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Response to Shirli Gilbert

MILTON SHAIN and
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Shirli Gilbert is to be commended for her exhaustive survey of writing, both scholarly and popular, on South African Jewry since the earliest times to the present. She provides an invaluable point of access to the literature for all, but in particular for new entrants to the field. Engaging and deeply researched, Gilbert's overview has persuasively argued that contemporary concerns have always driven and informed the South African Jewish historiographical agenda, reaching back to the troubled aftermath of the South African (Boer) War (1899–1902) when Rabbi Dr. Joseph Hertz in Johannesburg called on history "to combat prejudice through historical work." This is clearly evident, as Gilbert maintains, in Gus Saron and Louis Hotz's edited volume *The Jews in South Africa: A History* (1955), published half a century later, in the wake of the victory at the polls of a party which in the 1930s had challenged the Jewish presence in South Africa. Subsequent historiography has also reflected contemporary anxieties, most notably over the community's responses to the ethical challenges posed by life in an apartheid order. But in this sense South African Jewish historiography is not distinctive.

All in all, little of note has been omitted in her survey. Perhaps the most notable absence is the edited collection by Marcus Arkin, titled *South African Jewry: A Contemporary Survey*, which appeared in 1984 (Cape Town: Oxford University Press). With contributions from noted scholars including Antony Arkin, Allie Dubb, and Jocelyn Hellig, it captured the state of the field at the time though not pathbreaking in itself. Gilbert might also have paid greater attention to an increasing memoir literature, most notably of Jews on the left who fought apartheid. Baruch Hirson's *Revolutions in My Life* (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1995) is one such example, but there are many more, including the recollections of Joe Slovo, Rusty Bernstein, Pauline Podbrey, Ronnie Kasrils, and Norman Levy.

Gilbert is fully aware of how few "active scholars" have ploughed this field. Unfortunately, the prospects of this changing are unlikely. The

initiative to establish Jewish studies at the University of the Witwatersrand was short-lived, leaving only the University of Cape Town as a home for Jewish research. While the Kaplan Centre for Jewish Studies and Research has been very productive, it remains a challenge to attract South African postgraduate students into the field. The challenge is all the more steep given the increasing absence of a cohort of Jewish students in South Africa committed to research in the humanities. Hitherto, with few exceptions, the field has depended on aspirant Jewish scholars, but if the field of Jewish studies is to flourish, it will need to move beyond this shrinking pool.

A major obstacle to doing this is the way in which the Jewish experience has long been marginalized in a South African historiographical mainstream dominated for decades by questions of race and class. Unlike "coloureds" and "Indians", Jews barely surface. Standard works of scholarship, like the *Cambridge History of South Africa* published in 2011, have scant reference to the Jewish presence in the society. In the recent past, few historians in a well-regarded South African history department like the University of Cape Town's showed much interest in Jewish history, despite the frequent visits of renowned scholars to the Kaplan Centre.

A possible corrective to this lack of engagement could be through the broadened scholarly research agenda proposed by Shirli Gilbert. The many topics she identifies might well entice a new cohort of researchers, not only of historians but also from related disciplines. At the same time though, there remain more traditional questions that still need further exploration. This is most evident in the field of South African Jewish economic history. For example, has the rapid upward mobility and professionalization of the Jewish population been adequately explained? Has one-time Jewish dominance in sectors of the economy such as retailing and clothing manufacturing been properly accounted for? Research into these topics could draw on a flourishing North American and European scholarship. Likewise, the question of the persistence of patriarchy in communal life needs attention, as does granular exploration of the over-representation of Jews in civic affairs. So would the more traditional area of scholarly biography, neglected for the most part in South African Jewish historiography. Studies of communal leaders both lay and spiritual, for example, might shed light on the internal dynamics of the community and the challenges it has faced.

Gilbert correctly concludes that "the field . . . is wide open" and argues that "for those who wish to take on the urgent challenge of studying

South African Jews, materials are plentiful." She alludes only briefly to these. Certainly, there is much more to be mined. The national archives of South Africa remain a barely exploited resource, as do private archives such as those of the Standard Bank, whose records stretch back well into the nineteenth century and contain a wealth of information about Jewish participation in the economy. Similarly, the records housed in Deeds Offices throughout the country are an unexplored source for Jewish property transactions, arguably a primary driver of Jewish upward mobility in South Africa.

Ultimately, the take-away from Gilbert's laudably comprehensive overview is the astonishing richness of the literature. Given that the South African Jewish population never exceeded 120,000 and that very few entered the field of Jewish studies, the output is remarkable, however uneven the quality. Clearly there are significant gaps and new topics to be pursued. Gilbert has alerted us to many of these.

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