



**Rabbi's Point of View** June 2013

## **Successes and Mistakes of 80 Years of Progressive Jewry in South Africa**

**By Rabbi Greg Alexander**

Last year the Progressive movement celebrated 80 years of activity in South Africa. Depending on who you speak to and which figures you are using, Progressive Jews seem to make up around 10% of the Jewish community in this country. This article will ask why, given a flying start in the 1940s and 50s, the movement never grew to dominate the South African Jewish community in number or in influence. One will often hear it remarked that the average congregant of an Orthodox synagogue differs very little from their Progressive counterpart in belief or in practise, and yet the majority of affiliated Jews in this country continue to join Orthodox synagogues presided over by rabbis who neither share their (un-Orthodox) beliefs about God and the Torah nor condone their (un-Orthodox) practise. Why have they continued to swear loyalty to a Judaism they neither believe nor practise when they could join a Progressive shul that fits more appropriately their outlook?

In the 1930s and 40s two strong leaders, Rabbi Moshe Chaim Weiler in Johannesburg and Rabbi Dr David Sherman in Cape Town, brought the teachings of Reform Judaism<sup>1</sup> in Western Europe and America to a South African Jewry hungry for change. Although it had no institutional roots in Lithuania, the teachings of egalitarianism, social justice and intellectual criticism found wide appeal and grew swiftly into a new movement. Many of our grandparents were attracted to join, and not always for the doctrine. In my family, the

reasons were given as “I liked to be able to sit with my family in services” and “they didn’t have reserved names on seats at High Holy Days.” So much for ideology.

However, a remarkable number of young Jewish individuals were attracted to the teachings and signed up to be lay leaders, cantors, choir members or teach in the cheders. The movement went country-wide, with synagogues opening in all the major cities as well as Springs, Port Elizabeth, Klerksdorp, East London, Germiston and even Bulawayo. Donors bought camp sites in the Magaliesberg and near Margate for family shabbatonim and retreats. A youth movement was started which later led to the forming of Netzer Maginim, today Netzer South Africa, which at its biggest summer machaneh counted 300 campers. By the end of the 50s the Progressive movement looked as if it was on a path to challenge Orthodoxy for the loyalties of South African Jewry.

And then a combination of internal and external challenges bit. Externally, the political realities of post-Sharpeville South Africa led many of the brightest and politically aware to seek a future elsewhere, taking with them many leaders and potential future leaders of the liberally-inclined Progressive movement. You will find these people or their children as rabbis or layleaders of Reform and Conservative synagogues in Perth, London and Vancouver.

At the same time internally, while the movement spent a great deal of money and energy in opening impressive synagogues, it failed to build the institutions that would secure its future – a training programme for musicians, cantors and educators, a higher learning programme for BA, MA and yeshivah students and a rabbinical school.

While Progressive Judaism is built on the premise of educated decision-making, none of its laity was preparing to engage in serious Torah learning. With a more conservative leadership at the helm, the movement often stumbled to respond to the challenges of post-Sharpeville South Africa, and slowly ceased being a movement at all. For spiritual guidance it took to relying on importing rabbis from Britain and the United States who, with some exceptions, were largely not invested in growing the local movement. They were sometimes keen to engage in the political struggle, but discouraged by their layleadership and by-and-large were more interested in a quiet pulpit than in getting their hands dirty building the structures of a fledgling organisation.

Synagogue services changed very little in style and music, settling on a theatre-style synagogue with fixed pews, robed rabbis in front leading the service and a great emphasis on decorum. The music was arranged for operatic voices and encouraged congregants to listen rather than join in. By the 1980s, Progressive synagogues had become airport lounges for lifecycle events with the majority of members merely names on a database who flew in for their babynaming, bar mitzvah or wedding and absent until the inescapable burial. Shabbat services were attended by a handful of devoted founder members, who in many cases were also relied on to sit on the committees and perform lay functions. Even the

infallible “once-a-year” showing up at Yom Kippur began to fall by the wayside. Services were lead by (paid) rabbis and (paid) choirs, who were the singers, leaders, torah and haftarah readers and givers of sermons, as the movement’s laity became more and more passive, uneducated and unskilled.

Nobody hit the panic button because on paper, the numbers were still stable. This was largely because of a steady influx of converts seeking to marry a Jewish partner who saw the requirements on study and observance as easier than that required by Orthodoxy. While converts are ordinarily the most passionate and committed members of any organisation, with some exceptions the majority did not convert for ideological reasons, seeing the conversion process as a means to a Jewish wedding, Jewish children and appeasing Jewish in-laws-to-be. This only enhanced the perception of the movement as “Judaism-lite”, an option of convenience, not of conscience. What made it even worse was that in many cases the Jewish-born partners felt disconnected from the Classical Reform style of service and lack of spiritual or inspirational rabbinic leadership and continued to attend their Orthodox synagogues of birth, further diluting the movement’s dynamism.

One can only imagine what might have been had the promising launch of a non-Orthodox movement been given the right nurturing to grow through the ‘60s until today. It did not, while in Johannesburg, a revolution was stealthily taking shape. In the last quarter of the Twentieth Century, two Orthodox outreach organisations, Chabad and Ohr Somayach were quietly setting up in humble houses on the corners of Yeoville, Glenhazel and Sandton, disdained as marginal by the traditional South African community used to the Reform and Orthodox mega-shul. Content to begin with a minyan, and based on passion, charisma and genuine Orthodox observance<sup>1</sup>, they slowly started the *shtibilisation* of Johannesburg Jewry. Even though Cape Town has not seen the same results, it is telling to note that a situation unimaginable only 20 years ago has come to be - nearly every major Orthodox synagogue in the city is now lead by a Chabad rabbi. What we see today is an Orthodox movement driven by a *ba'al t'shuvah* (newly observant) battery that is young, upwardly mobile and committed 24-7-365.

Where the Progressive movement employs six rabbis in the country, the Orthodox have dozens and growing, backed by an educated and well-organised laity, robust institutions and growing numbers of young adults going to Israel to study in yeshivah or seminary.

All the Progressive movement seemed (and in many cases continues) to offer in the way of serious education for its members were irregular shiurim for adults, a cheder and bar-bat mitzvah programme from 10-13yrs and a one-year Introduction to Judaism course largely used by Jews-by-Choice only. That meant that unless you were a self-motivated student, a pre-adolescent or a non-Jew, there was no way of your getting access to spiritual and practical Jewish education.

Fortunately, the last decade has seen a turn-around in the Progressive movement. We have a stable group of rabbis, some of them South African-born, who, together with a new lay-leadership have taken on the slow and painful task of rebuilding the movement. Although numbers have not grown across the country, they have not declined and we have begun to attract a new demographic (mostly young families) to join out of choice, rather than spousal conversion. With creative programming and ideological leadership the Progressive movement is showing new signs of dynamism and direction. The launch of SACRED last year was a dramatic step in the right direction. Founded to fight religious discrimination, the launch campaign saw them take up the cause of the right of women to sing in the Yom Ha'atzmaut celebrations. Their YouTube video campaign went viral and attracted the attention of Progressive and Orthodox Jews both in South Africa and abroad. Communal initiatives such as Limmud and Melton have seen our rabbis and congregants exposed to the broader sphere of Jewish education and loving it. Members of Progressive synagogues are putting themselves forward to sit on boards of communal organisations like the Board of Deputies, Zionist Federation and the Jewish day schools.

What is required in this period of renaissance is a careful attention to detail, huge patience, and a clear eye on the long term goal of re-building the foundations of a movement that will inspire our children and grandchildren. It will take painful and expensive investment in change, always a painful process, and will require not being married to "same-old" thinking. It will require lay and rabbinic leadership motivated not by personal ego but by commitment to the community, and the desire to grow in learning.

Given the numbers in this country, we are likely to remain the only non-Orthodox movement, and that should be seen as an opportunity for a broader-based umbrella movement that embraces the fullest spectrum of non-Orthodoxy, from Liberal, Jewish Renewal to Masorti. That will require a wider offering of services and programming, a new vision of the synagogue as community centre offering parallel services and the embracing of diversity rather than seeing it as a threat. It will also require the activating of the current and next generations to become more educated, more committed and more practising than their parents and grandparents were. Is that possible? Is it sustainable? Only if the passion and dedication of the 1950's can be rekindled.

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