are some women clergy in South Africa, this is still an exceptional, and in some cases contested, phenomenon. The position of women is little different in Islam, Hinduism or African traditional religions although some African women have achieved relatively high status through participation in women's church groups.

Yet at the same time, several women's organizations have played prominent roles among different sectors of South African society. In the 1920s and 1930s in particular, Afrikaner women's organizations were effective both in their welfare work and in mobilising support for Afrikaner nationalism. The ANC's Women's League has been a powerful political and social force among African women in particular, and the Black Sash is a well-known civil and human rights monitoring group with a well-established record of protest against the former apartheid state.

During the 1980s, and especially after the unbanning of the ANC (African National Congress) and the SACP (South African Communist Party) in 1990 and the beginning of the liberalisation of South African society, a variety of women's organizations – liberal, feminist, Marxist, religious, party-political – both in principle and on the basis of lessons learned from revolutions elsewhere, insisted on women's liberation together with, and not after, political liberation. The sentiments expressed in the 'struggle' slogan of working for a 'democratic, non-racist, non-sexist society' were incorporated into the new constitution and the Bill of Rights. As a result, South Africa has some of the most progressive gender-related legislation, constitutional clauses, and even dedicated structures and procedures in the world. As in many places, however, there is a gap between intentions, even when enshrined in law, and implementation, and the 1998 CEDAW (Convention Against Discrimination Against Women) report to the United Nations documents that gap for South Africa.

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[4] Convention Against Discrimination Against Women Report, 1997.

In addition, and congruent with an authoritarian (national) regime and notions of exclusivity, it was not surprising that in the past the organised Jewish community showed little tolerance for internal dissent. It was also, and with considerable historical justification (see Shain, 1994) sensitive to its own vulnerability. Since the liberalization of South African society, with its efforts towards democratization and its embrace of diversity in all spheres, Jews too are beginning to express their internal differences more openly, and tensions, conflicts and even intermarriages are on the rise. In short, as South African society 'normalizes', so South African Jewry undergoes a diaspora version of normalization and becomes more like other diaspora Jewish communities.

How have these historical processes and conditions of existence impacted on Jewish women in South Africa?

For the east European immigrants, supporting their families and fashioning a cohesive communal structure were of primary importance. To this end, congregations were established and consolidated throughout the country, and a proliferation of Jewish organisations catered for a wide range of interests and needs in both rural and urban areas.'Ladies' Guilds' were attached to most congregations and their activities, particularly in the smaller rural communities, often extended well beyond synagogue matters. However, seldom, then and now, did they serve on the main synagogue committee.

Not surprisingly in an immigrant community, welfare organisations of various kinds were among the earliest to be established. As might be expected, women were active in all of these wherever they were to be found. Welfare societies to help new arrivals, to look after orphans (and later, the aged and widows), *chevrot kadisha, bikkur cholim* societies, and soup kitchens were among the many kinds of association formed and/or run by women.[5]

Women were also active in the Zionist movement. Indeed, according to Shimoni, "from the beginning, women conducted the bulk of Zionism's practical work in education, fund-raising and organisation." Yet it was not until 1928 that one of the leading women Zionists became a member of the SAZF's Executive in her own right.

The *B'noth Zion* Association (Daughters of Zion), a women's Zionist organisation whose membership grew from 60 to 160 in the first two months of its existence, was established in Cape Town in 1901 as an affiliate of *Dorshei Zion,* an all-male Zionist society (Widan, 1984). Among other things, the BZA took responsibility for the distribution of the Jewish National Fund 'blue boxes', contributed to the newly formed WIZO (Women's International Zionist Organisation) in Palestine, initiated Hebrew classes for girls and started the first Hebrew nursery school – but its funds were controlled by the men! However, by 1930, the year white women in South Africa gained the vote, the *B'noth Zion* finally took control over the monies it raised and gained representation on the Dorshei Zion.

In 1932, the (national) Women's Zionist Organisation of South Africa was formed. By 1967, its membership had grown to 17, 000 and it had become "by far the most numerous and active component of South African Zionism."[6] In addition to fund-raising for a variety of Zionist funds and for their own projects, all branches ran wide-ranging educational and cultural programmes

[5] see Abrahams, 1955; Norwich, 1993; Saron & Hotz, 1955; Schrire, 1993.

[6] Shimoni, 1980:252.

Of course Jews also engaged in broader societal processes, beyond specifically Jewish interests. Their contribution to the economy, 'the arts, and sport has been documented in a variety of publications with little focus, however, on women.[7] The painter Irma Stern and the novelist Nadine Gordimer are probably the only Jewish women in their fields known outside of South Africa.

Politically, it should be noted that despite their upward mobility through the century, Jews in South Africa have never constituted a significant political force. Their small number, the 'English' control of commerce, and the constituency-based parliamentary system within a Westminister framework from 1910 to 1994, precluded their access to real power. Yet their involvement in political processes, and most particularly in opposition politics, has always been disproportionate to their number.[8] In each era, and in each political space, Jewish women have been among the activists. Bertha Solomon, liberal parliamentarian and noted advocate on behalf of the underdog, Ray Alexander, Communist and tireless trade unionist, were just two of the most prominent. In a later period, Ruth First was murdered as a direct consequence of her willingness to confront the apartheid state, and Helen Suzman gained international recognition as a champion of the oppressed.

The Jewish individuals who participate actively in the cultural and public domains in South Africa clearly do so as individuals, and not as representatives of the Jewish community. However, many of those noted for their political activism were, in the Isaac Deutscher sense, 'non-Jewish Jews'. Thus, in relation to public Jewish figures in general, but to the anti-apartheid activists in particular, the relationship between their Jewishness and their behaviour continues to be questioned and debated.[9] On the other hand, a few women, known to identify as Jews, serve in various senior positions in the new democratic administration. This is truly a new phenomenon that invites investigation.

Of course there were always Jews who specifically wished their activities to be associated with the label 'Jewish.' Foremost among these was the Union of Jewish Women. Founded in 1930 as a national secular organisation for Jewish women, it is the only Jewish women's organisation to work closely with non-Jewish women's organisations. It undertakes projects of all kinds, for the benefit of Jews and Gentiles, and has been at the forefront of many developments in coloured and black communities. One of its proudest achievements was the early establishment of pre-schools in disadvantaged communities. Like the Women's Zionist Organisation it also conducts an extensive educational and cultural programme.

In the past, one particular consequence for women of the privileged status of whites, was the availability of affordable domestic labour. A full-time, live-in domestic worker and child-minder was a commonplace and one did not have to be rich to afford this liberating luxury.[10] Jewish women were thus available for communal work to a much greater extent than their counterparts in other countries, and in fact constituted a particularly important resource for the day to day conduct of Jewish communal life. Furthermore, in all centres, and at least until the late 1970s, a significant proportion of the members of the Synagogue Ladies'

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[7] see Arkin, 1984 (Ch.9); Kaplan, 1986),

[8] see Shain & Frankental, 1997; Shimoni, 1980 (Ch.9)

[9] Frankental & Shain, 1993; Shain & Frankental, 1997; Suttner, 1997.

[10] The relationship between Jewish employers and their domestic workers, and the changes in those relationships in response to the changing political climate in the country, and in comparison with non-Jewish employers, would be one worthwhile area of investigation.

Guilds and/or the Union of Jewish Women were also members of the Women's Zionist Organisation (WZO), resulting in valuable cross-fertilization of ideas, and considerable co-operation among Jewish women's organisations.

However, as women have joined the work-force in increasing numbers, all voluntary organisations have experienced a drop in membership. In addition, with the general changes in South African society, the employment of domestic workers is no longer as widespread a practice. Neither the Union nor the WZO espouses what could be called a feminist philosophy nor does either body consider feminist consciousness-raising a primary responsibility. One consequence is that, with individual exceptions, those Jewish women who are involved with organisations which fall under the broad rubric of 'the women's movement' are not involved with Jewish organisations; and those who work for and with Jewish organisations do not, for the most part, join other kinds of women's organisations. Indeed, although Jewish women were among the founders of the Black Sash, they were not conspicuous among its members in the 1970s and 1980s. A further consequence has been that those young women who encounter feminism at the university are not attracted to Jewish women's organisations once they leave college, even if they were active in Jewish youth or student movements while in high school and college.

This raises questions of continuity and of leadership. While these are issues that concern most Jewish communities in the diaspora, the South African context is particular in several respects. Foremost among these is the fact that the community is aging rapidly, not only because of the demographic trends common to all liberal democracies – lower birth rates, delayed marriage, a rising proportion of well aged – but especially because of emigration. And those most likely to emigrate are always the most mobile: talented and skilled young singles or childless young couples, and older wealthy people, often benefactors of the community. From a Jewish perspective it is to be hoped that the strong ethnic identity of South African Jews will lead them to contribute positively to Jewish life wherever they find themselves, and evidence from around the world suggests that this is indeed the case. From a South African perspective, faced with a situation of diminishing resources and growing need, within a country undergoing rapid and radical transformation, strong lay and professional leadership is essential.

Somewhat ironically this situation bodes well for potential leaders among Jewish women. Historically, women have usually achieved positions of leadership within women's organisations before attaining leadership positions in other Jewish organisations. And, as is common everywhere, women are more likely to be second-in-command to male chairpersons, school principals or presidents – even on committees such as welfare, where they are the majority. In South Africa, welfare organisations and welfare professionals had more dealings with, and more knowledge of, both state structures and disadvantaged communities than any other sector of the organised Jewish community. In the new political dispensation that experience is invaluable and I believe it no accident that the current Chairperson of the Board of Deputies, the first woman to hold this position, has a background in welfare work. In addition, there are growing numbers of women in law and in business, two traditional source areas for Jewish lay leadership. This, coupled with the propensity of diaspora leadership for the 'political correctness' of the moment, may well see dramatic changes in the participation, and status, of women in the South African Jewish community.

In similar vein, the assumption should be tested that the rise in outmarriage is a consequence of the dilution of Judaism or Jewish identity, or that South African Jewry is simply 'catching up' with Jews in the rest of the free world in the conditions of modernity and post-modernity. It is equally possible, at least in the South African setting, that a combination of structural factors underlies this relatively new phenomenon: the sociological success of the day schools – which means that most young Jews in a given city know each other from school; escalating emigration due to factors in the wider society, leading to demographic imbalances in terms of both age and gender.

In the religious domain, most identifying South African Jews, men and women, fall into the paradoxical category of 'non-observant Orthodox' (i.e., are affiliated to Orthodox synagogues but practise little). In these congregations there has been no sign of any new possibilities for women in ritual or synagogue life. Quite the contrary: it is the opinion of many that with the influx of Lubavitch and other ultra-Orthodox rabbis, the *Beth Din* has become palpably more vigilant and more stringent in the application of *Halakha* in the past decade.

Despite the educational activities of the Jewish women's organisations, including those of the Reform movement, most Jewish women in South Africa know little about feminism and are isolated from the women's movement abroad. They have never heard of the women elsewhere in the world who have campaigned against barriers to women's full participation in Jewish life, nor are they familiar with the issues involved. Among the relatively small proportion of observant Jews, which includes the rapidly growing number of *ba'alei and ba'alot t'shuvah* in Johannesburg, there has been an exponential increase in educational and other organised activities for women, within an Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox understanding of women's place in the world. Indeed, the success of the *ba'al t'shuvah* 'movement' in Johannesburg (also an under-researched phenomenon) has wrought profound changes in the lives of a great many of the city's Jews. Because the 'outreach' (to Jews) programmes of a variety of religious groups have reached so many, the lives of their non-or-less observant kin and close friends have inevitably also been touched. The effects are visible and measurable: the dramatic increase in the number of Jews physically recognisable by their dress as Orthodox, the increased use of the *mikvah*, the introduction of an *eruv* in several residential areas, an increase in the number and variety of kosher eating places and increased patronage of them, the increased use of a *mechitza* at weddings, and, in contrast to any other city in South Africa, the marked increase in the number of non Sabbath-observers who attend synagogue services and *shiurim*.

Until very recently there was little, if any, contact between religious women's groups and other Jewish women's organisations. However, a new body, the Co-ordinating Council of National Jewish Women's Organisations, was founded in 1998, which suggests that there may be new-found recognition of the value of women working together.

There are also hints of other, less formal, change. Younger women, often those who have lived abroad and usually in North America, have experienced the kind of Jewish life that permits – or at least tries to promote – combining career, family and involvement in community. Difficult though 'having it all' has proved to be everywhere, it is gratifying to note small, but enthusiastic new beginnings in several places. At the initiative of young, well-educated, Jewishly committed women, several new ventures – study and

discussion groups for men and women – have begun in both Cape Town and Johannesburg. What is genuinely new is that the groups are unaffiliated to any existing organisations and that the exploration of controversial issues in Judaism and Jewish life, form their central agenda. In the past, even the recent past, sensitivity to their own vulnerability inclined Jews to value consensus to an unusual degree. The new groups deliberately recruit participants with distinctly varied degrees of (past) commitment to Jews and Judaism, reflecting the rich diversity that is South African Jewry in the new South Africa.

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