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The Yiddish press and the making of South African Jewry in the British world: exclusion, libel, and Jewish nationalism, 1890–1914

WILLIAM PIMLOTT

South Africa was the first country in the anglophone world where the Yiddish press preceded the English-language Jewish press. The South African Jewish press was also the youngest Jewish press in the British Jewish world – even the Australian Jewish press preceded it.¹ This article critically narrates the early history of the Yiddish press (1890–1914) and its role in the development of the South African Jewish community and its political institutions. The South African Yiddish press lies at the margins of both South African Jewish historiography and histories of the global Yiddish press, and yet its unique features offer important insights for both. Work that has focused on Yiddish source material has generally chosen to emphasize the exclusion of Yiddish at the behest of a hostile Zionist ideology.² In fact, the Yiddish press in this period was successful, influential, and committedly Zionist.³ It was a crucial forum for the advocacy of immigrant rights; its campaigns extended far beyond its pages to political and legal interventions at the national level. Exploring the early media of the South African Jewish community underlines the agency and influence of the new immigrant group as well as its limitations. This reshapes our conception of the “making” of South African Jewry to

1 Jacob Solomon Judelowitz, “Tsu der geshikhte fun der idische prese in dorem-afrike”, *Dos Naye Vort*, 1 Sept. 1916, 65.

2 See Evangelos Mantzaris, “Class, Community, Language and Struggle: Hebrew against Yiddish in South Africa 1900–1914”, University of the Witwatersrand History Workshop, 9–14 Feb. 1987; Joseph Sherman, “Between Ideology and Indifference: The Destruction of Yiddish in South Africa”, in *Memories, Realities and Dreams: Aspects of the South African Jewish Experience*, ed. Milton Shain and Richard Mendelsohn (Johannesburg and Cape Town: Jonathan Ball Publishers, 2003), 28–49.

3 South African historians of Zionism pay some attention to the individual activities of immigrant Zionist Yiddish journalists but stop short of considering the press as a whole: Gideon Shimoni, *Jews and Zionism: The South African Experience (1910–1967)* (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1980), 18; see also Marcia Gitlin, *The Vision Amazing: The Story of South African Zionism* (Johannesburg: Menorah Book Club, 1950), 101–4.

emphasize immigrant involvement and dynamism.⁴ In addition, it offers a starting place for reconsidering global Yiddish press history and the role of Yiddish politics within the Anglo-Jewish world.

Jewish immigration to South Africa was dominated by Lithuanian Jews, about 40,000 of whom arrived in the three decades preceding the First World War.⁵ Settlement after the discovery of gold in 1886 predominantly took place on the Witwatersrand; by 1887, Johannesburg had been labelled an “Anglo-Semitic town”.⁶ This was the environment in which the Yiddish press developed. In 1890 Nechemiah Dov Hoffmann founded *Der Afrikaner Israelit*, the first Jewish newspaper in South Africa. He had brought over the first Yiddish typeface.⁷ The Yiddish press in South Africa subsequently flourished, serving as a crucial forum for the development of immigrant politics and South African Zionism. It served as a principle venue for arguments between immigrant and established Jews about politics and

4 This article intends to extend and elaborate on Edna Bradlow’s work on the *South African Jewish Chronicle*, which gives a more partial picture of the Jewish media landscape. As Bradlow writes, “Beyond the Ghetto: Lionel Goldsmid, the ‘South African Jewish Chronicle’ and the Creation of a South African Jewish Identity in the Early Twentieth Century”, *Jewish Affairs* 53, no. 1 (1998): 9–17, the readership of the *Chronicle* may have represented the English-speaking elite more than the community as a whole.

5 This article is indebted to the pioneering scholarship of Veronica Belling on Yiddish in South Africa, and draws on her *Yiddish Theatre in South Africa: A History from the Late Nineteenth Century to 1960* (Cape Town: Kaplan Centre for Jewish Studies and Research, 2008); Belling, “Yiddish Writing in South Africa: Leibl Feldman’s Radical History of Johannesburg Jewry”, *Journal for the Study of Religion* 19, no. 2 (2006): 63–75. Veronica Belling’s translations are a vital bridge to South African Yiddish journalism and scholarship: Leibl Feldman, *The Jews of Johannesburg (Until Union – 31st May, 1910)*, trans. Belling (Cape Town: Kaplan Centre for Jewish Studies and Research, 2007); Yakov Azriel Davidson, *His Writings in the Yiddish Newspaper Der Afrikaner 1911–13*, trans. Belling (Cape Town: Kaplan Centre for Jewish Studies and Research, 2008). On Jewish immigration see Richard Mendelsohn and Milton Shain, *The Jews in South Africa: An Illustrated History* (Johannesburg and Cape Town: Jonathan Ball Publishers, 2008), 29–33; Shimoni, *Jews and Zionism*, 5–12.

6 Milton Shain, *The Roots of Antisemitism in South Africa* (Charlottesville and Johannesburg: University of Virginia Press and Witwatersrand University Press, 1994), 19–21.

7 Nechemiah Dov Hoffmann, *Book of Memoirs: Reminiscences of South African Jewry*, trans. Lilian Dubb and Sheila Barkusky (Cape Town: Kaplan Centre for Jewish Studies and Research, 1996), 54: “I hope . . . that when the history of the Jews in South Africa comes to be written . . . to be remembered as the pioneer and founder of the Jewish press in South Africa, being the first in time and also having attained an excellent standard.” Jacob Solomon Judelowitz, “The Jewish Press in South Africa”, in *The South African Jewish Year Book*, ed. Morris de Saxe (Johannesburg: South African Jewish Historical Society, 1929), 249–51. Where possible I have used the author’s English-language transliterations of South African Jewish names.

religious practice. Historians have not written Hoffmann, or the Yiddish-language industry he founded, into South African Jewish history.

South African Jewish immigration historiography, much like its British counterpart, has often focused on three distinct groups: an anglophone Anglo-German Jewish elite, demographically far smaller than a much larger immigrant Yiddish-speaking Jewish population, traditionally conceived of as isolated and marginalized, and alongside both of these Jewish groups, a hostile majority community.⁸ Where historians have focused on what Gideon Shimoni has called the “interdependence” of the two former groups, they have often stressed brilliant individuals, “great men” who were influential in both Jewish groups, rather than investigating the institutional intersection between groups.⁹ Even historians who were sympathetic to the significance of the Yiddish public sphere tended to underplay its importance by emphasizing its apartness and ultimate erasure through Zionist activism.¹⁰ This article departs from this scholarship by considering the Yiddish press not only as a medium of Jewish political and cultural life, but also as an active participant in events that involved the contestation of the three groups mentioned earlier. To do so, it juxtaposes analysis of South African Yiddish newspapers from 1896 to 1914, with a closer focus on two landmark events within South African Jewish history in this period: an investigation into a campaign to defend Jewish immigration to South Africa by declaring Yiddish a European language (1902–05), and a libel trial in the First Civil Court in Johannesburg (1911). These events underline the potency, as well as the limits, of immigrant agency and the reciprocal tensions between the three groups.

Focus on the Yiddish press reveals a further important element that expands on the triadic approach of immigration historiography: international networks. These served as a fourth main site of exchange. South African Jewish life existed within a complex set of relationships: local, national, and imperial. One framework that embraces this polyvalent

8 This analysis is indebted to David Feldman and Bill Williams’s work on Jewish immigration: Feldman, “Mr. Lewinstein goes to Parliament: Rethinking the History and Historiography of Jewish Immigration”, *East European Jewish Affairs* 47, nos. 2–3 (2017): 134–49; Williams, *The Making of Manchester Jewry: 1740–1875* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1976); Williams, “‘East and West’: Class and Community in Manchester Jewry, 1850–1914”, in *The Making of Modern Anglo-Jewry*, ed. David Cesarani (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 15–33.

9 Shimoni, *Jews and Zionism*, 13.

10 Mantzaris, “Class, Community”, 1–24; Sherman, “Between Ideology and Indifference”, 28–49.

identity is the “British World”.¹¹ Immigration from Eastern Europe from the 1880s through to the 1950s transformed the existing Jewish communities in Australia, South Africa, Canada, and Britain. Historians have underlined the transnational economic and religious networks that defined earlier anglophone Jewish communities.¹² After 1880 they were confronted by an insurgent working-class immigrant group which brought a new set of political and social priorities. Much historiography has focused on the assimilation, social mobility, and integration of these new immigrants, but not the Yiddish-language networks that existed between them and the new institutions they built. The new lingua franca across the Jewish British world had suddenly become Yiddish. The new modern Jewish institutions – the Yiddish press, Yiddish school systems, and Yiddish theatre – offered alternative paths for the modernization of Jewish societies across the British world, as did Jewish national ideologies that used Yiddish as a conduit. South Africa and its Yiddish press offers an important entrypoint to reconsidering the British Jewish world and its transnational networks in the period of mass migration.

This colonial history is also a global history. European history has increasingly considered how colonies in turn shaped and defined the metropole. And yet little Jewish historical attention has been paid to how Eastern European Jewish experience across the British world in turn affected the development of modern Jewish politics in Eastern Europe. This article takes as inspiration the recent work of scholars that have begun to assess multi-directionality in the development of modern Jewish

11 Tamson Pietsch, “Rethinking the British World”, *Journal of British Studies* 2 (April 2013): 441–63. I aim to respond particularly to Pietsch’s challenge, 447, to “think not of a singular British World but multiple, produced British world spaces . . . worlds that warped and shaped each other fashioning uneven transnational realms that were global but by no means universalizing.”

12 There is substantial scholarship on Anglo-Jewry and its international and transnational ties, e.g. David Feldman, “Jews and the British Empire, c. 1900”, *History Workshop Journal* 63, no. 1 (2007): 70–89; Abigail Green, “The British Empire and the Jews: An Imperialism of Human Rights?” *Past & Present* 199, no. 1 (2008): 175–205; Adam Mendelsohn, “Great Britain, the Commonwealth, and Anglophone Jewry”, in *The Cambridge History of Judaism*, ed. Mitchell Hart and Tony Michels (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 133–63. There is also growing scholarship on the Jewish communities that came under British rule with the expansion of empire: Sarah Abrevaya Stein, “Protected Persons? The Baghdadi Jewish Diaspora, the British State, and the Persistence of Empire”, *American Historical Review* 116, no. 1 (2011): 80–108; Elizabeth E. Imber, “A Late Imperial Elite Jewish Politics: Baghdadi Jews in British India and the Political Horizons of Empire and Nation”, *Jewish Social Studies* 23, no. 2 (2018): 48–85.

politics, in particular assessing how American Jews exported back to Eastern Europe key components of modern Jewish politics and culture.¹³ This work has remained binary between the U.S. and Eastern Europe, but the British world offers a third path for tracing polycentric Jewish historical development.

This Jewish history is necessarily a history of the interaction between Jews in the British world not only with the dominant imperial authorities but also with displaced and oppressed indigenous communities, alongside other ethnic communities. Jewish politicians and intellectuals often advocated full Jewish participation in the British imperial project.¹⁴ But there has been a growing awareness of the conflicted role that Jewish communities played within the broader imperial hierarchies. In part this article aims to explore this role. South African Yiddish historians have often paid more attention to this than their English-language counterparts.¹⁵ Leybl Feldman, the most prominent Yiddish-language South African historian, showed special interest in the African experience of South Africa, broader South African social problems, and the history of other minorities.¹⁶

Jewish life in South Africa was tightly integrated into the global Yiddish and Hebrew journalistic network.¹⁷ Nechemiah Dov Hoffmann reported on the viability of South African settlement to the St. Petersburg-based Hebrew newspaper *Ha-Melits* (The Advocate) as early as 1884, before he

13 See Tony Michels, “Exporting Yiddish Socialism: New York’s Role in the Russian Jewish Workers’ Movement”, *Jewish Social Studies* 16, no. 1 (Fall 2009): 1–26; Eric L. Goldstein, “A Taste of Freedom: American Yiddish Publications in Imperial Russia”, in *Transnational Traditions*, ed. Ava F. Kahn and Adam D. Mendelsohn (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2014), 105–39; Hagit Cohen, “The USA-Eastern European Yiddish Book Trade and the Formation of an American Yiddish Cultural Center, 1890s–1930s”, *Jews in Russia and Eastern Europe* 57, no. 2 (2006): 52–84. For work emerging outside the U.S. and Eastern Europe there is Mariusz Kalczewiak, “Seen from Warsaw: Poland’s Yiddish Press Reporting on Jewish Life in Argentina”, *Studia Judaica* 17, no. 33 (2014): 85–107.

14 Feldman, “Jews and the British Empire”, 81.

15 Sherman, “Between Ideology and Difference”, 31.

16 Feldman repeatedly critiqued the lack of broader scope of the South African Yiddish press: *Yidn in dorem-afrike* (Johannesburg and Vilnius: G. Kleckina, 1937), 75. He showed an interest in the Jewish attitude to Africans: *Jews of Johannesburg*, 190–93. See also Leybl Feldman, *100 yor indyer in dorem afrike: 1860–1960* (Johannesburg, 1961). For a broader consideration of Feldman’s work see Belling, “Yiddish Writing in South Africa”, 63–75.

17 For the Hebrew press see Michael Pesah Grosman, “A Study of the Trends and Tendencies of Hebrew and Yiddish Writings in South Africa since their Beginnings in the Early Nineties of the Last Century, to 1930” (Ph.D. diss., University of the Witwatersrand, 2013), 2–52.

emigrated to South Africa in 1890.¹⁸ The Hebrew scholar and journalist Meyer Dovid Hersch wrote regular columns for the Warsaw Hebrew daily *Ha-Tsefirah* during the 1890s and 1900s, and his son, the pioneering South African Yiddish journalist Benzion Hersch, wrote for the St. Petersburg Yiddish daily *Der Fraynd* in the 1900s. It would be incorrect, however, to describe South Africa as being one part of an undifferentiated global whole. Within this broader Yiddish world the South African community was also tightly integrated with a developing British Yiddish world.¹⁹ Crucial figures in the development of the Yiddish press in South Africa, such as David Goldblatt and Hyman Polski, both lived and worked in London before working as journalists in South Africa, while the British Yiddish journalist Isaac Stone briefly formed a partnership with Hoffmann in South Africa before returning to Britain. This network within a network can be seen in David Goldblatt's idiosyncratic summary of global Yiddish activity in 1905. Of the 9 dailies he mentions, 2 are from England, while of the 20 weeklies he describes, 4 are from England.²⁰ A writer less imbricated in the British Yiddish world would not give such ample consideration to the Yiddish press in Britain, which then as now was generally overlooked. The Eastern European Yiddish press conceptualized South Africa as part of England, explaining South African Jewish politics through English Jewish politics, where English meant the British Empire.²¹ Little attention has been paid to how immigrants to destinations in the British world articulated the importance of Yiddish as more than a vernacular for their political positions, and how this fitted into the broader sweep of Yiddish-language politics.²² This article argues for the importance of the Yiddish press in South Africa and the role of Yiddish politics in the broader British world.

18 Chaim Gershater, "From Lithuania to South Africa", in *The Jews in South Africa: A History*, ed. Gustav Saron and Louis Hotz (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1955), 68–70.

19 Belling, *Yiddish Theatre in South Africa*, 12, demonstrates the links between the British and South African Yiddish theatres.

20 David Goldblatt, *Yiddish: Is it a European Language?* (Cape Town: Jewish Advocate Printing and Publishing Works, 1905), 14.

21 Benzion Zundel Hersch, "Briv fun dorem-afrike", *Der Fraynd*, 15 June 1903, 2.

22 For a brief account of American and British Yiddishist discourses see Emanuel Goldsmith, *Modern Yiddish Culture: The Story of the Yiddish Language Movement* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1997), 65–6, 68. On Yiddish language politics overall in this period see David Fishman, *The Rise of Modern Yiddish Culture* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2005), 3–79; Jeffrey Shandler, *Yiddish: Biography of a Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 93–4, 150–64.

Table A Timeline of the Yiddish Press in South Africa, 1890–1914²³

1890	<i>Der Afrikaner Izraelit</i> , Johannesburg, edited by Nechemiah Dov Hoffmann, weekly
1895–97	<i>Ha-Or</i> , Cape Town, edited by Nechemiah Dov Hoffmann, weekly
1896–97	<i>Afrikanische Idishe Gazeten</i> , Johannesburg, edited by A. Berman and Solomon Vogelsson, weekly
1898–1900	<i>Der Yidisher Herold</i> , Cape Town, edited by Nechemiah Dov Hoffmann and Isaac Stone, weekly
1900–02	<i>Der Idisher Telegraf</i> , Cape Town, edited by Nechemiah Dov Hoffmann, Eigel, A. S. Kaplanski, Goldblatt, weekly
1899	<i>Der Krigsshtapet</i> , Cape Town, edited by David Goldblatt, daily
1902–05	<i>Di Idishe Folks-Tsaytung</i> , Cape Town, edited by Nechemiah Dov Hoffmann, Rev. J. L. Schrior, M. Matuson, weekly
1903–08	<i>Ha-Kokhav</i> , Johannesburg, edited by Israel Michael Traub, weekly
1904	<i>Di Idishe Fraye Prese</i> , Johannesburg, edited by B. Levitsky, weekly
1904–14	<i>Der Idisher Advokat</i> , Cape Town, edited by David Goldblatt, weekly
1904	<i>Der Shttral</i> , Cape Town, edited by Lazarus Manfrid, weekly
1909–13	<i>Di Yudishe Fon</i> , Johannesburg, edited by Benzion Hersch, at first fortnightly, then weekly and lastly (May–July 1913) daily
1909–14	<i>Der Afrikaner</i> , Cape Town, edited by Nechemiah Dov Hoffmann, monthly
1910–11	<i>Di Idishe Shtime</i> , Johannesburg, edited by Simon Joffe, weekly
1911–32	<i>Der Afrikaner</i> , Johannesburg, edited by Solomon Vogelsson and later Hyman Polski, weekly
1912	<i>Di Naye Tsayt</i> , Johannesburg, edited by Akiva Zabov, H. L. Sternfeld, Abraham Dusheiko, monthly
1912–13	<i>Di Yohanesburger Togeblat</i> , Johannesburg, edited by Elias Rende, daily
1913	<i>Di Naye Heym</i> , Johannesburg, edited by Jacob Solomon Judelowitz, daily
1914	<i>Der Tsiemist</i> , Johannesburg, edited by Jacob Solomon Judelowitz, monthly, a Yiddish supplement of the <i>Zionist Record</i> (1908–59, Johannesburg, edited by I. Abrahams, I. M. Harris, Isaac Goodman, monthly)

23 Hoffmann, *Book of Memoirs*, 54–5; Feldman, *Jews of Johannesburg*, 135–89.

The South African Yiddish press, 1890–1914

Before the First World War the Yiddish press in South Africa may have been the most important medium for Jews there.²⁴ Mass immigration meant that a majority of the Jewish population had become primarily literate in Yiddish, and a new thriving industry sprang up to cater to and influence this market.

The Yiddish press preceded the English-language Jewish press in South Africa by twelve years. In this early stage, where many immigrants had yet to learn or were in the process of learning English, the Yiddish press was the main source of information, as well as a means of imparting Yiddish culture. The latter function increasingly dominated after the period in discussion here. But at this time the need for information gave Yiddish press editors an opportunity to enlighten and convince, as well as entertain.²⁵

The press was also enormously fecund. As the table above demonstrates, the South African Jewish community, despite its relatively small demographic size, produced several Yiddish newspapers. In 1912–13, three dailies coexisted.²⁶ These publications were also private – set up by individual entrepreneurs and with profit as a factor – although perhaps this can be overstated given the relative difficulty of this profession.²⁷ Newspapers were often founded and then abandoned, normally either because they could not turn a profit or because the partners had fallen out.²⁸ Yiddish newspapers were often the work of one person if the journalist in question could not afford to pay the setters. In Hoffmann’s words, “he would write at night and then he would spend the whole day standing over the crates setting.”²⁹ Circulation numbers are harder to come by,

24 Leonard Prager, “Yiddish Press”, in *Encyclopedia of Modern Jewish Culture*, ed. Glenda Abramson (London: Routledge, 2005), 711–13, states that “until the First World War Yiddish dominated the South African Jewish press.”

25 Feldman, *Yidn in dorem-afrike*, 73.

26 Jacob Solomon Judelowitz, “Di ershte teglikhe tsaytung in yohanesburg un ir redaktsye”, *Literarische Bleter*, 20 March 1939, 10–13.

27 Feldman, *Yidn in dorem-afrike*, 75. Feldman emphasized the profit motive for Yiddish journalistic production in South Africa. An exception to the individual practice was *Ha-Kokhav*, which was founded by selling shares to stakeholders; Hersch, “Briv fun dorem-afrike”, *Der Fraynd*, 17 April 1903, 4.

28 Judelowitz, “Idische prese in dorem-afrike”, 67.

29 N. D. Hoffmann, “A bisl vegn zikh zelbst”, *Der Afrikaner*, April 1914, cited in Judelowitz, “Tsu der geshikhte”, 66. All translations mine unless stated otherwise.

but Yankev Mortkhe Sherman estimated a circulation of 5,500 to 20,000 newspapers sold weekly in 1933.³⁰ For Feldman the figure would have been higher; this number did not include the newspapers that were imported from abroad.³¹ The most important and enduring Yiddish newspapers before the First World War were *Ha-Kokhav*, *Idisher Advokat*, *Di Yudishe Fon*, and *Der Afrikaner*.³²

Journalists who worked for the South African Yiddish press were also the main correspondents for the Eastern European Yiddish press. Jewish life in South Africa was discussed in many early twentieth-century Eastern European Yiddish newspapers, such as *Der Fraynd* (St. Petersburg), *Haynt* (Warsaw), *Der Veg* (Warsaw), testifying to some interest in South African questions. The majority of these articles described the difficulties of immigration and communal tensions.³³ They also described the colonial and racial context which shaped Jewish life in South Africa.³⁴ Benzion Hersch (1883–1935), an ambitious young Zionist journalist who will be discussed in greater depth later, wrote about the prominent Jewish politician Harry Solomon, “the only member of the current parliament who is popular in the whole country”, who proposed that “coloured” people should not be allowed to travel in the same wagon as white people.³⁵ When a fellow parliamentarian drew on examples of European racism against Jews to argue that racism should not be reproduced against “coloured” people in South Africa, Solomon responded by rejecting the comparison and insinuating that his opponent was an antisemite. “Yes, I am a Jew and I am proud of it”, he declared. “I am grateful that I live in a country where such examples are not used.” Solomon was celebrated in a later supplement of *Der Fraynd* with a photo-portrait and fawning essay.³⁶ Thus, the Yiddish press in Eastern Europe was witness to the complex racial politics of South Africa in this period, and was willing to endorse anti-black politics if it benefitted Jews.

Despite the differences that this racialized context posed, the Eastern European Jewish press conceived of Jewish life in South Africa

30 Yankev Mortkhe Sherman, “Yidish in dorem afrike – un nokh epes”, *Literarische Bleter*, 27 Oct. 1933, 10.

31 Feldman, *Yidn in dorem-afrike*, 74.

32 Feldman, *Jews of Johannesburg*, 136.

33 See e.g. Benzion Hersch, “Briv fun dorem-afrike”, *Der Fraynd*, 24 April 1904, 1; “Briv fun dorem-afrike”, *ibid.*, 14 July 1905, 1.

34 Benzion Hersch, “Briv fun afrike: di yudishe kheyvres”, *ibid.*, 28 Feb. 1904, 1.

35 Benzion Hersch, “Briv fun dorem-afrike”, *ibid.*, 28 Jan. 1904, 1.

36 Benzion Hersch, “Tsvey yidische klal-tuer”, *ibid.*, 5 July 1904, 6–7.

as an extension of Jewish life in England. A celebratory notice with accompanying photograph of the newly elected mayor of Cape Town, Hyman Liberman, quoted the influential Cape Town rabbi Alfred Bender, who characteristically conflated South African and English Jewries: “The fact that they trust a Jew with the high position of City Mayor, shows, that we live in free England, where no difference is made between nations and faiths.”³⁷

Yiddish as metonym for Jewish rights

Jewish immigration to South Africa came under increasing threat after the South African War (previously called the Anglo-Boer War, 1899–1902). Within the British world, political antisemitism in this period was directed through anti-immigration agitation.³⁸ While this did not directly impact the lives of Jews already in Britain, South Africa and elsewhere, it negatively affected the future of Eastern European Jews who might still want to migrate.

In South Africa the first incident came in the form of the Cape Immigration Restriction Act in 1902, which aimed to prohibit immigration by banning access to the Cape by those who were “unable, through deficient education, to himself write out and sign in the characters of any European language an application to the satisfaction of the Minister.”³⁹ This law, hastily rushed through the Cape parliament, was designed to impede transimperial migration particularly by those from colonies in Asia, as well as Eastern European Jewish immigration.⁴⁰ The Jewish community needed to act to defend its freedom of movement and implicitly the future health of the community, which would be bolstered by further immigration. In doing so they had to defend Yiddish as a European language. As a result, the official status of Yiddish became a metonym for Jewish immigrant rights.

37 Benzion Hersch, “A yudisher mer”, *ibid.*, 8 Nov. 1904, 8. Hersch, the scourge of the Johannesburg Jewish establishment, was willing to praise the Cape Town equivalent at this time, taking an opposite position to Goldblatt’s, whose views will be elaborated later.

38 Colin Holmes, *Anti-Semitism in British Society 1876–1939* (London: Edward Arnold, 1979), 89–103; Todd Endelman, *The Jews of Britain, 1656 to 2000* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 156–62.

39 See Gustav Saron, “Jewish Immigration, 1880–1913”, in Saron and Hotz, *Jews in South Africa*, 92–101; Mendelsohn and Shain, *Jews in South Africa*, 60.

40 Milton Shain, *Jewry and Cape Society: The Origins and Activities of the Jewish Board of Deputies for the Cape Colony* (Cape Town: Historical Publication Society, 1983), 21–7.

The conventional account of the Jewish response to this crisis emphasizes the capacity of the established Anglo-Jewish community to influence government policy. According to this telling of the story, established representatives of the Cape Town community moved quickly to intervene, and Rabbi Alfred Bender, leader of the Cape Town Hebrew Congregation, approached the Agent General for the Cape in London, Mr. Fuller, and the Attorney General, T. L. Graham, who gave assurances that Yiddish would not be counted as a non-European language. In reality, the picture was more complex. The danger of the new immigration act was first spotted by David Goldblatt, a Yiddish journalist, who himself approached the Attorney General. Graham responded that Goldblatt should ask why the Jewish members of Parliament had not voted against the act. He agreed nonetheless to an amendment. This unilateral action by Goldblatt, taken without the approval of Bender and other figures in the Anglo-Jewish establishment, prompted consternation. Moreover, a visit from three “representative” gentlemen of the Jewish community of Cape Town requested “that the act remain as originally worded, and they assured him that the Jewish people did not regard Yiddish as their language at all.”⁴¹ At this crucial stage, Morris Alexander, then at the beginning of his career as a prominent liberal politician, intervened to support Goldblatt. He later claimed that “the part he played in the struggle for the recognition of Yiddish as a European language was the most important achievement of his public life.”⁴²

With Goldblatt’s assistance, Alexander led a delegation representing twenty-three Jewish institutions to visit the Attorney General. Although they received a favourable response to their plea to recognize Yiddish as a European language, it took three years before this was acted on.⁴³ For Bender this approach was wrong practically and ideologically; he refused to take part in the delegation. Practically, it represented a move away from the traditional Jewish politics of *shtadlanut* (intercession) that he had practised to represent Jews up to this moment.⁴⁴ Ideologically, it was incorrect for Jews to represent themselves as Jews in a matter not

41 David Goldblatt, *The Jew and his Language Problem* (New York: the author, 1943), esp. 139–40.

42 Enid Alexander, *Morris Alexander: A Biography* (Cape Town and Johannesburg: Juta and Co., 1953), 26–36.

43 Goldblatt, *Jew and his Language Problem*, esp. 133–50. To commemorate the delegation the group was photographed, a founding image of organized Jewish politics in South Africa; see Alexander, *Morris Alexander*, 3–4.

44 Mendelsohn and Shain, *Jews in South Africa*, 52–61, Alexander, *Morris Alexander*, 32–3.

pertaining to religion. For Bender and his ally Hyman Liberman, the Cape Town mayor, this also risked making the population “Jew-conscious.”⁴⁵

The results of this delegation were twofold. First, a partnership was cemented between Goldblatt and Alexander which served as the foundation of the former’s new Yiddish newspaper, *Der Idisher Advokat*. Second, in September 1904, the members of the delegation formed the Jewish Board of Deputies in Cape Town, which became the most significant Jewish institution there until the unification of the Transvaal, Orange Free State, and Cape Colony in 1910.⁴⁶ An alliance between a Yiddish journalist and a young Jewish lawyer had resulted in the creation of a political body that excluded the traditional elite Anglo-Jewish community (as represented by Bender and the Cape Town Hebrew Congregation). And yet the model was based on Anglo-Jewish norms.

A parallel dispute occurred in Johannesburg and the broader Transvaal. There a Board of Deputies, representing traditional Anglo-Jewish interests, challenged the earlier established South African Zionist Federation (1898), whose membership and priorities were more in line with the wishes of Eastern European Jewry. Thus, in one part of South Africa Eastern European Jews in partnership with an emergent Anglo-Jewish bourgeoisie displaced the established elite through a Board of Deputies, and in another an Eastern European and bourgeois Anglo-Jewish Zionist Federation was in conflict with an elite Anglo-Jewish established Board of Deputies.⁴⁷

After the first success of the delegation there was still work to do. In 1904–5, influenced by the agitation against Aliens in Britain, new anti-Jewish sentiment began to make itself felt in South Africa. There was also a new bill, in April 1905, which would force all businesses to keep their books in a “European language”.⁴⁸ In response to this bill, Goldblatt published his pamphlet *Yiddish: Is it a European Language?* with a foreword by Morris Alexander. Goldblatt and Alexander embarked on a tour of the Cape giving speeches defending the importance of Yiddish.⁴⁹ This contributed to the decision to append an amendment to the Act in 1906,

45 Alexander, *Morris Alexander*, 29. This is visible in Bender’s earlier praise for Liberman’s election, which showed that religious differences were not acknowledged in South Africa.

46 “Di Idische Board of Deputies far di keyp-koloni”, *Idisher Advokat*, 3 Feb. 1905, 1.

47 Shimoni, *Jews and Zionism*, 22–4. The South African Zionist Federation acted as a national body but its strength lay in Johannesburg.

48 Gustav Saron, “The Long Road to Unity”, in Saron and Hotz, *Jews in South Africa*, 225.

49 Alexander, *Morris Alexander*, 34.

“provided that for the purposes of this subsection, Yiddish shall be accepted as a European language.” The Transvaal followed the Cape’s lead in 1907.

The *Idisher Advokat* gives us insight into the other priorities of immigrant Jewry in this period. Goldblatt’s activism was not limited to the struggle around Jewish immigration. He also campaigned extensively for Jewish actors and musicians to be permitted to organize public concerts and plays on Sunday evenings, a privilege that was extended to Christians but not to Jews.⁵⁰ Alexander and Goldblatt used the *Advokat* as a platform for explaining the Board of Deputies, the Cape Colony constitution, and the immigration laws to their readers. The Yiddish press also became the mouthpiece for the official Cape Town organized Jewish community. In turn the Board enthusiastically supported their offerings. It recommended to Mr. Abramson, who later raised a motion to recognize Yiddish as a European language in the new Dealers Licence Act, Goldblatt’s pamphlet on Yiddish as a “source of facts”.⁵¹ When Abramson was eventually successful in appending the amendment, the *Advokat* was duly jubilant.⁵²

Goldblatt’s pamphlet marked a departure for the role of Yiddish in public discourse in South Africa. Whereas Yiddish had hitherto been understood merely as a vernacular, Goldblatt used a variety of arguments to try to convince Jewish and non-Jewish South Africans of the Europeanness of Yiddish.⁵³ He emphasized that Yiddish had Germanic components and so by proximity was a European language.⁵⁴ Given that its speakers were overwhelmingly born in Europe, he argued that the language must be considered European.

Beyond linguistic arguments, he claimed that the large Yiddish press and flourishing Yiddish publishing industry proved the legitimacy of Yiddish, and justified respect and rights for its speakers. Goldblatt hoped that through his pamphlet he might change non-Jewish opinions about Jews: “I trust that it will also prove to the English speaking world that the Jew who speaks Yiddish is not as ignorant as he might be supposed

50 “Redaktsyonele notisyen”, *Idisher Advokat*, 1 July 1904, 2.

51 “Redaktsyonele notisyen”, *ibid.*, 5 May 1905, 4.

52 “Kosher Kosher in keyp-parlyament”, *ibid.*, 2 June 1905.

53 Goldblatt, *Yiddish*.

54 Goldblatt argued in the tradition of the lexicographer Alexander Harkavy who also focused on establishing Yiddish as a language; Goldsmith, *Modern Yiddish Culture*, 65. Goldblatt’s work precedes other notable works in favour of Yiddish, e.g. Matisyohu Mieses, “Bizehut Hasafah Hayehudit”, *HaOlam*, 5 June 1907, 269.

to be, by those who do not understand him.”⁵⁵ He was not just arguing that Yiddish was European; he was arguing that Yiddish had worth as a language in its own right, and that it conveyed dignity (via Europeanness) to its speakers.

For Goldblatt those Jews who did not take Yiddish seriously in South Africa were synonymous with those who wanted to limit Jewish immigration from Eastern Europe. Conversely, advocating Yiddish in the British world setting was, in his worldview, advocacy for the people who spoke the language and for their rights of free movement. This Yiddish language politics, which developed in tandem with the Yiddishism of the Russian-American writer and activist Chaim Zhlitowsky and other diaspora nationalist advocates of Yiddish, was thus first and foremost a defence of Yiddish as a language of free movement and for immigrants.⁵⁶ Goldblatt’s advocacy for Yiddish, however, was written in the English language and must be understood within the context of broader Yiddish-language activism in the British world. In Britain, as in South Africa, this was a crucial juncture for a new respectability for Yiddish. In a 1906 lecture, “The Value of Yiddish”, the British Yiddish translator Helena Frank argued for the worth and literary merit of the Yiddish language in front of an audience of the East London Communal League. Frank’s speech was evidently successful. Her listeners were reported within the *Jewish Chronicle* as remarking that: “The general view was . . . that the conversance of the communal leaders with the Jargon would . . . enable them to know more of the life, feelings and aspirations of those coreligionists who spoke the idiom.”⁵⁷ Israel Cohen, for example, who later became one of the most prominent British Jewish journalists, wrote a positive article called “The Romance of Yiddish” for the national non-Jewish newspaper the *Manchester Guardian*, which carried many of the same arguments he made in a similar article he wrote in the Jewish newspaper *The Jewish World*.⁵⁸ Goldblatt then referred to Cohen’s *Guardian* article and to Frank’s activities in his pamphlet in defence of Yiddish. The legitimization of Yiddish in South African political life developed in a transnational conversation with England.

55 Goldblatt, *Yiddish*, 19.

56 Fishman, *Modern Yiddish Culture*, 15–17; Goldsmith, *Modern Yiddish Culture*, 45–182.

57 “The Value of Yiddish: Lecture by Miss Helena Frank”, *Jewish Chronicle*, November 2, 1906, 21.

58 Israel Cohen, “The Romance of Yiddish”, *Manchester Guardian*, 20 Feb. 1905; “On Yiddish”, *Jewish World*, 13 July 1906, 197.

The promotion of Yiddish in this setting forced Yiddish into a colonial equation.⁵⁹ Yiddish needed to be promoted precisely because it guaranteed that Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe would benefit from the assumption of European superiority that prevailed in South Africa, and the preferential treatment that recognition as “European” offered. “European” was used as a racial category signifying (if not explicitly stating) whiteness. Although Goldblatt and his peers were naturally advocating for language recognition to help more Eastern European Jews emigrate, they were also indicating on which side of the racial line they wanted to belong. In this sense Yiddish became a colonial language.⁶⁰

Yiddish press, Zionist politics

South African Jewish political life was dominated by Zionism, yet few historians have traced how the popularity and influence of this movement were reflected in the early Yiddish press in South Africa, which was also highly Zionist.⁶¹ Zionism was not universally supported. An early critical article in *Afrikanishe Idishe Gazeten* of 1897 reminded its readers that “we must heed his [Herzl’s] opinion, but far superior and convincing is the opinion of our old people’s ideas (tradition).”⁶² Over time, however, most newspapers were sympathetic to Zionism. “Congratulations to us”, was the title of one article in 1904 celebrating seven years of Zionism.⁶³ Even the socialist Goldblatt dedicated ample coverage to the death of Theodor Herzl, and minimized the importance of the social democratic movement in South Africa.⁶⁴ It is not surprising that the Yiddish press in South Africa was Zionist-oriented. Although it is sometimes de-emphasized

59 Roni Masel has explored and elaborated on Yiddishist and global Yiddish encounters with colonialism, particularly re South Africa in the 1930s: “The Sun never set on Yiddishland: Race, Empire, and the Globe in Interwar Yiddish Culture”, lecture, Institute of Jewish Studies, University College London, with the Institute for Polish-Jewish Studies, Oxford, 8 March 2022.

60 Goldblatt later wrote texts boasting about Jewish racial exemplarity to try to respond to Nazi race science, e.g. *Is the Jewish Race Pure?* (New York: Goldblatt Publishing Co., 1933); see Eric Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race, and American Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 184–5.

61 Shimoni, *Jews and Zionism*, 19–32.

62 Y. Turbavits, “Yudenshtaaf”, *Afrikanishe Idishe Gazeten*, 10 Sept. 1897, 2.

63 Benzion Hersch, “Mazel-tov unz!” *Idishe Fraye Prese*, 26 Jan. 1904, 10.

64 “Iber Dr Herzl”, *Idisher Advokat*, 12 Aug. 1904, 1; “Redaktsyonele notisyen”, *ibid.*, 26 Aug. 1904, 4.

by historians, much of the Yiddish press globally was similarly oriented, especially in the early years of its history.⁶⁵ Equally, some Lithuanian Jewish immigrant journalists also brought a strong Zionist orientation with them. The Litvak region of the Pale of Settlement had seen a large growth in the popularity of Zionism – although the same was true for socialist and radical movements which did not have a corresponding influence in South Africa.

In South Africa there was not the dialectical development between Hebraist Zionists and socialists, commercial publishers on the one hand, and radical political organizations on the other. In the United States and Britain, the earliest Yiddish newspapers were either the political organs of small socialistic groupings, or commercial newspapers published by those who promoted the “enlightenment” and education of their readers. The latter retained a commitment to the unity of the “Jewish people”, and in many cases to Jewish nationalism and later Zionism as a political movement (even if they were not officially Zionist in their affiliation). The two camps developed separately, though frequently engaging with each other in bitter ideological battles. In South Africa, by contrast, it was the commercial Zionist-oriented Yiddish press that dominated. Later, different strains of a radical press developed, and Yiddish became a key conduit for anti-Zionist positions.⁶⁶ But for the crucial period when the Yiddish press was the most significant medium for Jewish politics in South Africa it was also mostly Zionist. There are a variety of plausible explanations for this. In South Africa most Jews did not work in industrial occupations, and this may both have reduced motivation for Jewish socialists from Eastern Europe and Britain to move to South Africa and reduced socialist organizing in South Africa. The racial system in South Africa and the reliance on black labour also impeded significant Jewish socialist movement-building. Zionism may also have prospered because South Africa had two contending settler nationalities, each with their own language and national culture. The conception of South Africa as a multinational and multilingual union lent plausibility to the idea that Jewish nationalism would be compatible with South African citizenship.

Zionists in South Africa worked to represent the interests of immigrants. Those Zionists in the Transvaal, through the Zionist federation

65 See e.g. in North America, Kasriel Sarasohn’s pioneering daily newspaper *Yidishes Tageblatt*, in Galicia the early weekly newspaper *Der Yid*, the *Yidishes folkstsaytung*, *Izraelitishes folksblat*, *Yidishes folksblat*, and the *Folksfraynd*, and in Britain the *Idisher Ekspres*.

66 Shimoni, *Jews and Zionism*, 52–60.

they had founded there, gave permits to immigrants who wanted to come to the region, despite opposition from the Anglo-Jewish Board of Deputies.⁶⁷ Samuel Goldreich, a prominent South African Zionist, personally worked to get permits for immigrants and was “also not ashamed to speak a fine Yiddish (*mame-loshn*)”.⁶⁸ Goldblatt was critical when Bender and Liberman opened a Zionist library, which he thought would challenge his newly founded Board of Deputies as it would set up a rival institutional structure.⁶⁹ In general, however, he, like the rest of the journalists of the early Yiddish press, supported local Zionists and their political organizations.

Libel and the limits of Yiddish influence: Di Yudishe Fon vs the South African Jewish Chronicle

Immigrant Jews in collaboration with Anglo-Jewish elites built an array of organizations. But there were still ideological differences between different factions. These would flare up in the autumn of 1911 when the Jewish community in Johannesburg was rocked by a libel trial. The Yiddish newspaper *Di Yudishe Fon* sued the English-language *South African Jewish Chronicle*. “As far as the Jewish community is concerned,” wrote the editors of the *Chronicle*, the trial was “the most important legal action in which it has been engaged through its representatives, and that has ever taken place in South Africa.”⁷⁰ The affair has received scant historical attention. For the historian John Simon it may have been “a *cause célèbre* in the Johannesburg community” but is now “rightly forgotten.”⁷¹ Revisiting this landmark trial gives an opportunity to consider the limits of influence of the Yiddish press, and immigrant Jewry more broadly, in the making of the South African Jewish community.

Trials were crucial to the growth of a global Jewish press. The Dreyfus

67 Benzion Hersch, “Briv fun dorem-afrike”, *Der Fraynd*, 18 March 1903, 1–2; Hersch, “Briv fun dorem-afrike”, *ibid.*, 23 June 1903, 1–2; Mendelsohn and Shain, *Jews in South Africa*, 56.

68 Benzion Hersch, “Tsvey yidishe klal-tuer”, *Der Fraynd*, 5 July 1904, 6.

69 “Redaktsyonele notisyen”, *Idisher Advokat*, 3 Feb. 1904, 4.

70 “Our Libel Case”, *South African Jewish Chronicle* (hereafter, SAJC), 29 Sept. 1911, 853.

71 John I. Simon, “Pulpit and Platform: Hertz and Landau”, in *Founders and Followers: Johannesburg Jewry 1887–1915*, ed. Mendel Kaplan and Marian Robertson (Cape Town: Vlaeberg, 1991), 190. Feldman, *Jews of Johannesburg*, 149, writes of a conflict between the newspapers that resulted with their amalgamation, under the influence of the Board of Deputies, but dates this to 1912.

trial in particular accelerated the development of Yiddish newspapers across the Jewish diaspora.⁷² What made the 1911 trial different was that the two antagonists were both Jewish parties, and the case was brought to a non-Jewish court. This trial put on display two different ways of integrating into South African life and of presenting Jewishness to the non-Jewish world.

The trial was caused by arguments about Jewish education.⁷³ It was concerned with the Johannesburg Talmud Torah School, which was founded in 1903 “in a small way”, and in its early period was close to a traditional Eastern European Talmud Torah.⁷⁴ After 1906 the institution was modernized and increasingly anglicized. It changed its name to the Hebrew High School and by 1910 had built its own building.⁷⁵ The school moved from the “ghetto” of Marshall Street to the corner of Claim and Wolmarans Streets in April 1911.

This new location and name as well as other innovations rendered it religiously suspect to traditionalists in the community. One such was the “fanatically” Zionist Yiddish journalist Benzion Hersch, whose contributions to the Eastern European Yiddish press as a South African correspondent were discussed earlier. Hersch was the leader of a new generation of South African Zionists, and stepped up publicly to challenge the school.⁷⁶ He represented a generational threat to the Anglo-Jewish established order and was advancing his claims that he better represented Eastern European Jews than the Anglo-Jewish establishment.

72 Jacob Hodess, “Tsu der geshikhte fun der english-yidisher prese”, in *Yidn in England: Shtudyes un Materialn, 1880–1940* (New York: YIVO, 1966), 59. Sholem Aleichem’s famous short story “Dreyfus in Kasrilevke” (1902) illustrated this fictionally.

73 As early as 1904, Dvoretzun [pseud. Benzion Hersch], “Briv fun transvaal”, *Der Tog*, 26 June, 1, carried a report criticizing the lack of commitment of two of the pioneering rabbis of the Anglo-Jewish establishment in Johannesburg, Judah Landau and Joseph Hertz, to providing traditional Jewish education in the shape of a Talmud Torah; see Myer Ellis Katz, “The History of Jewish Education in South Africa: 1841–1980” (Ph.D. diss., University of Cape Town, 1980).

74 Marian Robertson and Mendel Kaplan, “The Care and Education of the Jewish Children of Johannesburg”, in Kaplan and Robertson, *Founders and Followers*, 231–50; Katz, “Jewish Education in South Africa”, 167–94; Israel Levinson, “The Late Reb Moshe Helfand: A Fellow-Teacher’s Tribute”, *SAJC*, 9 March 1951, 17.

75 Robertson and Kaplan, “Care and Education”, 248; Katz, “Jewish Education in South Africa”, 175; on the Hebrew High School see *ibid.*, 167–94.

76 For biographical details see Meyer Dovid Hersch, *The Writings of Meyer Dovid Hersch (1858–1933)* (Johannesburg: Ammatt Press, 2005), 242–58; Feldman, *Yidn in dorem-afrike*, 71; Gitlin, *Vision Amazing*, 100–02.

As a child Hersch had founded the first junior Zionist society, Pirchei Zion (Flowers of Zion), in Warsaw in 1896, and he brought his Zionist political convictions with him when he emigrated to South Africa in 1902, working there as a Yiddish journalist for many publications in both South Africa and Eastern Europe.⁷⁷ His most celebrated achievement, however, was his advocacy for South African immigrants, in whose service he worked as an official translator of the Supreme Court and as the Board of Deputies Immigration officer in Cape Town.

Hersch started his campaign against the Hebrew High School in earnest in the 4 May 1911 issue of *Di Yudishe Fon*, where, writing under the pseudonym Dvoretzun (Deborah's Son), he attacked the school for two offences: giving barmitzvah tuition in English and saying the Ashrei prayer in English at the afternoon prayer service.⁷⁸ For Hersch this represented a reforming tendency in Judaism and an attempt to foster assimilation. In a theatrical move typical of his style, he sent a cake to the Hebrew High School to congratulate them on, in his eyes, failing the Jewish youth of Johannesburg. The *Yudishe Fon* published a letter from an Orthodox reader, Shaul Dovid Zakesh, criticizing the behaviour of the editors of the newspaper, in particular the flamboyancy of the cake-sending as well as the polemical language of the attack. But Hersch responded by doubling down, asking again: "what do they want to make of our youth?"⁷⁹

The leaders of the Hebrew High School had recently settled its finances and selected a special committee to oversee its curriculum.⁸⁰ Hersch implied that all their work had actively damaged the institution. For Hersch the change of site away from the "ghetto" had corresponded to the change to a less authentically Jewish education. As he said later in the trial: "If a visitor came to the *Talmud Torah* he would see a nice building and nice surroundings. But if the teaching were examined, he would say there was no *Torah*, no teaching, and no satisfactory results."⁸¹ The Hebrew High School took its time before responding with a letter in Yiddish and English in the *South African Jewish Chronicle* (the rest of the paper was entirely

77 Hersch, *Writings of Meyer Dovid Hersch*, 242.

78 Dvoretzun [pseud. Benzion Hersch], "Kleyner feliton: 'Garey at' in di 'hibru hay skul'", *Yudishe Fon*, 4 May 1911, 9. Hersch had used the pseudonym to criticize the institution in *Der Tog* seven years earlier.

79 *Yudishe Fon*, 11 May 1911, 12–13; more criticism followed in the next issue, 18 May 1911, 13–14.

80 Katz, "Jewish Education in South Africa", 169.

81 "Our Libel Case in Court", *SAJC*, 8 Sept. 1911, 805.

in English).⁸² They claimed that Hersch's article was "full of scurrility and libels": "The Committee of the Talmud Torah have taken no notice of this attack, chiefly because they do not read such journals and because they treat the impudence of its writers with contempt – particularly as every Jew in Johannesburg knows that on the Committee of the Talmud Torah there are God-fearing men well versed in the Torah, and who have in their little finger more Judaism than the whole *Standard* staff; men who work in truth for the sake of our sacred religion and not for the sake of sensation."⁸³ This inflammatory response prompted Hersch to sue the *Chronicle* for libel.

The trial took place over the course of three days in September 1911.⁸⁴ The plaintiff called only one witness, Hersch himself, while the defence called six witnesses who were representatives either of established Johannesburg Jewry or of the Hebrew High School. This underlined an important element of the trial. Although the libel case was made by the *Yudishe Fon* against the *Chronicle*, the defendants were not from that organization. This gives some sense of the figures and institutions that Hersch had arrayed against him; his only support was his lawyer, Bernard Alexander (a cousin of Morris Alexander). His opposition was most of the Jewish establishment of Johannesburg.

Both sets of lawyers belonged to the same class of Anglo-German Jewish South Africans.⁸⁵ Lionel Goldsmid was the defendant. As editor of the *Chronicle* he became perhaps most famous during his lifetime for his strident editorials against Eastern European Jewish immigrants who did not enlist in the First World War.⁸⁶ At stake in this libel trial was not simply a division between anglicized German Jews and Eastern European Jews. Primarily, it was a trial that tried to define what Jewish education should be, and in turn what Jewishness was for South African Jews.

82 The SAJC was far more Zionist, and even pro-Yiddish, than its London counterpart; see "Further about Yiddish", SAJC, 12 July 1907, 26–7.

83 M. P. Vallentine, "To the Editor", SAJC, 23 June 1911, 13–14.

84 The SAJC and the *Yudishe Fon* dedicated several spreads to proceedings: "Our Libel Case in Court", SAJC, 804–10.

85 Marian Robertson and Dennis Diamond, "Chemists, Doctors and Lawyers: Some Early Jewish Professional Men in Johannesburg", in Kaplan and Robertson, *Founders and Followers*, 145–6. Manfred Nathan, *Not Heaven Itself: An Autobiography* (Durban: Knox Publishing Co., 1944), carries no reference to the trial, but is illuminating on the success of this first generation of Johannesburg Jewish lawyers.

86 For more on Goldsmid see Edna Bradlow, "Defining Antisemitism: The Goldsmid Libel Trial, 1917–1918", *Jewish Journal of Sociology* 43, nos. 1–2 (2001): 71–2. Goldsmid's controversies as editor of the SAJC are detailed in: Feldman, *Jews of Johannesburg*, 148–50.

All parties in the trial agreed about the importance of an Orthodox Jewish education. The trial was thus dedicated to uncovering what the different parties understood as orthodoxy. For Hersch, orthodoxy meant that the Hebrew language must play an important role in education, and that at the very least prayers must be read in Hebrew. Hersch emphasized the importance of traditional Jewish education, arguing explicitly that what was missing at the school was the “study of Hebrew, of Jewish history, and a knowledge of Jewish traditions.”⁸⁷ As the Hebrew High School now gave barmitzvah tuition in English, and said the Ashrei prayer in English at the afternoon prayer service, it could not be considered Orthodox.

The Anglo-Jewish clergy, on the other side, argued that language was not what defined orthodoxy. Rabbi Joseph Hertz, Rabbi of the Witswatersrand Old Hebrew Congregation and later Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the British Empire, one of the defence witnesses, “explained that the term orthodoxy was geographical. Thus, there was English orthodoxy, Russian orthodoxy, German orthodoxy, etc. The orthodoxy in his synagogue was that in vogue among English-speaking orthodox Jews.”⁸⁸ The “English orthodoxy” of the school was thus valid regardless of how much Hebrew was spoken. Mr. Kark, a member of the General Committee of the Hebrew High School and one of its founders, who denied that the Hebrew High School had ever read prayers in English, viewed language as crucial to a national question but not to a religious question. When he was asked “is the reading of prayers in English orthodox?” he responded, “It is not national. Orthodoxy has nothing to do with the question. As far as orthodoxy is concerned the prayers can be read in any language. But for Jewish national reasons and national sentiment we read our prayers in Hebrew.”⁸⁹ For Kark the Hebrew language was important for sustaining the Jewish national movement, not the Jewish religion. All the parties in the trial were committed Zionists.

At stake was a conflict between two transnational Jewish ideologies: on the one hand, an English-language religious orthodoxy in the service of an assimilatory, albeit Zionist, Jewish bourgeoisie (“English orthodoxy”), and on the other a transnational religious nationalist ideology that was primarily invested in Hebrew, but also appreciated the importance of the transmission of Yiddish (“Jewish national”). The *Chronicle* won the

87 “Our Libel Case in Court”, SAJC, 806.

88 *Ibid.*, 808.

89 *Ibid.*, 809.

trial. The magistrate concluded that the “plaintiff [Hersch] provoked the quarrel. . . . [and should not] complain if defendants hit him back rather harder than the absolute necessities of self-defence required.”⁹⁰ By mid-October the *Yudishe Fon* conceded that it had acceded to peace terms; both sides would withdraw their letters, and the *Fon* admitted that they had got carried away in their criticism of the Hebrew High School.⁹¹

The trial’s legacy is mixed. It set a precedent for the Jewish journalistic community in South Africa to settle communal differences in public courts. Goldsmid was emboldened after the positive result from this trial, and was in turn the plaintiff in another trial conducted in 1917.⁹² The fact that communal disputes could be settled satisfactorily in the public courts is a testament to the success of Anglo-Jewish elites within those same courts and also to the relative lack of antisemitism within the South African court system and broader society. The Hebrew High School was a flagship for a model of education that combined religious orthodoxy on the English model with secular education. The result of the trial had legitimized the increased involvement of the Anglo-Jewish clergy in the education and religious life of Eastern European Jewish immigrants.

The trial was also a critique of journalism. Hertz in particular had affirmed in his testimony that “the importance of newspapers is altogether exaggerated.”⁹³ The Yiddish newspaper had lost the trial and the *Chronicle* had played almost no part in it. In this context Yiddish language journalism was the main loser. The overall winners were the Anglo-Jewish South African clergy (and to an extent their bourgeois legal representatives).

It would be wrong to underemphasize, however, the importance of the Yiddish press in South Africa at this moment. Goldblatt had shown that the Yiddish press could represent immigrants’ needs and defend them when the Anglo-Jewish religious establishment and other representatives were complacent. Hersch went a step further: he put the religious education programme of the leading lights of Johannesburg Jewry on trial, and in doing so was able to publicize his own conception of Jewish nationhood, and what Jewish education should be, even if it

90 “Our Libel Case Decision”, *SAJC*, 29 Sept. 1911, 862.

91 “Der Sholem”, *Yudishe Fon*, 19 Oct. 1911, 3–4.

92 Bradlow, “Defining Antisemitism”, 71–85. Many of the same personalities were involved in this trial, but this time almost the entire Jewish community was arrayed against Goldsmid.

93 “Our Libel Case in Court”, *SAJC*, 809.

was only “study of Hebrew, of Jewish history, and a knowledge of Jewish traditions.” Hersch lost, but in doing so he was able to subject the establishment to scrutiny almost unparalleled in the rest of the British world in this period. The consequences did not seriously affect Hersch’s place in the establishment, the *Fon* was soon purchased by the SAJC, and Hersch continued to be a major voice in Jewish communal affairs. In Israel a communal hall is named after him, Beth Hersch, in Kfar Vitkin.⁹⁴

Rethinking the Yiddish press in the British world

The Yiddish press in South Africa advocated immigrant rights and priorities, but it did not go further. Its first historians were its harshest and first critics.⁹⁵ For Jacob Judelowitz, writing as early as 1916, the short existence of many of the Yiddish newspapers in South Africa was a reflection of the weakness of Jewish life within the community. “I do not know if there is a better indicator and a better measure of social-cultural development of a certain national-group, than the press. And when we look through the list of the Jewish press in Africa . . . we see how weak the social-cultural life is among our Jews in South Africa.”⁹⁶ Leybl Feldman was motivated by animus against the early Zionist leanings of the Yiddish press and its alleged subordination to religious authority. As he wrote critically: “Every question would be treated from the standpoint of whether it first of all had a bearing on the Zionist direction or ideology, and whether it affected the religious ‘power’ from which they drew – mainly through the advertisements – their wage.” It is clear that for Feldman the Yiddish press was a missed opportunity to build the basis of a lasting Yiddish-language community in South Africa: “instead of teaching and identifying with the life not only of the Jews, but also of the non-Jews, instead of going with the Jewish masses and leading them forward, it simply followed after them, powerless and impotent. For this reason it did not pass down any effect.”⁹⁷ Both Feldman and Judelowitz focused not on what the Yiddish press did achieve but what it did not. They judged the Yiddish press in South Africa by the standards set in North America and Poland, where Yiddish newspapers with mass readerships were at the

94 See Hersch, *Writings of Meyer David Hersch*, 253; Gitlin, *Vision Amazing*, 104.

95 This was also the case in Britain, with the exception of the journalist Jacob Hodess’s account; see Yekhezkel Vortsman, “Di idishe prese in England”, *Idisher Kemfer*, 14 June, 21 June, 12 July 1907.

96 Judelowitz, “Idishe prese in dorem-afrike”, 65.

97 Feldman, *Yidn in dorem-afrike*, 75, 78.

vanguard of successful diaspora nationalist and socialist political projects – ignoring the different economic and political contexts that stimulated these movements, and instead blaming Yiddish journalism when no similar movement prospered in South Africa. Attacking the Yiddish press was a synecdoche for the whole of South African Jewish society not conforming to other models of development.

A second generation of scholars made an error when analysing Yiddish in South Africa. Joseph Sherman in 2003 and Evangelos Mantzaris in 1987 explored Yiddish only in so far as it could be conceived as having existed on countercultural terms,⁹⁸ as a desired forum for opposition to Jewish national and Zionist projects. There is merit to this approach. Mantzaris correctly drew attention to the role of trade unions and *landsmanshaftn* (mutual aid societies) in Jewish working-class society, while Sherman identifies the lengths to which Zionist organizations went to erase Yiddish from South Africa.⁹⁹ However, the Yiddish press in South Africa did not exist only as part of a counterculture, and it was not exclusively anti-Zionist. Jewish nationalism and Yiddish were compatible. Indeed, Hersch's conception of a Jewish national education included both.¹⁰⁰ Within the South African Jewish press, Yiddish newspapers contained English, English newspapers contained Yiddish, and both contained Hebrew.¹⁰¹ It is ahistorical to project the later *Sprachkampf* (language conflict) between Hebrew and Yiddish – typified by the contentious events of the Czernowitz Conference in 1908 where Hebrew and Yiddish advocates argued bitterly over whether Yiddish was “the” or simply “a”

98 For Moshe Rosman, *How Jewish is Jewish History?* (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2007), 114–15, a subculture is a group who, while differing from the majority in language, values, tradition, or lifestyle, nonetheless “shares many of the values of the larger society and strives to achieve them”, while a counterculture is where “a central element of the normative system of the group is in conflict with the values of the majority society it is in. The counterculture defines itself largely by virtue of its contradictions with respect to the majority.”

99 Mantzaris, “Class, Community”, 11–13; Sherman, “Between Ideology and Indifference”, 33–9.

100 Roni Masel, “Who is a Yid? Reading the Journal *Der Yid* beyond the Hebraist–Yiddishist Binary”, *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 20, no. 3 (2021): 361–83, emphasizes this instability in this period of the Hebrew–Yiddish binary: “Thoroughly and hermetically distinguishing between Zionist-territorialist nationalism and diasporic nationalism thus becomes impossible. Similarly, allotting each nationalist model to a designated cultural ideology and language choice also fails to make sense.”

101 Feldman, *Jews of Johannesburg*, 157–8; Judelowitz, “Jewish Press in South Africa”, 253–4; Judelowitz, “Tsu der geshikhte”, 117.

national language – onto a period and region where Yiddish coexisted with Jewish nationalism and Hebrew education. Ultimately this serves to do the opposite of what Sherman and Mantzaris intended.¹⁰² They reduce immigrant agency by failing to consider it when it was expressed in a Zionist or Jewish national framework.

Why, for John Simon, was the trial “rightly forgotten”?¹⁰³ It may well be that Simon wished to emphasize the unity of the Jewish community. The trial occurred in the middle of a broad phase of integration and amalgamation.¹⁰⁴ As South Africa became a unified nation-state, so too did the Jewish community conceive of itself as one entity spread across one country.¹⁰⁵ Within this scenario, the nuances of compromise and confrontation are lost or deliberately forgotten.

In the liberal inclusive colonial environment of the British world, Yiddish functioned as an important tool for Eastern European Jewish immigrants to keep the assimilationist ideology of the Anglo-Jewish elites in check, but also to guarantee continued access to economic mobility and increased political enfranchisement without losing a Jewish national direction.

The need for a “British world” framework for this history is emphatically not jingoistic or tilted towards justifying British imperialism.¹⁰⁶ It is instead a productive framework for exploring the encounters and conversations between Eastern European Jews in the metropole and in the colonies of the British world. Many of the important figures in the development of the South African Yiddish press lived in Britain and worked in the Yiddish press there before they moved to South Africa. Goldblatt drew on the increasing legitimization of Yiddish in Britain when he wrote his landmark pamphlet and to help advocate Yiddish’s national

102 Sherman may have reached his conclusions because the Yiddish newspapers studied in this article were inaccessible; Sherman, “Between Ideology and Difference”, 30, writes of the “loss” of the earliest South African and Yiddish newspapers and journals.

103 Simon, “Pulpit and Platform”, 190.

104 Saron, “Long Road to Unity”, 226–69.

105 Robert Ross, *A Concise History of South Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 54–113; William Beinart, *Twentieth Century South Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 62–87.

106 Anxiety about jingoism has haunted the framework of the British world: “is [it] merely a dressed up form of the old imperial history”, in Saul Dubow’s words? Dubow, “How British was the British World? The Case of South Africa”, *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 37, no. 1 (March 2009): 1–27; Pietsch, “Rethinking the British World”, 446.

recognition. Hersch succeeded in eliciting that Hertz's orthodoxy was an "English orthodoxy", and that all orthodoxies were not one and the same. Eastern European Yiddish newspapers printed articles that comprehended events in South Africa as encounters with an international "English" ideology. British Jewish history has long appreciated the importance of South Africa for narratives around alien immigration and British antisemitism.¹⁰⁷ This article demonstrates the importance of the transnational encounters and conversations that happened between (often Yiddish-speaking) Jews in the metropole and the colony where they were active agents.

107 Holmes, *Anti-Semitism in British Society*, 66–70, 81–3.