

The Travelling Rabbi: My African Tribe

By Rabbi Moshe Silberhaft (as told to Suzanne Belling)

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Reviewer: Garth Mason, University of South Africa

The genre of *The Travelling Rabbi: my African Tribe*, by Rabbi Moshe Silberhaft, is difficult to categorize. It fits somewhere between an autobiography and a travel book. Each chapter focuses on a particular region within South Africa and the wider Southern African community of nations that Rabbi Silberhaft visited during eighteen years of visiting small Jewish communities in his work for the African Jewish Congress. The areas he visited include; the Western Cape, the Garden Route, KwaZulu-Natal, Mpumalanga, Botswana, Zambia and Mauritius. In each chapter the Rabbi offers a brief history of the area, together with his relationship with the resident Jewish community. Rabbi Silberhaft describes his community work as a “journey of selfless and causeless love” (341). This explanation of his work certainly bears out in the non-judgemental approach he adopts in his presentation of the history and nature of each community, whether conservative or liberal. For me there are two strengths to this book. First Silberhaft highlights the issue of diminishing Jewish communities in country areas within South Africa and in sub-Saharan countries. Second, Silberhaft presents histories of Jewish communities that need to be told, for example, the refugee German Jewish community of Beau-Bassin prison in Mauritius during the Second World War, black Jews living in neighbouring countries and the issue of vandalism of Jewish graves, raising the spectre of anti-Semitism.

While travel books and autobiographies generally have a popular readership, the question is whether of *The Travelling Rabbi: my African tribe* has academic value? The book was not written for an academic readership. Rabbi Silberhaft tells his stories from a Jewish insider perspective. The values he espouses of Jewish community and belief he assumes are shared by his readership. For me this narrow frame of reference does not discount the book’s academic value. Autobiography can provide a good source of community identity. Its narrative can shed light on how a community understands its own quest for survival. In this sense books such as *The*

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Travelling Rabbi can be read, not as critical producers of knowledge, but rather as valuable documents for research. But this is not to say that Silberhaft's observations are not important. The dominant theme that runs through Silberhaft's book is the condition of shrinking Jewish communities in outlying regions. The reasons he offers for this common experience of diminishing Jewish communities are several, namely; the lack of higher education in these areas, intermarriage and closing of synagogues. The book also offers very important quantitative and qualitative information about Jewish communities outside of the main urban areas, for example, thorough descriptions of the Jewish people living in different areas and the nature of their lives. The book also offers a representation of Jewish perception from one person's perspective - Rabbi Moshe Silberhaft. His perspectives might not be representative of a general South African Jewish perspective, but his is an important perspective due to his wide range of interactions with different Jewish communities in sub-Saharan Africa.

The most important academic contribution the book makes is, however, not from Silberhaft's perceptions and observations, but rather from a study of the character of his perceptions. The insider perspective that frames Silberhaft's perceptions reveals interesting blind spots in his narrative. The book begins with Silberhaft sitting at the bedside of Rabbi Harris before the former Chief Rabbi Emeritus died. Silberhaft explains how Rabbi Harris had been a great inspiration to him, particularly during the early years of democracy where his contribution to social transformation was significant. However, Rabbi Silberhaft's community work in South Africa is not focused on the broader South African community, but rather on maintaining the dignity of the Jewish community within South Africa. His descriptions of outlying Jewish communities in South Africa focus on the struggle these communities face in the context of dwindling population numbers and assimilation into the larger community through marriage. The clearest example of the isolationist thinking that runs through Silberhaft's narratives is the Musina story where a Christian couple was asked not to attend shul services due to complaints from the congregants. Silberhaft's discourse seems to reflect deepening community identity issues to the detriment of a larger South African identity and in contradiction to work of nation building undertaken by Nelson Mandela. By contrast, Silberhaft's descriptions of Jewish communities in other African countries show communities contributing to larger national cohesion in the form of education and health

programs. Silberhaft seems to find it easier to adopt an outward-looking perspective in countries outside of South Africa, whereas within South Africa his perspective is more conservatively shaped. For example, Silberhaft does not seek dialogue with other religions in South Africa, but in neighbouring countries he acknowledges the importance of a multi-faith perspective.

The Travelling Rabbi: my African tribe is an interesting book because it may offer a touchstone for the state of minority communities in South Africa – threatened and seeking to maintain a sense of identity. It is disappointing that Silberhaft does not pause to reflect on his own discourse. While providing very interesting information about Jewish communities and the efforts made to retain their dignity, the book sadly reflects too many missed opportunities for reflexivity. But, nevertheless, after reading the book the reader is left with the importance of community in South Africa, the need to recognize and retain the cultures of all communities.

