

Jewish Community, Represented by Rabbi Cyril Harris. Testimony before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, East London, 18 November 1999. [disclaimer](#)

CHIEF RABBI C HARRIS: Thank you Mr Chairperson, brothers and sisters and dear colleagues. Firstly, I want to welcome this opportunity on behalf of the Jewish community to participate in our faith hearings. We feel it's a wonderful opportunity to try to heal divisions and to start the process of building a better life. We must examine the past. We must admit failings of the past. But those failings must prompt us all to move us in some way to do something now and in the years ahead to build a better country for the millions of our brothers and sisters who live in this country and who hope for a better future. One of the greatest things which has happened in our country is that principles, values and concepts, which are normally considered abstract have come gloriously alive in these historic times that we're going through. The brotherhood and sisterhood of the human family has taken on increased meaning. Everyone knows "Simunye", we must try to be one. The TRC has given new meaning to wrongdoing and forgiveness. These are not abstract ephemeral notions, but they're notions which get to the heart of the past of our country and to the soul of its future. The inter faith dialogue has moved beyond a mere tolerance and debate to allow us collectively to try and create the building blocks for the future. And the most important concept as far as the communities of this country are concerned is the concept of sharing, which is also not an abstract religious principle. In our country at this time, that the "haves" must share with the "have-nots" is not merely a political, economic nor social certainty, it is a moral imperative.

I would like to pinpoint the failings as far as the Jewish community is concerned of all that happened in the apartheid era. The Jewish community did not initiate apartheid. Many in the Jewish community did not agree with apartheid. Almost everyone in the Jewish community had a kind of awkward tension about apartheid, but most of the Jewish community benefited in one way or another from apartheid. I want to read what Stephen Friedman, the Director of the Centre for Policy Studies recently wrote:

"No Jew who lived in South Africa during the apartheid period can plausibly claim that his or her circumstances today are not in some measure a result of apartheid. Anyone who succeeded in business, benefited from a right to economic activity which was denied others. Anyone who received a professional qualification, enjoyed a place at school, college, university which was denied to the majority on racial grounds alone. Anyone who enjoyed an authentic Jewish family life, Judaism is a domestic religion, did so in a home which persons not classified as whites could neither own nor occupy, save as a hired servant, in which latter case they were not permitted to enjoy a family life of their own. Any member of our community who found a job in a corporation or as a skilled artisan, probably occupied a post from which those classified not-white were barred".

This, of course, touches only on the formal legal stipulations which enabled the Jews along with other South Africans labelled white to get on in life at the expense of others. Apartheid was more than a set of racial laws. Its workings offered whites cheap labour in their homes and factories, subsidised their services and facilities and in general provided them with every tool for personal advancement which was denied to others. Its effect was to ensure that at least under apartheid's latter days, few if any whites, failed to achieve a degree of affluence as a direct result of the fact that others were forced to live in penury. This context creates a profound personal and collective responsibility for every apartheid reared Jew, for it raises the possibility that their attainments today may have been achieved only because of apartheid's role in denying to others what we now enjoy ourselves.

He goes on to say, and I think it's important, to anticipate an objection. "Yes, many Jews who made it during the apartheid era (let's get away from the impression that all Jews are millionaires – it's not at all true. We have meals on wheels for many old and poor Jewish people to this day). Yes, many Jews who made it during the apartheid era would have done well in countries which allowed equal opportunity to all."

Yes, many worked hard to achieve what they now have and employed much natural ability to do it. But can we really say that all of us would be what we are today, in the Jewish community, if apartheid had never existed? Can anyone of us, as a matter of principle, since it is impossible to determine how South African Judaism would have fared without apartheid, declare confidently that we enjoy no skills, capabilities and possessions which apartheid gave us? We bear responsibility today, whatever role we played in the past, however many letters we wrote to the newspapers, however many bursaries we sponsored, however civil we were to our workers or servants, because it is possible, indeed probable, that our personal circumstances are products of apartheid. And if we are responsible for this country's past, we are of course responsible for its future. In that the Jewish community benefited from apartheid, apology must be given to this commission.

The second question's more difficult. What did silence ...[inaudible] Very easy – that poster "The truth hurts and silence kills" which is true, but we need a sophisticated and in depth look at what happened. Now there were many Jewish individuals who were not silent, and we have in our written submission, we mention Professor Asmal Kadar Asmal, the current Minister of Water Affairs and Forestry, who recently saluted the Jewish heroes of the anti-apartheid struggle. He said the Jewish community of South Africa has produced proportionately more heroes in the struggle against apartheid than any other so-called white group and he went on to list a lot of names, which I won't bother to read, you've got them there and they're all well known. It is important to indicate that these were individuals not all of whom were practising Jewish males or females but that they were moved by either Jewish, and more often than not, humanitarian motivations to speak out and some of them suffered very greatly for it. But they weren't there, and I think it's an important part of our Jewish submission that this should not be overlooked. For example, more than half the 23 whites involved in the treason trial of the 1950's and all five whites apprehended in

the Rivonia arrests of 1963 were Jewish. Most Jews voted for the United Party, subsequently for the Progressive Federal Party, and eventually the Democratic Party. Whatever might have been the reasons for the voting patterns, it's not worthy that more than half of the 23 whites involved in the treason trial, as mentioned, and the Rivonia trial were Jewish.

Seeking peaceful change, Jews actually wanted to use the vote. The vote as an individual, which unfortunately so many millions didn't have, to try to effect change. Whatever might have been the reason for these voting patterns, 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 Justice in Cape Town, Jews for Social Justice in Johannesburg and the Black Sash. So there were individuals and there were groups. We must explain to you, and this is our obligation, the silence of the general Jewish community as distinct from individuals and specific groups during the apartheid era. What does silence denote? It denotes acquiescence and accommodation. One of the great evils of apartheid (I know there were so many evils) was that it desensitised decent people to the suffering of millions. They just got used to apartheid. The accommodated themselves to it, they were acquiesce in it. Another reason could be cowardice. [SIDE 2]...must be appreciated in the Jewish context otherwise it would be unfair. Another reason was plain fear. Apartheid was a very repressive regime, got more and more repressive, until thank God, the democracy came. The Jewish community is very small in numbers. It is a very silly mistake of many people to think that there are millions and millions of Jewish people in this country. There have never been! At its height, it was a community of 130000. At its height. And this was a very small community and of course, it may be a very high profile community, but it's a very small community in numbers, it's a post-holocaust generation. Do you know what the Nazis did to the Jewish people? So therefore, Jewish people all over the world have a sensitivity, one would say a hyper-sensitivity towards survival. At all costs they want to survive. I am not condoning the silence of the Jewish community in the apartheid era, I am attempting to explain it and I am asking for your understanding.

There is always a fear of anti-semitism Before the Second World War, the parliament of this country banned Jews from this country. With the Aliens Act. The Jewish community would be very much larger now if Jews, the refugees from Europe had been allowed in to South Africa. They weren't allowed in. Regarding the Nationalist Party in the early days, 1940's and 50's, there was always the fear of anti-semitism, so fear played a very great part, it shouldn't have done but it did.

The next point is, and I think as these are religious hearings, we should go into it....

CHAIRPERSON: My dear brother, I don't want to interrupt your wonderful eloquent...but those poor dears who are trying to interpret are finding it a little difficult to keep up...

CHIEF RABBI CYRIL HARRIS: I have to apologise, beg the commission's forgiveness twice. Once because I don't speak English, I speak Scottish and secondly I speak far too quickly. Okay, I'm going to go to the limit of 59 km's per hour, I'll try not to overdo it.

The silence is a question of discretion. A lot of people feel that speaking out can be dangerous and that speaking out can be futile. Now it is true to Jewish tradition that the citizen has never been empowered to surrender the use of his or her moral conscience. Civil disobedience has a long and honourable tradition in Jewish history. And against the argument that it is courting danger to challenge authority and that the exercise may well prove futile, traditional Jewish sources suggest it's not for the protesters to judge the outcome, that wrong must always be opposed, irrespective of the consequences. I want in this company of religious people to quote from the Talmut in Shabbat. It says as follows: "Rabbi Zera once said to Rabbi Simon, 'You must censure the ...[inaudible]. They've done something wrong and you have to tell them off'. He replied 'They won't listen to me, it's a waste of time'. Rabbi Zera retorted, 'You must censure them all the same. You have to speak out'. This accords with the view of Rabbi Agga, who said that the good Lord himself never reversed a decision except once. The Holy One, blessed be he, he said to the Angel Gabriel, 'Go through the city of Jerusalem and on the foreheads of the righteous mark an X with ink and on the foreheads of the wicked mark an X of blood and the Angel of Death is going to move through Jerusalem and slaughter the wicked and preserve the righteous.' Hearing that Justice became before the throne of Almighty God. 'Lord of the universe, what are you doing? What is the difference between them?' God answered, 'What a question is this? These are Holy righteous, and these are Holy Wicked'. Justice replied, 'Lord of the Universe, you are not giving the righteous people an opportunity of asking the wicked to repent'. God said to Justice, 'I know, but even if they protested, nothing would happen, nobody's going to listen to the Righteous, therefore they shouldn't speak out'. Said Justice to Almighty God, 'Lord of the Universe, you know that, but did they? They should still have spoken out'".

In contradiction to this view, there is a commentary, a selection of commentators called ...[inaudible] and they offer a cautionary note on this passage in the Talmut, indicating that in a situation where it is quite clear that the ruling authority will dismiss the protest out of hand, one may be justified in keeping silent. There is no moral compunction to speak out when one's word will be brushed aside. Indeed, the effect of protest may be to harden the transgressor in their misdirected path and make the situation even worse. Sometimes discretion is the better part of valour. It must be emphasised, however, that in Judaism the normative view prevails. It is insufficient to stand apart from violations of human rights and dissociation is inadequate where vocal protest is urgently called for and positive steps must be taken to rectify injustice. The Jewish sources also tell us that Job, the book of Job in the bible, that the reason he was punished by God, was that he failed to speak out against the injustices in his own time. So the Jewish community in South Africa, confesses a collective failure to protest against apartheid. The situation here was not one in which the human rights of the minority were adversely affected. That in itself would have been wrong. It was a

situation in which the human rights of the vast majority were systematically and forcibly denied and that is a monstrous aberration. The entire purport of Jewish moral teaching, together with the essential lesson of Jewish historical experience as the most consistent victim among the peoples in the world (have a look at the Jewish history) should have moved the community to do everything possible to oppose apartheid, distancing oneself from the anguished cry of the majority in one's own midst and myopically pursuing one's own interests, whether personal or communal can never be morally justified. The American Jewish philosopher, Abraham Joshua Heschel once wrote, "Indifference to evil is more insidious than evil itself. It is more universal, more contagious, more dangerous. A silent justification. Indifference: it makes possible an evil erupting as an exception, becoming the accepted rule and being in turn accepted." Because of the evil of indifference which so many in the Jewish community professed, we confess that sin today before this commission and we ask forgiveness for it. The pivotal issue of this commission is to turn the inequities of the past towards advantage for the future. That the reason we must endeavour to understand the feelings of the past is so that we can become fully aware of our responsibilities now, to help repair the damage. Please God, to build a better future, not that in spite of the past we must do better, but because of the past, we must do better.

In the Jewish community, we are developing a programme called Tekun. There has been a great deal of hot air yesterday and this morning about what ought to be done, but there have been very few practical examples which are influencing the grassroots, and if I may, I want to explain in a few moments the range of practical projects the South African Jewish community is undertaking under the broad umbrella of a programme called Tekun, which Bertie Lubner and I have the honour of being co-chairman. Tekun is a Hebrew word meaning repairing, trying to put things right. It is a wonderful exercise, we are trying to apply Jewish resources, skills, expertise and know how, to be of maximum benefit to the upliftment programme. One instance in food: the Jewish housewife, when she shops, is asked to buy an extra tin or extra packet. She is buying half a dozen tins, buy a seventh tin. A dozen packets of something, but a thirteenth packet. That goes in a separate part of the trolley, goes to the nearest Synagogue, some of the Hypermarkets have actually got...called the ...[inaudible] and we take that to the hungry.

We have many projects, I give you one instance on welfare. Nokatula, which is a home for the physically and mentally handicapped in Alexandria Township is consistently visited by the Selwyn Segal Centre, which is a similar home for physically and mentally handicapped people in Johannesburg. We share expertise and facilities and we all go together to Camp David at Magaliesberg. May I point out that here we are not being patronising. I know it sounds terribly patronising, we are trying to empower people to help themselves, and that's why we are handing over the skills. We have a major agricultural project at Rietfontein. It is an educational experience in farming, based on the success in Israel. Many of our projects, I mention this not God forbid to make a political point! I mention it because the state of Israel has expertise in things like water conservation, solar energy and all forms....helping at the moment seventeen African countries, and we feel very proud that the Israelis want to help us

with some of our projects. And they are helping us with this Agricultural Education Centre at Rietfontein. Two weeks ago 100 000 spinach seedlings (I love spinach because it's good)...spinach gives you energy Mr Chairman! Spinach seeds were planted and we are all helping with this exercise. We have very many educational projects. We have enrichment programmes which SADTU and COSAS have co-operated with us. Sometimes they have requested, sometimes we have gone to them. Our King David Schools in Johannesburg and the schools in Cape Town are helping in the townships with computer literacy programmes. It's where I'm computer illiterate but the youngsters, bless them, have to be computer literate, and we're helping in East Bank High School for example, in Alex, with many adult education programmes. Basic literacy courses. My wife, bless her, she insists that I mention this (she's a good girl) is the Chairperson of Ossac. Ossac is a black adult education school in Killarney, run in the Oxford Synagogue, we get over 100 every evening. The ages range from 20 to 60. There are domestic workers, security personnel, shop assistants, unemployed people. They do the IEB tests in English and Maths, and we have a 95% success rate, and there is nothing more joyous in the world than seeing somebody over 50 who has been denied an education actually coming every night and studying and the glow on that person's face when they hold their certificate, it is wondrous to behold. We are encouraging education in many ways. Our Union of Jewish Women has programmes in Soweto in HIPPI (home instruction for pre-primary youngsters which is geared to the mothers) and MATAL (upgrading the qualifications of pre-school teachers).

There was, many years ago in Israel, an Afro-Asian institute which actually taught very many in the trade union movement. Very many years ago. Some of the things I mentioning to you have been going on for donkey's years. The Rabbi Wyler's School in Alexandria was founded by the Reformed Jewish Movement over 50 years ago. Rabbi Wyler put in a primary school then and thank God it's still going. We have arranged to take groups of young professionals to Israel to train them in entrepreneurial skills, business development skills, banking skills. We are already on our fourth group there. Every single person who has been in one of these groups and come back, they have actually been given promotion. If they were a bank clerk, they are now assistant manager in the bank. And it's a wonderful thing.

We are using the expertise of ORT which is an international Jewish organisation and we have at Midrand a college of Science and Technology, which is again wonderfully successful. We are doing things for employment and there is a very wonderful lady called Helen Leverman, in the Cape, who doesla Bantu, it's making toys and bead decorations and they are sold all over the world, in Paris, London and New York. And it's a way of getting, including blind people, who can be taught how to string the beads and by the touch on a colour system, and it's a marvellous thing. We have sporting activities, Makabe goes in, and we have soccer in Soweto and they love it. And we have cultural activities. We have joint choral concerts. We have the black choir of Soweto, the Johannesburg Jewish Choir and something called the Welsh Male Choir. We are trying to build bridges, we are going across the board.

I have only given you, Mr Chairperson, dear, dear friend, I have only given you a few examples. I know it's a drop in the ocean, but we are trying to galvanise our Jewish community in order that we can actually help. It is our responsibility to be of help.

Finally, I want to say this. It's our job as religious people, if I may be bold to say so, it is the job of all of us to try to apply the antidotes. This TRC has become famous throughout the world because of the horror which has unfolded in testimony so many months before you. There is no-one who has listened in the radio, or who very humbly has come to sit at the back and listen to the testimony, there is no-one that hasn't been moved to tears, because we have had here a record of inhumanity. The worst things that human beings can do to other human beings and what we need in our country is to now change because of that. To change to the best, to display the best that human beings can do to fellow human beings. Not the hurt and the torture and the shame, but the love and the friendship and the mutual help to lift our country up. If apartheid was divisive, the antidote is building bridges and coming together. A togetherness which will spell the great future of our country. I want to finish by quoting Abraham Joshua Hershell once again. He said an incredibly beautiful thing about mission.

He said: "We all carry within our souls the gold to forge the gates of the kingdom". That's an incredibly beautiful statement to make, that God has blessed each of us, deep within us with the gold to fashion out and to make the gates of the kingdom. If we, together, all of us, all religious groups who are so meaningful in this country and have such an impact at the grassroots, if we can dig deep within ourselves for the gold of goodness within us, and we can make those gates and we can go through them, then we will have in our beloved country of South Africa, please God, a bright and wonderful future.

CHAIRPERSON: Thank you very much, my dear friend. Will you please just switch off? Thank you. I ask us to observe a moment of silence.

God Bless Africa. Guard her children, guide her leaders and give her peace. Amen. Thank you very much. I am so glad that you are our friend. That was a very moving testimony and we give thanks to God for you and for the tremendous contribution that you have made in the leadership that you have given to your community in the dark days and in the not so dark days. I am glad that we have been able to be together in both those periods. Khoza Mgojo?

REV. K MGOJO: Thank you Sir. I don't know what to ask from you, because I have seen you in the journeys travelling together. I think you people in the Jewish community, you may under estimate yourself. You don't know that you have the resources, biblical resources, as you have quoted the Talmut, and a lot in the Rabbinic Literature. There's a lot in the Jewish ambiguity, some historians like Josephus, where you get these types of things that you have mentioned here, which do help and sustain your community, based on the religious principles and moral imperatives and humanitarian motivations. I think they are very clear in the history of the Jewish

people and one could detail that there is a person speaking from the history of suffering dehumanisation. I am pleased that you did mention that you should have spoken, because by virtue of your community if you read your history, you have been speaking out, starting from the prophets like Amos and others, who were confronted with difficult situations, similar to these ones in their own time, and they did speak out.

I was to commend you for that and your people. I am pleased that you have studied the way which is very pragmatic, in the form of this "Tukun". It is very exciting, but you have been quoting many places, things happening here in the Transvaal in the Reef, and South Africa doesn't end there. Is there any way you can decentralise some of these projects, so that they touch other places?

CHIEF RABBI CYRIL HARRIS: Very good question brother. It is in fact decentralised. I am sorry I gave for my examples, I was concentrating heavily on Johannesburg and Cape Town. It so happens that the Durban Jewish community is also very, very active. On their ...[inaudible] programme the last group, a lot of them came from Bloemfontein, and it's not true, it gives the wrong impression. There is Jewish demographic reason for it: we used to have very many communities out in the country, and we don't for some reason or another, most Jewish people like to live in the city. But we do have to, we are trying with the agricultural projects. We actually are trying to reach out. And it is a national, not a localised organisation.

CHAIRPERSON: He is very pleased that you have something in Kwa Zulu Natal! Any questions. Bongani Finca?

REV. B FINCA: I don't know whether you followed the proceedings of the hearings in Johannesburg last week when the commission was interacting with business, and a proposal was made by Professor Terblanche on how to deal with the fact that apartheid has left us a legacy of a minority of people who live in luxury and a vast majority of people who subsist from day to day. I don't know whether you can perhaps comment on how the Jewish religious community would react to the proposal that was made by Professor Terblanche?

CHIEF RABBI CYRIL HARRIS: That's a very pertinent and important question. Clearly, equalisation is a very, very important issue to have in our country. We have topped the league for the last five years for the difference between the "haves" and the "have nots". The biggest chasm in the world is here in South Africa, not in Asia, not in South America. We have been top of the league. The United Nations gives and the G7 group gives...we are top of the league. And clearly there is a responsibility. I am not an economist, I am only a poor preacher, but I am quite sure, and I have already heard favourable comment over the weekend from some Jewish businessmen (I was at a reception on Sunday) and they said it would be only fair and proper if there was a wealth tax in order to redistribute. There were one or two fears mentioned that because - from the point of view of earners and businesses we are the most highly taxed country in the world, in real terms. And there was a feeling that it may prove,

God forbid, the opposite. There may be a disincentive. But I personally have always said that - I noticed it in Johannesburg where so many white houses have swimming pools and there is not one swimming pool in Alexandria Township. Not one public swimming pool in Alexandria Township. And we can't have this. It is quite utterly obscene and immoral. And I personally will put my weight behind any such suggestions. Whether my voice will be persuasive enough, I'm not sure. But I really feel that the religious communities have to endorse a practical programme for redistribution.

CHAIRPERSON: Piet Meiring?

PROF. P MEIRING: Thank you Rabbi for your submission, especially the last paragraphs on the future, the contributions made by the Jewish community struck me.

I want to ask you a question, I raised it also with the Anglican Church yesterday. Is it your experience that by and large your congregants, the Jewish people going to Synagogue have difficulty in really owning the TRC process? Are they denying, are they at war with the results of the TRC? Or do you succeed in helping them to really own the process? What can we do to help the by and large the white community to say, but this in spite of how painful the disclosures are, this is our process?

CHIEF RABBI CYRIL HARRIS: That too is a very fair and appropriate question. There's a generation gap in the Jewish community, as there is in most white communities. Old people got so used to apartheid, immune to it, that many of them still don't realise that thank God we now have a non-racial democracy, we have a black majority government in place. The youngsters are the opposite. The younger generation is very into the New South Africa, very cognisant of the necessity of the process. So I have to answer you that there is a dichotomy. We do have difficulty with many things, including the TRC, with those who are over the age of 60. We have no difficulty with those who are under the age of 30. We have some difficulties in the middle group. We are trying very much. The only specific complaint which has been aired about the TRC has to do with amnesty. There are a lot of people who feel that the relatives of victims, when they cry out to you for justice, that there may be, you know the ten commandments are absolutely categoric on "Thou shalt do this, and thou shalt not do that". All religions based on morality have a doctrine of reward and punishment. There is a line beyond which we are not allowed to go. How dare we treat fellow human beings in such a way, and therefore the one clear criticism that I have heard from quite a number of Jewish people is that they can empathise fully with those who have been complaining that the amnesty is too extensive. It is appreciated that the TRC may not have come into being at all, God forbid, if a deal hadn't been done on all sides regarding amnesty. But it is nevertheless true that while God is a God of forgiveness, there are certain things which are unforgivable, including some of the things that we have heard about. And that is one of the criticisms I have heard. By and large, the TRC is accepted, it's hearings have are followed. They are followed avidly. You may not have hundreds and thousands of people coming to them. But a

lot of people listen on radio, a lot of people do look in at the television summaries and it is being followed with a great deal of interest.

MR L FURMAN: I would just like to add that from my generation, slightly younger than the Chief Rabbi, I think that all that's emerged from the TRC has deepened the sense of shame that we feel at having been silent during that time. I think that we have come to realise that apartheid was much more than an idiosyncratic political system, and the brutality that has been exposed now is very much approximate to the brutality that our ancestors have experienced in the past. But I think that that sense of shame has only deepened the commitment that many of my generation feel to try and heal the wounds of the past.

CHAIRPERSON: Thank you very much. Thomas?

MR T MANTHATA: In order to be sensitive to this difficult problem of communities seeing themselves to be patronised and so on and so on. Is there a decided way where the Jewish communities are beginning to learn one or other African language, so that they can inter relate with the people without making the people foreigners all the time?

CHIEF RABBI CYRIL HARRIS: I am pleased to answer "yes" as Zulu is taught in most of our Jewish schools in Johannesburg and Xhosa in most of our Jewish schools in Cape Town and one is very, very conscious of the fact and I think very many people have wonderful black domestic help and are beginning to learn the conversational phrases and it is a very, very important part of nation building and bridge building that we do this. Again, we don't do it nowhere near as enough, but we are conscious of it and it is developing and we intend to make it a major educational component of our schools. We have replaced Afrikaans with Zulu, is the answer to your question.

CHAIRPERSON: Thank you very much. We are deeply grateful in all sorts of ways and we know that you will all continue, and your community will continue to be making a very significant contribution to the future of this country, especially because of your own history of suffering. Thank you very much. You may stand down.

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