



Gideon Shimoni. *Community and Conscience: The Jews in Apartheid South Africa.* Hanover: University Press of New England, 2003. xv + 337 pp. \$40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-58465-329-5.

Reviewed by Jocelyn Hellig (School of Social Studies, University of the Witwatersrand)

Published on H-SAfrica (March, 2005)

South African Jews and Apartheid: Self-preservation at the Cost of Moral Righteousness

South Africa's Jews resemble other New World Jewish communities, but are unique because of apartheid. They were part of the privileged white class in a system of racial discrimination in which every detail of the lives of the black majority was dominated by a white minority. At the heart of this contemporary historic investigation by Gideon Shimoni, distinguished historian and head of Jerusalem University's Institute of Contemporary Jewry, is a moral dilemma. How were the Jews of South Africa—the only white religious minority in the country—to respond to the racist system of apartheid instituted in 1948 by a newly elected government, whose members, until that time, had been avowedly anti-Semitic and even pro-Nazi? What historic factors influenced the response of the community's leadership and what were the historic outcomes of that response? The record of South African whites in general is a stain on humankind's moral conscience, but what of South Africa's Jews? Do Judaism's moral demands and the Jews' own particular experience of oppression place them in a special category? Did the South African Jewish community act with or without a conscience? These are the primary questions that underlie Shimoni's study, which, in the light of the racist victimization Jews had recently suffered in Europe, amply demonstrates the particular poignancy of the South African Jewish experience.

The book focuses mainly on the way the South African Jewish Board of Deputies, whose task is to protect the community's civil and religious rights, to counter anti-Semitism, and to act as the Jewish community's

spokesbody on all issues of importance, responded to apartheid during the period 1948-1994. It was during this time that this iniquitous system of social engineering was established, rose to its heyday, and then began to crumble, ultimately to give way to a nonracial democracy through negotiations. Unlike early South African Jewish histories, like *The Jews in South Africa: A History* by Gustav Saron and Louis Hotz (1955), which were bent on stressing the positive contribution of Jews to society, this book is part of a more critical South African Jewish historiography that has been emerging over the last few decades.[1] Its main strength is its consistently rigorous historical approach, in that it painstakingly examines Jewish reactions against the backdrop of each set of circumstances under which groups or individuals operated, giving due weight to the factors, both internal and external, that shaped their decisions and actions. It is minutely researched with copious footnotes.

The historic record suggests that the Jewish communal response to apartheid, represented by the board, was very timid. Only in 1985, at its 33rd National Congress, did the board explicitly use the word "apartheid" and openly condemn it, by which time the Nationalist government itself was considering secret talks with the African National Congress. Individual Jews, however, were at the forefront of the struggle, Jewish radicals being disproportionately prominent among white anti-apartheid activists. It is this paradox that Shimoni's book seeks to explain, observing simultaneously that the mainstream of South African Jewry gravitated toward the cen-

tre of the political spectrum. Shimoni also considers a wide spectrum of other actors in the Jewish community. Among these are the rabbinate, the mainstream community, the business community, the Zionist leaders, the students, the Zionist youth movements and, as the Nationalist government began to “refine” apartheid, ridding it of some of its more crass racism, groups like Jews for Social Justice.

Retrospective judgment of the board’s actions is often too facile. One cannot second-guess history. No one could anticipate how the Nationalist government and its supporters may have reacted had Jews openly condemned apartheid. It certainly did not hesitate periodically to threaten and embarrass the community, such as when Israel condemned apartheid, and it made frequent scathing remarks about the high profile of Jewish radicals in the anti-apartheid struggle.

A Jewish presence in South Africa long preceded the institution of apartheid and the rudiments of the country’s racial system prevailed long before the term “apartheid” was used. But it is not possible to understand Jewish thoughts and actions without some knowledge of South African Jewry’s origins, character, and experience, which Shimoni supplies in the earlier chapters of the book, where he discusses the community’s relationship with the governing powers, particularly the National Party. This material is not new, as it appeared in his book, *Jews and Zionism* (1980), and in a chapter specifically on the South African Jews and the Apartheid Crisis in the *American Jewish Year Book, 1988*.^[2] What this book does is to bring the role of the Jews and their leadership, in both the apartheid and post-apartheid years, up to date. It analyzes a great deal of post-apartheid material: Jewish responses to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, new Jewish community outreach initiatives such as Tikkun, recent statements and actions of Jewish community leaders and members of the mainstream community, as well as appraisal of publications by and on the community. It is in the earlier chapters of the book, however, that the moral dilemma that is so pivotal to the book receives its rationale.

The year 1948 was a watershed, particularly for South African Jews. Only three years after the Holocaust and the brutal elimination of one-third of the world’s Jews, the National Party came to power in South Africa and, almost simultaneously, the State of Israel was born. South African Jews had always been pro-Zionist, having inherited from their Lithuanian forebears a deep love of and attachment to Zion. As Shimoni, in the *American Jewish*

Year Book 1988 observed, in the “comparative perspective of the English-speaking countries, there is no more distinctive feature of South African Jewry than its overwhelmingly Zionist character” (p. 27). Thus, there was considerable apprehension among Jews about the well-being of the fledgling State of Israel, but there was also deep concern about the racist policies of the new South African government. It was, however, not possible for the board to ignore the anti-Semitic record of the National Party, which had spearheaded the discriminatory anti-Semitic immigration legislation of the 1930s that had barred Jews from entering the country when they most needed refuge. This forced it into following a morally ambiguous path.

As it happened, the National Party changed course when it came to power. Immediately perceiving the need to woo all sectors of the white community in the face of what it saw as its mounting “race” problem, it entered into rapprochement with the Jewish community, suspending its anti-Semitic utterances and creating firm links with the State of Israel. Prime Minister D. F. Malan was the first statesman who, while in office, made an official visit to Israel. Zionism, Shimoni observes, was recognized by the consensus of South Africa’s political elite, whether in power or in opposition, as an integral manifestation of Jewish identity (p. 5).

Acutely aware that rapprochement could not be effected if it came out openly against the government’s apartheid policies, the board found itself in a dilemma. It could not easily bypass the ethical demands of Judaism, so it formulated a policy of “communal non-involvement in politics, except where Jewish interests were implicated” (p. 17 and passim). The board would take no part in the party-political struggle and issue no directives on how to vote. Jews were to make their own political decisions and act according to their individual convictions, a policy that enjoyed broad consensus in the community, though it did not go entirely unchallenged. All statements and actions had, however, to be made with “a due sense of responsibility” (p. 113 and passim). This functioned as an effective restraint should anyone wish to be openly adversarial, but it also introduced an unmanageable ambiguity for the community and marred the defensibility of the board’s policy. The board argued that there is no collective Jewish attitude to the political issues which citizens of South Africa are called upon to decide and, even if there was, it would be both undesirable and possibly dangerous to the interests and safety of the community to attempt to formulate it.

Where, however, do politics end and ethics begin? The strategy of non-involvement in politics undoubtedly impinged on the moral sphere concerning human rights and dignity and, at every congress of the board, whether to say something about those rights that transcended formal party politics was hotly debated. As Arthur Suzman, chairman of the board's public relations committee, articulated the problem in 1965, "though we may rightly be expected to speak with one moral voice—to do so without entering the political arena appears to be a well-nigh insuperable task" (p. 33). The issue was made even more complicated by the board's cautious caveat that, while every Jew has the right to his/her own political views and actions, these had to be expressed in ways "of course within the framework of the law." This strategy, through which the board delicately trod "its precarious path between non-embroilment in the political thicket ... and the impulses of moral conscience, had the effect of muzzling the communal voice in the face of indefensible laws (p. 32).

Cognizant of the moral price of this policy, the board relegated to the rabbinate the responsibility for providing guidance on the moral ethos of Judaism. It also relied on its affiliate organization, the Union of Jewish Women, to serve as its unofficial arm for practical social action both within and beyond the Jewish community, a task the Union achieved with great distinction. But the rabbis, too, though it was granted that they had a duty and right to speak on ethical principles relating to the problems of the day, were asked to "deal with those important matters in moderate and sober language and with a due sense of public responsibility." This acted as a brake on them as well. Although most rabbis concurred with the board's view, several rabbis spoke out, few conveying the ethical ambiguity as poignantly as the Chief Rabbi, Louis I. Rabinowitz. At the height of apartheid repression, he described the position of rabbi as "one of peculiar difficulty, which is well-nigh intolerable" (p. 41). He later criticized the caution the board had shown in "refusing to declare a Jewish ethical attitude on the vexed problem of race relations" (p. 41).

It is testimony to the difficulty of the board's task at that time and to Shimoni's non-judgmental approach that he says, "If ever there was a rabbinical personality powerful enough to make an attempt to lead the Jewish community into such a battle it was Louis Rabinowitz. That he did not do so is in itself evidence of the constraining power of the Jewish sense of vulnerability in the heyday period of apartheid" (p. 42). Lamenting that the strategy of non-involvement in politics inevitably "meant the ab-

dications of any claim to give a lead in these matters", Rabinowitz too was not prepared to risk the consequences for the Jewish community (p. 42).

Given the South African Jewish community's strong attachment to Israel, the latter's shifting attitudes to apartheid—from condemnation during the sixties, to close relations with the apartheid government in the eighties—affected local Jewish responses. When in 1961, during the second decade of apartheid rule, Israel entered the United Nations anti-apartheid campaign joining some African states in an attack on South African foreign minister, Eric Louw, it was perceived as a "stab in the back." Funds from South African Jews to Israel were stopped with the warning: "The Jews will thus have to choose where they stand ... with South Africa or with Israel. It can no longer be with both" (p. 51). In 1967, the Six-Day-War resulted in a wave of sympathy for Israel sweeping across white South Africa, but there were accompanying hostile actions from the Arab bloc and the United Nations, and, by 1974, there was an almost total severance of relations between Africa's nations and Israel. This wholesale desertion "virtually drove Israel into the [by then] all-too-willing arms of South Africa" (p. 156).

From the late 1970s, the unattainable, nonviable, and immoral nature of apartheid was becoming apparent. By the late 80s, with rioting and dissension from within the country, and international condemnation and sanctions from without, it was obvious to most, including the government, that apartheid was moribund. As this ideological shift developed, the boundary of moral criticism permitted by the white consensus was extended, culminating in the board's open condemnation of apartheid in 1985. This ideological shift is the key to understanding the increasingly emboldened political stance of the board. The turning point came in 1976 when the chairman of the board was able, for the first time, to imply publicly criticism of apartheid. In the presence of the Nationalist Prime Minister, B. J. Vorster, he stated, "Attitudes and practices, the heritage of the past, bearing upon the relations between our various racial groups are no longer acceptable ... we must move away ... from discrimination based on race or colour, and ... must accord to every man and woman respect and human dignity and the opportunity to develop to their fullest potential" (p. 136).^[3] Rather lame-sounding now, this was a watershed.

The book is largely chronological in its approach, the one break being an interesting discursus on Jewish radicals (pp. 73-93). Basing his argument on interesting biographical material, which makes the various individuals

come alive, Shimoni explores the possible reasons for the large number of Jews among white activists. He makes a distinction between Jewish liberals—those whites who sought to conduct their opposition within the parameters deemed legal by the regnant white policy, and radicals—those who moved beyond those parameters. A main cause of Jewish radicalism, he concludes, is marginality, or outsider status, in relation to the established elites and interests of white society, compounded by alienation from the normative life of the community. This was usually conflated with some degree of ideological radicalism imbibed either from the family or the social environment. Exposure to Zionism, he suggests, is another causative factor, but he finds no real evidence to bear out the theory that “Judaic values” were a decisive motivation. Deriving his explanation more from sociology than religious dynamics, Shimoni observes an inverse relationship between Jewish observance and political activism. Whatever the case, Jews were seen as prominent in moves to subvert the state.

No book on the behavior of the Jews in apartheid South Africa can escape controversy. So fraught a subject is bound to evoke either apologia or moral indignation. But Shimoni resists making moral judgements. The historian’s task is neither to excuse nor indict, but to present as objective, balanced, comprehensive, and empirically documented an account as possible. This is a task that Shimoni has achieved admirably, though there is unlikely to be consensus even on the nature or extent of evidence he has summoned to make his case. The board’s actions will always be variously interpreted from individual perspectives, as either “admirable discretion” or “reprehensible timorousness” (to use Chief Rabbi Rabinowitz’s 1961 words cited on page 40). Crucial in understanding the fears and concerns of South African Jews is the realization that, prior to the victory of the National Party, anti-Semitism “was a central point of consensus”

in Afrikaner nationalism. It was “the very linchpin of accord” between the adversaries in the Afrikaner ideological conflict. The community thus felt itself well advised to heed Dr. Malan’s warning, delivered at the December 1940 Transvaal Party Congress, that the Jews had best not forget “they were guests in South Africa” (p. 14).

The board may be judged to have failed in the anti-apartheid struggle, but changing South Africa was not its mandate. It was elected to protect the South African Jewish community, a responsibility it did not betray, notwithstanding the fact that its historical stance is often frowned upon in South Africa’s new democracy. “On the whole,” Shimoni concludes, “the community’s leaders, lay and religious, acted consciously but with deep pangs of conscience, although whether this at all qualifies as a morally redeeming factor will no doubt remain a point of contention” (p. 276). There is nothing in this record, he suggests, “deserving of moral pride,” but “neither does it warrant utter self-reproach. From a coldly objective historical perspective, this was characteristic minority group behavior—a phenomenon of self-preservation, performed at the cost of moral righteousness” (p. 276).

Notes

[1]. Gustav Saron and Louis Hotz, eds., *The Jews of South Africa: A History* (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1955).

[2]. Gideon Shimoni, *Jews and Zionism: The South African Experience, 1910-1967*. (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1980) and “South African Jews and the Apartheid Crisis” in David Singer and Ruth R. Seldin, eds., *American Jewish Year Book: 1988* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1988).

[3]. Part of a speech given by the board’s chairman, David Mann, at a banquet given by the board in honor of Prime Minister B. J. Vorster’s 1976 visit to Israel.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-safrica>

Citation: Jocelyn Hellig. Review of Shimoni, Gideon, *Community and Conscience: The Jews in Apartheid South Africa*. H-SAfrica, H-Net Reviews. March, 2005.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=10367>

Copyright © 2005 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication,

originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.