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The limits of communal dissent: the rise and fall of the Kollel Yad Shaul as South Africa's premier outreach organization*

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The contemporary growth of Orthodox Judaism is an important and much studied phenomenon.¹ Despite the transformation of Orthodoxy in South Africa over the past five decades, however, the subject has received little serious attention.² For the 1950s and 1960s, the bulk of South African Jewry was correctly described as “non-observant Orthodox”.³ Although most

1 For scholarship on the U.S. see Jeffrey Gurock, “Twentieth-Century American Orthodoxy’s Era of Non-Observance, 1900–1960”, *Torah u-Madda Journal* 9 (2000): 87–107; Gurock, *Orthodox Jews in America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009); Samuel Heilman, “American Orthodoxy: Where Are We, Who Are We, and Where Are We Going?” *Edah* 5, no. 1 (2005): 2–8; Zev Eleff, “From Teacher to Scholar to Pastor: The Evolving Postwar Modern Orthodox Rabbinate”, *American Jewish History* 98, no. 4 (Oct. 2014), 289–313; Nishma Research, “The Nishma Research 2023 Jewish Community Profile: Beliefs, Practices, Attitudes and Priorities Across the Jewish Community with a Focus on U.S. Modern Orthodox and Haredi (Chasidish and Yeshivish) Sectors”, 1 March 2023, <https://nishmaresearch.com/assets/pdf/REPORT%20-%20Nishma%20Jewish%20Community%20Profile%20March%202023.pdf>; Nishma Research, “The Journeys and Experiences of Baalei Teshuvah”, 4 Nov. 2019; <https://nishmaresearch.com/assets/pdf/Nishma%20Research%20-%20Report%20on%20Baalei%20Teshuvah%20Nov%202019.pdf>; Jack Wertheimer, “The Outreach Revolution”, *Commentary*, 1 April 2013 (accessed 20 Sept. 2023).

2 Dana Kaplan, “South African Orthodoxy Today: Tradition and Change in a Post-Apartheid Multi-Racial Society”, *Tradition* 33, no. 1 (Autumn 1998): 71–89. This article is largely based on my thesis: David Fachler, “Tradition, Accommodation, Revolution and Counterrevolution: A History of a Century of Struggle for the Soul of Orthodoxy in Johannesburg’s Jewish Community, 1915–2015” (Ph.D. thesis, University of Cape Town, 2022); see also Nadia Beider and David Fachler, “Bucking the Trend: South African Jewry and their Turn toward Religion”, *Contemporary Jewry* (30 July 2023), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12397-023-09501-1>.

3 See Jocelyn Hellig, “South African Judaism: An Expression of Conservative Traditionalism”, *Judaism* 35, no.2 (1986): 233–242.

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Orthodox religious leaders adhered strictly to Halakhah, they preached an accommodating Orthodoxy that emphasized the cultural and universal aspects of Judaism. Among the laity, few observed the dietary laws or the Sabbath. By the mid-1960s with the growth of Johannesburg's Yeshiva College and the import of strictly Orthodox American rabbis, traces of a religious revival could be detected.⁴ By 1970, only nine per cent of local Jews called themselves strictly Orthodox. This changed rapidly following the arrival of various outreach organizations in Johannesburg. The result, five decades later, is a city where 48 per cent of the Jewish population self-describes as Orthodox, 22 per cent of them strictly Orthodox or Haredi.⁵ Yet, were the average person to name the groups responsible for this change, most would point to the Chabad and Ohr Somayach-affiliated organizations in South Africa.⁶ Few assign any credit to the Kollel Yad Shaul. This article argues that it was this Kollel that first introduced ultra-Orthodoxy or Haredi Judaism to the broader Jewish population. While the organization continues to this day to support full-time Torah scholars, its heyday as the premier outreach movement is all but forgotten.

By focusing on Kollel Yad Shaul and presenting it as the first Orthodox outreach movement in South Africa, this article builds on scholarship that has identified the impact and importance of the phenomenon of the community Kollel within the growth of Orthodoxy.⁷ Adam Ferziger, for example, has traced the evolving role that the institution has played from its traditional roots in the nineteenth century to its current incarnation. The first to describe itself as a Kollel was the Kovno Kollel (Kovno/Kaunas, Ukraine), established in 1869.⁸ It consisted of a select group of outstanding young married scholars who were engaged in full-time Torah/Talmudic study, and were supported by a communal stipend. Yet,

4 For the history of Yeshiva College see David Saks, *Yeshiva College: The First Fifty Years* (Johannesburg: Yeshiva College, 2004).

5 David Graham, *The Jews of South Africa in 2019: Identity, Community, Society and Demography* (Cape Town: Kaplan Centre, 2020).

6 For a comprehensive history of these two movements see Fachler, "Tradition, Accommodation", 109–19, 145–62.

7 Adam S. Ferziger, *Beyond Sectarianism: The Realignment of American Orthodox Judaism* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2015); Ferziger, *The Emergence of the Community Kollel: A New Model for addressing Assimilation* (Ramat Gan: Rappaport Center for Assimilation Research and Strengthening Jewish Vitality, Bar Ilan University, 2006/5766), https://www.bjpa.org/content/upload/bjpa/ferz/Ferziger_Emergence%20of%20the%20Community%20Kollel.pdf.

8 Ferziger, *Emergence*, 15. Unless otherwise stated the facts in this section have been drawn from this source.

it had virtually no interaction with the community, and its scholars would often isolate themselves.

Seventy years after this Kollel's establishment and amid the horrors of the Holocaust, Rabbi Ahron Kotler, a distinguished graduate of the Kollel system, established the first Kollel on American soil in Lakewood, New Jersey, which was known colloquially as the Lakewood Kollel.⁹ With this move, Kotler sought to recreate the lost European institutions, and concomitantly isolate himself from American Judaism, including modern Orthodoxy. He had no interest in integrating into American Jewish society. A generation later, his more confident son and successor, Rabbi Schneur Kotler, set about exporting the Kollel model across North America, beginning with Toronto, Canada. There, a small group of Lakewood graduates established a Kollel that mostly imitated their alma mater. While full-time learning during the day was the norm, the night session was devoted to poring over Talmudic texts with members of the local Orthodox community. This type of Kollel engaged in "inreach". They did not seek unaffiliated Jews but sought to strengthen the standards of an already observant community.

In 1996, a generation later, a new model was devised with the establishment in Atlanta, Georgia, of the Atlanta Scholars Kollel. This institution, devoted specifically to outreach, recruited trained professionals, and limited intense learning to the mornings. The rest of the day and the evenings were spent in diverse Jewish communities including the local Reform temple. A similar model was used several years later in Chicago, with an additional emphasis on religious Zionism. Around the time that Kollèles were being introduced in North America, they were also being established, albeit on a smaller scale, elsewhere in the English-speaking world. This included the traditionally oriented Gateshead Kollel in the north-east of England, the community oriented Kollel Yad Shaul in Johannesburg, and Kollel Beth HaTalmud in Melbourne, Australia.¹⁰ In fact, the Gateshead and Johannesburg Kollèles were established before their counterparts in Lakewood and Toronto.¹¹

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid., 33 n. 50 briefly refers to Johannesburg's Kollel, but his information is largely reliant on the partisan accounts of Rabbi Moshe Sternbuch and Nitzotzot Min HaNer; *ibid.*, 3. For Gateshead Kollel see Avrohom Katz, "The Gateshead Kolel", <http://gatesheadkolel.weebly.com/history.html>; for Melbourne's Beth HaTalmud see <https://www.kollel.edu.au/about-us>.

11 Ferziger, *Emergence*, 28–33, 35, 42.

Kollel Yad Shaul, however, does not fit neatly into Ferziger's categorization. While its creation coincided with the establishment of "inreach" Kollels in North America, any interaction that it had with community was of an outreach nature. Yet, unlike the later outreach models, the fellows at Johannesburg's Kollel were scholars who devoted themselves full-time to Torah study, leaving precious few evening hours to engage with the broader community. This blend of serious learning with equally serious outreach will be examined below.

The early years

In March 1966, Jacob Salzer, the rabbi of Johannesburg's Adath Yeshurun, a separatist Orthodox German congregation, sought to provide young adults with a high-level strictly Orthodox education. To that end, he launched a twice-weekly study programme where, among others, he would deliver public lectures to the less religiously educated in the broader Jewish community.¹² Although it was neither a full-time institution nor limited to married *yeshivah* students, he ambitiously called this venture the Kollel. At a time when the term "outreach" was barely known, Salzer's modest aims were to strengthen the community's religiosity. In addition to the recently arrived American rabbi Norman Bernhard, his Kollel was supported by Johannesburg's chief rabbi, Bernard Casper. Delivering the official opening address a few weeks after its founding, Casper played on the Hebrew word "Kollel", which denotes both a small-knit community and something "all-embracing", and declared his desire that the institution "spread the knowledge and message of the Torah among all sections of the community".¹³

Contrary to expectations, the institution failed to gain much traction. Three years later, realizing that the Kollel's programmes were not having their desired effect, Salzer proposed that the Kollel should live up to its name and recruit full-time married *yeshivah* students. Since the small Adath Yeshurun was unsuitable for hosting the envisaged Kollel, an appeal was made for new premises. Answering this call, Salzer's stalwart supporter, Rabbi Koppel Bacher, who had studied for many years at the Chabad Yeshiva in Crown Heights, New York, offered the free use of

¹² "Invitation to Torah Study", *Zionist Record*, 11 Aug. 1967; Rabbi Moshe Kurstag, personal interview, May 2017; Rabbi Shmuel Steinhaus, personal interview, Feb. 2017.

¹³ "Chief Rabbi launches New Torah Group", *Zionist Record*, 7 April 1966.

his late father's home, located in the nearby suburb of Observatory.¹⁴ In thanks for this kind offer, the Kollel was renamed Kollél Yad Shaul in memory of Shaul (Solly) Bacher. In September 1969 it was officially dedicated, and following its opening, the Kollél started raising funds to recruit married students from overseas. These, it declared, would serve as fellows of the Kollél, who would be supported by bursaries so that they could learn undisturbed.¹⁵ For this purpose, Salzer looked to Gateshead in England, which hosted a Yeshiva founded in 1929, and was home to one of the oldest Kolléls, founded by the world-renowned rabbi Eliyahu Eliezer Dessler in 1941. It had already produced the finest Talmudic scholars.¹⁶ Contemporary reports described Gateshead's learning environment as British Orthodox Jewry's "very own Oxbridge".¹⁷ For Salzer, an alumnus of pre-1939 Eastern European Yeshivas, its reputation for training English Talmudic scholars in traditional learning rendered it the ideal option.

In December 1969, Salzer dispatched his brother-in-law, Zvi Lieberman, to fly to Gateshead on his mission to recruit students. That month at a meeting chaired by Bezalel Rakow, the then Rav (head rabbi) of Gateshead, it was decided to appoint Rabbi Mordechai Shakovitzky, as Rosh Kollél (head of the Kollél).¹⁸ As a youth activist for the Yad LeAchim (Hand to my Brother) outreach organization, and as a community rabbi in Leeds, Shakovitzky understood that the prospective position would not only involve intensive learning, but would also require some outreach.¹⁹ In fact, as a condition for joining the Kollél one had to undertake to learn for an hour each evening with community members and to deliver weekly public lectures.²⁰ This commitment was accepted by two other candidates at that meeting, Rabbis Eliezer Chrysler and Avraham Hassan. Chrysler served at that time as a teacher at the Gateshead Boys' High School, and Hassan was a young recently married *yeshivah* student, wishing to further his Talmudic studies at a postgraduate level. These

14 Koppel Bacher, personal interview, May 2017.

15 "The Growth of Torah in South Africa", *Jewish Tribune*, 19 Dec. 1969; "Kollél's New Home is Dedicated", *South African Jewish Times* (hereafter, SAJT), 12 Sept. 1969.

16 See <http://gatesheadkollél.weebly.com/history.html>.

17 Harriet Sherwood, "Torah on Tyne: How Orthodox Jews carved out their very own Oxbridge", *The Observer*, 22 Dec. 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/dec/22/gateshead-torah-on-tyne-britains-orthodox-jewish-community> (accessed 28 Sept. 2023).

18 Chanan Coblenz, "Chronicle of Events", *The Kollél Yad Shaul 20th Anniversary Banquet* (Johannesburg: Kollél Yad Shaul, 1989), n.p.

19 Rabbi Boruch Grossnass, personal interview, May 2017.

20 Steinhaus, interview; Rabbi Eliezer Chrysler, personal interview, May 2017.

three founding members were joined by two other young rabbis who had been in Johannesburg for a number of years, Mordechai Korn and Shmuel Steinhaus. Korn, originally from London, had been employed as a youth leader by the Adath Yeshurun, but his decision to become a Satmar Hasid put him at odds with the congregation. Steinhaus, in contrast, was a Gateshead Yeshiva graduate and Salzer's son-in-law, who had arrived in South Africa in 1968. It was agreed that these five rabbis would constitute the Kollel's first-year intake, and they would officially begin studies on 2 September 1970, corresponding to 1 Elul (5730), the day on which Yeshivas worldwide began their academic year.²¹

The launching of Kollel Yad Shaul

After officially launching the Kollel, the fellows' main concern was their devotion to studying and to self-growth. They agreed that the study hall would be devoted to Torah learning; mundane matters including outreach would have to be kept outside.²² This heavy emphasis on unadulterated Torah study was premised on an ideology that proclaimed that the mere fact that Torah was being learnt in the city left an indelible mark on the community's spiritual welfare. It was also underpinned by a belief that whoever seriously imbibed the Torah, which has been likened to water, could reach beyond his saturation point, and become "drenched in Torah". This then spilled over and nurtured the immediate environment.²³ Only a consummate Torah scholar, they contended, could serve as a role model for others to follow, otherwise one had no business engaging in *kiruv* (outreach).

In early 1971, Hassan placed a small advertisement in the classified section of Johannesburg's *Star* newspaper, inviting young men and women to come to the Kollel to hear public lectures on Jewish topics. The next week approximately twenty non-observant school leavers came to the Kollel to hear these lectures. Hassan's public address based on Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzato's *Essay on Fundamentals* proved popular with the students.²⁴ The fact that his lecture was set out in a lucid and organized form, and sought to explain through the lens of Kabbala

21 "Kollel welcomes New Head", SAJT, 11 Sept. 1970.

22 Steinhaus, interview.

23 Michael Karp, "We Came, We Learnt, and We Taught", *Kollel Yad Shaul 20th Anniversary Banquet*, n.p.

24 Rabbi Avraham Hassan, personal interview, Feb. 2017.

(Jewish mysticism) how the world operates, rendered it appealing to the early 1970s generation of seekers. They were also drawn to the other fellows' lectures on a variety of topics ranging from Talmud study to Rabbi Dessler's discourses on Jewish ethics, to the contemporary polemical writings by the ultra-Orthodox American rabbi Avigdor Miller.²⁵ It is ironic that Dessler and Miller's works, which appealed to these university students, emphasized the primacy of pure Torah learning to the exclusion of secular studies.²⁶

Soon the Kollel was supplementing its original students with many more. Within half a year, twenty-five weekly lectures were being delivered by Kollel faculty at various venues.²⁷ Some have attributed the reason for the lectures' popularity to the quality of the rabbis delivering them and the religious sincerity they exuded. Unlike Johannesburg's mainstream rabbis, these wore Haredi garb, unabashedly criticized anything they considered amiss with the local Jewish community and its rabbinate, and preached a conservative and parochial traditionalism which they labelled "authentic" Judaism.²⁸ Being in their mid-twenties to early thirties, the Kollel fellows established a rapport with their students. This was strengthened by the introduction in June 1971 of the first Shabbaton (religious weekend away) for adults, during which 60 male and female students from the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) spent an entire Shabbat with the Kollel faculty, attending classes and participating in question and answer sessions.²⁹ Under Hassan's initiative, the Kollel also started a non-profit bookshop and lending library in order to acquaint students with strictly Orthodox literature. Through these activities, the institute saw its reputation grow steadily, and readied itself for more ambitious projects.

In January 1972, a decision was reached to confine all lectures to one day a week and to one venue. Hence the Monday evening learning programme at the Kollel was inaugurated.³⁰ The evening would comprise two learning sessions, each offering a selection of lectures, separated by a break during

25 Izak Rudomin, "Torah Education and Outreach in South Africa", 30 Sept. 2020 <https://www.israelnationalnews.com/news/288164> (accessed 29 Sept. 2023).

26 Esther Solomon, "Rabbi Dessler's View of Secular Studies and Wissenschaft des Judentums", *Pardes*, 24 (2018): 122.

27 Coblenz, "Chronicle of Events".

28 See Kollel brochures *The Kollel Yad Shaul 20th Anniversary Banquet (1989)*; *The Rabbi Grossnass Legacy Dinner (2018)*.

29 "Johannesburg's First Shabbaton", *SAJT*, 2 July 1971.

30 Coblenz, "Chronicle of Events".

which students either mingled or browsed books displayed by the Kollel bookshop, which sold them at discounted prices.³¹ The programme proved popular and, according to contemporary reports, participants would be hard-pressed to find parking spaces on the surrounding streets, filled as they were with the cars of some 80 to 100 weekly participants. This number would swell to 200 when guest speakers were featured.³² Aside from Kollel fellows, the regular line-up of speakers included Rabbi David Sanders, the founding dean of Yeshiva College, who was a close friend of Shakovitzky and a gifted orator, and Ivan Ziskind, a lay outreach activist. Born in the small town of Benoni and having qualified as an architect at Wits, Ziskind went to Durham University in England in the early 1960s for postgraduate studies in town planning. Living in the nearby town of Gateshead, he was exposed for the first time to its ultra-Orthodox community, and to the young Mordechai Shakovitsky. On Ziskind's return to South Africa, he became a member of the Adath Yeshurun, and was heavily involved in the Kollel's founding, encouraging its fellows to engage in outreach. To facilitate the success of the learning programme, he saw it as his duty, as a layman with more learning experience than the average participant, to elucidate concepts that the British Kollel rabbis had difficulty communicating to their South African audience. Those attending the programme were drawn to its intense atmosphere, and established close relationships with Ziskind and the other speakers.³³ Reflecting on the dramatic effect the Kollel had at that time, Rabbi Norman Bernhard commented that its arrival was "like water hitting parched soil".³⁴

The political situation and the Kollel's success

Undoubtedly, the Kollel's achievements were largely due to the personalities who led it. However, this does not wholly explain the Kollel's success, or why such success was duplicated by Nonconformist Christian church organizations among their white congregations. The political milieu seems to have been an important contributing factor.

³¹ Hassan, interview.

³² Steinhilber, interview; anonymous members of the Kollel, personal interviews, Dec. 2019.

³³ Grossnass, interview; Akiva Tatz, personal interview, Feb. 2017.

³⁴ Rabbi Bernhard, interview with David Saks, 17 June 1997, cited in Gideon Shimoni, *Community and Conscience: The Jews in Apartheid South Africa* (Boston, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2003), 312 n. 97.

Indeed, by 1970 South Africa possessed features that made it conducive to religious revival. Racial and ethnic segregation was deeply entrenched and encouraged the separate development of Jewish and Christian populations who were divided over language and, more significantly, religion. While the mainstream Orthodox rabbis of the previous decades had preached a universalist approach that sought to water down doctrinal differences, South African Jews of that era may have found the ultra-Orthodox particularist message more in line with contemporary thinking.

With decolonization almost complete by 1970, and with South Africa finding itself increasingly isolated by the world, it is safe to speculate that a fortress mentality may also have developed, in which security was sought among one's own. Local Jews may have found comfort in an ideology which preached the greatness and difference of the Jewish people. Rabbis of all stripes may have spoken about the Jewish spirit, but the Kollel fellows (and to the same or greater extent, the Chabad movement) would probably have emphasized the Divine protection given to adherents to Judaism and the spiritual superiority of Jews over their neighbours. This philosophy would have attracted many.

While these possible explanations may be true, it must be borne in mind that Johannesburg experienced a much greater revival than Cape Town under the apartheid regime. Perhaps a revival could only come about when both the environmental factors and the personalities necessary to carry it out merged. In any event, environmental factors on their own cannot fully explain the success of Jewish outreach in Johannesburg.

At the same time that the Kollel was drawing crowds of students, it was also undergoing structural changes, from a small five-member learning institute into a fully fledged independent congregation. Originally consisting of Shabbat-observant local residents, the congregation rapidly attracted non-observant university-educated members who had tasted the Monday night sessions and were apparently unfazed by the strict rules applied by this ultra-Orthodox community. Unlike other communities which turned a blind eye to those driving on the Sabbath, the Kollel actively discouraged anyone not arriving on foot from partaking in the services. During prayer times a strict dress code was enforced, and males over the age of barmitzva were expected to wear a hat and jacket.³⁵ The Israeli Sephardi pronunciation, introduced into South Africa more than two decades earlier, was rejected: in fact, service leaders were barred from

35 Gary Lewenstein, "Tribute Article", *Rabbi Grossnass Legacy Dinner*, n.p.

using such pronunciation. Generally speaking, there was an insistence on high standards of *kashrut*, and congregants were expected to rely exclusively on the Adath's supervision guidelines. Despite the strictness of these rules, the community, in barely a decade, became home to approximately 200 congregants every Sabbath, about 80 per cent of whom were newly religious.³⁶ One of the Kollel's main attractions were the invitations for Shabbat meals extended by fellows and core members to the less observant.³⁷

The Kollel's first clash with the Jewish community over Zionism

The Kollel experienced its first setback as early as March 1972. Underestimating the extent of South African Jewry's attachment to Zionism, including that of the religious Zionist youth movement Bnei Akiva, the Kollel committed a *faux pas* as regards Zionist mores, but declined to apologize or even acknowledge its mistake.

On Friday 25 March 1972, Rabbi Bernhard was indisposed and asked Rabbi Eliezer Chrysler to provide rabbinic services at his synagogue in Riviera Johannesburg, which was known colloquially as the Oxford shul.³⁸ Shortly before he was to preach, Chrysler was asked by the senior warden to recite the customary prayers for South Africa and Israel. Claiming unfamiliarity with this prayer, Chrysler declined the request, and another official recited it instead. Although his sermon was well received, it did not quell the ill-feelings of those who perceived his refusal as an insult to the Jewish State. Their reaction bespeaks the centrality of Zionism within the South African Jewish community, where it occupied and occupies the position of a civil religion.³⁹ Immediately after services ended, dissatisfied members engaged their guest rabbi in private conversation and he admitted to harbouring reservations about the Prayer for Israel. Word of this admission subsequently spread, and Jewish newspapers, who for the previous two years had virtually ignored the Kollel, painted it in a bad light.

First to respond to the reports was Chief Rabbi Casper, who until then had appeared warmly disposed to the Kollel. He wondered why

³⁶ Marilyn Segal, "A Return to Judaism", *Star*, 17 Oct. 1979.

³⁷ Tatz, interview.

³⁸ Norman Bernhard, "Oxford Synagogue Shabbat Hagadol Incident", *SAJT*, 21 April 1972.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

any spiritual leader would dissociate himself from a prayer which “not only bears the sanction of the Chief Rabbinate of Israel”, but “also links us directly with the overwhelming number of praying Jews in Israel”. Answering his own question, he suggested that the “Kollel scholars are usually untrained, inexperienced and unqualified in the field of pulpit, synagogue or pastoral work”, so it would be “unfair to expect them to engage in such activity.”⁴⁰

This attack irked Rabbi Bernhard, who, in his defence of Chrysler and the institution he represented, may have overreached himself. After praising the Kollel for devoting “tremendous . . . time and energy to educating the Jewish People”, he alleged that “this unique institution [was] being jeopardized by a false rumour originat[ing] in ignorance, ill-will or simple misunderstanding”. He accepted Chrysler’s explanation that he was unfamiliar with the text, but argued that even if his reluctance stemmed from theological grounds, it was unfair to make “recitation of a specific prayer the sole criterion or gauge of an individual’s . . . attitude towards Israel”.⁴¹ The Kollel’s executive committee, likewise, wrote to the press to insist that the Kollel was “unequivocally and enthusiastically pro-Israel”. Asserting the Kollel’s right to be “non-political”, and implying that its objections to the prayer were theological, the executive expressed the hope that Israel would find peace “under the banner of the Messiah [and] full redemption”.⁴² Absent from these counter-attacks was any apology for Chrysler’s albeit inadvertent offence.

Unsurprisingly, these justifications provoked more anger. In Bnei Akiva’s letter to the editor of the *Zionist Record*, its executive body questioned the Kollel’s claim of “sincere and devout affection” towards Israel when a member of its faculty “refused to make a prayer for that same country”.⁴³ It could not accept that Chrysler’s objection was specifically to this prayer, and may not have indicated a general reluctance to pray for Israel’s welfare.

Despite Bnei Akiva’s attack, the Kollel received strong support from university students with whom it had come into contact. Writing to the

40 Chief Rabbi Bernard Casper quoted in “More about that Oxford Incident”, letter to the editor, *Zionist Record*, 5 May 1972.

41 Bernhard, “Oxford Synagogue”.

42 “Statement by the Executive of the Kollel Yad Shaul of Johannesburg”, SAJT, 21 April 1972.

43 Hanhalat [Management] Bnei Akiva, “The Oxford Incident”, letter to the editor, *Zionist Record*, 5 May 1972.

press, the chairman of Wits University's Students Jewish and Zionist Association, Harold Waner, denounced the Kollel's accusers. Claiming that "anyone attending any lecture or discussion given by the Rabbis of the Kollel" would "at once be imbued with the love generated for the Land of Israel", the chairman criticized those claiming otherwise. Those seeking to "discredit" this devoted institute, he argued, were "either doing so through lack of factual information or sheer vindictiveness and malice, the latter being beneath contempt".⁴⁴ These accusations by the student leader may have been reflective of the Kollel's popularity among some in the Jewish student community. An onlooker viewing the spat might feasibly have concluded that the Kollel had successfully shrugged off its opponents. Certainly, the battle seems to have been won. Retrospectively, one may wonder whether this row may have eroded the Kollel's status.

At the end of 1973 and beginning of 1974, a second batch of students arrived from Israel and the United Kingdom, including Rabbis David Weil, Mordechai Fachler, and Chaim Shein.⁴⁵ The last mentioned, a native of Bloemfontein, had spent several years studying at the Gateshead Yeshiva, and was the Kollel faculty's first South African member. This new batch buttressed the older one, introduced new classes at the Monday night programme, and joined their fellow faculty members in delivering public lectures at Wits University and at various army camps.⁴⁶ Over the course of 1975 the Kollel continued to expand its presence with the opening of an afternoon nursery school; a Beis Yaakov (House of Jacob) girls secondary school named after the worldwide network of Haredi girls' schools, which catered to Kollel families; and a part-time seminary for women.⁴⁷ This seminary, also named the Beis Yaakov programme, was created to "dispel the myth that the Kollel was only interested in educating chauvinistic men". Inviting "mature young ladies" to participate in "serious and deep Sunday mornings", its curriculum included lessons on the classic commentaries, discussions on prayer, and a general series of talks by Shakovitzky titled "An Approach to Life". These lectures introduced female students to Rabbi Dessler's philosophical writings contained in *Michtav MiEliyahu* (A

44 Harold Waner, "Dynamic Jewish Way of Life", *Zionist Record*, 5 May 1972.

45 Coblenz, "Chronicle of Events".

46 Clare Stern, "Long Search ends at the Kollel", *Star*, 19 May 1979.

47 "It's back to the Bible and Judaism for these Girls", *SAJT*, 7 March 1980; Brian M. Levin, "Kollel Praised", letter to the editor, *SAJT*, 12 March 1976; *30th Anniversary of Beis Yaakov Girls High School* (Johannesburg: Beis Yaakov, 2005).

Letter from Eliyahu, first published 1956).⁴⁸ Beyond the Kollel's premises, its faculty was also having an impact on Johannesburg at large, and by June 1975 Kollel fellows and its ad hoc lecturers were delivering a total of 53 weekly classes (*shiurim*) and public lectures.⁴⁹

The Kollel's clash with the kosher supervision authorities

During 1975 and 1976 the Kollel became embroiled in a controversy that was considerably more harmful than the first one. To understand this conflict, some context is needed. Until 1970 most of Johannesburg's Orthodox community trusted the *kashrut* of the Federation of Synagogues' Beth Din. The exception to this rule was the small Adath Yeshurun congregation in Yeoville. Over the years it had established an independent *shechita* (kosher slaughtering) organization which employed its own *shochet* (kosher slaughterer), and produced meat at its own abattoir under the Adassia label, yet under the auspices of the Federation.⁵⁰ In the late 1960s, after realizing that running this organization was draining Adath's resources, Salzer approached the Federation with a proposal.⁵¹ In exchange for Salzer sitting as a rabbinic judge on its Beth Din, the Federation would assume financial responsibility for running Adassia.⁵² A contract was then signed between the Adath and the Federation stipulating that Adassia meat would continue to be overseen by Salzer, but would also be granted Beth Din certification.⁵³ In an appendix to the agreement, it was noted that were the relationship to break down, the status quo ante would be restored, and Adassia's abattoir would be returned to the Adath.⁵⁴ Several years later, some of the Beth Din-supervised butchers discovered that, following Salzer's directive to his flock not to purchase meat that was not also under Adassia's supervision, many Adath and Kollel members avoided buying meat from their establishments. Disturbed by their findings, the butchers

48 Kollel Yad Shaul, newsletter, 11 Oct. 1975.

49 Coblenz, "Chronicle of Events".

50 "Tribute to our Rav", *Adath Yeshurun Golden Jubilee* (Johannesburg: Adath Yeshurun, 1986), n.p.

51 Norman Bernhard, "Original Notes of Hespel for Rabbi Salzer", n.d. [c. 1980], Norman Bernhard Collection.

52 Chief Rabbi B. M. Casper, letter to Rabbi J. Salzer, 12 Jan. 1970, Norman Bernhard Collection.

53 "Application for Ritual Slaughtering from Adath Yeshurun to Dr. Coetzee, Chief Meat Hygiene Officer, Department of Health", 13 Jan. 1976, Norman Bernhard Collection.

54 Chief Rabbi Casper to Rabbi Salzer.

complained to the Beth Din. After investigating the matter, the Beth Din approached Salzer and asked him whether he had issued this directive. Salzer replied that owing to his doubts about Beth Din meat he had ruled it should not be consumed by the observant community.⁵⁵ Shortly after making his statement, Salzer tendered his resignation as a rabbinical judge on the Beth Din. The Beth Din accepted it and the two organizations parted ways.

The Chief Rabbi, disappointed that the experiment with unifying the Orthodox institutions had apparently unravelled, issued a statement that the Adassia butchery was no longer under Beth Din supervision. He also warned his constituents that since the meat was overseen by only one individual it could not be relied on.⁵⁶ Casper's warning was followed by the publication of several letters in the Jewish press in which writers questioned how Adath could possibly run an independent organization.⁵⁷

In the meantime, Adath thought it could deflect the Federation's attack by relying on the escape clause contained in Casper's letter to Salzer, which ostensibly permitted either party to opt out of the agreement. To its dismay, the Chief Rabbi denied such a clause existed. He announced, moreover, that Adassia's current lease of the abattoir would soon expire, and he would not support Adath's application to operate any other abattoir.⁵⁸ Both parties were well aware that under government regulations, an abattoir could only operate with the express authorization of the "Head or Leader in the Republic of the religion concerned."⁵⁹ Casper's lack of support would mean their application would certainly fail.

This fact, however, did not dampen the enthusiasm of Salzer's disciples, especially Kollel members, who, unlike their more restrained German Jewish colleagues, were prepared to retaliate.⁶⁰ Newly qualified attorneys and businessmen associated with the Kollel felt they were left with no other option. Sacrificing the unity of the Orthodox community, they petitioned the Minister of Agriculture to recognize the Adath and its

55 Kurstag, interview.

56 Chief Rabbi Casper, letter to the United Hebrew Congregation, n.d. [c. 1976], Norman Bernhard Collection.

57 See "Shechita Move Condemned", open forum, SAJT, 9 Jan. 1976.

58 Chief Rabbi Casper, letter to Chief Meat Hygiene Officer, 10 Dec. 1975, Norman Bernhard Collection.

59 Regulation 10(2) of the Standing Regulations, Animal Slaughter, Meat and Animal Products Hygiene Act, 1967.

60 "Shechita Move Condemned".

followers as a separate religion headed by Salzer.⁶¹ The Minister eventually acceded to this request, and for the first time the Adath and the Kollel declared themselves, and were recognized, as a separate religion. A real rift formed which would take years to heal.

In the aftermath of the *shechita* controversy, Rabbi Moshe Kurstag, a former member of the Kollel's earliest incarnation and a part-time member of the Beth Din, penned an article in the Hebrew-language journal *Barkai* which severely criticized the Kollel's current version.⁶² Although he faintly praised the Kollel's outreach, it appears he did not consider their work to be a net gain. His disdain for the average returnee attending that institution was accentuated by his putting the Hebrew words *baal teshuvah* (literally "Master of Repentance") in quotation marks, and by expressly questioning whether they deserved this exalted label. Accusing them of gross ignorance, he stated that the returnees should not only regret having committed sins in their youth, but should also feel remorse for their minuscule Torah knowledge. Alluding to the fact that these Kollel members had challenged the Beth Din's practices and traditions, he expressed the hope that this remorse would lead the returnee to appreciate that the centralized religious establishment had great scholars, whose *kashrut* standards they had no right to question. While acknowledging that there are various levels for observing kosher laws, Kurstag rejected the insinuation that a more lenient level of supervision rendered the food any less kosher. He warned that the delegitimization of the religious institutions would only undermine observance as a whole. Since Casper and Kurstag represented the mainstream Orthodox leadership, the extreme measures they took and the words they wrote show the extent to which they felt the Kollel had distanced itself from the established community.

Growth and fracture

Over the course of several years, Shakovitzky, along with other Kollel fellows, delivered lunchtime lectures on various topics at Wits University's main campus and its medical school. After noticing that some students were clamouring for deeper learning, Shakovitzky visited Israel in early 1976 with the purpose of finding a candidate to head a

61 "Application for Ritual Slaughtering".

62 Moshe Kurstag, "A Red Light in Religious Life" (in Hebrew), *Barkai* (Johannesburg) 43 (April 1976): 10.

yeshivah for them, which would be run under the Kollel's auspices. Having called on old friends, he received a positive response from Rabbi Boruch Grossnass, who welcomed the opportunity to head his own yeshivah that would be specifically tailored to the needs of the South African Baal Teshuva.⁶³ In December 1976 Grossnass settled down in Johannesburg where he established the Ohr Yisrael Yeshiva with ten full-time and part-time students.⁶⁴ The student body was primarily made up of those with a minimal Jewish background who had been introduced to Talmud study through Shakovitzky's lunchtime classes. As is common among such institutions, it concentrated mainly on Talmud studies, with the bulk of classes given by Grossnass. Other Kollel fellows taught Jewish law and Jewish ethics.

While the Yeshiva's student body and Kollel fellows continued to enliven the Kollel as a whole, its lay congregants sought to move the institutions to new premises in the less affluent suburb of Yeoville. It was believed that this would attract young married couples who could more easily afford the flats available there.⁶⁵ In March 1977 the Kollel acquired 26 Frances Street in Yeoville. This premises, which was henceforth referred to as the Kollel Beis HaMedrash (House of Study), provided daily and Shabbat *minyanim* (quorate services).⁶⁶ At the same time, the Observatory venue continued to house the Kollel faculty and Yeshiva students, as well as the Monday night programme. A few months after the Kollel embarked on this voluntary split of venues, and just before Grossnass completed his first year in Johannesburg, Shakovitzky announced that after seven years at the Kollel's helm he was leaving for Israel.⁶⁷ He named Grossnass his successor and acting Rosh Kollel. This sudden change of personnel was to have a profound effect on the Kollel's future direction.

Unprepared for Shakovitzky's departure, and untrained in fundraising or in outreach activities, Grossnass felt frustrated. To help him out of this quagmire, Grossnass invited Rabbi Chanoch Ehrentreu, then head of the Sunderland Kollel near Gateshead, to come to South Africa to lecture, and at the same time to assist in raising funds for the Kollel.⁶⁸ Presumably

63 Avraham Hassan, "Tribute Article", *Rabbi Grossnass Legacy Dinner*; Lewenstein, "Tribute Article".

64 "Largest Post-Matric Yeshiva", *Zionist Record*, 24 Feb. 1978.

65 Lewenstein, "Tribute Article".

66 Coblenz, "Chronicle of Events".

67 "Rosh Ha-Kollel goes on Aliyah", *Jewish Herald*, 3 Oct. 1977.

68 Coblenz, "Chronicle of Events".

on Ehrentreu's advice, the new Rosh Kollel implemented the idea of a businessman's *shiur*.⁶⁹ Providing Jewish businessmen with a lecture devoted specifically to them created an unspoken financial commitment. Starting as a fortnightly event, it quickly proved popular enough to become a weekly feature, hosted at the offices of a prominent congregant and attorney, Michael Karp.⁷⁰

In January 1979, Rabbi Moshe Shirken, a former Capetonian who had left South Africa for Israel in 1960, was appointed associate Rosh Yeshiva, allowing Grossnass to concentrate on his role as head of the Kollel.⁷¹ Possessing the rare qualities of a returnee to Judaism who was also a respected Torah scholar, Shirken attracted a wide following. At the same time, the Kollel's management realized that, with all its focus on community growth and with its shrinking Kollel faculty, its emphasis on outreach was suffering. A campaign was therefore launched to reinvigorate the Monday evening sessions by branding it "the largest team in Africa dedicated to Adult Torah Education".⁷² The lecturers included Rabbis Fachler, Grossnass, Hassan, Steinhaus, and Shirken as well as Ivan Ziskind. In total they delivered 13 weekly lectures. Barely a year later, with the departure of many of the key speakers, the revamped sessions fizzled out. The programme that had sought to restore the Kollel's *kiruv* role turned out to be a last gasp at halting inevitable decline.

At the beginning of 1980, the Bacher family repossessed their Observatory home. All programmes still being held there were relocated to 22 Muller Street, Yeoville, one block down from the Kollel Beis HaMedrash. This new site accommodated the Kollel fellows, the *yeshivah* students, and the Kollel bookshop, and although they had left the Shaul Bacher residence, they still retained the name Kollel Yad Shaul.

In 1981, Shirken suddenly departed. To fill the void, Grossnass invited the world-famous Halakhic decisor Rabbi Moshe Sternbuch to take over as associate Rosh Kollel. It was anticipated that a personality of his stature would attract an entirely new batch of Kollel fellows. Following an arduous process, Sternbuch arrived that September with ten new scholars.⁷³ Sternbuch's independent style and his insistence on

69 Grossnass, interview.

70 Coblenz, "Chronicle of Events".

71 MS [author], "Rabbi Shirken's Long Path", *Zionist Record*, 19 Oct. 1979.

72 Kollel Yad Shaul Public Booklet, "Invitation to Torah '79", n.p.; "Invitation to Torah", *Zionist Record*, 9 March 1979.

73 "Kollel welcomes Rabbi Sternbuch", *SAJT*, 28 Sept. 1981.

completely separating the Kollel fellows from the rest of the community ensured that the new rabbi barely lasted a year.⁷⁴ A month after leaving the Kollel and the country, Sternbuch returned to Johannesburg to establish a rival community, which he called the Vilna Gaon Torah Centre.⁷⁵

Shortly after the establishment of this Torah Centre, the Kollel suffered its own internal breakdown. Originally amicably divided into two venues a block apart from each other – one for lay congregants and the other for past and present Kollel fellows – many members wanted to see more interaction between the two communities. Meetings were held to discuss the situation, and apparently most voted in favour of closer integration. Consequently, many congregants who had attended the Kollel Beis HaMedrash moved down the block to the Kollel Yad Shaul. A minority of congregants at the new Kollel opposed integration, and along with their rabbi, Meir Rogoznitzky, officially split off from their parent congregation to form a new entity referred to as Kollel Agudas Achim (Association of Members). By the early 1980s, the once united community had effectively split into three independent entities, which probably weakened their appeal.

These breakdowns notwithstanding, the core Yad Shaul community throughout the 1980s remained a place of serious learning, with many of its previous programmes continuing unabated.⁷⁶ It also initiated a new programme that involved its members meeting weekly with other congregations to study in mentor-student pairs.⁷⁷ This, however, failed to reverse its declining fortunes. It is true that the founders of the later kiruv organizations were direct or indirect products of the original Kollel; yet, by the mid-1980s the Kollel as an institution no longer played a central role in Johannesburg's Orthodox community.

Conclusion

A careful reading of the history of the Kollel Yad Shaul provides many clues as to why this institution did not retain its status as an outreach organization. As delineated here, it failed to appreciate the local Orthodox community's deep attachment to Zionism and its loyalty to the established

74 Kurstag, interview.

75 Brenda M. Shein, "New Yeoville Torah Centre", *Zionist Record*, 14 Jan. 1983.

76 "Kollel helps out in Bloemfontein", *South African Jewish Herald*, 12 April 1983.

77 See "Project SEED: Chanukah SEED Programme Kollel-Waverley-Germiston", South African Jewish Board of Deputies Archives, Johannesburg, n.d. [c. Dec. 1983].

kashrut authorities. Even when called out on its misconduct, it appeared unprepared to retreat from its positions. This may have rallied the troops but probably also alienated those who felt their leadership was being undermined. The turnover of personnel, especially the resignation of the first Rosh Kollel, Mordechai Shakovitzky, and the subsequent departures of key figures, also damaged Yad Shaul's image. Further, the creation of the Torah Centre and the Kollel Agudas Achim, and the effective splitting of one congregation into three, projected a profound disunity, which made it even less attractive to the broader community.

More broadly, one could point to the evolving Jewish social environment of the 1980s as compared to the 1970s. In 1970, despite the abhorrent racial policies practised by the minority white government, white society, including Jews, considered itself morally upright and starkly opposed to the seeping in of the global permissive culture. For that reason, television was introduced into the country only in 1976. Under this type of regime, it makes sense that uninvolved Jews would be enticed by a resolutely anti-secular organization. A decade later, with access to television and greater exposure to global trends, a movement that declared itself opposed to universalism would have found it tougher to recruit adherents and retain the outreach momentum.

Notwithstanding these reasons, there may have been something deeper about this Kollel's demise, perhaps embedded in its constitution. From the beginning, its aim was to introduce a new and different Judaism. While its fellows made a good impression, especially on the student body, they insisted that everything be done on their terms as they considered themselves the exclusive gatekeepers of "authentic Judaism". Accordingly, the community, along with its Zionism and its purportedly compromised kashrut standards, had to be disparaged. Indeed, as noted earlier, they felt it better to declare themselves a separate religion than to concede that the Beth Din was valid. The problem was that once this attitude was projected outward, it soon affected the organization from within. Perhaps the unbending attitude which appealed to the 1970s soul-searchers could not outlast a decade. Instead, it rebounded back onto the organization, destroying its capabilities as an outreach movement.

In a recently discovered document, Rabbi Meir Rogoznitsky, a British native who was originally recruited to South Africa to head the Kollel-affiliated Shaarey Torah primary school, and who later served as rabbi of the Kollel Agudas Achim, eloquently describes his experience of the Kollel Yad Shaul and its effect on Yeoville:

Almost from its inception has the Yeoville Baal Teshuva Community been wracked by dissension. Whether it was towards Mizrachi, Lubavitch or even its own Rabbanim [rabbis] the intolerance was the same. Rabbi Shurkin [sic], Rabbi Sternbuch, Rabbi Chryslar, Rabbi Saunders [sic] [are] some of the victims of a hierarchy bereft of Kovod Talmidei Chachomim [respecting Torah sages] . . . An intolerance breeding myopia and self-righteousness as if the Shechinah [Divine Presence] recognized only one spot in Johannesburg.⁷⁸

The Kollel's approach to outreach was demanding. It dictated a meticulously observant lifestyle that disdained the secular world, and it expected its followers to undertake an intensive course of Torah study. Even by the 1980s, when South Africa began looking to rejoin the international community, the Kollel was unable to adapt itself to external changes. At the same time, it remained limited in its capacity to cooperate with the established institutions, a factor which impeded its outreach potential. These flaws, however, would probably have been overcome had it not been for the incessant infighting that, arguably, stemmed from a purist and uncompromising ideology, which in turn led to its implosion.

Despite its decline, in many respects Yad Shaul can be considered the spiritual forerunner of Ohr Somayach in South Africa, which came to play a key role in the growing religiosity of the community. From its inception in the mid-1980s and almost forty years later, Ohr Somayach is still synonymous with outreach. Strategically, its approach to kiruv has virtually been the opposite of that of Yad Shaul. From the outset, its charismatic South African founders carefully cultivated ties with the chief rabbinate and lay leadership of the Orthodox establishment. While never actively promoting Zionism, its representatives who served as university chaplains consciously avoided challenging the student population's Zionist ethos. Like Yad Shaul, it too was witness to breakaways and satellite communities which later became autonomous. This, however, was largely a gradual and amicable process. Unlike Yad Shaul's strict view that only a Torah scholar was capable of performing outreach, it created a new type: an outreach professional who leads a relatively modern lifestyle while devoting time to Torah study. These factors, coupled with its commendable capacity to avoid controversy, allowed Ohr Somayach to be viewed as a mainstream Orthodox organization, albeit to the right of other congregations. It is this openness and flexibility, so different from Yad

78 Rabbi Meir Rogoznitsky to his congregation, 4 April 1985, Union of Orthodox Synagogues, Beth Din Archives, Johannesburg.

Shaul, that have ensured its avoidance of the pitfalls of Johannesburg's first outreach organization. Yet, Yad Shaul laid the initial foundations, providing the impetus for South African Jewry to move towards a much more Orthodox lifestyle. As such, its history, even with its eventual eclipse by Ohr Somayach, is important to document.