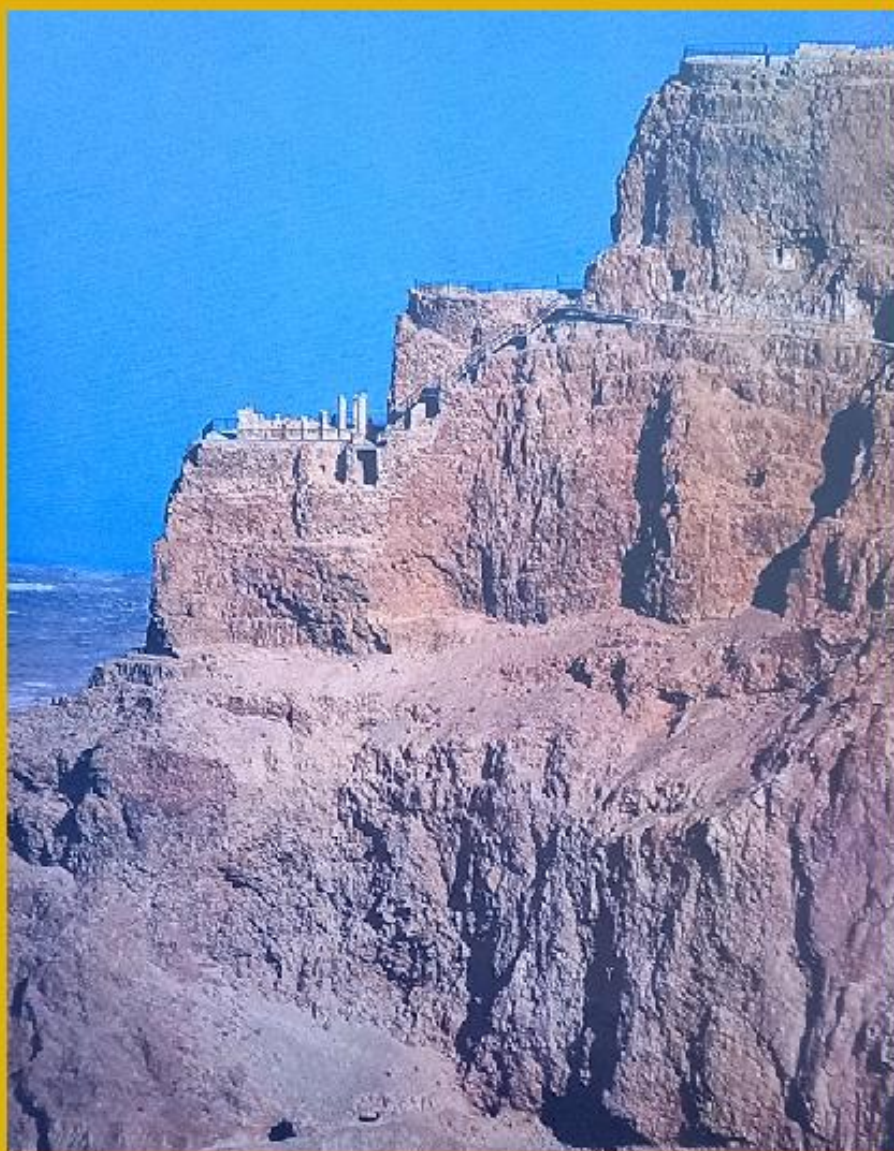


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WINGS AND THINGS: COMETS, CHERUBS AND THE ARK OF THE COVENANT

Gwynne Schrire

In Lewis Carroll's *Alice Through the Looking Glass*, the walrus and the carpenter go for a walk on a beach. "The time has come", the Walrus said, "To talk of many things ... and why the sea is boiling hot and whether pigs have wings."

This article will be talking about many things, not about wings on pigs, but about wings on horses, bulls, sun disks, seal impressions, mythical creatures and cherubs, not about whether, but why, they have wings. It will look at possible reasons why the wings symbol was introduced in ancient Egypt, what it came to symbolize, and its spread into other Middle East civilizations, including the Kingdom of Judah despite its monotheism.



**Winged horse, modern impression from Chalcedony cylinder seal, Assyrian, 14th–13th century BCE
(Metropolitan Museum of Art)**



**Winged bull from palace of Sargon II,
721–705 BCE, Louvre**

In 1967, Johannesburg's new Berea Synagogue commissioned the Hungarian sculptor Herman Wald to create a sculpture to be placed on either side of its Holy Ark [\[1\]](#). He designed a huge copper relief, which he called 'Wings of the Shekhinah'. The son of a rabbi and brought up in the Chasidic tradition, Wald wrote: "It is no simple matter to reconstruct a conception derived from Biblical days, when the Covenant was carried in the desert ... Bezalel ... did the carving of the Cherubim in which the Covenant was carried ... I had to take into account that the Law forbids the use of living figures in sculpture, so I could only use the non-figurative part of the Cherubim theme – namely, wings to embrace the Ark in which the Law is carried". [\[2\]](#)

Wald's 'The Wings of the Shekhinah' were suspended in the synagogue above and on each side of the Holy Ark as though sheltering and protecting it. Although the word 'Shekhinah', referring to the presence of Hashem in the place, is not found in the Tanach, and only dates from Talmudic times, the image of protective wings was used for a thousand years before the Exodus. Why wings?



Herman Wald's Wings of the Shekhinah displayed at a 2012 exhibition of his work alongside the Ark in the Tikvath Israel Synagogue, now the SA Jewish Museum.

According to the *Book of Exodus*, Hashem instructed Moses to build the Ark during his third 40-day stay upon Mount Sinai. When Moses came down from Mount Sinai, he told the Children of Israel to construct an Ark, giving them precise details as to how it was to be built and what materials were to be used (*Shemot/Exodus*, chapter 25).

From the two ends facing each other there were to be cherubs made of beaten gold with wings spread upwards to overshadow the throne of mercy. Verse 20 states that “the cherubim shall have their wings spread upwards, shielding the ark cover with their wings, with their faces toward one another; [turned] toward the ark cover shall be the faces of the cherubim.”

As Moses had just given them the Ten Commandments with strict instructions that they were not to make a carved image or any likeness of anything in heaven or on earth beneath or in the waters under the earth, this was a surprising instruction. Having just told them not to make any images; Moses now tells them to do so. (Herman Wald would not do so.) And why winged cherubs? This question has also concerned rabbis whose theories were outlined by Rabbi Dr. Zev Farber, senior editor of TheTorah.com, and a Research Fellow at the Shalom Hartman Institute's Kogod Center [\[3\]](#).

Rav Katina explains the symbolism of the cherubs' wings touching each other as representing love, calling to mind the love of Hashem to His people, Israel. He writes, “What Rav Katina does not explain is how the love of two creatures who are exactly the same should come to represent Hashem and Israel”.

Rashbam and Chizkuni both suggest that a cherub is a bird because it is depicted with wings. R. Bachya ben Asher says they are angels. As the cherubs are on top of the Ark, not underneath, Raanan Eichler suggests that the cherubs' wings were spread in a protective capacity over the Ark. The cherubs functioned as cover for what is below them, not support for what is above.

Is there another possible reason why winged cherubs were to be placed on top of the ark?

Moses was born in Egypt and grew up in the Egyptian royal court. He would have attended funerals and ceremonial events; he would have seen paintings and carvings of winged deities, winged discs, winged beasts, and winged dung beetles (scarabs) spreading their wings on either side of a king or deity as guardians and protectors. They played a crucial protective function in the iconography in Egypt and the Levant.

There was the winged sky goddess Nut. There was the winged goddess of justice Ma'at. There was Ra the sun god and creator of all the other gods who could fly across the sky on wings. Ra was also shown as a hawk, or as Khepri, the winged dung beetle, who rolled up the Sun in the mornings. Or as a man with the sun disk on his head. Or as a phoenix, heron, ram, serpent, bull, cat, or lion. Sometimes he was shown as a golden calf, where the rising sun was seen as a newborn calf emerging from the horizon. This latter association has been suggested as a reason for Moses' fury when the children of Israel built a golden calf to worship. [4]



Gertrude Shope, one of the women shown in the installation *All Our Mothers 1984-2024* by South African artist Sue Williamson, in a dress featuring the sun disk representing the Egyptian sun god.



Glazed faience winged scarab pierced in four places to attach to mummy wrappings. (26th Dynasty, c 664-525 BCE, Valley of the Kings, Thebes (sold at Christies. London, 1994)).

There was Horus, the god of the sky and the midday sun, depicted as a hovering winged falcon. Falcon cults were widespread. Feathered festival garments were worn when pharaohs wished to show visible symbols of their divinity, with long falcon tails sticking out from their garments[5].

Why falcons? For centuries falcons had been trained for hunting and feeding the family. Petroglyphs depicting falconry on horseback were found in Teymareh, Iran dating back as far as 7000 years ago. It was practiced in the Al Rafidein region, Iraq, about 3500 BCE and seen in 3rd millennium pottery sherds at Tell Chuerae, Northern Syria[6].

Although falcon hunting was found in Egypt's neighbours, there is no evidence that it was practiced in ancient Egypt until the discovery in Cape Town's IZIKO Museum of the mummy of a force-fed kestrel (a falcon), perhaps as a votive offering to Ra or perhaps an indication that they were bred for falconry [7]. Maybe the bird was only worshipped for its exceptional powers of vision and ability to fly at high speed to the heavens, but absence of evidence is not evidence of absence.



Hittite bas relief stele, Bogazkoy, Turkey, 13th Century (Louvre)[8]



**3rd millennium pottery sherd, Tell Chuerae,
Northern Syria (Goethe University)**

Egyptian temple walls, sanctuary gates and coffins had depictions of Horus the Behdetite as a solar disc with falcon wings. Horus was also a god of war, and the two wings could refer to his ability to protect the two lands of Egypt [9]. A later origin myth explained that he attacked the enemies of Ra, who then ordered Thoth, the moon god, to place the winged disk of the Behdetite in every temple. “You shall make this winged disk in every place that I have rested in the places of gods of Upper Egypt and the places of gods of Lower Egypt” [10].

The winged disk appeared above nearly every temple doorway, on coffins and the tops of many stelae, and was the most commonly depicted deity. It might have served like a protective evil eye talisman. The earliest example was found on the lintel of Pharaoh Pepi 1 (2332-2283 BCE), when it first got the name of the Behdetite, and was on his wife Queen Meretites’ funerary monument. Below is one found a thousand years later from a temple at Luxor. The custom even extended into Graeco-Roman times.

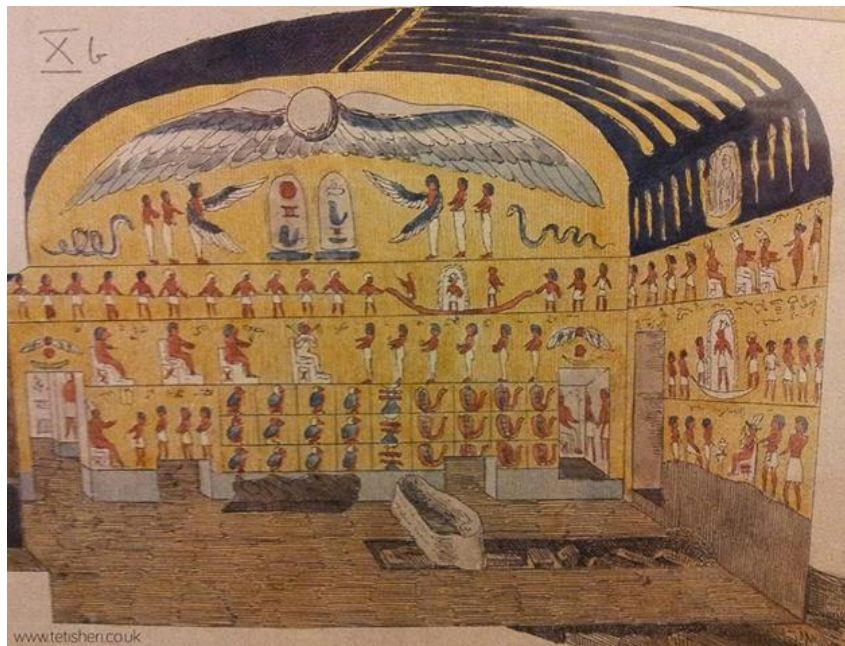


Royal cartouche of Rameses III (1186-1155 BCE) at Habu Temple, Luxor

These images would have been seen by Moses, who is thought to have lived in the 13th or 12th centuries BCE. The enslaved Children of Israel would have seen them as they went around their daily work, not only as bricklayers, but also as skilled craftsmen, carpenters and jewellers’ who might have been making these images for their overlords. How else could they have possessed the skills to build the Ark, and cast the golden calf and the winged cherubs (most likely using the

cire-perdue ('lost-wax') technique used in the Nachal Mishmar hoard of copper objects, possibly from a chalcolithic temple in Ein Gedi found in a Dead Sea cave (4500–3500 BCE), and used by the Egyptians from ca. 3500 BCE)? [\[11\]](#).

Winged cherubs spreading their wings in the symbolic protection of the Ark with its precious contents would have fitted into Moses' cultural background. To the escaped Jews they would have formed a logical decoration to protect the Ark just as winged objects did in the Egypt they had left.



Belzoni's drawing of Pharaoh Seti 1's burial chamber, 1279 BCE, Valley of the Kings. Note the coffin, the central winged disk at the top, winged gods below and winged sun disk below right [\[12\]](#).

But why wings? How else but with wings could the sun travel across the sky? How else but with wings could one travel to the heavens, to the gods who played a crucial role in determining the harvests?

This article looks at ideas recently advanced for another reason why winged images were so significant to ancient people and traces the use of winged images across three thousand years to the present.

Imagine the lives of early people, living a long time before agriculture and urbanisation, without telescopes or an understanding of science, gravity or electricity. They were as intelligent as we are, only lacking the knowledge we have accumulated since then. What did they think when they watched the changing night sky from their caves or grass shelters, in a world without light pollution? They understood causation – if they rubbed two sticks together, they could cause fire. If they hit an animal with a stone or arrow, they could cause the animal's death, if they were lucky. If they were unlucky, women would dig up roots or berries causing them to have food to eat.

There must be answers to the inexplicable phenomena they sometimes observed. Why did the moon change shape regularly? Was rain caused by tears from above? Whose anger created the thunderous shouts and fire-producing lightning? Even in Judaism there is a blessing to be recited upon seeing lightning. "... He who does acts of creation." To early people there must have been some enormous creative power up there in the sky. If they had wings, they would be able to go up and find out – wings that bees, birds and bats had, but humans lacked. If they had wings, they would be like the divine.

When the hunters became farmers, it became necessary to propitiate the mysterious power above that sometimes produced rain, sometimes withheld it, leading to famine. Religious beliefs developed as early as 140 000 years ago when skulls with polished smoothed-off edges were found in Herto, Ethiopia [\[13\]](#).

As they lacked wings, in order to be closer to this power above, people built places of worship on high hills. There they burnt incense and offerings so that the smell or the smoke would waft up to the heavens to ensure that the gods would look on them with favour and provide rain for their fields. Thus, the Parthenon on the Acropolis, the Aztec and Mayan temples, Babylonian ziggurats, and even the towering spires of churches and minarets of mosques were built. To this day Buddhist pilgrims climb many stairs to reach sacred temples erected high above.

The Ancient Egyptians also sought explanations. The sun must be a great god. How did it move? Wings must be an answer. The earliest winged image excavated was on a comb belonging to King Djnet at Abydos from about 2980 BCE [\[14\]](#). It showed a winged falcon in a boat sailing on a pair of wings, representing the heavens [\[15\]](#). Amun Ra, the sun god, travelled across the sky in a boat and was depicted as a falcon-headed man with a solar disk above his head. Was the sun moved across the sky by Khepr, a winged dung beetle? In the Old Kingdom period (2649–2150 BCE) Egyptians associated Ra with Khepr and scarab symbols became increasingly popular.



Hippopotamus ivory Comb with the name of King Djet, c. 2980 BCE.

During the reign of King Snefru (2575 – 2551 BCE) the falcon wings image was changed and a round disk representing the sun was inserted between the wings. This sun disk was found on the coffin of his wife Queen Hetepheres (2500 BCE) [16] and became ubiquitous. Sir E.A. Budge has translated c.110 BCE hieroglyphic inscriptions found on the wall of a temple in Edfu built by Cleopatra which provided an origin myth for the winged sun disk called Behedti that represented the sun god Ra [17]: *“Horu-Behutet (Behedti) flew up into the horizon in the form of the great Winged Disk, for which reason he is called “Great god, lord of heaven” unto this day. And from that day figures of Horu-Behutet in metal have existed. And Ra said unto Horus of Heben “O Winged Disk, thou great god and lord of heaven, seize thou them ... and he slew them and ... brought one hundred and forty-two enemies to the forepart of the Boat of Ra and with them was a male hippopotamus which had been among those enemies ... Then said Thoth to Ra, Horus shall be called Winged Disk, Great God, Smiter of the enemies in the town of Heben from this day forward.”*

And so it happened, and the winged disk was adopted in the town of Heben and all the other Egyptian towns. Israeli archaeologist Tallay Ornan has written that the age-old motif of the winged sun disc, which symbolised divine protection, is one of the most prominent Egyptian symbols that was adopted into the visual

traditions of the ancient Near East [18]. Through inter-cultural exchanges resulting from commercial, political and military interaction the wings began to appear in Anatolia, Syria, and Israel. Around 1785 BCE the Hyksos from the Levant, including areas of Canaan and Syria, invaded Egypt and adopted the Egyptian winged disc, which started appearing on Syrian cylinder seals in the middle of the eighteenth century, Canaanite scarabs between 1750-1550 BCE and in Hittite art. It was found on Nuzi, Mitanni and Middle Assyrian seal impressions dating to the fourteenth and early thirteenth centuries BCE.



**Hittite god Kumarbis under a winged disk, circa.
1600-1180 BCE [19]**

The winged disk was a remarkably persistent symbol. As an aside, when Sir Leonard Woolley was excavating the Hittite city of Carchemish in 1911 with the help of TE Lawrence (later Lawrence of Arabia), he wrote that on the lintel of the house erected for them to stay in “Lawrence amused himself by carving the winged sun-disk which was the emblem of the Hittite godhead.” Forty years later an archaeologist wrote to enquire about this ‘unpublished’ monument [20].

Fifteen hundred years after King Snefru, either Assyrian kings Tiglath-pileser I (1114-1076 BCE) or Assur-bel-kala (1073-1056 BCE) used the winged disk on the Broken Obelisk near the Ishtar temple at Nineveh. It was found on Neo-Babylonian cylinder seals dating to the 9th and 8th centuries [21]. From the 9th Century, the Assyrians went one better, erecting colossal, winged bulls and lions to protect the entrances to Nineveh. With wings the beasts could carry messages to the heavens. Judging by the protection offered by wings as in those of the cormorant in the picture below, it would be of little use in practice but psychologically it performed a reassuring (if symbolic) protective function that might remind the gods to look after them. But what if they actually saw an unusual large, winged object in the sky?



“The dawn cormorant welcomes you!”, Kalk Bay (Rens Rezelmann, *Daily Maverick*, 3/2/2025) [\[22\]](#)

Like a comet? The cyclical moon was regular and predictable. Rain, thunder and lightning from above often occurred. Not so comets. They seldom appeared and when they did, they were the most remarkable objects in the night sky, unlike anything else. What did they mean? Were they messengers of the gods, or omens of disaster? Was that winged object the cause of, or a prediction of, famine, disease or military disaster? Even Noah’s flood, it was claimed in Tractate Brakhot of the Babylonian Talmud, was caused by two stars that fell from *khima* toward the earth, *khima* [\[23\]](#) meaning a star with a tail, i.e. a comet.

In January 2025 many South Africans saw a large, winged object flying through their skies. This was Comet C/2024 G3 (ATLAS), a non-periodic comet, which reached its closest point to the Sun on January 13, 2025. Three months previously, another winged object had come hurtling through our skies. From 13-15 October 2024 South Africa was visited by Comet C/2023 A3 Tsuchinshan-ATLAS, the *brightest comet* since Hale-Bopp in 1997[\[25\]](#). When Hale-Bopp last visited 4,200 years ago, Pharaoh Pepi 1 had it carved in the Pyramid Texts on his burial chamber walls at Saqqara as a star followed by the hieroglyph for long hair to describe its wings [\[26\]](#). This might be why from the time of Pepi and his wife, the winged disk was used instead of wings alone.



**People watching Halley's comet in awe and fear, 1066.
CE, Bayeux Tapestry [24]**

(The word comet comes from the Greek *komētēs* for long haired star.) As for Comet A3, it completes an orbit around the sun every 80,660 years so we shall not see it again, but human beings 80,660 years ago would have seen it as it flashed by in their night sky dragging its wings or long hair behind it.



**Comet A3 ATLAS: a tail or wings and Telescope
NASA Astronomy Picture of 2025, January**

Seventy-five thousand years ago people living in Blombos Cave, in the Southern Cape (known as the cradle of human culture) were producing art by crosshatch patterns on a piece of ochre that had first been scraped and ground to create a smooth surface. They also drew on stones with pieces of ochre sharpened like crayons. These early humans would have noticed the passage of these rare comets, as well as the regularly repeated changes every 28 or 29 days in the shape of the moon, and in 1973, while excavating a cave in the Lebombo Mountains, near South Africa's border with Swaziland, Peter Beaumont found a piece of a baboon fibula with twenty-nine notches carved across it [27]. The bone is between 44,200 and 43,000 years old, according to radiocarbon datings. It looks like the calendar sticks still in use by San clans in Namibia. Could it have been a very early *lunar phase counter*? *If so, it would be the first known attempt to record astronomical observations.*

Fast forward many thousands of years, people were still observing the sky, had better equipment for carving and painting, had learnt to write, and there was still no light pollution. Using these skills they were able to record the appearance of such wondrous and unusual objects flying across the heavens with their wings trailing behind them. Such extraordinary sights would have been noticed all around the world.

During the Shang dynasty in China, around 1486 BCE, astronomer priests noticed a comet that they described as being one of the largest ever observed with an astonishing ten tails. The event was recorded in the *Divination by Astrological and Meteorological Phenomena* [28] in the Mawangdui Silk Almanac, compiled by Chinese astronomers of the Western Han dynasty before c.168 BCE, which accurately depicted the planetary orbits for Venus, Jupiter, Mercury, Mars and Saturn and lists 29 comets that appeared and the disasters associated with them, with information dating as far back as 1500 BCE [29].

Graham Phillips [30] has suggested that this awe-inspiring comet with its ten wings inspired superstitious fears around the world, influencing religious ideas. It was so spectacular that the Chinese portrayed what they had seen. They carved a round disk with rays or wings emerging from it, like a comet, like the comet in the Bayeux tapestry. The Chinese decided that the comet must be a new deity which they called Lao-Tien-Yeh, "The Great God", and illustrated it as a circle with ten straight lines radiating from it, like the comet.



The symbol for the god Lao-Tien-Yeh glyph that first appeared in China, fifteenth century BC

Egypt was already worshipping the sun god. At the same time, also in 1486 BCE, during the 22nd year of the reign of the Pharaoh Tuthmosis III, a bright rival to the sun arrived in the sky. Its priests recorded its appearance in the Tulli Papyrus as a brilliant disk much larger than the full moon, “a marvel never before known since the foundation of this land”. They also concluded that it must be a deity that they called Aten (meaning “sun disk”). Similar to the symbol for Lao-Tien-Yeh, the Egyptians depicted their new deity by a circle with a fan-shaped series of lines radiating from it. Both carvings look like a comet with tails – or wings.

During the Amarna period (c. 1353 – 1336 BCE), Pharaoh Akhnaton made Aten the sole god of ancient Egyptian state worship. Aten was the creator of all countries and peoples and cared for every creature. No statues of Aten were allowed as that was seen as idolatry. Aten was visualized as a disk with wings, like a comet, and the solar disk became the primary focus of worship [\[31\]](#).



Egyptian Aten symbol (Hans Ollermann/[CC BY2.0](#))

When Akhnaton died, the priests who had lost their controlling positions and tithes, regained their powers under his son Tutankhamen who reopened the state temples to their many other gods and re-positioned Amun Ra as the pre-eminent solar deity among all the other gods. The sky goddess Nut was shown earlier on his pectoral. His father would have been horrified.

Around this time, according to Phillips, other societies also started to worship winged gods looking like a comet. Phillips concluded that when they saw this spectacular winged comet flashing across the sky, they too decided it must be a god. The Hittite god Kumarbis, the Assyrian god Antum, the Mitannian god and the Persian god Ahura Mazda – all were shown as a winged disk hanging in the sky.



Assyrian winged disk

Let us get back to Jews. There has always been cross-cultural transfers of information. That is how we learn. We notice what our neighbours are doing, we adapt and adopt their practices and possessions to fit our own ideas and uses. We learn how to spin, how to domesticate the animals our neighbours have, and plant the crops the neighbours grow. Camels, horses, cattle, wheat, rice, maize, potatoes, tomatoes, all were adopted from others. Bar mitzvah *brochas* started featuring Japanese sushi alongside Ashkenazi herrings. Jews adopt and adapt spiritual practices, but, as the Tanach describes, it is often a battle to get them to change the practices they have adopted from the neighbours.

In August 2024 a 2700-year-old winged protective figure was found engraved on a black stone seal in Jerusalem's City of David National Park. It had belonged to "Yeho'ezer ben Hosh'ayahu". His name is written in the Hebrew script, yet the figure engraved on it clearly shows the influence of the winged demons worshipped in the Assyrian Empire. It is the first time that a winged 'genie' has

been found in Israeli archaeology and shows the extent of Assyrian influence even in Jerusalem [32].

Jews are monotheists. They do not believe in a god of the sun, of the moon, of thunder. They do not believe in the divinity of dung beetles. They do not need winged sun discs for protection. Ho'ezer ben Hosh'ayahu, living in First Temple times, should not have thought it necessary to wear around his neck a personal seal with a protective winged Assyrian demon engraved on it. This shows how difficult it is to counter the cross-cultural influence of the people around one, especially when they are powerful and threatening one's independence.

The Northern Kingdom of Israel was captured by Sargon II, king of the Neo-Assyrian Empire, in 722 BCE. In 701 BCE its King Sennacherib besieged Jerusalem, capital of the Kingdom of Judah, which was conquered by the Babylonian King *Nebuchadnezzar II*, in 587 BCE. They all used winged disk imagery. Wings that could fly to the heavens. Wings that gave protection to their kings and their gods. So, what effect did this have on the Jews?



Lmlk seal from Lachish on 8th century jar handles

These winged emblems were found on Hebrew seals associated with royal usage in Judah, and its highly developed state administration. They are seen on excavated seals belonging to servants of Kings Uzziah (791-739 BCE) and Ahaz (735-715 BCE). Dr Eilat Mazar discovered the royal seal of King Ahaz's son King Hezekiah (715-c. 686 BCE) in an archaeological dig on the southern wall of the Temple Mount in 2009, but the writing identifying his name was only deciphered in 2015.

As Hezekiah tried to abolish idolatry, it is unlikely that he was aware that these winged sun disks had originally represented the Egyptian sun god Horus the Behedti or had stood for kings in contemporary Assyrian and Syrian imagery.

To Hezekiah it would not have symbolised the winged cherubs on the Ark of the Covenant either but probably Hashem's protection [33].



LEFT: “Belonging to Hezekiah, [Son of] Ahaz, King of Judah”, Seal of Hezekiah, 727-698 BCE, found Jerusalem. RIGHT: Hezekiah seal with winged scarab found on the antiquities market.

As Hezekiah was an Assyrian vassal, it is not surprising that his seal shows a winged sun disk, but there could be another reason for its use. The wings in the lmlk seals are usually upturned, but on King Hezekiah's personal seal above left, the wings are turned down [34]. When King Hezekiah became seriously ill, he prayed “O Lord, the G-d of Israel, enthroned above the winged creatures, [also translated as “Who dwells between the cherubim”] you alone are G-d, ruling all the kingdoms of the world.” (Isaiah 37:16)) and asked for a sign that he would get well again. Isaiah replied that the shadow on the sundial would recede ten degrees and this miracle occurred. (Isaiah 38:8). Hence the sun symbol on his seal. No self-respecting king would depict his authority with lowered wings! Yet here we have a unique, humbled expression shown by the lowered wings. Based on the description of Hezekiah's life, the post-illness period certainly fits well with this seal” [35]. There is no such excuse for Ben Hosh'ayahu.

The seal on the right also belonged to King Hezekiah and shows a scarab with two upturned wings. The appearance of the scarab beetle (representing Ra) was influenced by Egyptian culture across the region. Judah had made an alliance with Egypt and the southern kingdom against the joint threat from the invading Assyrians. People make meanings through images, but those meanings can change. Like the winged disc on lmlk impressions, the winged scarab on the lmlk seals represented a divine emblem, not the sun god, not a dung beetle, not a cherub, but Hashem.

Numerous Jewish scriptures compare God's attributes to the *sun* and refer to symbols of wings of birds (e.g., Psalm 84:11) but when the Torah refers to wings, it symbolizes ideas, not protective gods, and those are bird wings, not those of

imaginary beasts or demons. The strength of eagle wings appears in Exodus 19:4; Deuteronomy 32:11, to represent the power and loving kindness of Hashem, “I will carry you on wings (*kanaf* [\[36\]](#)) of eagles”.

Maimonides has written that whenever wing/cherub is used in reference to the Deity, it must be translated as “that which conceals” or “covers” [\[37\]](#). The passage “carried upon the wings of eagles,” was taken to heart by Yemenite Jews, who had never seen planes before they were airlifted to the new state of Israel in 1949-1950. Likewise, immigrant Ethiopian Jews, who arrived on aliyah in the 2020 *Operation on Wings of Eagles*, knew they were not travelling on eagles’ wings. There was nothing divine about these crowded noisy winged metal monsters.

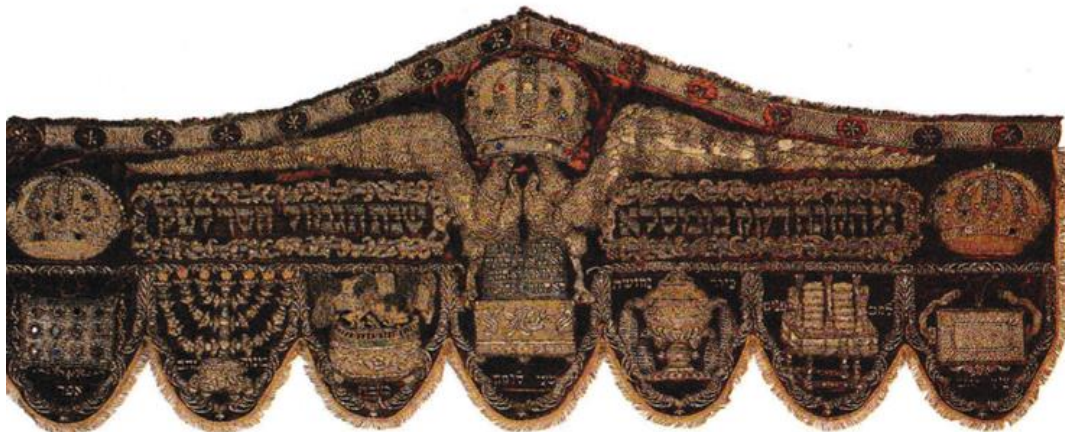
The cherub wings are not meant to be eagles’ wings, although Moses certainly intended his people to obey and keep the covenant. Unlike the Egyptian images above tombs or coffins that Moses would have seen, the wings of the cherubs were not serving as a protective cover over the children of Israel; they were just covering the ark.

Religious iconography, once developed, can be remarkably persistent. It often becomes an indelible part of religious tradition, so the winged sun disk, whether derived from Ra or from the 1486 comet as suggested by Phillips, was repeated in Egypt and Mesopotamia for two thousand years and found in Israel. There is also historical continuity of symbols in Jewish traditions. As recounted above Herman Wald, asked to design something for the Holy Ark, in the 20th Century CE, chose the wings of the *Shekhinah*.

Appearances, however, can be deceptive. This image on an Austro-Hungarian silver breastplate looks like the winged sun disks illustrated in this article. The silversmith who made it in the late 19th Century CE was unlikely to have known that the winged image had represented the sun god. He thought his winged image represented the Torah as a source of light [\[38\]](#).



19th Century Torah breastplate.



Winged birds on Torah valance, Prague, 1718/1719

In the valance above right dated to 1718/1719 designed to hang above the curtains covering the Holy Ark in a Prague synagogue, the embroiderer had no idea that her design harked back to designs made 3000 years earlier. Compare this picture with the earlier picture of the wings above Pharaoh Seti's 1279 BCE tomb. That winged sun disk protected the tomb below. The winged cherubs on the Ark of the Covenant protected the objects below. The bird wings on this valance protected representations of ritual Temple implements below including the menorah, altar, laver, table for the shewbread and portions of the high priest's costume [39]. These wings however belong not to cherubs or mythical beasts, but clearly to recognisable birds, with wings, beaks and legs. The Jews have adopted the symbols and practices of their neighbours but transformed them to fit their own beliefs and, unlike *Ben Hosh'ayahu*, have rooted them firmly within their own specific Jewish identity and values.

Rabbi Jeremy Rosen [40] has written that Moses had the unique advantage of having seen other systems of governance (and religion) both in Midian and in Egypt. He grew up in two different worlds. First there was the world of his birth parents, which was identifiably Israelite. Then there was his life in the court of Pharaoh as the adopted son of Pharaoh's daughter. He was able to see exactly how the Egyptian royal system worked. There could be a reason other than those suggested by Rav Katina, Rashbam, Chizkuni, R. Bachya ben Asher or Raanan Eichler why the Children of Israel were commanded by Moses in the Book of Exodus, to place cherubs above the Ark despite having been told about the Second Commandment. Historical and astronomical reasons firmly based in time and place.

It is small wonder that when it came to constructing something so important and so precious as the Ark, in which Aaron was to place a sample of the manna, his rod and the two tablets containing the Ten Commandments, winged cherubs would have been placed above it to protect it. Winged figures which had already been in use in Egypt for fifteen hundred years as a protective image and which Moses and the Children of Israel would have seen. winged figures that might have been adopted in Egypt in the belief that these might be able to fly up to heaven to their gods. Winged figures that might have been adopted from wonder at the daily movement of the sun and the power of the gods responsible for light and rain. Winged figures that might have been adopted by those filled with awe and fear who had seen overhead travelling from the heavens a flaming comet with wings.

- ***Gwynne Schrire, a veteran contributor to Jewish Affairs, is a former Deputy Director of the SA Jewish Board of Deputies – Cape Council. She has authored, co-written and edited over twenty books on aspects of South African Jewish and Western Cape history.***

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A PARCEL OF STONES

Omi Morgenstern Leissner

I have hurled myself into something I have been meaning to do for years – a wad of papers that answers to name of “Granny’s and Grandpa’s.” They come in a cone, the kind of “roll ‘em up and shove” shape one might sculpt things into when not quite sure if and when you’ll ever need them again. The pages require careful peeling off. Some are worn through at the bends and have long since lost their edge. My fingertips will become black to the touch. I take a breath and begin.

I emerge a few days later, without having fully understood everything but unquestionably shaken. What touches me most deeply are the numerous documents I find pertaining to visa requests. From what I can make out, all of them, without exception, even those in foreign languages, say the same thing: Please get me and my family out of here!

The requests are hand-written in a beautiful script on fine, lined sheets of paper with a fading pen. So pale are some that my sister thinks we might be looking at carbon copies of the originals, though official-looking scrawls and stamps seem to imply otherwise. Under these circumstances, I am relieved every time I reach a brief, typed up document, only to be overcome, first with the rise, then with the steep fall of my grandparents’ hopes – “*visa nao possivel.*”

Clearly, their main efforts were focused on the United States. Secondarily they tried Brazil. Maybe there are others in there that I fail to understand. All we knew growing up was that my grandfather had succeeded in obtaining a visa as a diamond-cutter to Lourenco Marques, now Maputo, Mozambique.

My father, Jacques Morgenstern, didn’t like to talk about his family’s flight through war-torn Europe. We knew he had been born in Poland and that his family – parents Leibish and Witta, elder sister Anne and himself – had moved to Antwerp when he was but a baby. The primary motivating factor behind that

move appears to have been to make a living. My grandfather began working as a diamond merchant, a common profession for Jewish men. One Friday – it was the second week of May 1940 – he failed to reach the bank in time to deposit some “stones” he had in his possession. That weekend, the bombing began and was soon, unbearable. My grandfather decided they were to take the next train to France.



Our father, so he told us, was furious. He was a headstrong teenager, adamant that what they needed to do was “stay put” along with the other Jews, who were waiting at least until Monday for the banks to open in order to withdraw money for the inevitable journey. My grandfather stood firm. He took his family, a few essentials and his little parcel of stones and somehow managed to cram them all, first, onto the coach to Brussels and then, onto the one bound for Paris. When it was subsequently learned that the train they had caught was the last to leave unoccupied Belgium, my father never got over the guilt – “What would have happened to us had I gotten my way!”

What did we know about the journey? That the train was diverted from Paris and had wound its way through the south of France; that there were soldiers everywhere; that my grandfather had put on tefillin in their cabin (my father was frozen with fear); and that my aunt had become very ill and that my grandmother had wept and begged the officials not to take her off the train, until they relented.

We learned that my aunt eventually received treatment in a little village named Ravel, the first in a line of eventful stopovers. After that came Toulouse, Marseille, Perpignan – at the foot of the snowy Pyrenees, and on the other side – Barcelona and Madrid. Finally they reached Lisbon, “Bottleneck of Europe in World War II,” where they remained for some months, until setting sail for Mozambique, a Portuguese colony at the time.

We were also aware that at some stage, a 16-year-old Jewish youth, a neighbor from Antwerp, had joined the quest. The boy was completely worn out when my father's family found him and persuaded him to stay. He appears to have lived in their home for some time, and the two youngsters must have become something of brothers. Certainly, my father spoke of him as a friend, though this was already years later, and the memory had long since gone fuzzy.

We understood that in the end the youth had chosen not to accompany my father's family on their trans-oceanic voyage and risk "isolating himself in a jungle in Africa." Instead, in the wake of apparently, joyful news that his parents were back in Antwerp, he aimed to "go back" and find them. More than that, nobody knew. But always, I wondered what had happened to him.

After that, I look up other streets and numbers. I find a brick-faced block in Antwerp; a road in Ravel; another pretty building in Lisbon, this time in pink; and a grand apartment block on Piotrkowska Avenue in Lodz. This must have been the home where my grandparents began their married life. Wikipedia proudly presents me with various pictures of it over the years. I try to imagine what it was like for Jews. Mostly, I look closely at the names. I am fascinated at how they change from document to document. Sometimes they are written in Jewish accents, sometimes in French. I read them carefully and find the ones I am familiar with — Leibish, Witta, Hanna and Jacques — and then one more — Abram. For the first time, I hold the possibility of the "adopted" boy's identity in my grasp.

I spend hours on the internet. I try different versions of the name in various combinations. Sometimes, my own (infuriating) spelling mistakes lead me off track. Sometimes, they are a stroke of luck. Either way, I finally find it, an obituary, a few years old by now, but the description of the early biography seems to fit. The young man's name, I learn, was Bram (Abraham) Fishler. I recover the names of Abram's children. There are five of them, four boys and a girl. I locate some contact details. They are spread between Belgium and the U.S. Now what? I write them, in the way of "Dear madam/sir. There might have been a connection between our fathers during the War. Please be in touch. Regards."

I wait impatiently for replies. In our instant world, hours feel like days. Months. Finally, they begin to appear on the screen, cautiously at first, then spilling with emotions, like me and my sisters, all taken up in this unexpected brush with some terrifying untold past. Something of a story begins to unfold:

Dear Omi,

our late father did not talk much about those times, it was certainly too painful, so we really know very little. From what I remember, he did mention something about a family who took him along on the run, and the name does seem to ring a bell. I also do remember him saying that

some families had ended up in South Africa, so it could very well have been your father's family. I remember him telling us that he actually left Antwerp of his own will. He had wanted to get away for a few days, being tired and annoyed at having to go to cheder so often, as he used to say. He met his sister on the way to the railway station, and asked her to tell their parents not to worry, that he would be back before Shabbos. The Germans invaded Holland while he was traveling, and that clearly changed his plans.

It seems that while in Lisbon, our dad received a free pass from the German authorities, allowing him to return to Antwerp to be reunited with his family. It was in fact his mother's efforts to get her son back that resulted in its being issued. When my father was informed that such a pass was issued, he immediately saw it was a trap, so rather than go back, decided to continue his trip.

Not being able to receive a visa to the States, my father was able, with the help of an Antwerp man in Lisbon, to receive a visa for Cuba, where he ended up meeting my mother, who was also on the run from Belgium. After the War, he finally made his way to New York to try to see if any of his family had survived. Nobody had. He never got over the guilt.

He lost his entire family in Auschwitz.

Where do you live now?



Bram (Abraham) Fishler

Us? I write back. We are six daughters. We were born and grew up in South Africa. Today we all live in or around Jerusalem. I am proud to write that. I am also suddenly struck by the arbitrary, the fragile, the whimsical, the tenuous nature of my own identity.

I am frightened by the way in which my very existence owes itself to a little parcel of stones; the outcome of a quarrel over a jam-packed train; and the “yay” or “nay” clumsily typed up by some anonymous clerk with a fancy stamp. More so, I am in awe at the foresight and strength that drove the actions and decisions of two people, exactly my age at the writing.

They stand before me now, stripped of the grandparent images they took on in the various family portraits in which I came to recognize them. I examine for hours the photos attached to the various certificates. My grandfather is unshaven and wan. My grandmother ekes out a strained smile for the camera. My aunt is beautiful. My father looks sixteen. It is the oldest picture of him we have.



Leibish, Witta, Anne and Jacques Morgenstern (photos found among the papers)

The family eventually arrived in Lourenco Marques and some months later, they were able to obtain a much sought-after permit to enter South Africa. When they arrived in Johannesburg, my father was amazed to find it was not a jungle after all but a bustling modern city, with skyscrapers far taller than the buildings he had known growing up in Belgium.

He flung himself into his studies, attaining within two years a school-leaving certificate that sported the highest number of “distinctions” the district had ever seen. He went on to study architecture, at which he excelled, and was soon appointed as full-time university lecturer. It was there that he met my mother. They married, set up a co-practice and built a beautiful home for their growing family.

My aunt completed her social work studies and channelled her survivor's guilt into a working trip to a D.P. camp at Bergen Belsen immediately after the war. She eventually married and settled in South Africa, where she continued to carry out acts of *chesed* and was outspoken in her renunciation of apartheid. My grandparents bought an apartment in the center of town in a building with a European façade and the presumptuous name of Buckingham Court. They tried to make a life for themselves, though I imagine they never felt quite at home. Grandpa Leibish made frequent trips to the Holy Land, where he meted out aid to the trickle of cousins that remained from his once-huge family. He was deeply mourned when he died, at the age of sixty-six. His body was flown to Israel, to its final resting place in Jerusalem.

After that, Granny Witta went to live in Israel and my father took over the diamond business that was left behind. In that way, his life took on contours strikingly similar to those of the sixteen-year-old 'Bram, himself the son of a Polish-Jewish family that had moved to Antwerp, where his father had found work as a diamond merchant. After the War, 'Bram returned to Antwerp, where, along with two orphaned cousins, he began a diamond business. It grew into one of the largest family-owned diamond companies, as diamond companies tend to be when Jewish men have sons.

It is hard to believe the two diamond men never met up in later life, even by chance. Indeed, my initial realization that such a meeting would never take place – 'Bram died in 2003, my father, in 2013 – met with great regret and frustration. I berated myself for not having probed those documents earlier. But now that I know a little more about what happened, I wonder if it was a blessing. One can only begin to imagine the pain such a reunion would have meant for them, both for the boy who had lost his closest family in the deluge, and for the one who was lucky enough to get away with them. It might have been too much for either of them to bear.

So I believe I am pleased that this stone was well-browned before being turned over. And I am reminded of what my father would say whenever he saw me get upset over something, "Life is full of surprises, my cookie, that's what gives us the drive to keep on living. You never know how things will turn out in the end."

- ***Dr Naomi Leissner is an independent researcher based in Jerusalem. This article is based on her presentation 'Alsedziai and Beyond' given in February 2025 to the membership, staff and guides of the Johannesburg Holocaust & Genocide Centre.***



DOV FEDLER: A TRIBUTE

Joanne Fedler

Editor's note: January 2025 saw the passing of the distinguished South African artists and cartoonist Dov Fedler. We thank his daughter Joanne for this insightful and heartfelt tribute to her father, which provides at least a glimpse into the man behind the images as well as recording his deep connections to his Jewish heritage and the Jewish community of which he was part. We further thank her for selecting and making available many examples of Dov Fedler's work, which many Jewish Affairs readers will well remember from the days when he was one of South Africa's foremost editorial cartoonists.



My father, Dov Fedler loved the spotlight but abhorred grandiosity so I'm not sure how he'd feel about being described as a 'legend,' or a 'national treasure.'

'He's not a legend, he's a very naughty boy,' I imagine him mimicking Monty Python's *Life of Brian*, one of his favourite movies.

Dov Fedler made people laugh. That was his superpower. Give him an audience and the plumage of his personality shone. He was a loveable Gruffalo of a man who could zap out a punchline with ferocious timing.

Humour was both his genius and shield, the way he made sense of the madness and tragedy of the world. His was an exquisitely original imagination which wrestled with life's inexplicable paradoxes like Jacob did with the angel.



Dov Fedler: 'Jacob's dream'

He was long-winded and loud, could infuriate, inspire, entertain, but never bore. He did not have a financial bone in his lumbering frame. My mother, and then my sister Laura managed his financial affairs, so he never had to worry about 'The Money' as he called it.

He was the key attraction at the Hobbies Fair each year at King David Victory Park school, where kids crowded at his elbows as caricatures streamed effortlessly from his pen. The Aladdin's cave of his studio was a treachery of junk and treasures from which puppets, sculptures and other astonishments materialized, as if you could simply imagine something and, behold it would appear. From this he taught me a blank page was the deepest invitation to your own soul's calling. Listen, and it would speak back.

Though he never considered himself a painter – this was a status reserved for the likes of his beloved friend, the artist Lionel Abrams – he once painted me a poster SUPERMAN LOVES JOANNE with Christopher Reeve flying through the sky. He told me to stop dieting because I'd never be a model, not with my build. 'You'll be other things,' he promised. He seemed so certain that pretty and skinny were the booby prizes in life.



An effervescence of talents spilled out of him, like hidden tricks up his sleeve – cartooning, sculpting, painting and in his later years, writing. Never without a pen and paper, he doodled and drew, read and ruminated. He filled hundreds of sketchbooks with ideas and collected thousands of books and movies, ever fascinated with Einstein, Van Gogh, the Coen Brothers and the Lubavitcher Rebbe. He had an encyclopaedic knowledge of comics and movies and had a collection of DVDs of his favourites which ran into the thousands – much to my mother's vexation.



Lionel Abrams teaching Dov Fedler perspective in painting

Born Noah David Fedler in Johannesburg on 21 January 1940, in the shadow of the Holocaust, to immigrant parents from Lithuania, he was obsessed with Walt Disney and comic books. His earliest memory at the age of four was of a yellow pencil in someone's hand making a mark on a page. Right then his hands grasped their destiny.

Dov' mother Chaya Michaelson, a Yiddish poet, arrived in Johannesburg from Zhager, Lithuania in 1926. She was a founding member of the Society of Zhagerer Landsleit whose aim was to help and support newly arrived immigrants. My grandparents' home in Mayfair, Johannesburg, was a hub of comings and goings, and when there was a problem for which a neighbour needed an ear and a cup of tea, everyone knew, '*Gey freg Fedlerin*,' ('Go ask the Fedlers.')



Solomon and Chaya Fedler



**Chaya Fedler (nee Michaelson)
as a young woman**

Chaya's warm personality and sense of humour belied the devastations of her depression which set in when her family was trapped and then killed by the Nazi's in Eastern Europe. She suffered her first heart attack when my father was eight, after which, he often told me, he'd cry himself to sleep every night, knowing she was going to die. A fatal cardiac arrest just after his barmitzvah left him motherless. His father Solomon, who'd immigrated in 1926 and become a

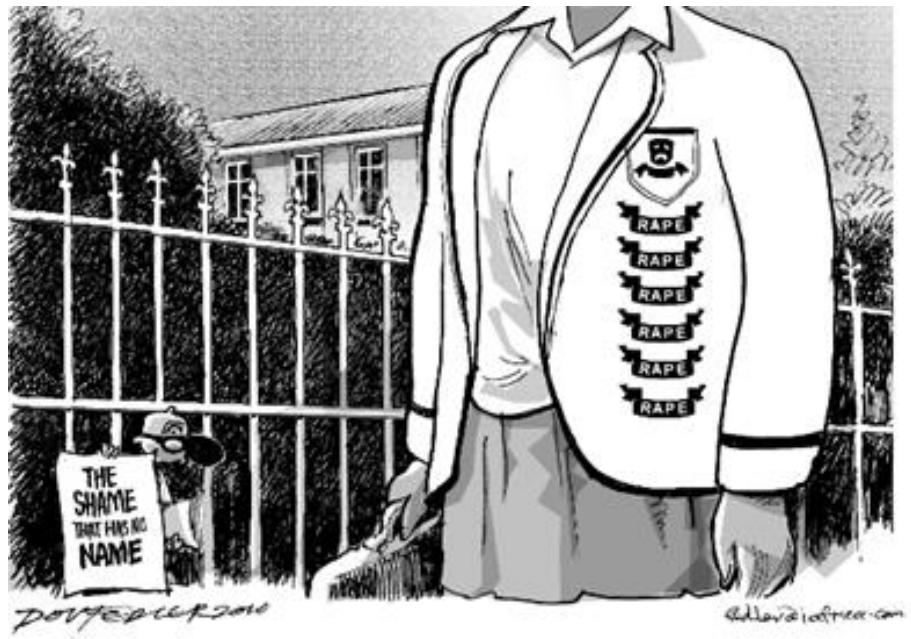
printer, remarried Dov's Hebrew teacher Fania Rubenstein three years later. She had lost her son and husband in the concentration camps in Dachau. The darkness in his family home was smothering and at twenty-two, Dov fled into the arms of the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen, my mother, Dorrine Cumes, a medical student. In due course, they married, and by thirty, Dov was father to three daughters. One, Carolyn, had a profound hearing loss, and he devoted himself to helping her learn to speak. He and Dorinne became active members of the Society for the Hard-of-Hearing Child.



**Marriage of Dov and Dorinne Fedler, pictured
here with Fanya and Solomon Fedler**

For over fifty years, commencing in 1969, Dov worked as *The Star's* leader page cartoonist (sometimes averaging six deadlines a week). Exposing the hypocrisy and injustices of South African political history, his cartoons and caricatures were poignant, satirical, sometimes biting, but never cruel. Some ended up in matric History exams.

Five collections of his cartoons were published, starting with *My Son, The Cartoonist* (1974) and followed by *The Season of Violins* (1991), *Follow My Leaders* (Ravan Press, Pan Macmillan, 2001), *Walk This Way* (2010) and *Deface the Nation: The Best Cartoons of the Year* (Royston Lamond, 2013).





Of his own work, he once said, ‘Cartoons are dog-piss on the doorstep to history. The cartoonist doesn’t even make it to the door, we document and comment, but we don’t change anything.’ You can find a selection of his cartoons here: <http://africartoons.com/cartoonist/dov-fedler>.

In 2015, he was the recipient of the Arts, Sports, Science & Culture Award at the Absa Jewish Achiever Awards.

Though he is best known for his social and political commentary, he was not a political beast but a spiritual hitchhiker, a yogi taught by the guru Manny Finger before he became a Lubavitcher for a few years. He often quoted passages from the Bible, and recited Hebrew prayers before he went to sleep, a hangover from his bearded tefillin days when he’d walk from Greenside to Yeoville on Shabbat morning just to hear Rabbi Mendel Lipskar speak.

He remained a soul-searching mystic who believed in signs and miracles and often spoke of a dead bird which flew from his hands just when he and my mother were waiting on a diagnosis to confirm my older sister Carolyn did not have brain damage. She went on to become the first hard-of-hearing person to qualify as a medical doctor in South Africa.

He was profoundly Jewish in gesture, sensibility and intellect. In May 2008 he wrote a poem, prescient for today’s times, called ‘In Every Generation’:

David Mamet
hears the rant and cant
against us.
What's the fuss?
Why the need
to decry our creed?
He says that we are
just the approved
target of hatred.
Rashi said that
it is a law
that Esau
hates Jacob.
It is good
to know
the world
is so
law abiding.

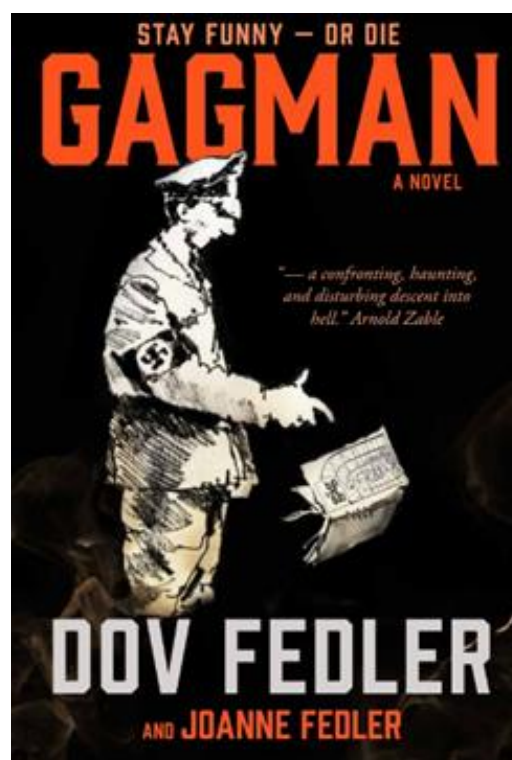
Dov worked incessantly, not only on his craft, but on his way of thinking. He owned thousands of books, many of which he never read, but always intended to. His mind never stopped whirring and turning. One of the most devastating consequences of ageing for him, was the loss of work. It had defined who he was. An old friend of his, David Gemmell, remembered that when he'd pop in to visit, Dov would always be drawing. But when asked how work was going, he would reply, 'Dire. I have none...'

'So what are you working on there?'

'When the gods who give you work – in your case the muses – look and see you aren't working, basically doing nothing, they pass you by,' he said. 'When they see you working, they reward you with more work. So I always keep myself busy...and you know what? The phone always rings.'

When he was diagnosed with macular degeneration, I don't think he ever recovered from the distress when instructed by doctors that he could no longer drive safely. In truth, though, he was always a terrible driver, slow and ponderous as he surveyed the kingdom of Johannesburg with an abiding affection. Even more tragic, was the realization that he could no longer see well enough to draw. My sisters and I watched him withdraw and isolate himself even from old friends. He would often sit in his chair in the loungeroom he loved, in silence, ruminating and sitting out the loadshedding with stoic endurance, entertained by his own thoughts.

Like many artists, Dov was cared for by selfless women all his life – his older sister Rae, when his mother was too ill, my mother, sisters, cousins Charlene and Sandra and beloved domestic workers Violet, Alexina, Nomusa and Bridget. Over the years, I helped him write, edit and publish four books including his memoir *Out of Line* (Tracey MacDonald Publishers 2015), *If You Can Write You can Draw*, (Joanne Fedler Media 2018), *Starlite Memories* (Tafelberg, 2019) and *Gagman* (with Joanne Fedler, Brio books, 2022) about an inmate in the concentration camps who survives by telling jokes, a project that took over thirty-five years to complete. To watch a video of the story of *Gagman*, see here: <https://www.gagmanmedia.com/>.



Gagman (cover), Brio Books, 2022



**Illustration from Gagman: Goebbels
and the book burning**

Dov was absurdly creative, with more ideas than he could keep up with. He invented a comedic artistic persona, Noland Marx, the father of 'Numerism' which inspired dozens of paintings of Cezanne, Lautrec, Van Gogh and Monet. It included one of Noland urinating in Monet's lily pond. He envisioned a coffee-table book filled with these paintings, one of the many unfinished projects I've been left to complete.



Years back, he gave my daughter Jess a sketchbook with the bones of a story about a magician named Shamansky which she has now turned into a three-part romantasy trilogy.

He was generous with his ideas, realising he couldn't keep up with them, as he was with his books, sketches, paintings and sculptures. Guests from our home would often leave with a Dov Fedler original in their hands. I don't think he ever appreciated the value of his own work.

On 23 December 2024, I rushed from Sydney to be at his bedside as he began to slip away. I sat vigil with my sisters and his angelic carers, playing his favourite Leonard Cohen songs, whispering last words of love and comfort into the giant elephant flaps of his ears and rubbing his size 12 feet. Even then, he couldn't help being funny.

When the doctor asked him how he was, he responded, 'I've been worse.'

I promised I would find a home for his massive body of work in a public source archive so it can continue to be enjoyed as part of the commons.

'So many promises,' he said. 'I just want a Coke.'



The writer with her father, April 2024

His humour remained shatterproof to the end.

But after my mother died in October 2021, his spirit flailed.

‘What shall we do, Dad?’ I asked.

‘We carry on,’

‘What does ‘on’ mean?’

‘I wish I could find the off switch,’ he sighed.

On 11 January 2025, ten days shy of his 85th birthday, he finally found it.

Joanne Fedler is an author, writing mentor and publisher, now living in Australia. Her latest book, *The Whale’s Last Song*, was published by Harper Collins, 2024.



LASTING LEGACY – MEMORIES OF THE LAST ‘OCHBERG ORPHAN’ IN CAPE TOWN

Charlotte Cohen

Molly Cohen passed away just 9 days short of her 100th birthday which would have been on 18 November 2013. Prior to her death, she was the last surviving Ochberg Orphan in Cape Town.

‘Connections and Recollections’ (in 2006 Temple Rosh Hashanah Annual, 2007 Pesach edition of *Jewish Affairs*, and later in David Sandler’s book, ‘The Ochberg Orphans’ published in Australia in 2014) described Molly’s early life in war-torn Eastern Europe, being rescued by the incredible Isaac Ochberg, brought to South Africa and growing up in Cape Town at Oranjia, the Cape Jewish Orphanage.

Molly married before she was twenty and had two sons. With the untimely and sudden death of her husband (at the age of 33), she was left a very young widow. Molly always worked hard and nothing was ever handed to her on a plate. Yet she was ‘a lady to her fingertips’ ... beautiful in appearance; her manner restrained and gentle.

Molly became my mother-in-law in 1959. Our relationship was respectful and cordial. After my divorce in 1987, our paths separated. However, after my younger son, Steven, married in 2003, my association with Molly was revived and renewed.



**Some of the 177 East European orphans brought
to South Africa by Isaac Ochberg, 1921**

So much had happened in our lives in the interim, that the formal roles of 'mother-in-law' and 'daughter-in-law' became more undefined.

Now, with shared concerns and convictions, we became friends.

One never knows how life will deal the cards. Nor can one anticipate how two completely separate lives may intertwine ...

Both of us had experienced great trauma during our lifetimes.

Born in 1913, for the first years of her life – during the First World War (1914 – 1918) and before she was rescued by Isaac Ochberg, Molly was an orphan in Eastern Europe. After Isaac Ochberg brought the 'Ochberg Orphans' back to South Africa, she grew up in an orphanage in Cape Town. Because of the untimely death of her husband, she was left a widow, and her two young sons were left fatherless at a very early age.

Tragedy had also overtaken my life in that my sons (and Molly's grandsons) both died within 4 years of each other – aged 45 and 42 respectively.

My ex-husband, their father, had also passed away.



**Ochberg Orphans disembarking in
England en route to South Africa**

Molly and myself, despite our age difference – and despite us both enjoying a laugh, a joke and good company – were both destined to meet ‘the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune’ head-on.

One of the greatest acts of compassion and kindness – and one which I will never forget – was when Molly attended the funeral of my younger son – and her grandson, Steven – in May 2010. Although a chair was placed for her at the graveside, Molly, aged 97, refused to sit down. She stood before the grave with her arm around me – never removing it and never leaving my side. After the burial, both of us sat on a bench erected at the cemetery in memory of Rodney and Steven – my sons and her grandsons.

Molly and I were both blessed on that bench by Rabbi Richard Newman. It will remain ingrained in my memory for as long as I live.

As well as many others on whom she had a profound effect, Molly became an integral part of my life in the years before her death. I often think of the times she would phone me to chat – or the talks we had when I popped in to see her. Even at age 99, she would still insist on making tea herself, which she brought on a tray to a small table by the window where would sit and discuss things and exchange ideas. What Molly said was clear, simple and meaningful.

Despite her gentle approach, she was not hesitant in speaking her mind; and even though she was in her late nineties, when she felt that it was time I needed to hear some real sense, she made her thoughts known to me.

In fact, being with her, was like being in a sanctuary – therapeutic, comforting, educational and uplifting.

On one occasion she remarked: “People are mean to one another because of three things: They are either jealous, they feel inadequate or they want to be ‘top dog’. ... The three factors she cited were real food for thought: “Think of anyone who falls into one of these categories” she said. “Whether they are jealous, feel inadequate or think you are invading their space, it makes no matter what you do in order to win them over: They are never going to ‘like’ you. Not because the fault lies with you – but with them. So you are wasting your time. Best thing is to move out and move on”

Her counsel changed my thinking and attitude.



**Molly Cohen (age 99) at the Ochberg Commemoration
held at Oranjia, 22 February 2012**

Another exchange |I had with Molly a few months before her passing, was again one of the most meaningful I have ever had. It has also impacted on many others to whom I have posed the same question and then related what she said.

I asked her “What is it about yourself – what you did with your own life – that has made you most proud?” ... (What would your response be if that question were asked of you?)

Without hesitation, she answered: “When I said I would do something, I did it!”

For a few moments, I absorbed her statement.

“So you could be trusted?” I said.

“Yes,’ she replied simply.

What an incredible thing to be able to say about oneself: “I could be trusted.” Of course, the statement embraces much more than just those four words. It also shows loyalty, commitment and determination.

There are things that cannot be bought. They have to be earned. They offer rewards greater than any money can buy – not only for you – but for those who have ever been in contact with you. (If you lose them, no amount of money can buy them back).

They are trust and respect.

Molly epitomised those qualities. Her legacy of wisdom, friendship, understanding and good advice remains with all who were privileged to have known her.

Rescued by ‘Daddy Ochberg’ (as the Ochberg Orphans called him) as a child of 5 – and having lived a life which typified guts, determination, courage and kindness, Molly personified the same characteristics and attributes which exemplified Isaac Ochberg and which, in its own way, perpetuates Ochberg’s prestigious memory.

- ***Charlotte Cohen, a veteran contributor to Jewish Affairs, is an award-winning short story writer, essayist and poet whose work has appeared in a wide variety of publications since the 1970s.***



YOM HASHOAH CAPE TOWN, 2025

Yakub Nowakowski

“Time doesn’t pass over me, over us. It doesn’t erase anything, doesn’t undo it. I’m not alive. I died in Auschwitz, but no one knows it.” These haunting words of Charlotte Delbo, a French survivor of Auschwitz, capture the indelible scars of the Holocaust.

Time marched on, but for the survivors, the past remained ever-present. Their lives bore the weight of history, a burden they carried not only for themselves but for all of us.

Ladies and gentlemen, I am honoured and humbled to stand before you on this important occasion, in the presence of the entire community, its leaders, invited guests, and most of all, Holocaust survivors and their families. This year, the Yom HaShoah ceremony is held in their honour and in honour of all your family members who did not survive. We have heard some of their names read out loud at the beginning of the ceremony.

We know the numbers. Six million Jews were murdered in the Holocaust. But let us narrow this incomprehensible figure down. In Poland, over 90% of the Jewish population—3 million people—were killed. In the Netherlands, more than 100,000 Jews, approximately 75% of the community, perished. In Lithuania, 95% of its 220,000 Jews were murdered. We could keep listing, going through every European country that was conquered by the Germany, or was one of its allies.

But instead, let us narrow this number, 6 million, further down. Warsaw, once home to the largest Jewish population in Europe, saw its Jewish community almost entirely annihilated. Amsterdam lost three-quarters of its Jewish

residents. Kovno, a vibrant Lithuanian city, saw over 30 000 of its Jewish inhabitants massacred.



But let us dive even deeper.

Consider the story of Yaacov Goldstein, a young boy from the small village of Gniewosów in eastern Poland. Yaacov survived the war hidden by non-Jewish Poles in a storage nook so small he couldn't straighten his legs. When the war ended, this 12-year-old boy discovered he was the only survivor of his family. His parents and younger brother had been killed—not only by the Germans but also by his former neighbours, non-Jewish Poles. Yakow was 12 years old and was alone, with nothing, in the land or ruins. He was one of the 5000 Jewish children that survived the Holocaust in Poland. 5 thousand children from the population that just 6 years back numbered 3.5 million, including hundreds of thousands of children.

The Israeli poet Irit Amiel called people like Yaacov “touched by the fire, smouldered.” This phrase encapsulates the profound and lingering impact of the Holocaust on its survivors. It speaks to the way their lives, though continuing, bear the marks of unspeakable trauma and loss—not only their physical survival but also their emotional and spiritual endurance.

And for years after the Shoah not many wanted to listen to their stories. Not many recognized their pain and gave space for healing. As while in 1945 Jaacov was liberated from the fear of death, he was not liberated from the fear of life in this new, post-Holocaust world, from this “pain of freedom”, which Isaac Habib

described in his poem which we also just heard [*See Appendix*]. It took decades for us to recognize them as heroes, living symbols of resilience and reminders of a history that must never be forgotten. It took us even more time to recognize that the pain and trauma of the Survivors, the long-lasting legacy of ultimate terror, is resonating in their children and grandchildren – new generations that came after.

The Survivors are here with us today. Their/your importance is monumental. Not just because you witnessed unimaginable evil, but because you became the custodians of truth.



In 1945, the soldiers who liberated the camps were horrified by what they found. Eighty years later, an increasing number of people question the reality of those horrors. Holocaust denial and distortion are on the rise, especially among younger generations. Survivors, simply by existing, have been a vaccine against the disease of oblivion. Your stories have shielded humanity from forgetfulness. Today, in these challenging times of anxiety, turmoil, stress, and fear we need your voice more than ever. We are currently witnessing the erosion of fundamental ideals of the modern world—striving for peace, tolerance, and democracy. Anger and hatred, antisemitism and racism seem to be spreading, leading to mass violence, terror, and war.

None of this is inevitable. All of this comes because of our – human – decisions. And it is about the consequences of these decisions that we need to teach. Marian Turski, another survivor of Auschwitz said that Auschwitz did not fall from the sky. Auschwitz was a logic result of the decisions made by logic, in their

madness, well-educated people. What happened to the Jews of Amsterdam, Warsaw, and Kovno, Jews of Paris and Rhodes Island, although occurring in different moments and places, were in fact parts of the same plan, a singular design.

The mass killing of European Jews, in its intent and scale, was for a long time unimaginable—until, through a series of decisions and events unfolding, it became a devastating reality. Until we, the non-Jewish politicians, leaders, soldiers, farmers, priests, teachers, train drivers, architects, peddlers, until we, non-Jewish neighbours, allowed for it to happen. But we must not get confused. Holocaust was not an accident, collateral damage, or a result of an impulsive decision; it was a state-sponsored plan designed to annihilate all European Jews.

No matter where they lived, they were targeted solely because they were Jewish. The geographical scale of the killing, the number of countries and governments that collaborated, the sheer number of victims, and the technical innovations devised to facilitate the process of extermination were all unprecedented in the history of the world. This is why, 80 years later, people across the globe continue to learn about the Holocaust. Because it happened, and because in happening, it forever changed the world.

And so, it is humbling that we can be here today in the presence of the survivors. If not for you, countless victims of that tremendous crime would have been entirely forgotten. It was you that carried the names and memories of those who perished, becoming the fragile thread that connects us to a past that might otherwise have been lost. *This is a gift of memory.* Your testimonies allowed us to understand the scope of the destruction, the systematic nature of the Holocaust, and the truth behind the unimaginable numbers. This is a *gift of knowledge.*

Finally, we must honour the survivors not just for what they endured but for how they chose to live afterward. In the face of the terrible loss, you have found the strength and courage to love and to rebuild. You gave life to the next generations, sheltering them from the past to the best of your capabilities, while desperately trying to give them a *gift of a better future.* This, perhaps, is your greatest legacy: the strength to move forward, the bravery to embrace life, and the determination to give humanity another chance. These were your gifts to us. What we do with these, is solely for us to decide.

- ***Jakub Nowakowski is director of the Cape Town Holocaust & Genocide Centre***

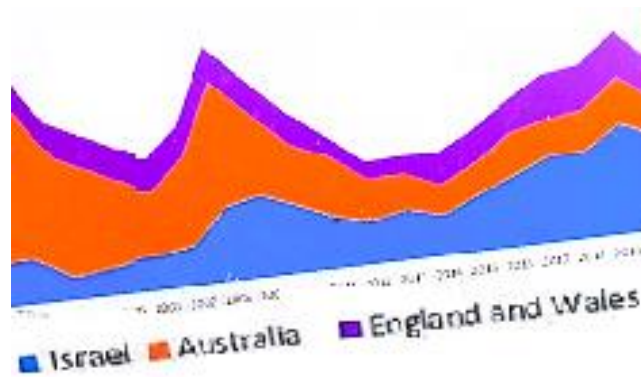
APPENDIX

LA DOLOR DESPUÉS DE LA LIBERACIÓN – THE PAIN OF FREEDOM

By Isaac Habib

Un año ya pasó
Cuando en Yom Hashoah
La comunidad Sefardi
Aki en Cape Town
Tuvo el honor en conmemorar
Los ochenta años de la deportación
De todas estas almas Djudias
De la isla de Rodis
Verso los desgraciados
Campos di Auschwitz-Birkenau.
El sofrir de todos sus captivos
No se scapò con la liberación
Di Auschwitz en este día friolenco
Del 27 de Enero del 1945
Sus penas permanecieron
Sin piadad hasta ke
Las armas silenciosas kedaron
Y les arivò la libertad
Libertad ? Kua la libertad !
La palavra esta pedriò
Y daínda màs no tiene
Siñificaciòn dinguna
A los ke se salvaron
Destruídas fueron sus vidas
A los ke de este infierno salieron
Poco o muncho contaron
Unos sin reposo avlaron
Mientras otros mudos kedaron
Con sus tormentos encerrados
Por dentro de sus almas
Palavras en millones no bastavan
Al contar lo ke sus ojos vieron
El espanto y el hambre ke tuvieron
Hasta la pedrita di toda dignidad.
Como pudieran dar respuestas a :
" Es ke mis padres estan bivos ?"
"Has visto a mi hermanico ?"
" Y TU ! Porke te salvates ?"
" Ama ke es lo ke estash contando !"
El silencio fue la mejor ditcha
La majoriya hoy descansa
En países leshanos
Y a mosotros los descendientes
Mos cae el dover en enseñar
Las tragedias de la Shoah.

A year has passed since
On Yom Hashoah
The Sephardi Community
Here in Cape Town
Was honored in remembering
The 80th year of the deportation
Of all Jewish souls from
The island of Rhodes
Towards the infamous
Camp of Auschwitz-Birkenau.
The suffering of all captives
Did not end with the liberation
of Auschwitz on this freezing
Day of January 27th 1945
Their ordeal was to carry on
With no clemency until
All arms finally kept silent
And freedom arrived
Freedom ? What freedom !
This word became and
Remains meaningless
Their lives had been shattered
Those who came out of this inferno
Related much or little
Some restlessly spoke of their suffering
While most remained forever mute
Their torments enclosed
Deep in their heart
Million words did not suffice to recount
What their eyes saw,
Their constant fear, hunger
And loss of dignity.
How could they have replied to :
" Are my parents alive ?"
" Have you seen my little brother ?"
" How come YOU survived ?"
" What are you talking about ?"
Silence became the best chosen word.
Most rest now in far-off lands
And we their descendants
Have no choice but to carry on
Sharing the tragedies of the Shoah.



SOUTH AFRICAN JEWISH EMIGRATION: THE WHAT, THE WHERE AND THE WHY

Reviva Hasson

South Africa's Jewish population has been steadily declining for decades. From a peak of close to 120 000 in the 1970s, the community has more than halved in size. By 2019, there were just over 52 000 Jews living in the country, constituting about 0.09% of the national population. While some decline can be explained by low birth rates and assimilation, the overwhelming driver has been emigration, with relatively few new arrivals to offset the losses.

The Jewish community's emigration is embedded within the broader South African trend of, mostly skilled labour, emigration. Data collected by the UN for example, indicate that there are over a million South African born individuals living abroad.^[1] During the apartheid era emigration was generally motivated by a mixture of fear of civil war, discomfort with the apartheid system and anxiety regarding how the transition of power would unfold.^[2] However, in the post-1994 democratic era, the emigration trend has continued and has become an entrenched feature of contemporary SA Jewish life, such that three in five Jewish South Africans have close family members living abroad.^[3]

By bringing together administrative migration data and three national surveys of the South African Jewish population we map the main trends in Jewish emigration since the end of apartheid. Although the surveys have some differences in method and design, all include questions on migration and shed light on changing attitudes over time. The 1998 and 2005 surveys are quite similar each involving 1000 face-to-face interviews with Jewish adults living in the four main cities in South Africa.^[4] The most recent survey, the 2019 Jewish Community Survey of South Africa (JCSSA) was conducted online and gathered responses from 4192 Jewish adults from across the country, offering a particularly detailed view of who is leaving, where they are going, and why.^[5]

Where Are South African Jews Going?

Understanding where Jewish South Africans have gone — and where they expect to go — requires drawing on both governmental records from censuses and Jewish community survey data. Together, these sources reveal not only the size and distribution of the South African Jewish diaspora but also how emigration patterns have shifted.

We estimate that there are about 60 000 South African-born Jews now living abroad — more than the 52 300 Jews currently living in South Africa (Table 1).

Country of residence of South African-born Jews ⁶	Estimated number
United States (2021) ⁷	16,000
Australia (2021)	15,400
Israel (2018)	13,800
Canada (2018)	8,200
England and Wales (2021)	6,300
Total	59,700

Table 1. Estimate of the Size of South Africa's Jewish Diaspora [8]

Like most South African emigrants (Figure 1), the overwhelming majority have settled in English-speaking democracies: the United Kingdom, Australia, the United States and Canada. One country, however, stands apart: Israel. While not a top destination for South African emigrants generally, it accounts for over a quarter of all *Jewish* emigrants from South Africa — a significant divergence from the general South African pattern. [9]

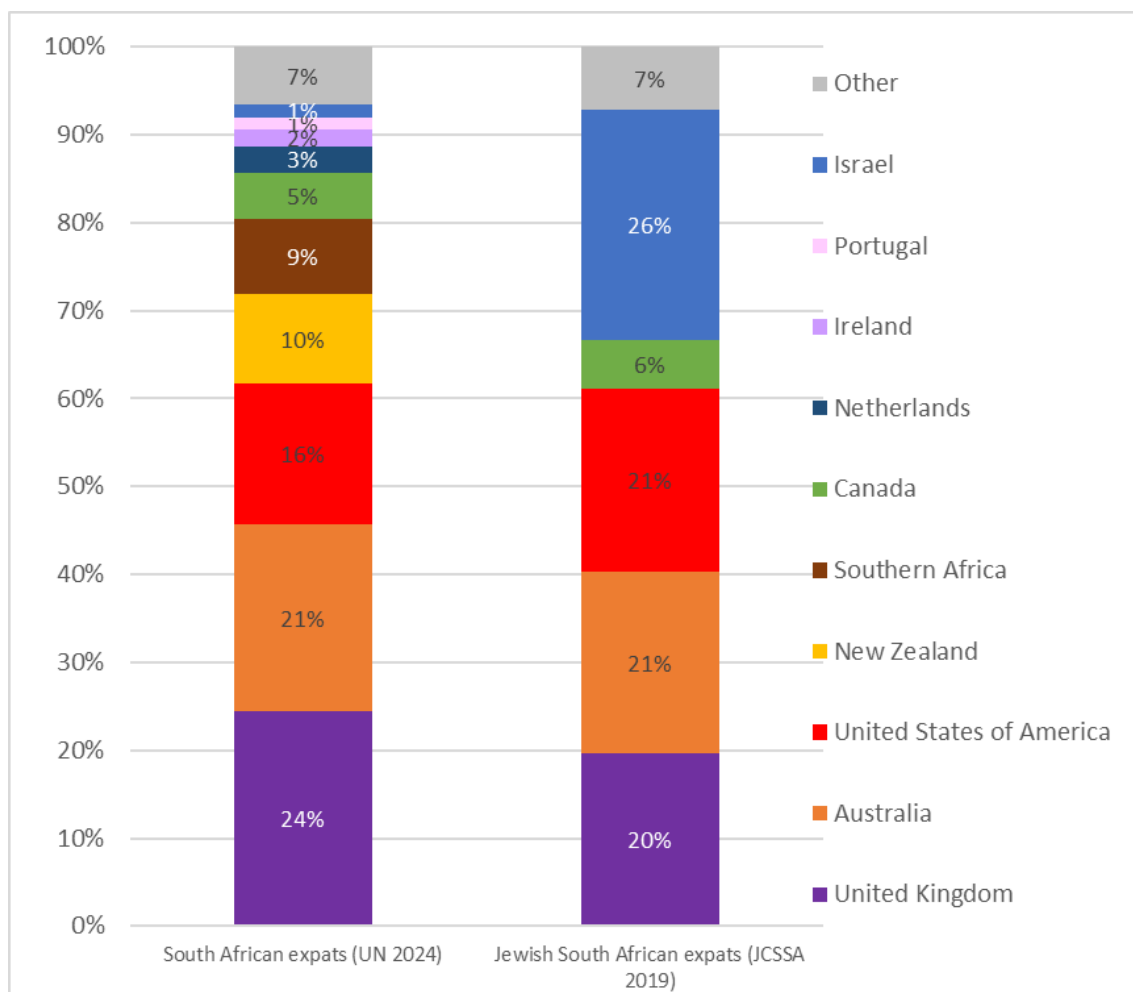


Figure 1. Location of South Africans living abroad [10]

Detailed South African Jewish migration statistics from Israel, Australia, and the UK (Figure 2) show that the trend fluctuates over time with periods of increased emigration in 2007-2008 and again from 2015-2021, while emigration reaches its low point in 2004-2005 and again from 2012-2014.

Notably, the dominant destination has changed: prior to 2010, Australia was the most popular choice; but from 2015 onward, Israel became the leading destination for South African Jewish emigrants. In 2001, for every South African Jew moving to Israel, four moved to Australia. Twenty years later, in 2022 the ratio had reversed: for every one person going to Australia, three went to Israel.

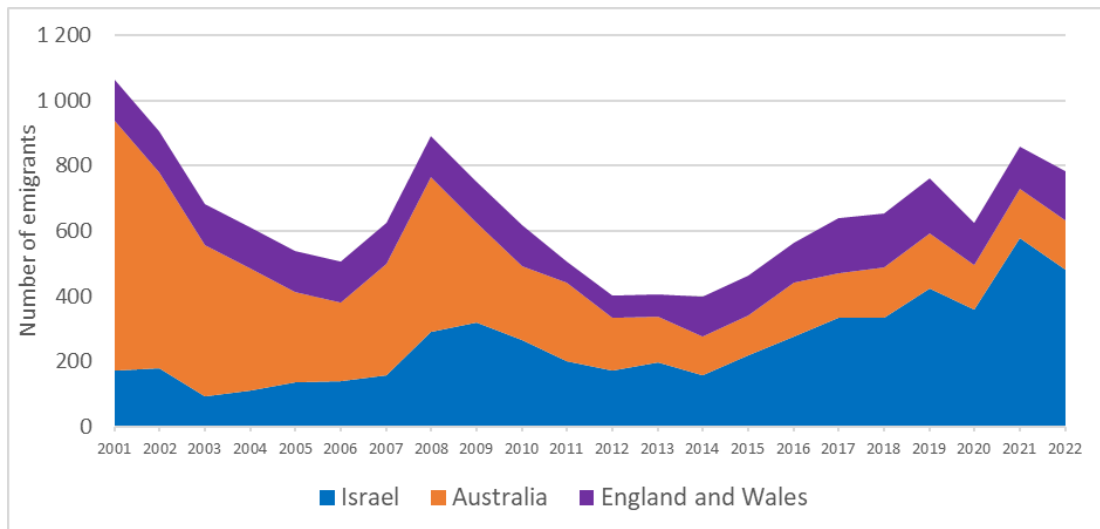


Figure 2. Migration of South African Jews to Israel, Australia, and England and Wales 2001–2022. [11]

We observe the same shift in the community survey data. In the 1998 and 2005 community surveys, Australia and the United States were the top destinations among those considering emigration, making up more than half of the responses (Figure 3). By contrast, in 2019, 51% of respondents said they would go to Israel. The United States and Australia combined accounted for significantly less at 22%.

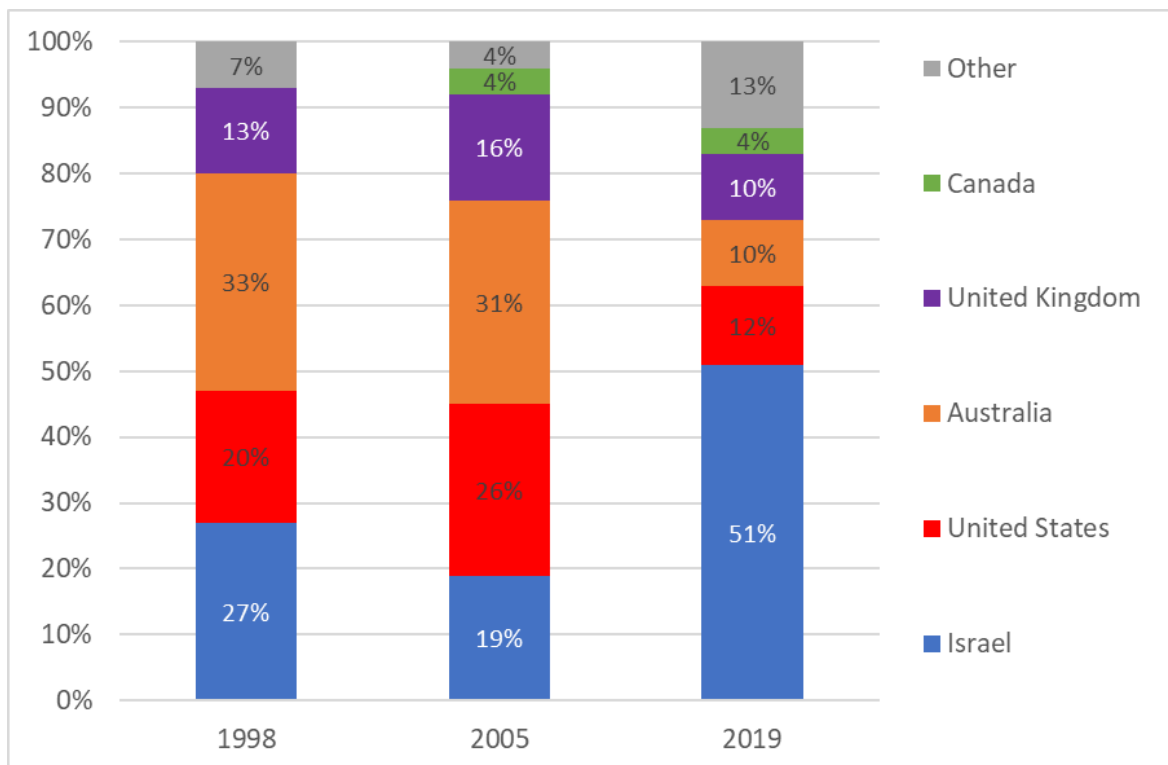


Figure 3. Preferred Destination Country by time period. [12]

An in-depth examination of the 2019 survey data shows that the trend of Israel emerging as the primary destination was evident across almost all demographic subgroups, regardless of age, income, or location (Figure 4, Figure 5 and Figure 6).[\[13\]](#)

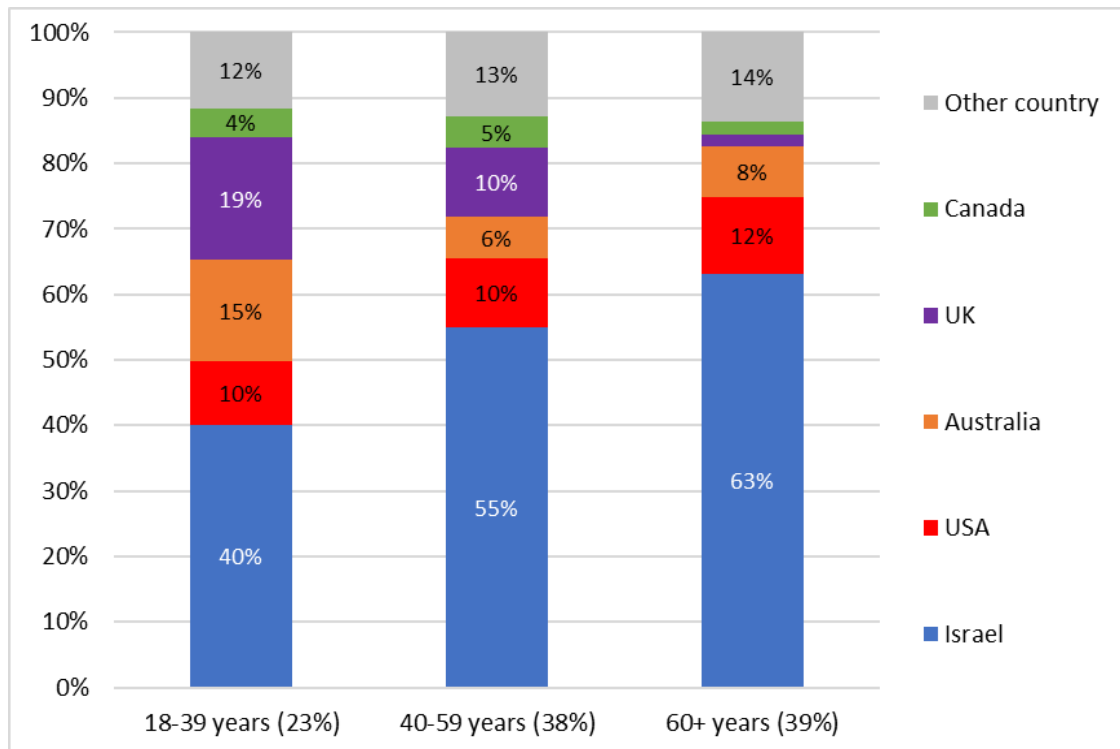


Figure 4. Preferred destination country by age group (JCSSA, 2019)

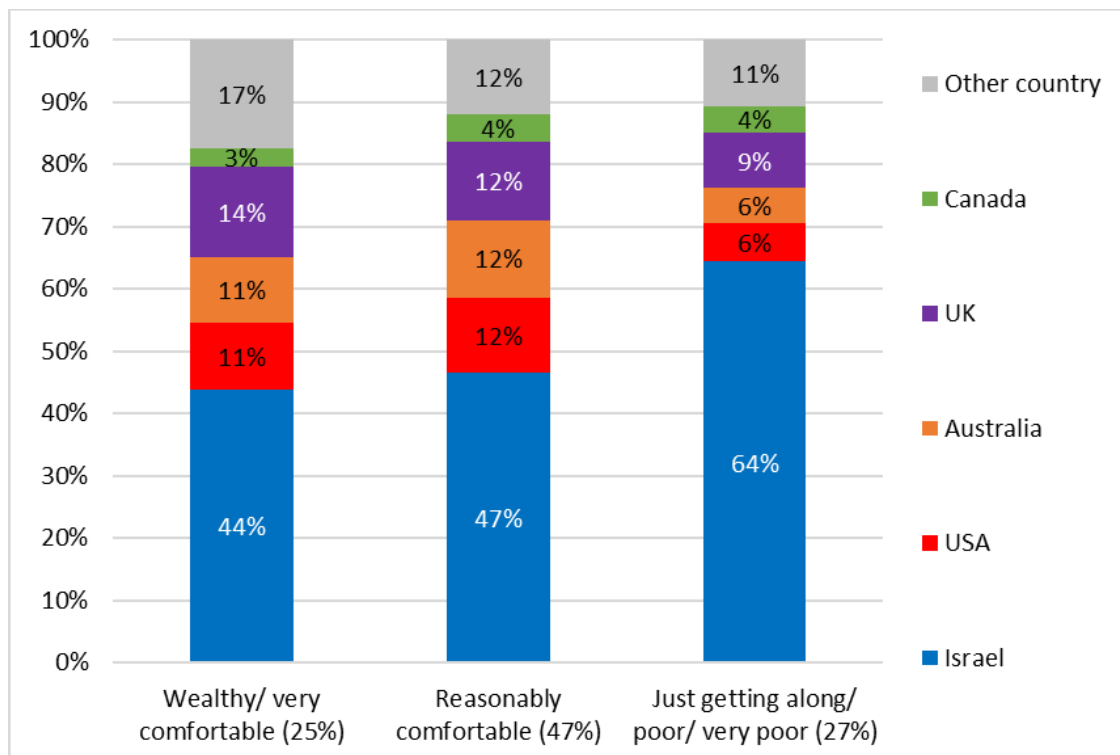


Figure 5. Preferred Destination Country by Financial Wellbeing (JCSSA, 2019)

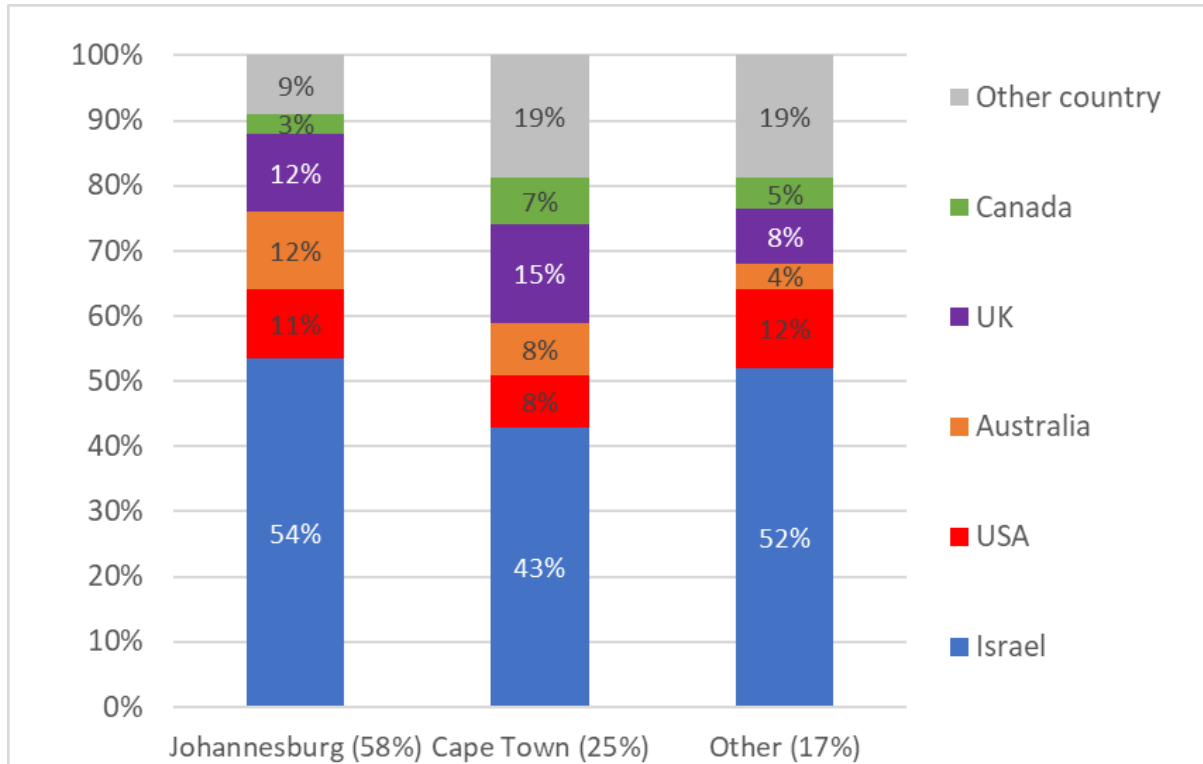


Figure 6. Preferred Destination country by Place of Residence (JCSSA, 2019) [14]

Interestingly religious identity is found to play a strong role in shaping destination preferences (see Figure 7). More religious Orthodox respondents—particularly those identifying as Haredi, Chassidic, or Strictly Orthodox—were much more likely to choose Israel compared to their Secular or Cultural Jewish counterparts. In contrast, Secular/Cultural Jews showed a stronger preference for emigration to the United Kingdom.

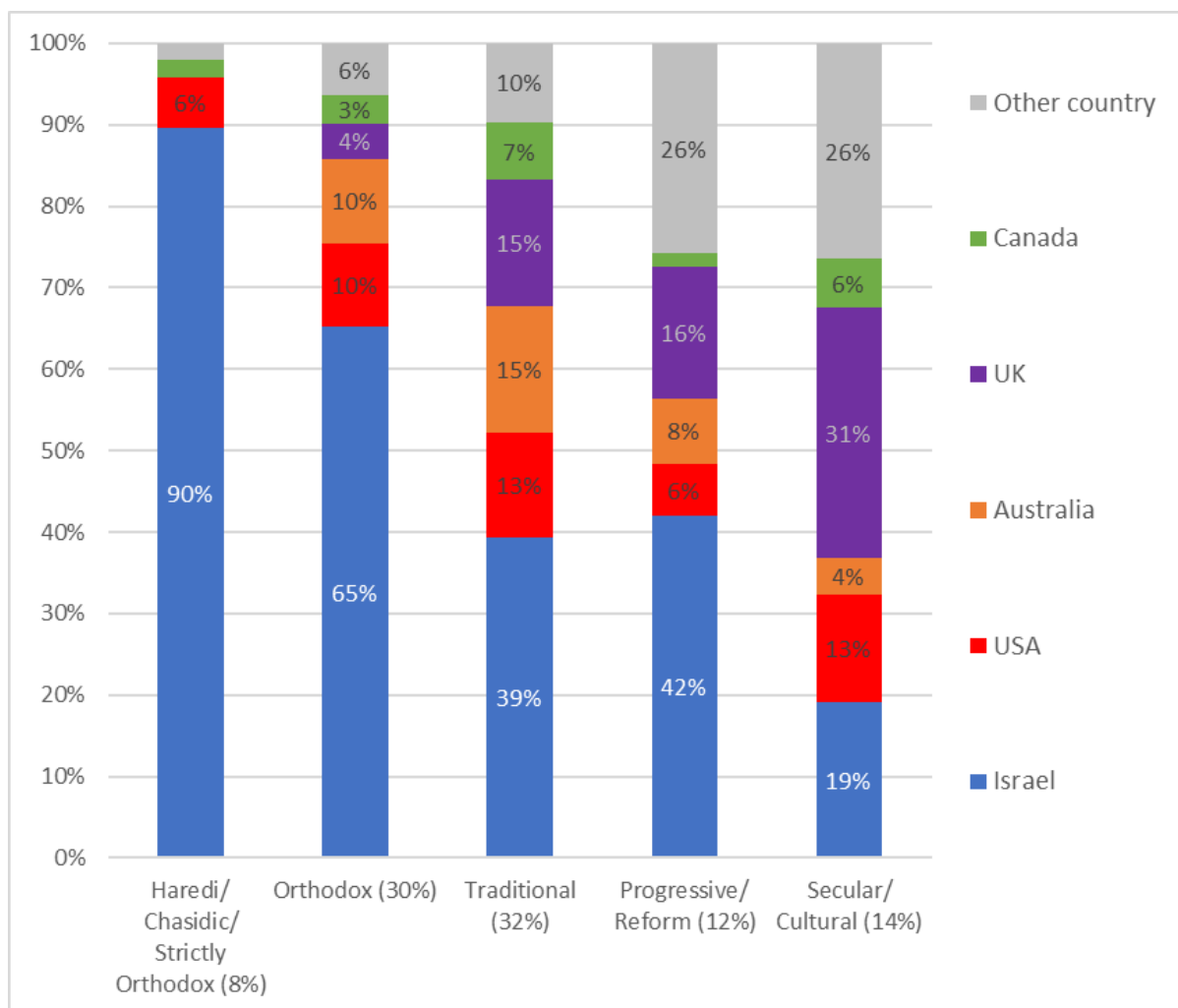


Figure 7. Preferred destination country by Jewish identity strand (JCSSA, 2019) [15]

Most countries' immigration policies tend to favour younger individuals and those with greater financial means. It is therefore not surprising that a relatively high proportion of older and less affluent individuals choose Israel (Figure 4 and Figure 5), suggesting that for those who wish to leave South Africa but lack broader options, Israel may be the only viable destination. At the same time, it is evident that a significant share of younger and more affluent Jewish South Africans identify Israel as their preferred destination, indicating that for many, Israel holds intrinsic appeal—a destination of choice rather than one of last resort.

Who's Most Likely to Leave?

The surveys asked respondents how likely they were to leave South Africa. The bars displayed in Figure 8 indicate the percentage of the population that answered they were likely or very likely to leave within the next five years, and while not indicative of actual emigrants, capture the emigration sentiment at a

particular time. In order to give a sense of the broader context in which these surveys were conducted; our findings are superimposed upon the South African GDP growth rate with additional information showing the presidencies and major global events.

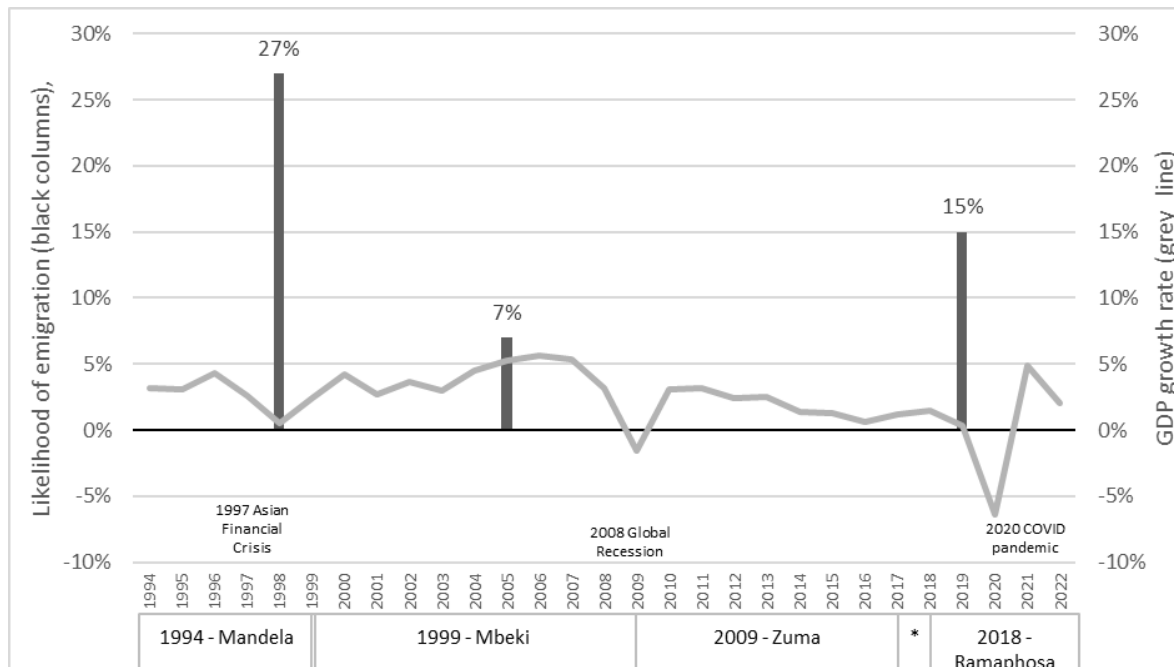


Figure 8. Emigration Sentiment (black columns) and GDP Growth rate (light grey line) [16]

We observe that in 1998, a time of declining growth, political transition, rising crime and, following the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis, instability throughout the developing world, emigration sentiment was at its highest – with 27% of survey respondents saying they were likely to emigrate. In stark contrast just seven years later, emigration sentiment dropped to a low of 7%. 2005 was a golden time in the new South Africa, having just passed a third peaceful election cycle South Africa was characterized by political stability, economic growth and a strengthening currency. However, by 2019 — after a decade of economic stagnation and political disillusionment —emigration sentiment rose again to 15%.

Survey data from 2019 also reveal which sub-groups with the South African Jewish population are more likely to consider emigration:

- Age (Figure 9): Almost a quarter of respondents aged 18–39 said they were likely to leave, compared with just 7% of those over 60.
- Place of residence (Figure 10): Capetonians showed slightly lower levels of emigration sentiment than those living in Johannesburg and other smaller communities outside of the main centres.

- Jewish identity (Figure 11): Those identifying as Orthodox showed a slightly higher emigration sentiment (18%) compared to those identifying as Traditional or Secular (13%).
- Sense of belonging (Figure 12): Those who felt less connected to South Africa were more inclined to leave.

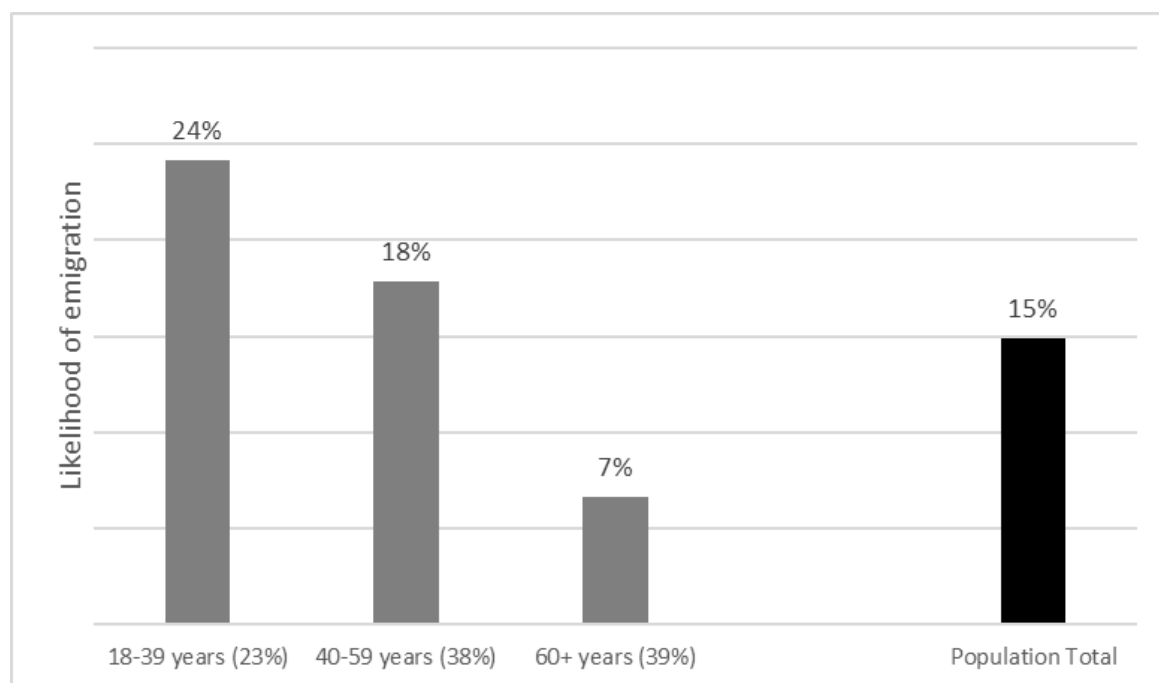


Figure 9. Emigration Sentiment by Age, (JCSSA 2019)

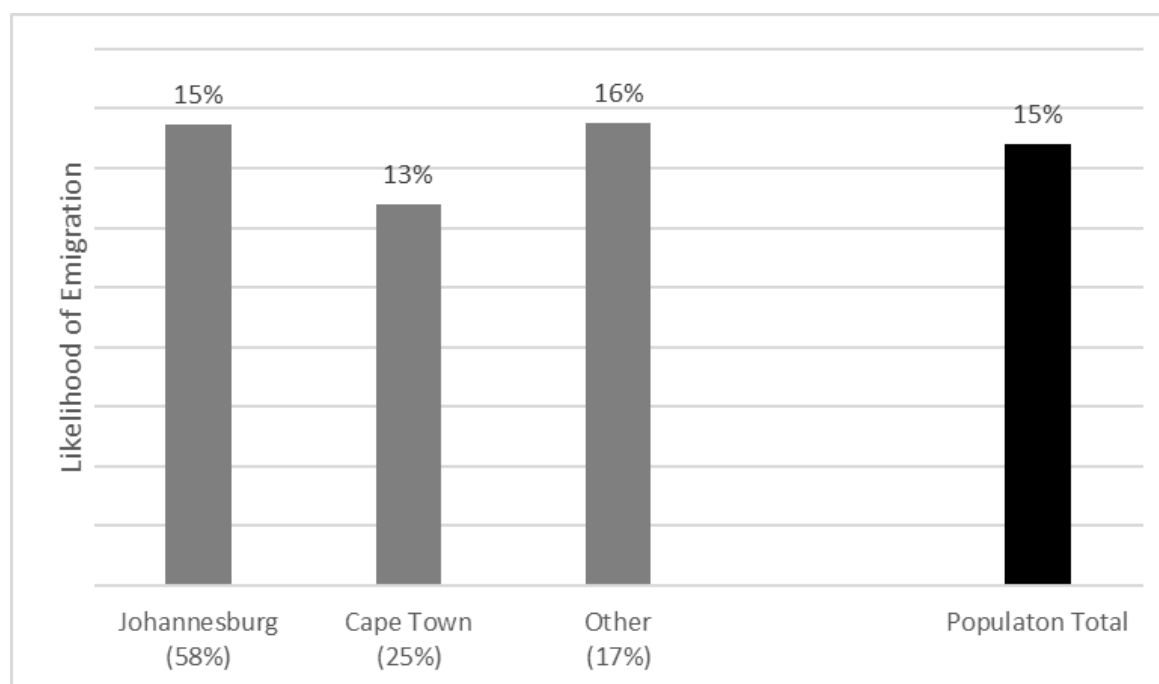


Figure 10. Emigration Sentiment by Place of Residence, (JCSSA 2019)

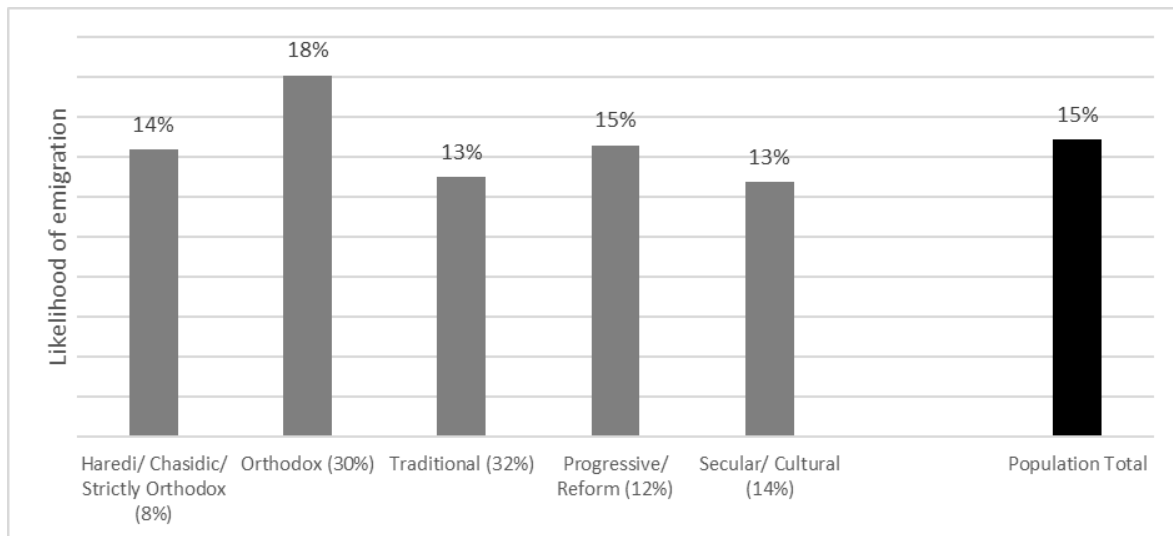


Figure 11. Emigration Sentiment by Jewish Identity Strand, (JCSSA 2019)

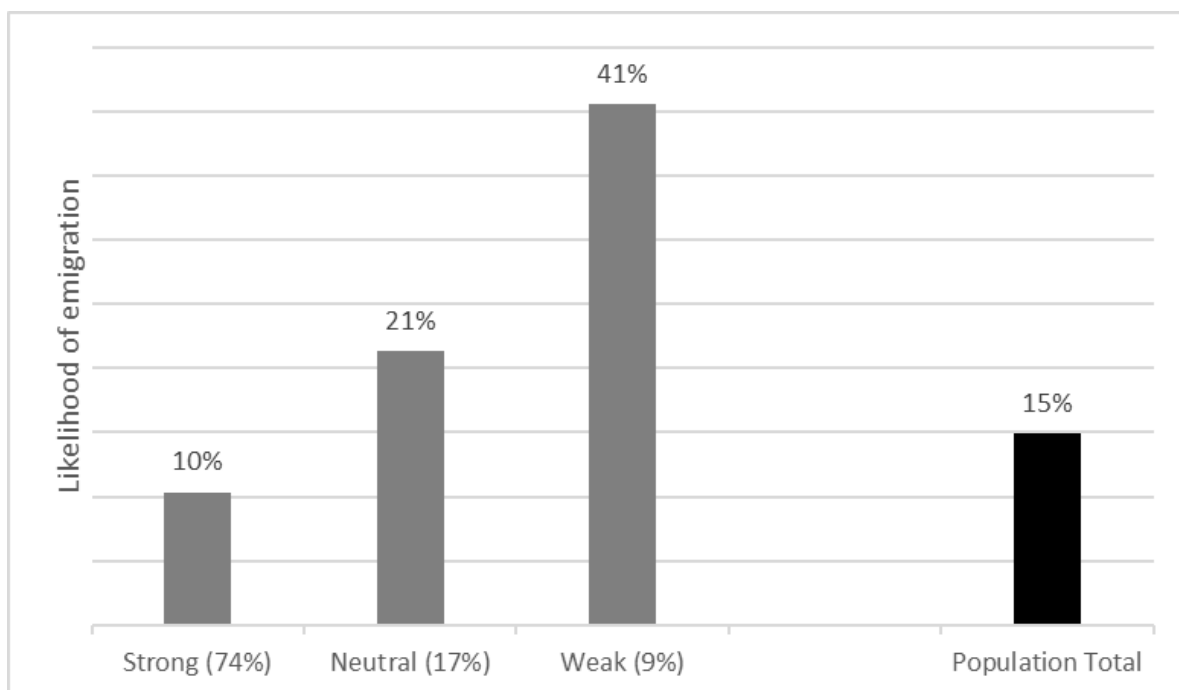


Figure 12. Emigration Sentiment by Sense of Belonging in South Africa, (JCSSA 2019) [17]

Interestingly, personal financial well-being did not show a strong association with the likelihood of emigration. Across income groups, attitudes were fairly similar. This suggests that broader economic concerns weigh more heavily than personal financial circumstances in shaping emigration decisions.

Reasons for Emigration

Figure 13 shows that over the past three decades, the motivations provided for emigration have shifted. In 1998, the dominant concern was personal safety, with nearly half of all respondents citing it as their main motive. In 2005 one

observes the dominance of ‘pull’ rather than ‘push’ factors with the main reasons given for emigrating being family ties and career or study opportunities abroad. Safety concerns continue to play a role but have dropped significantly since 1998, and similarly with regards to ‘concerns about the future’, which dipped to a low of 6%.

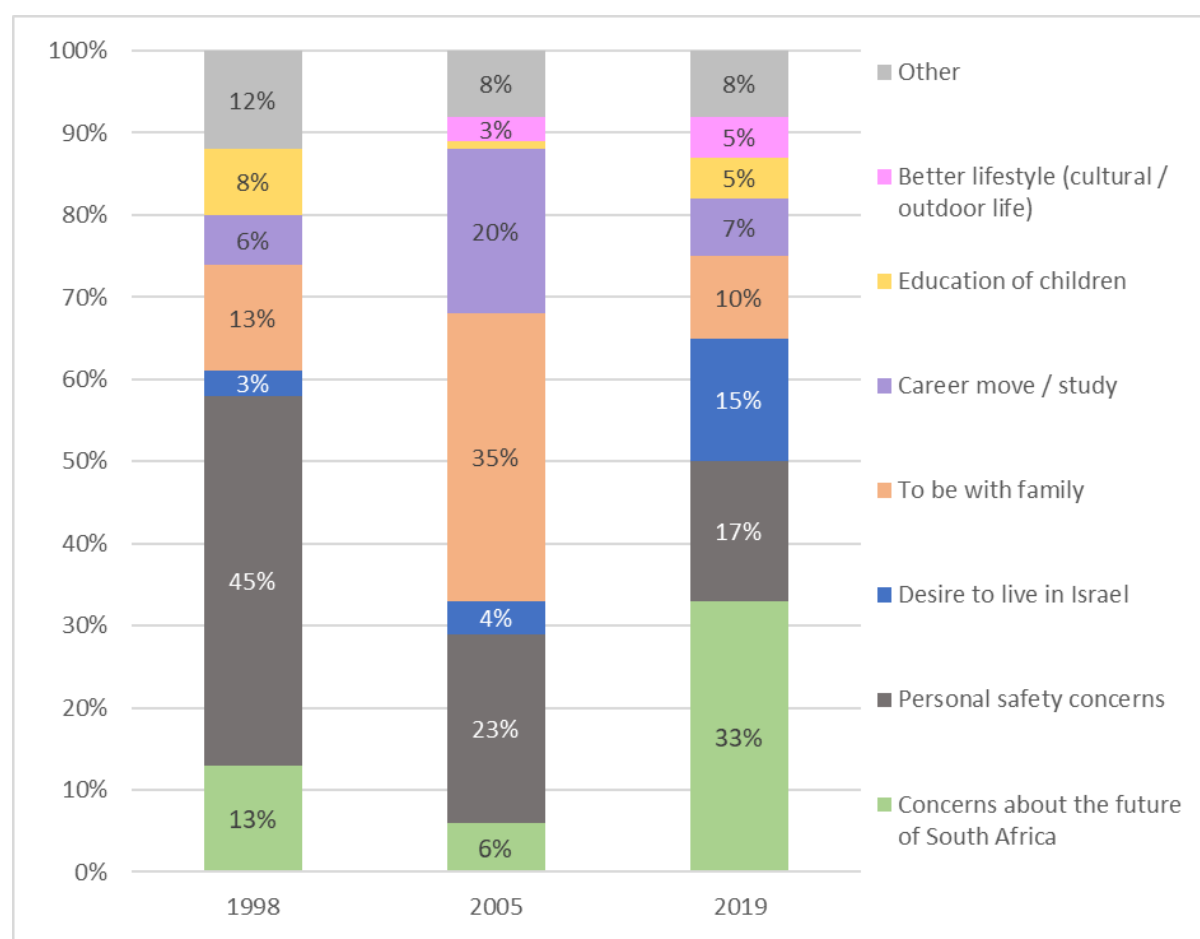


Figure 13. Main motivations for wanting to leave South Africa. [18]

In 2019, two new trends emerged. In this period the most cited reason for wanting to emigrate was concern about the future of South Africa — named by 33% of respondents. Safety concerns still featured, but less than in the previous surveys. The second notable trend is that the motivation, ‘desire to live in Israel,’ increased significantly, from just 3–4% in earlier surveys to 15% in 2019. While a ‘trickle of the more ideologically motivated can be expected to occur all the time,’ one would have expected this proportion of the community to have remained fairly constant. The increased popularity of Israel, despite security concerns in Israel, indicates that a major change has taken place in the attitudes of many South African Jews.

The 2019 dataset further shows that motivations vary by age (Figure 14). Older respondents (60+) were more likely to be driven by pull factors- a wish to

reunite with family or a desire to move to Israel, while younger people (18–39) were more likely to cite ‘push’ concerns about the country’s future and personal safety, as well as the pull factor of career and study opportunities.

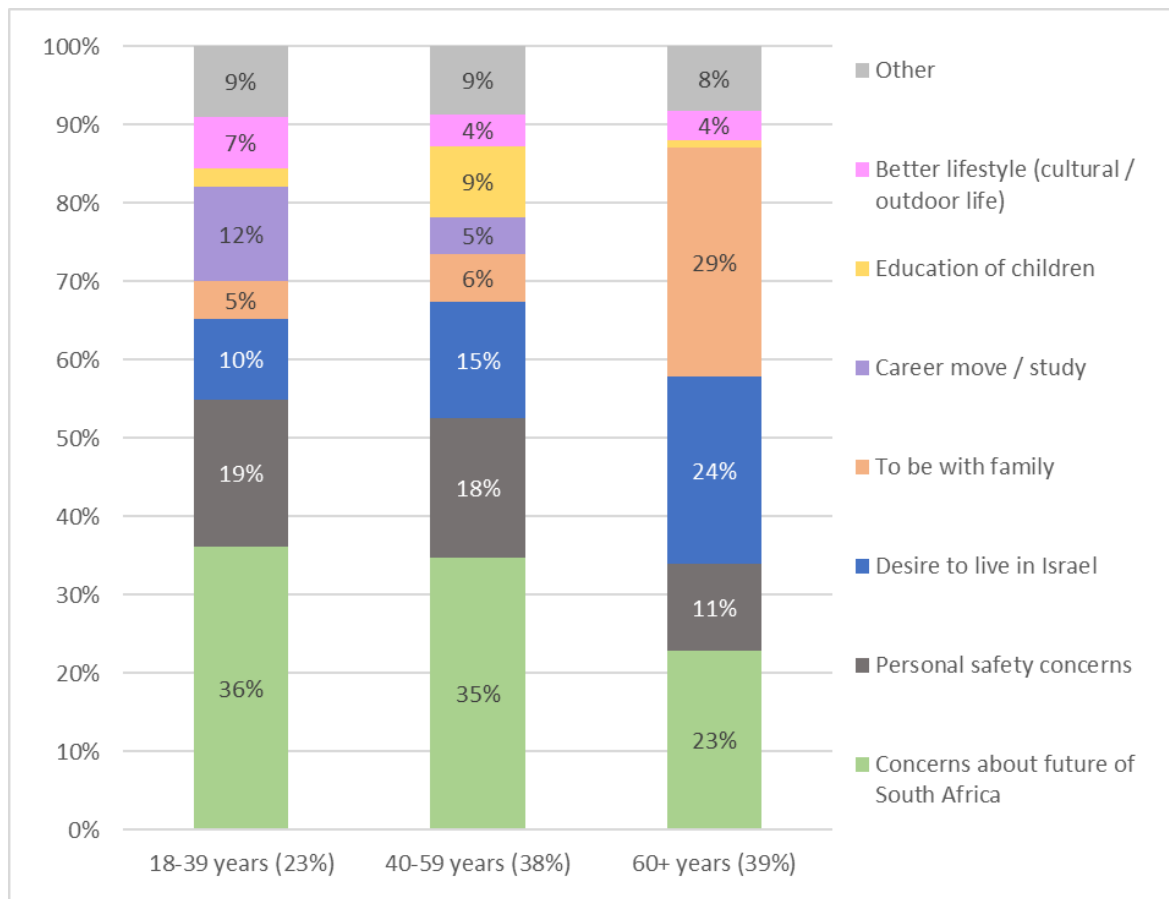


Figure 14. Main motivations for wanting to leave South Africa by age (JCSSA 2019)

While a person’s place of residence made only modest differences in motivations (Figure 15), those living in Johannesburg were slightly more likely than Capetonians to cite concern for the country’s future or personal safety as reasons, while people outside the main centres showed the strongest pull towards wanting to live in Israel as well as family reunion reasons.

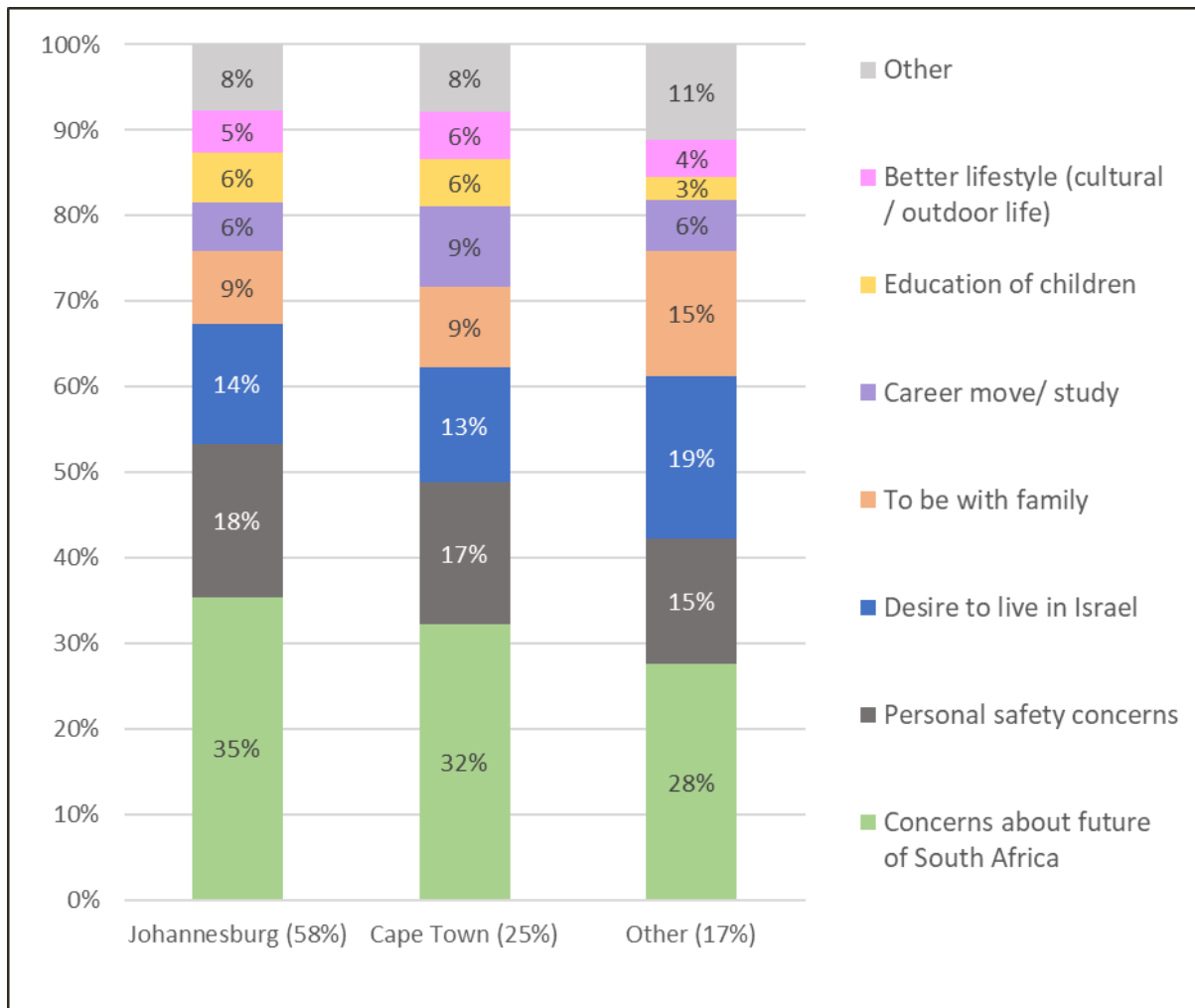


Figure 15. Main Motivations for Wanting to Leave SA by Place of Residence (JCSSA 2019)

As in earlier sections, personal financial status was not a major discriminating factor in understanding differences in the reasons for emigration. Across all income groups, concern about the country's direction was the most frequently cited basis for emigration (Figure 16). We note that wealthier individuals were more likely to list personal safety as a motivation as well as 'career move/ study' compared to those financially less well-off.

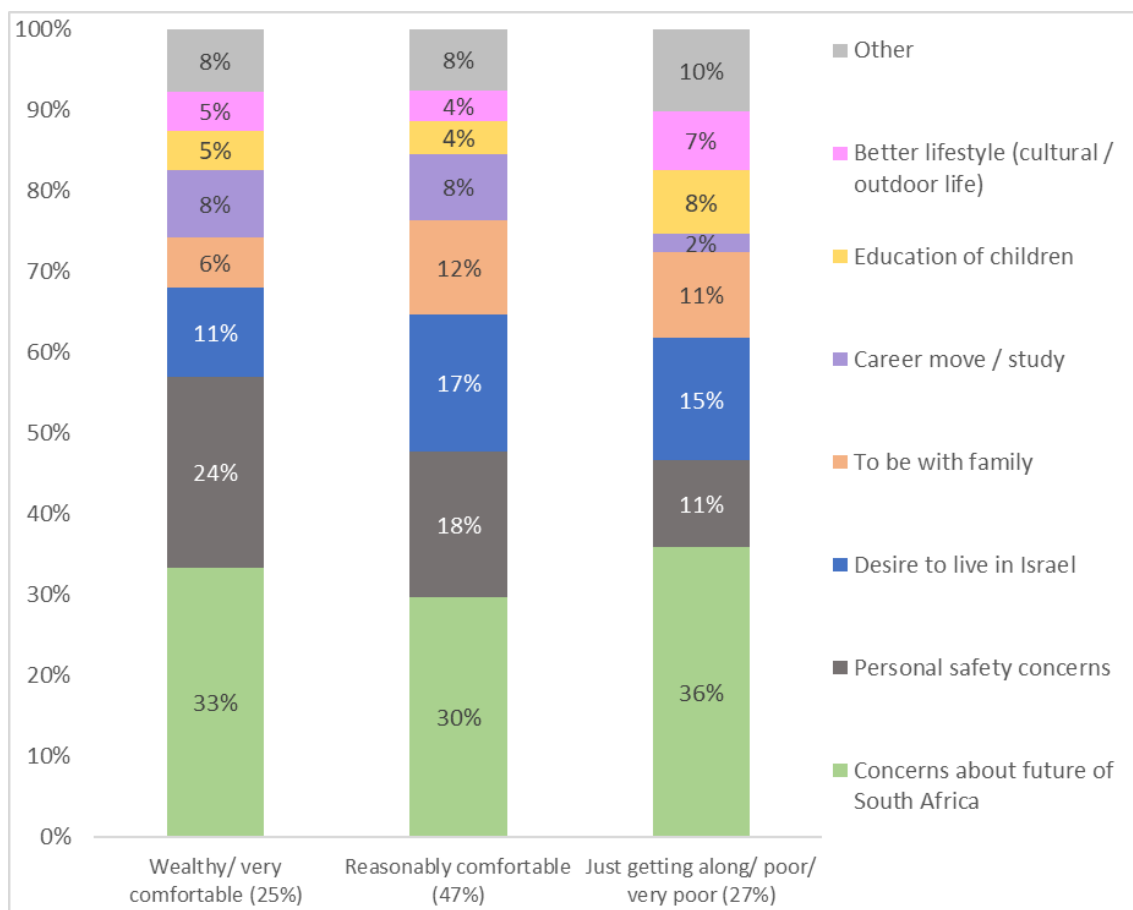


Figure 16. Main motivations for wanting to leave South Africa by financial well-being. (JCSSA 2019)

Jewish-Religious identity was found to be associated with a person's primary motivation for emigration. Figure 17, mirroring Figure 7's choice of destination counties, shows a clear pattern: the stronger someone's Orthodox- religious Jewish identity, the more likely they are to say they're leaving South Africa because they want to live in Israel. This is especially true for those in the Haredi subgroup, where 40% said moving to Israel was their main reason for emigrating. That share drops to 20% among Orthodox Jews, 6% among those who identify as Traditional, and just 3% among secular Jews. In comparison, Secular and Traditional Jews are more likely to say they're leaving because they're worried about South Africa's future or about their personal safety.

The Progressive/Reform group does not fit this stepwise pattern. The Progressive sub-group shows a mix of similarities with other groups, like the Orthodox, many are drawn to Israel, while others, like the Secular, are motivated by concerns about safety and for a better lifestyle elsewhere.

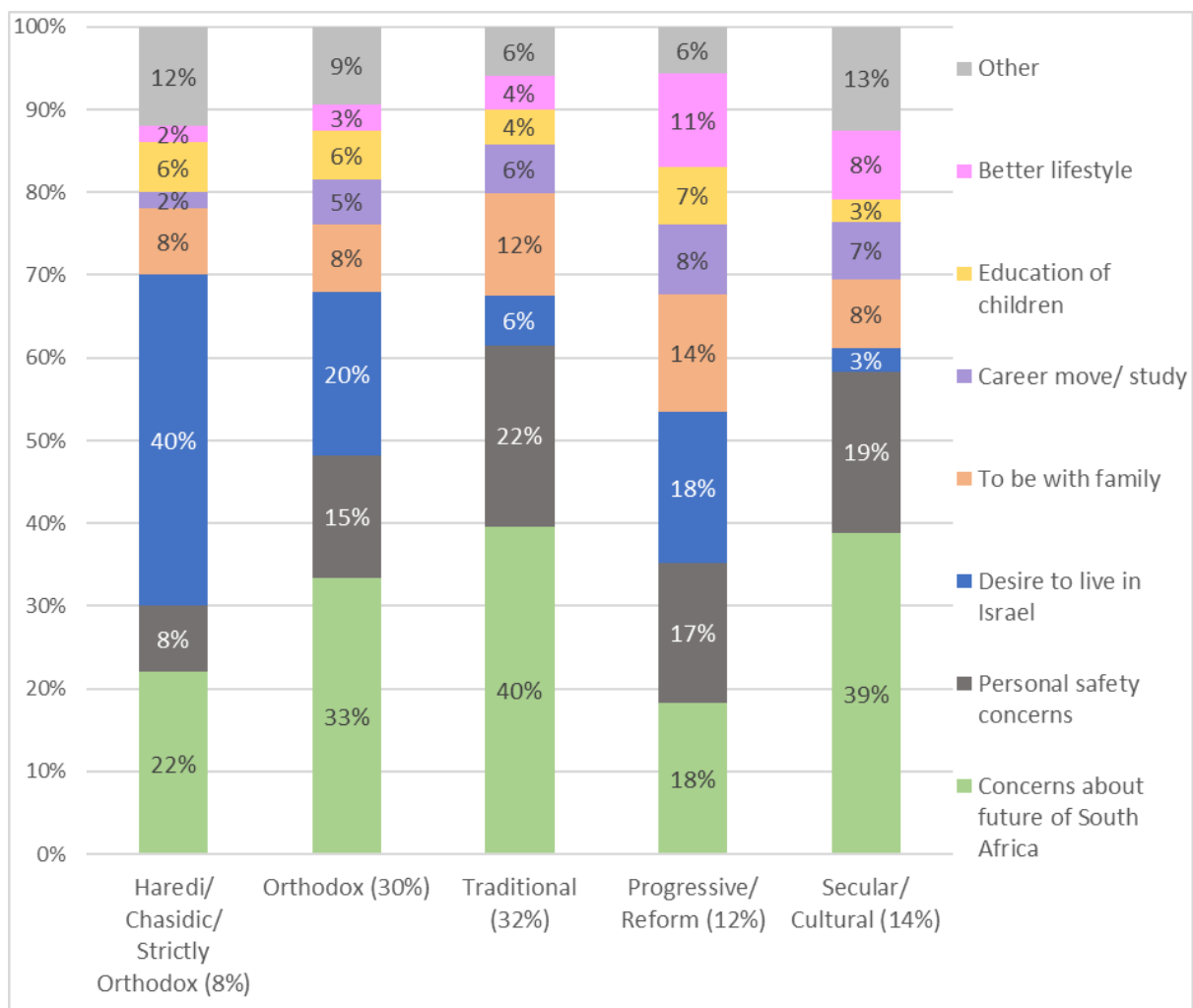


Figure 17. Main motivations for wanting to leave SA by Jewish identity Strand (JCSSA 2019)

Given that emigration is almost always the result of multiple factors, the JCSSA survey also asked respondents to share their second and third most important reasons for considering emigration. While the overall picture remains the same, the combined responses highlight the important drivers of: Concern regarding one's children's education, dissatisfaction with affirmative action policies, frustrations with poor municipal services and the pursuit of a better lifestyle.

While the survey data presented thus far has focused on attitudes towards emigration from respondents still living in South Africa, the 2017 Gen17 survey of Australian Jews provides insights from 838 South African-born Jews who now live in Australia. [\[19\]](#) Their reasons for leaving South Africa reflect the broader trends seen in the South African survey data. In the 1990s, the most common reasons for having emigrated were concerns about crime, social instability, the poor political situation and the implications for the future. From 2010 onward however, crime became a less of a factor and family-related reasons became increasingly important.

The Gen17 survey further asked Jewish South African expatriates why they chose Australia specifically as their destination. 40% said it was because of family connections; 34% cited a desire for a safe environment and a better future for their children while others cited Australia's similarities to South Africa (11%). However, it is notable that only a small minority mentioned job opportunities or economic gain —3% listed employment as a factor, and only 1% believed they would be better off financially. These findings support what many in the community have long observed: SA Jewish emigration is rarely about financial advancement. Rather, it is about security, stability, and family ties — even when it means giving up material comfort or professional status.

The Last Five Years

The world has not stood still since the most recent survey of the South African Jewish community was conducted in 2019. In the intervening years, a series of major global and domestic events have likely influenced migration decisions in various—and sometimes contradictory—ways. While it is difficult to determine their net effect, these events undoubtedly shaped how people evaluate their future in South Africa and abroad.

Globally, the COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2021) had a profound impact on international mobility. Lockdowns and travel bans made emigration practically difficult, and it is likely that many individuals postponed their plans due to the uncertainty. Yet once restrictions eased, emigration surged, particularly among those who had previously delayed their departure. This is evident in SA aliyah numbers to Israel, which slumped in 2020 and then peaked in 2021.[\[20\]](#) At the same time, the rise of remote work has reshaped migration logic: as people were able to decouple their place of work from their place of residence, this opened new possibilities for both domestic and international migration.

Within South Africa, two key events appear especially salient. First, the July 2021 riots—including widespread looting, violence, and destruction mainly in KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng. The riots intensified a sense of instability and weakened confidence in the state's ability to provide security, and probability pushed a lot of people one step closer to making the decision to emigrate.

In contrast, the 2024 national elections and the formation of a Government of National Unity were widely seen as a turning point. After years of ANC dominance, the emergence of a multi-party coalition signalled the resilience of SA's democratic institutions and a renewed belief in the country's future.

With regards to Israel, the shock and devastation of the 7 October 2023 attacks and outbreak of war would have been a significant consideration for anyone

thinking about emigrating to the country. While *The South African Jewish Report* [21] has highlighted individuals who proceeded with their plans to move to Israel despite the conflict, for many others, the war led to hesitation, re-evaluation and delays. *The Times of Israel*, for example, reported a drop globally in immigration to Israel in 2024 compared to the previous year. [22] Meanwhile, a rise in global antisemitism—from American college campuses to London to Sydney— may have reduced the appeal of the Western countries once thought to be ideal destinations. At the same time, antisemitism has also become more prevalent within South Africa. The ANC-led government's decision to take Israel to the International Court of Justice, for example, has strained relations between the Jewish community and the state more than at any point since the advent of the democratic era. This shift has eroded the sense of security and belonging for many South African Jews. As shown in Figure 12 above, there is evidence that those who feel a weaker sense of belonging in the country are more likely to consider emigration.

In sum, the past few years have been marked by a range of global and domestic events that have undoubtedly shaped migration intentions in multiple, and at times conflicting, ways. Yet it remains difficult to assess their overall impact. Importantly, this is not the first period marked by volatility. South African Jews have long navigated a shifting landscape of uncertainty, regularly assessing their options.

Discussion and Conclusion

Migration is a complex issue, rarely driven by a single factor. Each individual's decision to emigrate is shaped by a unique mix of personal circumstances and broader influences. Nonetheless, our analysis highlights key themes that have shaped South African Jewish emigration trends in the post-apartheid era.

Our study draws primarily on three high-quality, in-depth surveys of the South African Jewish community, each examining emigration intentions. This data enables us to trace changes over time in the overall likelihood of emigration, preferred destination countries, and the underlying motivations for leaving.

In the late 1990s, the dominant driver of emigration was crime. Over time however, this has been overtaken by a deeper concern about the country's political and economic future. Emigration has become less about immediate safety or financial need and more about addressing long-term uncertainty. Unlike typical economic migrants who emigrate for better income and jobs abroad, most Jewish South Africans emigrants do not expect a better material life abroad. In fact, they often anticipate a drop in lifestyle standards. The motivation is for a more stable and predictable future.

The role of social and familial networks as a driver of emigration cannot be overstated, given that the majority of South African Jews have close relatives living abroad. These social connections both reduce the barriers to emigration and weaken the ties anchoring individuals to South Africa. As a result, even if concerns around safety and the economic-political environment were resolved, it is likely that network effects would continue to sustain emigration trends.

Historically, most South African Jewish emigrants settled in English-speaking Western democracies. However, one of the most notable shifts in the past two decades has been the rise of Israel as the primary destination. Israel's growing appeal signals a significant change in how South African Jews view potential destination countries. While an emotional attachment to Israel and the attraction of Israel's growing economy may play a role, practical factors are just as important: In a global context of increasingly restrictive immigration policies Israel offers admission to Jews through the country's Law of Return, and a softer landing through financial benefits offered to new immigrants. For many, Israel now offers a compelling combination of ideological connection, social ties and practical accessibility.

Our analysis of subgroup dynamics found that, as is frequently observed, younger people are the most likely to emigrate from South Africa. Orthodox individuals are marginally more inclined to leave than those affiliated with other strands. Place of residence also appears to have some effect, with residents of Cape Town slightly less likely to emigrate compared to those living in other parts of the country.

Our findings reveal no significant link between an individual's personal economic circumstances and their likelihood of emigration. Rather, it is the broader macroeconomic environment that plays a decisive role, with emigration sentiment rising and falling in response to South Africa's political and economic climate. As we observe, during periods of economic growth, such as in 2005, the desire to emigrate declined substantially. This insight offers an alternative trajectory for the South African Jewish community: should the country achieve sustained economic growth and political stability, some of the main drivers of emigration would recede, paving the way for a more stable demographic future.

- ***Reviva Hasson is a research fellow at the Isaac & Jessie Kaplan Centre for Jewish Studies & research at the University of Cape Town. A more detailed and academic version of this research will be appearing later this year in the Journal Studies in Contemporary Jewry.***

NOTES

[1] United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2024). International Migrant Stock 2024. <https://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/content/international-migrant-stock>

[2] Colin Tatz, Peter Arnold, and Gillian Heller, *Worlds Apart: The Re-Migration of South African Jews* (Dural, NSW: 2007), 185.

[3] David Graham, “The Jews of South Africa in 2019,” 2020, 25, Available at www.kaplancentre.uct.ac.za

[4] Shirley Bruk, “The Jews of South Africa 2005 – Report on a Research Study,” 2006; Institute for Jewish Policy Research and The Kaplan Centre for Jewish Studies, “Survey of Jewish South Africans 1998” (Cape Town: Kaplan Centre [producers], 1999. DataFirst [Distributor], 2021, 1998), <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.25828/W4Y8-W546>; Barry Kosmin et al., “Jews of the New South Africa: Highlights of the 1998 National Survey of South African Jews,” 1999.

[5] Institute for Jewish Policy Research, Kaplan Centre for Jewish Studies [producers], and DataFirst [distributor], “Jewish Community Survey of South Africa 2019 [Dataset],” 2020, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.25828/6C7F-1680>.

[6] Country census and survey data rely on people self-selecting the Jewish option for the question on religion. This table excludes other countries, of which the largest is probably New Zealand (whose total Jewish population was enumerated as 5,274 in the 2018 Census).

[7] The number of Jewish U.S. residents born in South Africa is difficult to estimate given the small sample, less than 1%, of Sub-Saharan Africa-born Jews in the U.S. data. Pew Research Center, “Jewish Americans in 2020,” 8, 173. Based on JCSSA data, which shows that 21% of Jewish South African emigrants are in the USA, we infer a South African-born Jewish population in the United States is roughly 16,000.

[8] *Sources*: Australian Bureau of Statistics, “Census 2021,” 2021, online at: abs.gov.au/census; Office for National Statistics (ONS), “Census of England and Wales (Various), Table CTo265,” 2021, online at: ons.gov.uk; Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS), “Statistical Abstract for Israel, Table 4.4” (Jerusalem: 2018) online at: <https://www.cbs.gov.il/en/publications/Pages/2019/Statistical-Abstract-of-Israel-2019-No-70.aspx#>; Brym, Neuman, and Lenton, “2018 Survey of Jews in Canada.”

[9] We note that the both the JCSSA survey and UN data are estimates and neither are able to capture the full picture. The survey data is limited by those who still have family living in South Africa, hence if everyone in the family has emigrated, they will

not be included in the results. Administrative data on the other hand only reflects official data and is unlikely to reflect illegal migrants.

[10] Question (JCSSA, 2019): “In which country/countries does/do the members of your immediate family who USED TO LIVE in South Africa, CURRENTLY live? If there are more than four people in any category, please limit your answers to the ELDEST FOUR. An immediate family member is defined as a parent, sibling, child or grandchild.”

United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2024). International Migrant Stock 2024.
<https://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/content/international-migrant-stock>.

“Southern Africa” refers to countries that border South Africa: Botswana, Eswatini, Lesotho, Namibia, Mozambique and Zimbabwe.

[11] Sources: England and Wales: (Office for National Statistics (ONS), Census of England and Wales (Various), Table CT0265). The census recorded religion, country of birth, and year of arrival data, although only grouped totals were available and these have been averaged out in the table. Australia: Australian Bureau of Statistics, Census, 2006, 2011, 2016, 2021. The censuses record religion, country of birth, and year of arrival. Enumerated data were adjusted for undercount, given that the religion question is voluntary. Israel: CBS, Statistical Abstract for Israel, Table 4.4. The Israeli data record annual numbers of arrivals by country of origin (migrant flows).

[12] Question (2019): “Where would you move to in the next five years?” Question (1998/2005): “Which country would you most likely move to?”. This question was only asked to people who responded they were “very likely” or “quite likely” to emigrate from South Africa in the next five years (1998 [N= 267]; 2005 [N=69]; 2019 [N=555]). Sources: *Brook, The Jews of South Africa 2005*, 88, 93 (includes 1998 data); *Institute for Jewish Policy Research, Kaplan Centre for Jewish Studies [producers], and DataFirst [distributor], “Jewish Community Survey of South Africa 2019 [Dataset],” 2020*, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.25828/6C7F-1680>.

[13] The percentage shown in parenthesis on the x-axis in these and forthcoming figures indicates the percentage of each subgroup within the South African Jewish population.

[14] “Other” includes all South Africans residing outside of the two main centres, mainly comprising Durban/Umhlanga, Gauteng Province (other than Johannesburg), and the Western Cape Province (other than Cape Town).

[15] Question (JCSSA, 2019): “How would you describe your current religious/Jewish identification? Please select one answer.” (Mixed religion (2 percent), not Jewish (1 percent) and other (1 percent) not shown).

[16] Question (JCSSA, 2019): “How likely are you to move from your current location in the next five years, including abroad?” The responses show those that responded to this question as being “very likely” or “quite likely” with regards to moving to “a

different country.” *Question* (1998 and 2005): “Thinking of the next five years, which of the alternatives comes closest to what applies to you?” (The options ranged from “a different address but within 5km of my current location” to “a different country.”). (1998: [N=1000]; 2005 [N=1000]); 2019 [N=4193]). Names of South African presidents and the start of their terms are shown below the graph; *Kgalema Motlanthe served as president from September 2018 to May 2019. Key economic events are noted at the bottom of the figure.

Sources: Macrotrends, “South Africa GDP Growth Rate 1961–2023,” online at: www.macrotrends.net/global-metrics/countries/ZAF/south-africa/gdp-gross-domestic-product (accessed 27 February 2024); Graham, “The Jews of South Africa in 2019”; Bruk, *The Jews of South Africa 2005* (includes 1998 data).

[17] *Question* (JCSSA, 2019): “To what extent do you have a sense of belonging in South Africa? Please select one answer.”

[18] *Question* (2019): “Why would you consider leaving South Africa?” *Question* (1998/2005): “You say that you are likely to leave South Africa to live in another country during the next five years. What would you say are your three most important reasons for leaving?”

This question was only asked to people who responded they were “very likely” or “quite likely” to emigrate from South Africa in the next five years (1998 [N= 267]; 2005 [N=69]; 2019 [N=555]).

Sources: Bruk, *The Jews of South Africa 2005*, 105 (includes 1998 data); Institute for Jewish Policy Research, Kaplan Centre for Jewish Studies [producers], and DataFirst [distributor], “Jewish Community Survey of South Africa 2019 [Dataset],” 2020, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.25828/6C7F-1680>.

[19] We gratefully acknowledge JCA in Sydney and the Australian Centre for Jewish Civilization at Monash University in Melbourne for access to the Gen17 data

[20] Pers com with the Jewish Agency and Israel Centre, May 2024

[21] See some examples in the SAJR: Tankle (22.08.2024) ‘SA aliya to Israel not slowing’, Tankle (6.03.2025) ‘Aliya increases, with most olim under 40’ and Tankle (05.09.2024) ‘Wartime Israel doesn’t deter thousands of olim’

[22] ‘Immigration to Israel down 24% since last Independence Day’ *The Times of Israel* (28.04.2025)



THE RITUAL SLAUGHTERERS OF SUTHERLAND, NORTHERN CAPE

Wilf Stein

The town of Sutherland lies in South Africa's Northern Cape province. It has the reputation of being the coldest town in South Africa. As a descendant of a Sutherland family once wrote, "the water freezes to ice in the taps. ". One basis for the cold is the town's location high in the western Roggeveld mountains in the Karoo, but another is that the sky is so clear. And that is why the SALT (Southern Latitude Astronomical Telescope) is located in Sutherland. The presence of this telescope is one reason why tourism is such a strong part of the economic basis of Sutherland and why there are so many places offering accommodation in and around the town. Another attraction is the ancient cemetery just outside the town. Within that cemetery is a small Jewish cemetery, and it is this that is the focus of our story.



The general cemetery has some 275 graves. The Small Jewish Communities Association ([Small Jewish Communities Association – SA](#)) has recently surveyed it and found 11 Jewish graves, seven of which have tombstones. Four of these were renovated and photographs published. A previous survey by the Genealogical Society of South Africa had photographed four of the tombstones of the Jewish graves:



Rev. W Smilg



Rev. M M Spitz



Barnett Perlman



Unreadable Jewish grave

The survey of the Small Jewish Communities Association added one to this collection (that of the late W. Frank – who was not resident in Sutherland but rather in Fraserburg, 170 km distant) and supplied a translation of the “Unreadable Jewish grave” pictured above.

The upper two gravestones in the pictures above are on the graves of the two ritual slaughterers (*shochatim*) of the town, Wolf Smilg and Reverend Menachem Mendel Spitz. The bottom left is that of Barnett Perlman, the

founder member of the Perlman family which will be discussed in detail further on. And here is the mystery that we mean to solve: Why should there be two slaughterers to service so small a Jewish population? I will develop this riddle's explanation in detail since it provides the history of this somewhat isolated Jewish community.

Who were these two *shochatim*? The first to arrive was Reverend Spitz. I have a record of the shipping manifest for his journey on the *Dover Castle* that left Southampton for Cape Town on 18 May 1910. His occupation is listed as "slaughterer". Menachem Mendel Spitz was born in 1885. His father Moshe Spitz, who died in Kretinga in the far west of Lithuania, is described on Menachem's gravestone as "*ha Rav Hagadol*" – the great rabbi – while his mother was from Plunge (Plungian). Menachem settled in Sutherland, finding a house on Primrose Street. He was joined in July 1912 by his wife Chaya and their two children, listed on the shipping manifest of the *Dover Castle* as Samuel and Moses. The happy reunion was short-lived as Menachem died on 18 January 1913. The cause of death was given as pneumonia and his occupation as "Hebrew slaughterer". Listed on the probate (signed by his wife, in Cape Town, in 1915) are three children, Max, Maurice and Mendel. The latter, named after his father, was posthumous, born on 13 March 1913. Maurice is presumably the "Samuel" shown on the 1912 shipping manifest. Chaya later married Benjamin Grolman in Johannesburg in 1944.

Menachem Mendel's successor as *shochet*, Wolf Smilg, was born in Vidukle, in the east of Lithuania, in 1892. He left Southampton (also on the *Dover Castle*) on 11 October 1912, his occupation likewise listed as "slaughterer". I have wondered about the timing of his recruitment. Did the growing Sutherland Jewish community already feel the need for a second *shochet*, or was Menachem Mendel's health failing so that he could not do the work? Most probably, Smilg came to South Africa to look for work and was already there when Reverend Spitz died.

Who were these Jewish families who had come to settle in Sutherland? The other two graves shown in the figure provide a substantial part of the answer. We know a great deal about Barnett (sometimes Burnard) Perlman since one of his sons, Hayim Perlman, has left us a fine memoir on which I have based this story. Barnett arrived in South Africa as a young man of 29 at the very end of 1894. According to his son's memoir, he was met at the boat by a welcoming committee that included a Mr Jacob Cohen, a "*landsleit*" (coming from the same part of Lithuania as Barnett). Mr Cohen as Hayim Perlman writes "set about organising things for my father and in no time he was equipped with a cart and horse which enabled him to go as a "smous" [peddler] amongst the farmers in the district selling his goods. My father was a religious man who read the Bible every day and got on very well with the farmers. With the assistance of friends, he was soon established in Sutherland as a shopkeeper, a general dealer and produce dealer".

Barnett had a sister Zelda (affectionately known as Zlatte) who came to Sutherland with her four sons, Benjamin Hirsh, Mordecai (known as Max), Michael and Lionel. Benjamin and Max joined Barnett in the business that became known as Perlman and Stein.



Mordecai married his cousin Rachel Mervis (their mothers both being sisters of Barnett) in Sutherland in 1908. Of Benjamin, his daughter Nancy wrote, “My Dad, Bennie Stein served on the Sutherland Town council and was known and loved by all as *Oom* Bennie. He spoke a *suiwer* Afrikaans”. [“*Oom*” is Afrikaans for uncle, a true uncle or else used in an affectionate sense, while “*suiwer*” is “pure”, i.e. fluent]. In Sutherland they had an old country house with a tennis court and a dam in which they could swim in summertime”. The brothers ran a general dealer store and were also involved in *smousing* [itinerant peddling] and sheep speculating, traveling long distances from farm to farm”.

The business, Perlman and Stein, did well. Barnett built himself a fine house on Commercial Road, now called Piet Retief Street. The house has been well preserved and provides excellent bed and breakfast accommodation.



The other major Jewish family in Sutherland were the Blochs. We know of them from the transcription and translation of the inscription on the fourth grave in the picture above, the one simply labelled “Jewish grave”. The translation reads: “Our dear son, outstanding student of Torah and in teaching and excellent in his moral values: Noah Leib son of Aharon Bloch. He was born on 5th Tammuz 5658 in Vabalninkas in the province of Kaunas, Russia. He was taken from us on 8 Nissan 5675 in the sixteenth year of his life“. [Thus, he was born 25 June 1898 and died 23 March 1915]. A search on JewishGen found the Blochs in Vabalninkas, Lithuania, as Aaron and Sarah, with their children Sheine, Noah Leib, Chonel and Mendel. Aaron and Sarah’s 1895 marriage record could also be found. Aaron’s brother Nathan was already in South Africa in 1901, and Aaron was there by 1903. Sarah and the children followed Aaron only in 1912, by which time the business of Bloch Brothers, dealing in livestock, was already well established, also in Commercial Street.

Hayim Perlman left us a wonderful photograph, by Philip Helman of Vleiland, Laingsberg, showing the children of the Perlman and Bloch families with their teacher. Hayim himself is the charming little boy in the middle of the bottom row, holding his book in his hands. I have identified the other children from their birth years and gender but may have made mistakes. Since Hayim was born in 1909, we can date the photograph as probably taken in 1914. The teacher must thus be Rev Wolf Smilg, since Menachem Mendel Spitz had died in January 1913.



Top: Sheine Bloch (10), Annie Perlman (11), Rev. Wolf Smilg, Chonel Bloch (16), Mendel Bloch (12). Bottom: Lily Perlman (7), Hayim Perlman (5), David Louis Perlman (8)

Hayim Perlman remembered that Rev Smilg lived in the Perlman house as a bachelor, paying for his rent by being the community's Hebrew teacher. The Bloch's eldest son, Noach Leib, was perhaps too old to be with these young children, his gravestone giving his age as sixteen when he died in March 1915. Other relatives of the Perlman family joined them in Sutherland. These were the Millmans and the Ormans, cousins of the Perlmans. The Millmans were related through Barnett's mother, a Millman, and the Ormans through Barnett's father. I have a marriage record of Yetta Millman marrying Abraham Orman in Sutherland in October 1913, with both members of the couple being recorded as residing in the town. A witness to the wedding signed himself as M. Stein. This was Mordecai Stein, a cousin to both members of the couple.

But this little community was not to last very much longer. Barnett Perlman died in the Spanish Flu pandemic on 14 November 1918 while Rev Spilg died just four days later. Seven graves in the non-Jewish community were also filled in the last half of 1918.

Soon after Barnett's death, the Perlman properties were sold, and the widow Sarah moved to Cape Town. She settled at 1 Milner Road in the Gardens District, the house having a lovely view of Table Bay. Here, the Perlman children were brought up, went to school and entered into their careers.

My own family has been closely connected with the Perlmans over the years. David Louis (DL) witnessed the will of my grandfather, Wolf Rollnick, in 1927, while his brother Hayim did the same for my grandmother Chaya Rollnick in 1929. Hayim later drew up the ante-nuptial contract for my wife and me in 1954.

In the 1980s Hayim, together with his wife Leah, came on Aliyah to Israel. He was a staunch member of our local Conservative synagogue and read the Omer every year.

Benjamin Hirsh Stein and his wife Zlatta left Sutherland for Laingsburg in 1916. There, wrote their daughter, “they lived for nine years on the banks of the river. When Laingsburg suffered the flash flood in the late 1970’s [actually 1981], the house in which my family had lived was washed away. In mid-1925 the family moved to Somerset West to run a large General Dealer Store. Our home in Somerset West was wonderful. We had a ten roomed house... a beautiful chestnut horse called Venus, and a cow called Daisy. My Dad had a wagon for deliveries and a smart black shiny trap for personal use. There were big outbuildings on the grounds at the back of the house and shop, which had barns for timber, coal, chaff and lucerne Behind this enormous building was the fowl run.”

Later the family moved to Cape Town, where Benjamin first ran a hotel and afterwards a dairy. Wrote Nancy, “My Father became well known for his white cheese (today called Cottage Cheese) and he supplied Woolworth’s, OK Bazaars, Rogalsky’s, CTC Bazaar and Milly’s in Cape Town.” Benjamin Hirsh was buried in Cape Town and Zlatte in Stellenbosch, where her relatives were buried.

The first five children of Rachel and Mordecai (Max) Stein, Benjamin’s brother and business partner in Perlman and Stein, were born in Sutherland. After the Perlman-Stein partnership “turned sour” (according to Mordecai’s daughter, Sarah) Mordecai and Rachel left Sutherland, first for Oudtshoorn where Mordecai first made and then lost money in the ostrich feather trade. Thereafter they joined the Benjamin Stein family in Laingsburg, where another three children were born. Mordecai and Rachel moved finally to Johannesburg to be near to where their daughter Leah lived with her husband Eleazar Hoddes. Mordecai was working as a bookkeeper at the time of his death. He and Rachel are buried in Johannesburg.

Bloch Brothers, the other business on Commercial Street, did not lose a partner to the ‘flu or to a souring of the partnership, but carried on for another decade. I found records in the South African Archives of several legal cases in the 1920s involving the Bloch Brothers, with the final case, as late as 1927, being that between them and a Mr. Ockert Cornelius Vermeulen, “overseer of sheep farming”. But the Blochs too eventually left Sutherland, in their case for Cape Town. Aaron Bloch bought himself a property at 4 Roodehek Street in Gardens and set himself up as a dealer in horses. His daughter Rachel married Hyman Selig Orman in 1922, giving her address at the time as 4 Roodehek Street as did her brother Maurice who listed his address as again 4 Roodehek St (and his occupation as General Dealer} when he married Rachel Ezer in 1929. Aaron’s wife Sarah was living in the house when she died in 1934 while Aaron himself was still living there on his death in 1942, the cause of death being a result of injuries caused by a kick from a horse. Aaron’s brother Nathan bought a house

on Hopeville St, also in Gardens and some six minutes' walk from his brother. His death record records him as a "retired speculator (cattle)". He is buried in Cape Town, as are his nephew Maurice and Maurice's son Stanley.

Perlman and Stein and the Bloch Brothers were not the only Jewish businesses in Sutherland. In the Sutherland Archives is a list headed (in Afrikaans), "Jewish Traders in Sutherland". I have not been able to find out when or why the list was drawn up. The two businesses that we know about are on the list. Several names on it, such as Stegmann and Moag, are of persons not Jewish while for some other names I have not been able to find anything relevant in the South African archives. But some of these names have provided useful leads. For instance, I found that Ezekiel Cohen, who had been born in Trakiai, Lithuania, had died in Sutherland in March 1893, his occupation being listed as bottle storekeeper. Thus, he was living and working in Sutherland before Barnett Perlman had even arrived in South Africa. Ezekiel had married a local Afrikaner woman, and their sons were the Cohens on the list of Jewish traders. Another name on the list was that of Gustav Hochfeld, who had also married a local Afrikaner woman. The H.S. Orman on the list was Hyman Selig Orman. We saw above that he had married Rachel, a daughter of Aaron Bloch of Sutherland's Bloch Brothers. Hyman's occupation was given as hotel keeper. Had he kept a hotel in Sutherland? A witness to the marriage was Moses Zieve, on the list of Jewish traders as being in the business of Lipschitz and Zieve. Moses had married Frida Sambursky in Cape Town already in 1900, giving his address at the time as Sutherland. H. Lipschitz had signed the 1908 marriage record of Mordecai Stein and Rachel Mervis in Sutherland. Entering the names of Harry Lipschitz and Moses Zieve returned numerous records in the South African archives, from 1900 through to 1920, for Lipschitz and to 1935 for Zieve although the later records for Zieve concerned his activities already in Cape Town where he had set up a meat trading firm in the Cape Town abattoirs. (Incidentally, in one of those cases he was together with my uncle Harry Shore in a litigation against some other meat traders). In Cape Town, Zieve was living at 9 Breda St, just three minutes' walk from where Nathan Bloch was living. These ex-Sutherlanders had apparently created for themselves in Cape Town's Gardens a close-knit community where they could talk about their shtetl, that being in this case Sutherland.

Most interesting of all is that following up these names I found a list of the members of the Sutherland town guard during the Anglo-Boer War. The Jewish businessmen were well represented. Moses Zieve, Harry Lipschitz and Marcus Stein (presumably our Max/Mordecai) all received Military Campaign Medals. Morris Braude, a Jew who was not on the list of Jewish traders – being a hawker and thus not owning a business – also received such a medal. When researching Moses Zieve I noticed that he had been on trial, and been convicted, for treason [*presumably they were "Cape Rebels", British citizens who joined the Boers, Sutherland being part of the Cape Colony – Ed.*] during the war. I followed this up and found quite a list of people on searching for traitors from

Sutherland. Apart from Moses Zieve, the list included Gustav Hochfeld and also one of Ezekiel Cohen's sons and many names of Afrikaners.

The Anglo-Boer War had taken place in the very early days of Jewish settlement in Sutherland. Twenty years later, most of the Jewish businesses seem to have closed down and the Jewish community dispersed across South Africa.

It is this fact that is the answer to the question we asked at the beginning of this little history: why were there two slaughterers buried in the Jewish cemetery together with only three other Jewish persons? It would seem that in the first place, there were never two slaughterers active at the same time. Sadly, Rev Spitz served in that capacity for only a few short years before he died and was replaced by Rev. Smilg. Also, each slaughterer had another duty, namely he was also the Hebrew school teacher of the little town. But we have now seen that the main reason for the numerical disparity that we found in the graves of Sutherland's Jewish cemetery is, of course, that the Jewish community lived in the town only some 20 years before dispersing to other parts of the Cape and to further afield, and that it is in those places that their graves lie.

Of the sons of Menachem Mendel and Chaya, Max (known always as Max Jacob) married Rachel Lavine in 1937, his occupation at the time being listed as "manufacturing". When he visited Brasil in 1945, he was recorded as a "comerciarior", but later he and Rae went on *aliyah* to Israel. There Max worked on the rebirth of the city of Ashkelon. The South African Zionist Federation played a huge role in the early days of Ashkelon, recruiting South Africans to work, manage and live in the village. Max headed the original management committee. Later he became the managing director of Peltours, which expanded greatly under his direction to become one of the largest travel and tourist enterprises in Israel.

It is interesting that two descendants of Sutherland families were much involved in sports favored by English-speaking Israelis, bowls in the case of a son of Menachem Mendel Spitz, and cricket, where a grandson of Barnett Perlman was the captain of the Israeli cricket team in the Maccabi Games of 1989.

Playing a game of bowls may not have seemed an important priority to most Israelis after the War of Independence. There was the dire security situation and the desperate state of the economy, but full credit must go to Max Spitz, who is revered as the father of lawn bowls in Israel. In the early 1950s, Max dreamed of bringing bowls to Israel, but did not anticipate the bureaucratic hurdles. But what would have broken the back of lesser mortals did not apply to Max – he had nerves of steel. Supported with a team of fellow South African *olim*, Spitz convinced the mayor of Ramat Gan, Avraham Krinitzi – who had absolutely no idea what bowls was about – that the sport was vital for Israel's survival.



‘The Founder of Israeli Bowls’ Max Spitz (left), seen here with Golda Meir in Ashkelon in the 1950s. It is uncertain whether he was suggesting where to build a bowls club!’

Max’s brother, the posthumous Menachem Mendel, studied medicine and was a medical practitioner in Kinross in the Bethal district of Transvaal. There he married Dorothy Dison, a gifted pianist, in 1944. Dorothy’s obituary (she died aged 103) records that “During World War II she served as a nurse in Durban, where she met dashing young doctor Mendel (Mendy) Spitz. They married and moved to Kinross ... where Mendy was the GP for the whole of the Kinross and Bethal district. She often helped out in the surgery as a receptionist.” Dorothy was active in the local Kinross community, establishing the library, and local branch of the Transvaal Women’s Agricultural Union (TWAU) and organizing the celebrated annual agricultural show in the Kinross Town Hall. The Masonic Hall in Kinross, completed in 1966, was named after W Bro Dr Mendel Spitz, PAGDC, who had taken a leading part in promoting the formation of the Lodge and in planning and carrying through the hall project. The Dorothy and Mendel Spitz Study Bursary was established in their honour in the field of medicine, tenable at any university in South Africa.

A note on sources

Hayim Perlman’s memoirs and the photographs of the Perlman-Stein store and the Sutherland Jewish school children were made available to me through the kindness of one of Hayim’s sons, who also made available to me the information about the Benjamin Hirsh Stein family, this being from the records of the late Nancy Stein Gregory. I am grateful also to another member of this Stein family who gave me additional valuable information on the family.

Marriage and death certificates were from Family Search:

<https://www.familysearch.org/search/>

Genealogical records were extracted from JewishGen:

<https://www.jewishgen.org/databases/>

The South African Archives for Sutherland and for individuals were searched at <http://www.national.archsrch.gov.za/sm300cv/smws/sm300gi?20220130153959A3F2EE63%26DB%3DRSAE>

Jewish gravestones in Sutherland and the picture of the Jewish Cemetery are from https://graves-at-eggse.org/main.php?g2_itemId=43

Mr Lien Fourie, proprietor of the Perlman Family House in Sutherland (<https://www.perlmanhouse.co.za/>) gave me much useful information. The photograph of the Perlman house is taken from this website.

Chana Stein transcribed the text of the “Jewish Grave” and shared with me her knowledge of the residents of the Gardens of Cape Town in the 1930s and 1940s.

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A BRIEF JOURNEY THROUGH MOROCCAN JEWISH HISTORY

Bernard Katz

Jewish Presence in Ancient Times (10th Century BCE – 3rd Century CE)

The presence of Jews in Morocco goes back to early pre-Islamic times. Legends claim that it dates as far back to the First Temple in the time of King Solomon and the Phoenicians (10th Century BCE), when Hebrews came to Sala in the vicinity of Sale (Rabat) to purchase gold.[\[1\]](#) If this is correct, Jewish settlement would predate by five centuries the known existence of a Carthaginian (Phoenician) gold market in Morocco.[\[2\]](#) A Jewish gravestone from the North African Tunisian city of Carthage has been found with an inscription dating to 813 BCE.[\[3\]](#) Epigraphic evidence for Jewish settlement in Morocco emerges much later, during Roman times. 3rd Century CE inscriptions on gravestones in the Roman town of Volubilis have been found. [\[4\]](#)



Bronze oil lamp in the shape of a menorah found in the ruins of Volubilis, late Roman period

Jews of the Maghreb (Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and Libya), who historically spoke Berber languages are known as Berber Jews. The Arab historian Ibn Khaldun names a number of large Moroccan Berber tribes who converted to Judaism prior to the Arab conquest.[\[5\]](#) This has led to many scholars postulating that these Jews were originally indigenous Berbers who had over time converted to Judaism.

The theory of large Berber conversions to Judaism is, however, not supported by a genetic study published in 2008. This study investigated samples of North African Jews and found an absence of the M1 and U6 mtDNAs (transmitted from mother to children). The authors concluded that the lack of M1 and U6 chromosomes among North African Jews renders the possibility of significant admixture, as between the local Arab and Berber populations with Jews, unlikely.[\[6\]](#)



Berber Jews from the Atlas Mountains, circa. 1900
Jewish Presence Pre- and Post the founding of Morocco
(ca 600-850)

Between 581 and 693, many Jews were compelled to leave Spain due to persecutions by the Visigoth kings. According to later traditions, thousands of Spanish Jews had settled in North Africa by 693. Some historians claim that there were Jews among the Berber-Muslim invaders of Spain in 711.^[7]

The Idrisids (788-974) are considered to be the founders of Morocco. They fled from the Abbasid Caliphate in Baghdad and founded Morocco's first dynasty. Idris II (791-828) established the capital in Fez and invited a large number of Jews to settle in the city. Protection, however, came at a price, the jizya tax, which was paid in gold. Notwithstanding the tax, Jews flourished as traders and merchants.^[8] Some historians consider that, from a spiritual and intellectual point of view, the most brilliant period of the Jews in Morocco belongs to the reigns of the Idrisids.^[9]

Jews in the Emergent Arab Lands (ca 850-1250)

Jews lived in Arabia for centuries before the birth of Mohammed. The emergence of Islam in the 7th century and the Arab conquests of the 7th and 8th centuries resulted in an Arab empire from Morocco in the west to India in the east. The majority of Jews in the world at this time thus lived in Muslim lands. Jewish culture developed and flourished, and Jews participated in the creation of a vibrant civilization which had no peer between Rome and the Renaissance.^[10]

During the 11th and 12th Centuries the Almoravids, a confederation of Berber tribes, established an empire in Morocco and Spain. The position of Jews under the Almoravids was apparently free of major abuses.^[11]

By 1154 Morocco had come under the control of the Almohads, a rival Berber confederation of tribes who didn't tolerate non-Muslims. Thereafter, however, a short period of improvement occurred for the Jews of Fez.^[12] In 1159 Maimonides fled Spain due to persecution from the Almohads, who were in the process of gaining control over Muslim Spain. Maimonides settled in Fez, also under Almohad control, for five years before ultimately relocating to Egypt. Many of the Jews of Fez were forced to convert to Islam.^[13]

From the time of the Crusades the Muslim world grew poorer and weaker and the Christian world stronger and richer.^[14] The decline in the Muslim world impacted negatively on its Jewish citizens, who also experienced a significant decline in the quality of their lives.^[15]

The Jewish American historian and Orientalist Norman Stillman writes that the Almohad period was an aberration in the history of Jews in Arab lands and forced conversions of Jews were extremely rare.^[16]

Maghrebi Jews emerged from the period of Almohad domination spiritually and numerically impoverished.^[17] According to Stillman, the course of Moroccan Jewish social history was marked by "tremendous polarities of tolerance and intolerance, assimilation and isolation, and security and insecurity."^[18]

Jews in Arab Lands in the Late Islamic Middle Ages (ca 1250-1800)

The Merenid dynasty, another Berber tribe (1244-1465), replaced the Almohads and established their seat of government in Fez. The Merenids had very little in common with the Arab bourgeoisie and considered themselves to be outsiders in the cities. They were well disposed towards the Jews, with Jewish communities being reestablished and Jews appointed to senior positions in the administration.^[19] Despite the Merenids favourable disposition, however, the popular mood remained hostile.^[20] It was the Merenids who, in the wake of anti-Jewish disturbances, created the first *mellah* for Jews in Fez in 1438. This became prototype for the Moroccan Jewish ghetto. Although the creation of the mellah was for Jewish protection, the Jews were not happy with it. In fact, the Fez *mellah* failed to provide the envisaged protection, for in 1465 almost all the inhabitants were killed by rebels who brought down the Merenid dynasty.^[21] The Wattasid dynasty, another Berber dynasty, then ruled for approximately the next 80 years.



Merenid tombs, Morocco

Under the Merenids, Moroccan Jews were prosperous, being in complete control of the Sahara gold trade as well as trade with Christian countries.^[22] However, during the 15th Century in particular, Muslim power declined and the Jewish position deteriorated accordingly.

Following the expulsions of Jews from Spain in 1492 and later from Portugal in 1497 possibly 20 to 30 000 of these expelled Jews (known as *megorashim*) found refuge in Morocco.^[23] The *megorashim* were for the most part ill-received by their native co-religionists (known as *toshavim* – indigenous) ^[24] and maintained their own synagogues. The *megorashim* generally enjoyed superior economic and cultural status compared to the *toshavim* and quickly came to dominate Jewish life in Morocco.^[25] The Spanish and Portuguese Jews thus revitalised the Jewish community of Morocco.^[26] In the late 15th and 16th Centuries Jewish life in Morocco improved from the upheavals of the post Merenid period, aided by the Spanish Portuguese Jewish influx.

Moroccan Jews, like their Ashkenazi counterparts provided the religiously distasteful economic functions shunned by the majority religious group, including moneylending. Jews also had virtual monopoly on jewellery-smithing.^[27] In spite of all the restrictions Jewish life in Morocco was never as bad as it was in medieval and modern Europe. Jews were permitted to enter into joint ventures with Muslims. The situation of Jews in Morocco was, however, more oppressive than the situation of Jews in most other Arab lands.^[28]

After the capture of Constantinople in 1453 the Ottoman Empire grew to control a vast area. This led to an improvement of conditions for Jews in these lands.^[29] However, two major Muslim countries with significant Jewish populations, remained outside the Ottoman's ambit, namely Morocco (in the west) and Iran (in the east). In both of them, writes Anglo-American historian Bernard Lewis, the position of the Jews was far worse than in Ottoman lands.

Moroccan Jews suffered two disadvantages compared to Jews in the Ottoman Empire. The first were the Almohad persecutions, which created material and intellectual degradation from which Jews never fully recovered and the second being their position as the only religious minority in an overwhelmingly Muslim land. [30\]](#)

According to Anglo-Jewish author Chaim Raphael, at one level Jews of Morocco epitomised the humiliation and poverty often associated with the Sephardi masses but at another the country's isolation from the Ottoman Empire and its association with Spain and Portugal and the Atlantic provided some Jews opportunities in trade and diplomacy. Trade was particularly enhanced when Portugal, at the height of its power, occupied Morocco's Atlantic coast in the 16th Century. [\[31\]](#) More than a century prior, during the reign of John I (1385-1433), Portugal had in 1415 captured the port city of Ceuta. In time it was transferred to Spain, which still possesses it.

Bernard Lewis remarks that in the centuries following the 16th Century Jewish life in Morocco was on the whole unpleasant. On this theme he quotes Stillman, who described it as "the highly ritualized degradation of the Jews of the major towns and cities." [\[32\]](#)

The 18th Century saw impressive commercial activity amongst the Jews of Morocco. In 1766 the sultan turned the port of Mogador (now Essaouira) into a commercial hub making it and Tangier the only two Moroccan ports able to trade with Europe. However, the calm situation did not last and the situation for the Jews deteriorated with the sultan ordering the destruction of synagogues in Fez and the expulsion of Jews from the city. (Two years later they were allowed to return after the ascension of a new sultan). After the attack by Spain on Tangier in 1791, the sultan extracted the cost of the war and the added protection now required from the Jews.

European Intrusion into Arab Lands and Colonialism Period (19th and 20th Century, pre-World War II)

In 1830, France occupied Algeria. Tunisia became its protectorate in 1870 and Morocco in 1912.

The progress in terms of civil rights made by Jews in the Ottoman Empire and in Algeria (under French rule) bypassed Morocco, whose Jews lived under one of the most oppressive *dhimmi* systems of the late Islamic Middle Ages. This remained in force for most of the 19th Century and in some places well into the 20th. [\[33\]](#)

The Jewish situation deteriorated in Morocco in the 19th Century together with a general worsening in law and order. [\[34\]](#) In one particularly egregious case Sol Hatchuel, a 17-year-old girl from Tangier was publicly executed in 1834 for apostasy to Islam. A Muslim woman she had befriended wished to convert her.

The Muslim woman reported Hatchuel to the authorities claiming that she had converted but stayed true to her Jewish faith. Hatchuel denied the accusation that she had converted.

The plight of the Jews in Morocco came to the attention of influential Jews in Western Europe and the United States. In 1863, Moses Montefiore led a delegation of British Jews to Morocco with the backing of the British government. His goal was to improve the legal and social position of Jews and to get the sultan to protect them from widespread abuse. He succeeded in getting Sultan Mohammad IV to issue a *dahir* (decree of the King) that promised “Jews...rightful measure of justice equal to others according to the law.” Whilst Montefiore’s visit and the sultan’s *dahir* sent an important message, in practice, however, this decree had little impact on the status of the Jews.[\[35\]](#)

In 1860 Alliance Israelite Universelle (AIU) was established for the purpose of safeguarding human rights of Jews around the world [*on this, see Anny Wynchank, [In the beginning was a school: The Alliance Israélite Universelle and its Legacy – Jewish Affairs – Ed.](#)*]. Its first school in Morocco was established in Tetuán in 1862 and by the end of the century schools had been established in most major towns and cities with Jewish communities from Morocco to Iran. These made a significant impact, and a middle class imbued with western values emerged from this education.

Morocco has been ruled by the Alawite dynasty since the 17th Century. The Alawites resisted incursions by the Ottomans, Spanish, Portuguese and British. From the mid-19th Century competition between France, Britain and Spain for influence in Morocco could be evidenced. After France’s victory over Morocco at the Battle of Isly in 1844 and Spain’s occupation of the northern city of Tetuan in 1860-62 Morocco’s economy became increasingly subjected to global trading markets taking on increasing debt which required the introduction of new taxes. Morocco’s dire economic situation prompted France to force Morocco to sign the Treaty of Fez in 1912. This divided Morocco into a French protectorate over most of Morocco and a Spanish protectorate over northern Morocco excluding Tangier. Unlike Algeria, where Jews became citizens of France, Jews in Morocco remained subjects of the sultan.

According to the British Jewish historian Martin Gilbert Jewish life in Morocco suffered a setback with the advent of French rule. The Moroccan population, seeking retribution but not strong enough to fight the French, sought out the Jews who became scapegoats. Two weeks after the French seized control of Fez, the *mellah* was attacked and more than 60 Jews were murdered.[\[36\]](#)

Jessica Marglin, an associate professor of religion at UCLA authored a book *Across Legal Lines, Jews and Muslims in Modern Morocco*, in which she examined through the experience of one Jewish family how the law helped integrate Jews into Muslim society during the 19th and early 20th centuries and

how much of that was disrupted after the French occupation of Morocco. [37] Her research resulted in a number of important observations:

- As *dhimmis* Jews were under the special protection of the sultan. [38] They were permitted access to – albeit not entirely equal – to Islamic courts and the right to maintain Jewish courts. Jews also had the ability to choose among the legal fora – Jewish law, Islamic law, and in some cases foreign courts (extraterritoriality). [39]
- The French never formally abolished the *dhimmi*, nor did they introduce equality for the Jewish citizens. Jews remained *dhimmis* de facto until 1912 and de jure following Moroccan independence in 1958. [40]
- French legal reforms were one of the ways in which barriers were created between Jews and Muslims, with the erection of administrative walls. [41] Jews were restricted in their access to Sharia courts, whose previous use by them evidenced Jewish integration into Muslim society. [42]
- AIU schools was another factor causing Jews to move towards the West and away from the Muslims amongst whom they lived. [43] This gave Jews a massive advantage over Muslims in terms of both education and job opportunities. [44] AIU also lobbied on behalf of Jews in trouble. [45]
- The unintended consequence of French legal reforms introduced for the most part negative consequences by creating colonial legal divisions. [46] The legal system went from a factor contributing to integration into Muslim society to one which divided and separated. [47]

World War II

After France surrendered to Germany in June 1940 and an armistice was reached with the Vichy government Morocco, along with Algeria and Tunisia, came under Vichy control.

Whilst the Jews of Morocco escaped the full brutality of the Nazis they nevertheless suffered much. Sultan Muhammad V reputedly refused to sign-off on ghettoization and deportation of Jews. Despite his opposition the Vichy government nevertheless enacted partial race laws, which had a damaging effect on both livelihoods and morale. Jews holding public office were fired and banned from working in the free professions.

The efforts of King Muhammad V to protect his Jewish subject led to Shimon Peres and others arguing that he be recognised as a Righteous Among the Nations at Yad Vashem. This initiative was, however, not successful.



King Mohammed V with US President Franklin D Roosevelt and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, Casablanca (aka Anfa) Conference, January 1943

Israeli historian David Guedj reflects in his book, *Light in the West: Hebrew Culture in Morocco 1912-1956* on the hardships faced during World War II: “For the Europeanized and Westernized Jews the dream of integration was shattered.”^[48]

Wrote US historian Susan Miller, “Wedged between an indifferent Muslim majority and an anti-Semitic settler class, Morocco’s Jews were pushed to the edges of society during World War II, entering a no-man’s-land from which they never really returned.”^[49]

Modern Period – Independence and Jewish Emigration

After World War II pressure mounted on France to grant Morocco independence. In 1953, the French exiled Muhammad V to Madagascar amid increasing protests. However, his exile did not last long, and just prior to independence in 1956 he returned.

After 44 years of French rule, 90% of Moroccans were illiterate. Only 1415 had bachelor’s degrees, 640 Muslim and 775 Jews.^[50] In 1960, it was estimated that over 40% of Morocco’s Jews were illiterate.^[51]

Largescale Jewish emigration from Morocco began after World War II and intensified after Israel’s independence. The Six Day War was the last straw for most of the Jews that remained.

In 1948 about 250 000 Jews lived in Morocco. Raphael Spanien, emissary of the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, estimated that only between 25 000 and 50 000 were “Westernized.” Amongst the 50 000 who had immigrated to Israel in the decade following World War II, “there is not even one doctor.”[\[52\]](#) By and large Moroccan Jews were poor and illiterate. As a generalization the poor and illiterate Jews moved to Israel whereas the educated and rich moved to France and Canada.

Jamaa Baida, professor of history at a Rabat university, attributes Jewish emigration to many factors. They include decolonization, the clash of national identities, the poverty of the Jewish masses, and the uncertainties of the political and economic future of Jews in an independent Morocco. [\[53\]](#)

Aomar Boum, Assistant Professor in Sephardi Studies at UCLA and a Muslim born in a small Moroccan village, has devoted his career to the scholarship of Jewish history in Morocco. He contends that although economic reasons (competition with members of the dominant society) and political stresses were strong factors in the emigration of Jews, the success of Zionism and the failure of Moroccan nationalism to include Jews after independence, together with the strengthening of Arab Nasserite nationalism and the emergence of Islamism led to great fear amongst Jews about their future.[\[54\]](#)

After the declaration of the State of Israel, Sultan Muhammad V warned both his Muslim and Jewish subjects against any action that would disrupt law and order and undermine a secular tradition of friendly relations between the two communities on Moroccan soil.[\[55\]](#) In 1955 he said that “Jewish Moroccans have the same rights and the same duties as other Moroccans.”[\[56\]](#)

The Moroccan government took a dim view of Jews emigrating to Israel. In 1961 the Minister of Information described it as a “betrayal and desertion” and that “It was unjust that Moroccans should take the place of Palestinian Arabs in Israel.” Emigration to Israel was forbidden and the public mood towards Jews was described as being “ugly.”[\[57\]](#)

In 1962 Hassan II became king on the death of his father Muhammad V. Ben Gurion negotiated with him and agreed to the demand that Morocco be paid USD100 for each Jew moving to Israel. To achieve this Ben-Gurion overruled finance minister Levi Eshkol, who argued that Israel could not afford the payments. Between 1962-64, 100 000 Moroccan Jews relocated to Israel at a cost of up to USD10 million [\[58\]](#).



Moroccan Jews in transit to Israel, Gibraltar, 1961

One of the positive outcomes of the agreement was that a close relationship developed between Israel and Hassan II. This led to secret visits by Yitzchak Rabin (1976) and Moshe Dayan (1977) and it provided the catalyst for Anwar Sadat's visit to Israel (1977) and the Israel-Egypt peace treaty (1979).

Following riots in Morocco after the Six Day War, King Hassan II protected Jewish citizens and punished the violent mobsters.^[59] Concerned at rising xenophobia against the Jewish community, he issued a statement: "The Jew has fulfilled all his obligations towards Arabism and Islam, but the sentiments of the population have unfortunately been exploited by some elements whose only concern is to sow confusion and disorder and to brand the Jews with treacherous slogans." Hassan reiterated his father's objection to Zionism but defined himself as the protector of Jews.^[60]

For a long time and even in the 20th Century Jews in some places of Morocco spoke Berber languages. A survey in the 1930s showed that half of the surnames of Jews in the Maghreb were of Arabic or Berber origin.^[61]

Boum interviewed 80 respondents representing four generations of the communities in the vicinity of the village in southeastern Morocco where he was born. He concluded that the grandparents and great grandparents' generation "continue to discuss nostalgically the richness of Jewish-Muslim life in the past" but that the "younger generation demonstrates narrow and misinformed perspectives of Jews"^[62] and that the Palestinian Israeli conflict continues to enlarge the gap of misunderstanding.^[63]

During the period 1912-1956 Moroccan Jewry was in the process of secularizing, a process that had begun in the 19th Century, but which gained momentum at the start of the 20th as a westernized elite emerged. The elite for the most part was composed of graduates of AIU affiliated institutions.[\[64\]](#)

Chabad emissaries started arriving in Morocco in 1951. According to Guedj, the advent of Chabad in Morocco marked the birth of ultra-Orthodoxy in Morocco.[\[65\]](#)

Today probably only about 2500 Jews remain in Morocco.[\[66\]](#) Jewish Israelis of Moroccan heritage, according to reports, comprise one million citizens. [\[67\]](#) Before the Covid pandemic and the current Middle East conflict more than 50 000 Israelis (and many other Jews of Moroccan extraction from France and elsewhere) visited Morocco every year.[\[68\]](#)

Notable Moroccan Jews

Andre Azoulay served as an economic advisor to King Hassan II and later King Mohammed VI. He has been the target of political slogans in protests against Israel although he has publicly stated that, “I have complete legitimacy in this country....Until the Palestinian is afforded identity and dignity, my Jewishness is weakened.”[\[69\]](#)

Serge Berdugo served as Tourism Minister for King Hassan II (1993 – 1995) – with the specific brief to promote cultural and economic ties with Israel. He also served as secretary-general of the council of Moroccan Jews. In 2006 King Muhammad VI appointed him ambassador-at-large in the quest for peace in the Middle East.[\[70\]](#) In 2010 Berdugo was also charged to oversee a program initiated by King Muhammed VI to renovate Jewish cemeteries and shrines. Yitzhak Navon, president of Israel, was a descendent of Moroccan Jews who left Morocco in the 17th Century.

David Levy, former foreign minister of Israel, was born in Rabat, leaving for Israel at age 18.

Rene Cassin, of Moroccan origin, was a French jurist who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1968.

Harvard University’s Baruj Benacerraf, likewise of Moroccan origin, won the Nobel prize in medicine in 1980.

Concluding Remarks

At the end of the 20th Century, Bernard Lewis reflected on the 14 centuries of Jewish life under Islamic rule: “The Jews were never free from discrimination, but only rarely subject to persecution.” He noted that the situation of Jews living

under Islamic rulers was “never as bad as in Christendom at its worst, nor ever as good as in Christendom at its best.” Lewis observed that “there is nothing in Islamic history to parallel the Spanish expulsion and Inquisition, the Russian pogroms, or the Nazi Holocaust.” But he also commented that, on the other hand, there was nothing in the history of the Jews under Islam “to compare with the progressive emancipation and acceptance accorded to Jews in the democratic West during the last three centuries.”[\[71\]](#)

Carlos de Nesry, a Jew from Tangier, was witness to the catastrophe, which he recorded in his book *Jewish Moroccans had to Choose*. He wrote: “Emigration...an exodus that no one truly desires, but that is often rendered inevitable due to economic necessity.... [Jews] are not fleeing Morocco, but their own misery. They are reluctantly leaving a country that is made for them, that remains part of them, and that they will never forget.”[\[72\]](#)

Reflecting on the emigration of the bulk of Morocco’s remaining Jewish population after the Six Day War, Susan Miller wrote that it had “ended a millennium of coexistence that had marked Morocco as the most tolerant of Muslim societies.”[\[73\]](#)

Morocco’s new constitution in 2011 recognised “Hebraic influences” as having enriched and nourished Moroccan identity. Boum is quoted as saying, “What the state did is take the conservation of Jewish heritage and make it more visible.”[\[74\]](#)

Lewis concluded that the “Judaeo-Islamic symbiosis was another great period of Jewish life and creativity, a long, rich, and vital chapter in Jewish history. It has now come to an end.”[\[75\]](#)

Morocco has been one of the most moderate Arab countries in its relationship with Israel and its kings have a proud history of defending its Jewish citizens against hostile foreign parties and elements of its own population. In late 2020 Morocco joined the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain in normalising relations with Israel and signing the Abraham Accords.

Places of Jewish Interest

In recent times many synagogues, cemeteries and shrines have been repaired with funding from, inter alia, the Moroccan government. Morocco, in celebrating its Jewish heritage, is using it to encourage Jewish tourism.

Casablanca

Casablanca’s Jewish community is of modern origin dating essentially to the period of French occupation from 1912. Approximately 2000 of Morocco’s 2500 Jews live here today.

The Museum of Moroccan Judaism, at one time the only Jewish museum in the Islamic world (one now exists in Essaouira as well), opened in 1997. Its exhibits include numerous artefacts of Moroccan Jewish life. The extensive restoration projects underway for Moroccan synagogues and cemeteries are also on display. An interesting item is a copy of the preamble to the Moroccan constitution of 2011, which includes reference to Hebraic influence being a pillar of Moroccan unity.

The Beth-El Synagogue is the city's largest synagogue, seating 500 persons, and an important community centre. Completely renovated in 1997, it is characterised by a typical Sephardic layout with a wooden bimah in the centre, Marc Chagall inspired stained glass windows and a carved ceiling in the Arabic style.



Beth-El synagogue, Casablanca

A tiny kosher bakery can be found around the corner from the entrance to the Beth-El Synagogue which sells challah and pastries.

The Ettegui Synagogue dates to the 1920s. It was damaged by an allied bomb during Operation Torch in November 1942, although miraculously the bomb did not explode. The synagogue was rededicated in 2016 at a ceremony personally attended by King Mohammed VI.

There are apparently 16 synagogues still operating in Casablanca.



Ettedgui Synagogue, Casablanca

Rabat

The Mausoleum of King Mohammed V is an impressive building. Mohammed V (reigned 1927-61 but over an independent Morocco from 1956). Mohammed V is revered by Jews because of, inter alia, his actions during World War II. Many Jews regard him in saintly terms and make a pilgrimage to visit his tomb. His son Hassan II (died 1999) is also buried in this mausoleum. According to the American diplomat Martin Indyk, Hassan II was weaned by a Jewish woman.

Tangier

From the mid-19th century Tangier grew significantly and became Morocco's most internationalised and cosmopolitan city. By the late 19th century after a century of growth Tangier had become Morocco's leading port surpassing Essaouira while not yet being challenged by Casablanca.^[76] By the early 20th Century 25% of the city's population was Jewish.^[77] Tangier's Jews played an essential role with capital and expertise in trade being concentrated amongst them.

Tangier is one of the few places in Morocco which didn't have a designated Jewish quarter or *mellah*. It has a Jewish cemetery which houses over 1000 graves, but which has not been active since 1983. The graves are all coloured white, which seems to be the practice in Morocco.

A number of synagogues can be found in Tangier including Moshe Nahon (1878) and Beit Yehuda (1880).

Chefchaouen

The “Blue City”, as Chefchaouen is known, is located up in the Rif Mountains. There are many legends as to how Chefchaouen became known as the “Blue City.” Possibly the most convincing theory is said to be that the colour originated after an influx of Jews from Spain in the early 1500s after their expulsion and derived from the Jewish tradition of wearing prayer shawls with *techelet* (blue dye) to remind people of the presence of God.

When the Spanish arrived in the 1920s they were stunned to find Chefchaouen’s Sephardi Jews speaking an old dialect of Spanish that had been extinct for four centuries.

There is not much to evidence a Jewish presence in Chefchaouen other than a plaque which reads, “The Jewish neighborhood dates back to the 16th Century, when the Jews were welcomed to reside within the walls of the Medina.”



An alleyway in “The Blue City”, Chefchaouen

Volubilis

Volubilis is a well-preserved Roman city, dating to the 3rd Century BCE. It was originally a Berber, then proto-Carthaginian settlement. The town grew rapidly under Roman rule from 1st century CE – 3rd century CE and served as the capital of Roman Mauretania.

At Volubilis, the first epigraphic evidence of Jewish settlement in Morrocco was found. Several Jewish gravestone inscriptions in Hebrew, Greek and Latin, as well as two lamps decorated with menorahs were found. They are likely from the 3rd century CE and indicate a significant Jewish community in the city. One of inscriptions referred to “head of congregation” – which according to the researchers indicates indisputable evidence of the existence of a synagogue but they were unable to identity a particular building that served as the synagogue. The researchers were surprised at the use of Hebrew at a location so remote from the centres of Judaism in that era. [\[78\]](#)

One of the most prominent buildings at Volubilis is the triumphal Arch of Caracalla. It was Emperor Caracalla who bestowed citizenship on all residents of the Roman Empire, including Jews, in 212 CE.



Arch of Caracalla, Volubilis

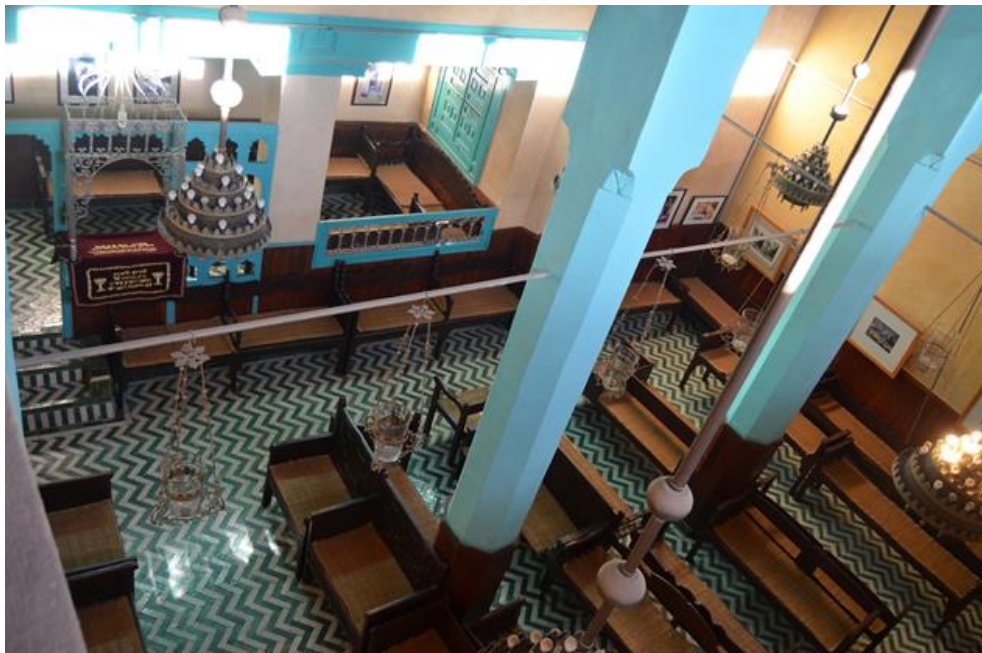
Fez

The first *mellah*, or Jewish quarter, in Morocco dates back to 1438. It was established in Fez during the rule of the Merenids, in the shadow of the sultan’s palace, after repeated attacks on the Jews. *Mellah* derives from the Arabic word for salt. A salty stream, Wadi Mellah, ran through or close to the neighbourhood. Many Jews became wealthy through their involvement in the salt trade.

Fez was a bridge between Spain and Babylon. Jews of Fez were a strong community whose rabbis had always been linked to the great yeshivas of Sura and Pumpedita, sending financial help and seeking rulings on Talmudic questions. As the Jewish community in Spain grew, it attracted scholars from Fez.

While the *mellah* is no longer home to any significant Jewish population, it still contains a number of monuments and landmarks from the Jewish community's historical heritage in the city.

The Ibn Danan Synagogue was originally completed in the 17th Century, but the current synagogue was rebuilt and reinaugurated in 1999. From 1812, until its closure in the 1960s, its rabbis all came from the Danan family, a dynasty whose ancestry can be traced back to 15th Century Spain. Like many of the synagogues in Morocco this one is decorated with tilework and woodwork.



Ibn Danan Synagogue, Fez

An interesting, and possibly unique, feature of this synagogue is its *mikveh*. By lifting a manhole cover on the synagogue floor the *mikveh* below can be seen. The roof of the synagogue can be reached by a very steep staircase, and from there the cemetery can be seen. The gravestones are all coloured white.

The Al Fassiyyine Synagogue is reputed to be the oldest synagogue in Fez. It is thought to have been built during the Merenid Dynasty (13th-15th centuries) but the current building dates from the 17th Century. This community comprised of Jews (called *toshavim*) who predated the Jews exiled from Spain (*megorashim*). It has been restored and was reinaugurated in 2013.

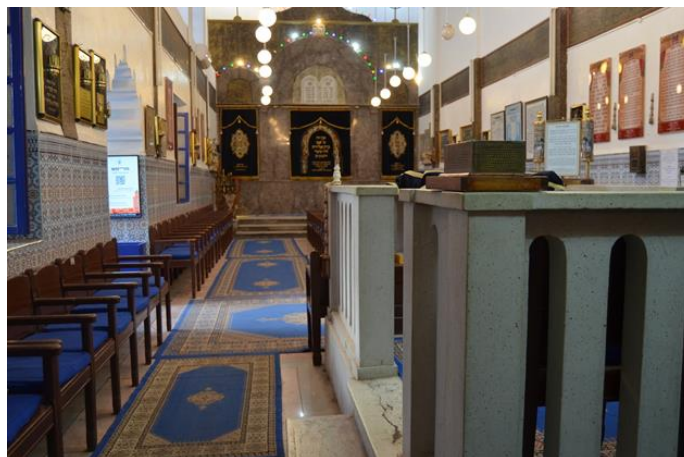


Al Fassiyine Synagogue, Fez

Marrakech

The *mellah* in Marrakech, once a small walled off area within the city, was established in 1557 by order of the king and the 30 000 Jews of Marrakech were all moved into this area. In the 19th Century, the Jewish population increased as Jews from the Atlas Mountains relocated to Marrakech, which became the largest Jewish community in Morocco. Today apparently only four Jewish families still live in the *mellah*. Spice trading is evident in the *mellah*, a market that was once dominated by Jews.

The Lazama (El-Azama) Synagogue was built by Spanish Jews shortly after the 1492 expulsion. Its blue and white interior (of a later iteration) is decorated in the traditional Moroccan manner with mosaic tiles and carpets and has been beautifully restored. The synagogue is part of a larger complex that includes a museum and courtyard at its centre.



Lazama (El-Azama) Synagogue, Marrakech

The Jewish cemetery is adjacent to the *mellah* and dates from its establishment. The arrangement of the graves is unique to Marrakech. There is a children's section which contains 7000 graves of children who died of typhus. There is also a separate men's and women's section. Around the perimeter are the graves of the pious, judges and scholars, which apparently serves to protect those on the inside.

About 100 Jews remain in Marrakech.^[79]



Marrakech cemetery

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CHILDHOOD RICHES (A MEMOIR)

Zita Nurok

The willow tree at the bottom of our backyard garden was the gift that nature gave me as a Jewish child growing up in small-town South Africa. It offered me the riches of my childhood with freedom to explore, to imagine and create, and to fantasize. It was a magical place – a place to play, a place where my friends and I shared and laughed together – about school, about our older and younger brothers or sisters, or about games we enjoyed playing.

We talked about the different riches of being Jewish but in our very own eight or nine-year old way. What were these?

Shabbat was when the same small group of families gathered at the shul every week for services, and we the children of those families often played outside in the backyard, periodically returning to participate in the service and to enjoy the singing of prayers.

Cheder was where we learned how to read and translate Hebrew which was helpful as we grew older when we read prayers during various holidays both at shul and in our homes.

Sometimes we talked about the holidays as those occurred during the year, with Simchat Torah being the favorite because everyone was given bags of candy prepared by the older children, and also because the women and girls sat downstairs with the men and boys for that service only. Rich times.

If we played around the tree on Friday afternoons before Shabbat that night, we would create ‘candles’ out of sticks, and we’d sing the blessings for those ‘candles.’ Mom who was usually busy in the kitchen preparing for Shabbat,

often came down to listen and to join in with our singing. Each of us imagined what favorite 'foods' to include for our Friday night supper, and she would give us ideas of what to add to the meal. We used leaves as plates, stones if we talked about kneidlach, grasses for fish or other delicacies.

And when the English or Afrikaans -speaking neighborhood friends came to play we climbed the flowing branches and jumped down from different levels. Who could climb the highest and jump down from the tallest branch? The bark felt rough and cracked, and the smooth shiny leaves were long and narrow.

Whenever we brought our dolls we sat them around the tree and pretended that they talked with each other. We sang favorite songs in English and Afrikaans, that we had learned at school.

We pretended to be doctors, or nurses, oftentimes teachers, firemen, or policemen, each with what we thought were their specific, important roles.

Holding hands, we skipped and danced around the tree, hugging it, and enjoying the riches of our friendships even more.

As we grew older we no longer played under that willow tree. Rather, we spent time around it sometimes reading, perhaps sharing homework, and sometimes merely talking and listening to the rustle of those willowy leaves blowing in the wind.

On Shabbat afternoons after attending shul services, our family often relaxed in that special place, appreciating the season's weather whatever time of the year it was. In the winter the tree shed its leaves, but the drooping branches remained graceful, being able to withstand cold and frosty weather, and at other times even drought. We looked forward to springtime when buds began to appear on the stems. In large windstorms the tree's flexibility allowed it not to snap.

My father told us of stories that he had read, about willow trees known as *Aravah* in Hebrew. He became interested in the topic when he discovered that the willow tree is in fact referred to several times in the Torah as a symbol of life and growth, but the drooping branches also represent sorrow, sadness, and mourning. The tree is linked to prayers for rain, especially during the holiday of Sukkot. Hoshanah Rabah occurs on the seventh day of Sukkot. Willow branches had been gathered from our tree and from others around the town. These were available when we came to shul, to be shaken seven times during the service on that day, as a symbol of the need for water and rain for crops. In Leviticus 23:40 the willow branch is mentioned with other leafy trees as part of the celebration on (Hoshana Rabah) the seventh day of Sukkot.

A verse in Isaiah 44:4 suggests that God's people will flourish like willow trees that grow near water.

In the book of Job 40:22 the tree is associated with protection and comfort. Psalms 137:2 describes the Jews in Babylonian captivity “We hanged our harps upon the willows....”

Willow trees generally need a good amount of water. Although there were no sources of water where our tree grew, it flourished nevertheless, and remained healthy all through our growing years.

Different people live in ‘our house’ now, but the memories of those riches that contributed to the beginnings of my Jewish childhood created around that willow tree, will forever remain.

- ***Zita Nurok***, a regular contributor to Jewish Affairs, is a former elementary school teacher who grew up in South Africa. In 2019, she retired after 48 years of teaching, nine of which were at the then Jewish Government School in Doornfontein.



THE CAT LADY

Clark Zlotchew

The white-haired woman was inclined over four large plastic bowls of an expensive brand of cat food. Setting down a fifth one, she stroked the black and white cat's back with her free hand. Several of the ten sleek, well-nourished cats of varying sizes and colors pressed their flanks against her ankles in courteous gratitude.

Sarah laboriously straightened up and stood there, watching them at their repast. They daintily licked up the savoury chunks of *Evanger's Grain Free Salmon*, chewing with gusto before swallowing. They seemed ladylike in their fastidious manner of eating. The frail woman's eyes crinkled with pleasure; a beatific smile spread across her face as she watched.

"Yes, my darlings," she murmured, "fill yourselves to bursting. Eat, eat! Be happy. Why not. Be good to yourselves. Life is short, especially yours, little kitties. It's a kindness that you don't realize how short it is."

Sarah broke away from this blissful contemplation and retired to her overstuffed sofa in the living room. She glanced at the mirror across from the sofa just for a moment. *No, it's not time yet. Patience, patience.* She picked up the remote from the coffee table and turned on the television. The woman watched what must have been the middle of a movie in which there were explosions and gunplay, resulting in spurting blood and body parts sailing through the air. She winced and immediately switched channels. A news program was in progress. *Yes, Sarah, she mused, it's important to know what's happening in the world, even though it's always so depressing.* She saw the attractive anchor-woman frown as she mournfully reported the latest figures of the non-stop slaughter in Syria, or was it Iraq? Her sombre tones were

accompanied by amateur video of men firing assault rifles and launching shoulder to surface rockets, while their comrades lay writhing in pools of blood. Others lay perfectly still, eyes staring lifelessly at the sun.

Sarah saw brutal men who separated victims' heads from their bodies with a dull knife. She observed a man –a living human being!– in a cage being burned alive. The anchor-woman's mournful tones continued, accompanied by videos of the dead and wounded in the capitals of Europe, reports of missiles fired at kindergartens and playgrounds in Israel, stabbings of civilians even in the holy city of Jerusalem... *Can this really be happening? Again? Or am I viewing one of those horrible motion pictures? Oh, I dearly hope it's a film.*

The eighty-four-year-old woman was overcome with a deep sense of despair. She sighed and was about to turn off the set, when suddenly she became aware of an abrupt change of focus. The anchor woman now flashed a broad smile, showing perfectly formed, dazzlingly white teeth. Sarah marveled at the sudden change of mood evident on the pretty anchor-woman's face, the abrupt transformation in her voice, which practically sang with delight rather than merely spoke. She was referring to the wondrous –*epic* was the term the anchor woman employed– performance on “American Idol,” and seemed on the point of bursting with joy and pride for the singer, whom she classified as *awesome*. After all, the performer was a candidate for worshipful admiration by the millions of screaming idolaters. *How can she change from sadness to bliss so easily? Perhaps she is an aspiring actress practicing her representations of various emotions while reporting the news. Does she really feel those emotions or is she only pretending?*

The elderly woman, her face etched with deep lines, closed her eyes, shook her head, and turned off the TV. She stood and walked into her bedroom, where she opened a dresser drawer containing two knitted sweaters, one grey, the other black –the familiar smell of mothballs comforted her– and a manila envelope. She removed this last item and sat on her neatly made bed. She opened the envelope and extracted a dozen photographs, some in black and white, others in sepia tone. All were yellowed with age and worn around the edges with frequent handling.

The subjects of the photos were seven adults and three children, dressed in overcoats and various kinds of headgear. Some of the women's hats had a feather protruding from the hat band, others had a short black veil covering the wearer's forehead and eyes. The men all wore suits and ties and either homburgs or fedoras. The unsmiling six-year-old boy wore a sweater, short pants and long socks. Locks of curly hair protruded from under a tweed cap with a visor. The two wanly smiling little girls with braids wore knee-length dresses, their hands ensconced in muffs. *Yes, she thought, that is how people dressed in the 1930s. Good times, pleasant times, in spite of the Depression. Well... Certainly better than what was to come, at any rate.*

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, which she held for a few seconds before forcefully expelling it. *They look so healthy and content with their lot, even though they do not seem well fed.* She looked at all twelve photos once more, lovingly lingering over each one. The photos now seemed blurry, indistinct, clouded. She reached for a tissue and dabbed her eyes. The photos were clearer. She thought, *Yet, when I look closely, I think I can see in their eyes some far-off gaze. Did that gaze evince some hazy glimpse of what was to come, the terrible, horrifying future. Their non-future. Could they sense what was going to happen? Could they somehow penetrate the mists of time and peer, however dimly, into the Abyss opening its maw before them?*

Suddenly she felt a chill and shivered. Tears welled up in her eyes. She briskly rubbed her left forearm with her right hand to settle down the gooseflesh. She stopped for a moment and stared at the blue serial numbers indelibly tattooed on her forearm. A red haze misted over her vision as she again studied the photos. "All ten of them, every last one of them..." she murmured aloud. Realizing she was talking to herself, she stopped. Through her mind ran the unspoken words: *They tell me I was lucky. Yes, I suppose I was. Of course. But why? Why me? This feeling of guilt, like a boulder on my chest, like a parasite draining my substance, for not being with them, for having escaped...* Suddenly, anger contorted her features. She again spoke, this time with impotent rage roughening her voice, "What right did they have...?!" She pounded her delicate fist on the dresser top. "How could they imagine they had the right...?!"

The aged woman clapped her hand over her mouth. *I really must stop talking to myself! Out loud! Such a bad habit. What would people think?*

She lifted her gaze to the dresser top and smiled. She looked at the full-color framed photographs of smiling young men and women, some of them with little ones. Happy, filled with vigour. Similar photos adorned the walls. *Thank God, she thought, I was allowed to make use of my freedom. I've given birth to six boys and four girls. All healthy. It had to be ten. No less. Now I have twenty-five grandchildren.* Her smile broadened when she mentally added, *So far.*

She gazed at the photograph of a handsome, dark-bearded man of about sixty years of age. *How lucky I was! God gave me David, my dearest David. He too was a survivor.*

Sarah stood, inhaled deeply, held her breath for a moment, then exhaled sharply. She dabbed a tissue to her eyes, then waved her hand in front of her in a backhanded sweeping motion as though wiping away the unpleasant memories. She strode to the plum-coloured couch where she sat and waited. She did not have to wait long. Her ten sleek, well-nourished charges came bounding from the kitchen into the living room, leapt on to the couch and affectionately sidled up to the old woman. They rubbed against her and purred

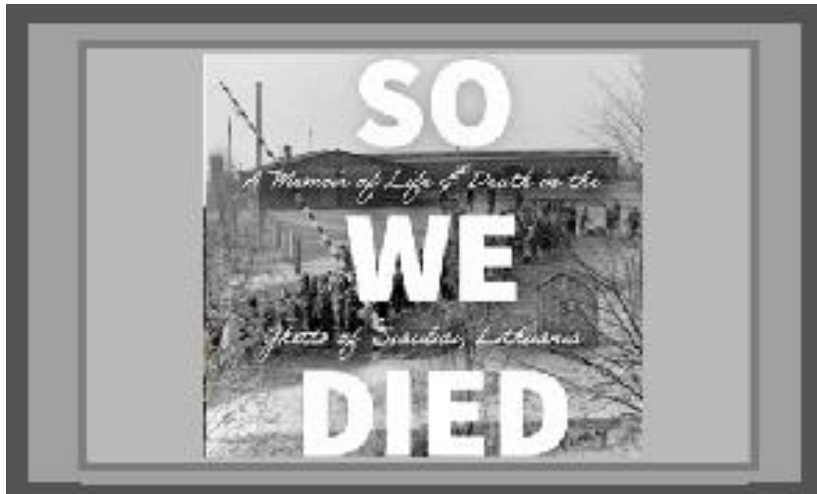
contentedly. Sarah's deeply-lined face broke into a warm smile and seemed to glow. Her eyes crinkled with contentment as she welcomed her feline companions into her embrace, all ten of them.

"All right, now, my dears, it's time to peer into the looking glass again." She relaxed and gazed into the mirror on the opposite wall. No lamps were on that side of the room. As she stared at the shadowy reflection of herself with her charges, she saw a five-year -old girl with dark hair in braids, wearing a knee-length plaid skirt and a starched white blouse. She liked the way she looked in the mirror. Three other children, as well as two adults dressed in overcoats and various kinds of headgear shared the couch with her. Their warmth pressing against her was comforting. Five other adults stood behind the sofa; their hands placed on the shoulders of the children. Sarah felt the comforting warmth of a pair of those hands.

Some of the women's hats had a feather protruding from the hat band, others had a short black veil covering the wearer's forehead and eyes. The men all wore suits and ties and either homburgs or fedoras. The unsmiling six-year old boy next to her wore a sweater, short pants and long socks. Locks of curly black hair protruded from under a tweed cap with a visor. The two wanly-smiling little girls with braids, one blond, the other reddish, wore knee-length dresses, their hands ensconced in muffs. *Why were they all wearing outdoor clothing?* wondered Sarah. *Oh, of course: they had just arrived, and it was cold outside.*

"Take off your coats and stay a while," she wheedled, "Please. There's plenty of time, and my Mommy's making a big pot of chicken soup."

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SO WE DIED

David Saks

In the closing weeks of June 1941, the regime of Nazi Germany launched Operation Barbarossa, as the mass invasion of the Soviet Union was called. Lithuania was one of the Soviet territories invaded, and shortly thereafter German forces, with the participation of many local Lithuanians, set about the mass killing of the Jewish population. The massacres continued throughout the summer of 1941. From the end of that year until late 1943, those Jews still alive – some 43 000, or one in five out of Lithuania’s pre-invasion Jewish population, were confined within ghettos in the country’s three main cities, Vilnius/Vilna, Kaunas/Kovno and Šiauliai/Shavl. Out of the latter’s pre-war population of 8000, between 350 and 500 Jews were still alive at the end of the war.

In 1949, a vivid, evocative memoir of life in the Shavl ghetto was published in Munich by the Association of Lithuanian Jews in Germany. The title was *Azoy zaynen mir geshtorbn* (“So We Died”) and the writer was Levi Shalit, a survivor of the ghetto and subsequently of Dachau to which he was sent after the ghetto’s liquidation. Shalit went on to become an eminent Yiddish journalist, author and activist for Jewish and Zionist causes. For thirty years, he lived and worked in South Africa, where amongst other things he became the long serving editor of the country’s leading Yiddish publication the *Afrikaner idishe tsaytung* (African Jewish Newspaper). He eventually moved to Israel, where he died in 1994.

Shalit’s original memoir did not include an account of the year he spent in Dachau Kaufering concentration camp, but ended with his arrival there in July 1943. The intention to publish an expanded edition with a concluding section

about life and death in Dachau was finally realised in 1975 when it was brought out by the South African Jewish Board of Deputies to mark the thirtieth anniversary of the camp's liberation. It appeared as a supplement to *Jewish Affairs*, as *The Road from Dachau: Thirty Years after the Liberation*.

At a time when so few still understand Yiddish, Shalit's powerful testimony was until very recently a closed book for most people. That, fortunately, is no longer the case, thanks to the appearance earlier this year of an English rendition, entitled *So We Died: A Memoir of Life and Death in the Ghetto of Šiauliai, Lithuania*. It was translated and edited by Veronica Belling, Ellen Cassedy and Andrew Cassel and published by the University of Alabama Press.

Veronica Belling will be well known to *Jewish Affairs* readers for her multiple noteworthy contributions to the journal going back more than thirty years. She is among this country's foremost Yiddish scholars, her previous publications in the field having included a translation of Leibl Feldman's *The Jews of Johannesburg* (2007), *Yiddish Theatre in South Africa* (2008) and *Yakov Azriel Davidson: His Writings in the Yiddish Newspaper, Der Afrikaner, 1911-1913* (2009). In addition to co-translating Shalit's memoir, Belling also contributes an introductory chapter inter alia recounting his life and career, giving an overview of the history of the Jewish community in Shavli and its eventual destruction and a summary and commentary on the themes and contents of the book.

So We Died is divided into four sections. Part One, entitled 'O, Israel, People of Faith', describes the German invasion of Shavl, the ensuing murder of thousands of Jews in the city and surrounding countryside and the herding of survivors into the Shavl ghetto. The second ('So We Lived') describes daily life in the ghetto while the third ('The Masada Book') recounts attempts to organize a resistance group, of which Shalit himself was a member. The final section ('The Community Dies') recounts the transformation of the ghetto into a concentration camp, the seizure and deportation of the community's children and the writer's experiences in Dachau.

The following quote from the introduction provides useful insights both into Shalit's literary and creative gifts and into what gives this particular Holocaust-era memoir its own uniquely memorably and evocative flavour:

Shalit was a creative writer, and in his introduction he makes it clear that his intention was to use his literary abilities to illuminate the reality of life in all the ghettos, not just Shavl. Composed in Germany shortly after the war, Shalit's narrative proceeds not day by day but through a carefully constructed set

of themes and anecdotes. Shalit's intention was not simply to document the events he lived through but to present them in compelling story form. His unique talent is his ability to traverse effortlessly from reportage to story and back. His stories become more and more dramatic until they reach a crescendo.

So We Died: A Memoir of Life and Death in the Ghetto of Šiauliai, Lithuania by Levi Shalit, translated from the Yiddish and edited by Veronica Belling, Ellen Cassedy, and Andrew Cassel. Introduction by Veronica Belling. Afterword by Justin Cammy. 271pp, bibliography, index, University of Alabama Press, 2025.

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