

## OFFICE OF THE CHIEF RABBI

Union of Orthodox Synagogues of South Africa

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*From Chief Rabbi Cyril K. Harris, Beneficiary of the UCF UNITED COMMUNAL FUND*

*B.A. M. Phil, F.J.C. (w.o.01 100 101 0002)*

*30<sup>th</sup> June 1997*

The Chairperson of the Human Rights Violations Committee

Truth and Reconciliation

P O Box 1158

Johannesburg

2000

Dear Sir,

Submission by Religious Communities to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission

I acknowledge with thanks your letter of 3<sup>rd</sup> June 1997 and have pleasure in enclosing the submission from the Jewish faith community. This comes to you from the Office of the Chief Rabbi of the Union of Orthodox Synagogues and has been compiled by me and my assistant Rabbi Ron Hendler.

May I point out that the reason for not making the submission sooner is that I have been abroad for the past three weeks.

I would add that as Islam, Hinduism and Judaism do not utilise the term 'church', it would be more in keeping with our new South African dispensation if your communications were to refer to religious communities, which is all inclusive, rather than churches.

With all good wishes for success with your TRC endeavours.

Yours faithfully

C.K. HARRIS  
CHIEF RABBI

## **TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION COMMISSION**

### **SUBMISSION BY THE JEWISH RELIGIOUS COMMUNITY**

#### **The Violations of the Past**

*Did the theology and activities of your community contribute to the formation of the motives and perspectives of those responsible for gross human rights violations either in upholding the previous system or opposing it?*

The Jewish religion teaches that human beings should pursue justice and that everyone should love their neighbour as themselves. Judaism affirms that everyone is created in the image of God, the union of the human family subsumes an inherent responsibility at all times and in all places to behave in a proper and virtuous manner. According to Jewish interpretation, in no manner can the Bible be used to justify the political, economic or social domination of any one group over another. No encouragement whatsoever to commit human rights violations appears in Jewish sacred sources, quite the contrary, but some may well have fallen short of the standards that Judaism sets.

*What was the contribution of Jewish community to creating a climate or justification for gross human rights violations to be committed?*

The Jewish community certainly did not contribute to such a climate.

*In which way did the Jewish community fail to live up to those principles of their faith which oppose human rights violations?*

One must remember that the Jews came to South Africa as immigrants, leaving the lands of their birth due to economic and political persecution based in the main upon discrimination against their faith. Feelings of insecurity as a vulnerable minority group were subsequently exasperated by the trauma of the Holocaust and by the threat of anti-semitism on the part of the ruling National Party which had spearheaded the discriminatory immigration legislation of the 1930s that effectively ended Jewish entry to this country from Europe. Nevertheless, while this may help to explain the caution of the Jewish community in the early apartheid years, in subsequent years many Jewish voices were indeed raised against injustice. Any indictment of Jewish moral failure to speak up collectively as a community must also take into account the fact that the Jews were such a small community –

never more than 4% of the white population – that they felt that they could not have made any notable difference to the situation, while there was always the fear of resurgence of state sponsored anti-semitism. /pp.1-2/

In contemporary South Africa, it is sometimes difficult to appreciate the extent and pervasiveness of the control the State exerted during the apartheid era. Of course, in common with all other faith groups, the Jewish community had the duty to protest against the apartheid system, but the view may be advanced that any such protest would have been futile and could have proved dangerous to the protesting community. Nevertheless with hindsight, it can be maintained that the community as a whole should have spoken out sooner than it did in condemning the large scale violations of human rights which occurred in South Africa.

It is also true that more could and should have been done to help the oppressed. The organised Jewish community could have mobilized its considerable capacities and talents in the commercial, educational and welfare fields, to better effect.

*In which ways did the Jewish community oppose gross human rights violations?*

Speaking at the launch of the book "Cutting Through the Mountain – Interviews with South African Jewish Activists" in May 1997, Professor Asmal Kadar, Minister of Water Affairs and Forestry, saluted the Jewish heroes of the anti-apartheid struggle. *"The Jewish community of South Africa has produced proportionately more heroes in the struggle against apartheid than any other so-called white group."* Asmal said the leading Jewish activists had suffered considerably by going against the tide of white opinion during the apartheid era. *"Some were imprisoned for long periods; some went into exile; some were martyred such as Ruth First, and some were almost martyred such as Albie Sachs. Many lost their livelihoods and the special branch gave them undivided, almost extra, attention. It is in recognising people such as Ray Simons, Nadine Gordimer, Barney Simon, Anton Harber, the Colemans, Laurie Nathan, the Slovos, Gill Marcus, Ronnie Kasrils, Issie Maisels, Arthur Chaskelson, Albie Sachs, Helen Suzman, Dennis Goldberg, Raymond Suttner and others equally worthy that a public has been done."*

Amongst important Jewish leadership which was outspoken in the condemnation of apartheid was the late Chief Rabbi Louis Rabinowitz who ministered in Johannesburg from 1945-1961. *"When it comes to the question of apartheid my conscience will not let me rest. I cannot accept that the colour of a man's skin shall dictate what privileges he may or may not enjoy. I know that discrimination is not confined to one party but has formed part of the policy of every South African government. I know there is a historical background to it, and that it will not disappear overnight. I am nevertheless convinced that it is ethically wrong, and that it is my duty as a rabbi to say so."* /pp.3-4/

While many rabbis restricted themselves to issues pertaining to the Jewish community, a significant number did speak out against the evils of apartheid. Among these were Rabbi Andre Unger of the Port Elizabeth Reform congregation who was expelled in 1955 by the Government; Rabbi Eugene Duschinsky, the Head of the Cape Town Beth Din (Ecclesiastical Court) who vehemently protested in 1979 against conditions in the Crossroads squatter camps; and rabbis such as Arthur Saul Super, David Rosen and Selwyn Franklyn who consistently urged that Jewish ethical standards be applied for the betterment of the under-privileged. In the legal sphere, notable personalities included Judge Richard Goldstone whose landmark judgments often defeated the objectives of inter-alia the Group Areas Act.

It is noteworthy that more than half of the 23 whites involved in the Treason Trial of the 1950s, and all five whites apprehended in the 'Rivonia Arrests' of 1963 were Jewish. Seeking peaceful change, most Jews voted for the United Party and subsequently for the Progressive Federal Party and eventually the Democratic Party. Whatever might have been the reason for the voting patterns that emerged clearly in election after election, the truth is that Jews overwhelmingly and continuously voted against the governing National Party, more so than any other white group in South Africa. Members of the Jewish community also participated significantly in various protest groupings such as the Five Freedoms Forum, Jews for Social Justice and Black Sash. Both in business and commerce and on the domestic scene, most Jewish people tried to be good employers, and indeed the widespread view of black workers indicates it was preferable to work for Jewish people.

### **Reflections on the Present and the Future**

*How can the Jewish community contribute to the healing, reparation and rehabilitation of victims as well as perpetrators, at individual, communal and national levels?*

Many members of the Jewish community are active in fields such as counselling, training, community development and inter-group contact. A significant Jewish initiative in the area of reconstruction and development was the establishment two years ago of TIKKUN which is a community project to uplift the disadvantaged. TIKKUN, which is spearheaded by the industrialist Mr Bertie Lubner and Chief Rabbi Cyril Harris, is the coordinating body of Jewish organisations involved in upliftment and is harnessing Jewish community resources, individual skills and expertise to fulfill its outreach projects. The operational sectors of TIKKUN cover Education, Agriculture, Business and Professions, Health, Welfare, Housing, Public Relations, Youth and Sport, Art and Culture. Limited progress has been made to date but these activities are being intensified. We are aware that the need for healing and for reparation in its broader sense are great and we would be happy

to join further local and national initiatives in this field wherever this may prove feasible.

*Recommendations of the Prevention of Human Rights Violations in the Future.*

The Jewish community, via its representative body, the Jewish Board of Deputies, contributed to the drafting of clauses in the Bill of Rights in our new Constitution. The teaching and promotion of proper behavior and requisite levels of tolerance should be given priority throughout our education system, and must be reinforced with spiritual goals leading to the formation of moral integrity, a sense of human dignity and an appreciation of social justice.

The development of a human rights culture, without which legal safeguards are virtually meaningless, must also be a conscious aim of civil society. Through schools, churches, synagogues, mosques and temples, through the press and other media, and throughout society in general, it is essential to create a climate in which sufficient outrage at any human violations is engendered, so that such violations be strongly condemned, and ultimately greatly reduced in number. Aware of the widespread anger directed at criminal elements who are threatening the basic law and order of our society, we recognise that the promotion of a human rights culture is in current circumstances all the more difficult a task.

*The Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation.*

The major religions of South Africa have delineated the necessary steps in the process of reconciliation. These are the acknowledgement by the perpetrator of the wrong-doing; articulated confession of the wrong-doing; genuine remorse; seeking forgiveness from the victims; and the firm resolve not to repeat damaging conduct in the future. How precisely this religious framework to correct the harm done in the past can be effected is a matter of anguished debate, but our religious, cultural and communal centers should be involved wherever possible in facilitating the process.

Creating a truly integrated society depends on the provision of an ideological base founded on religious principle. Intrinsic faith in the Fatherhood of God, which automatically betokens our responsibilities to each other as brothers and sisters, can be the driving force capable of motivating the quality of effort required for national unity. Together with all the denominations involved in the inter-faith movement, Jewish spiritual leadership is urging that human-made barriers and vested interests be transcended to purposefully create the new order.

It also seems to us essential that specific programmes to reduce various prejudices through information, contact and co-operation between groups that still hardly meet at a social level be set up, and carried out energetically in many parts of the country. Bridge-building efforts require time and perseverance, but the Jewish

community is keen to participate in all programmes which will alleviate tensions and help make our rainbow nation a reality.