Balancing Tradition and Transition: South African Jewish Women's Search for Affiliation

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Part A: A Personal Experience

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When I moved to South Africa in the late 1970s, I experienced a crisis of identity. Previously I had identified myself according to my nationality, as an Israeli. In the new country where I knew neither the land nor its people, I could not yet call myself South African. And as I slowly discovered the realities of apartheid South Africa, I was not sure that I wanted to be called South African – so I felt faceless and identity-less. It was a trying time. On Jewish holidays and on the Sabbath I gravitated towards the synagogues. Although I was a secular person, I needed to feel part of a group of people who, in some way, thought, felt or believed as I did.

Then my children were born and at the same time I started studying at university. These two events stimulated in me a great thirst for spirituality. The former threw me into an emotional turmoil and the latter created in me an intellectual curiosity regarding the questions "Who am I?" and "What am I here for?"

In the delivery room I had an emotional experience. The pain which I went through in order to give life to another human being, and the realisation that it is only women who can experience total and unconditional love in this particular form, brought upon me a great sense of empathy with all the women of the world. Overnight I started to write poetry, all of which dealt with women's experiences: Motherhood as well as Womanhood and Sexuality. I no longer suffered an identity crisis. I now knew who I was – I was a woman: sister and kin to more than half the people on the earth. God's creation of the world which occurred once, paled suddenly compared with women's continuous creation.

Women, all women around me, were important to me. Since women were kin, the well-being and the empowerment of all women grew close to my heart. I started studying women's history, women's health, and the portrayal of women in general literature as well as in the Bible. What I discovered did not please me. I was disturbed by what I found. My personal upbringing by enlightened parents, in an equal society in Israel, did not prepare me for the unfair perception that most societies have of women. I could not believe that men who loved their mothers, wives and daughters would at the same time treat them as inferior. What made it worse was that it seemed that it is not only men as individuals who hold women in low esteem, but that this perception is reflected in the teachings of the various faith communities.

My religion, Judaism, was no better than the others. I recognised Judaism for what it is: a "man's religion", a patriarchal tradition which excludes women from many religious experiences. I started feeling alienated from it. I could not reconcile the discrepancy between the spirituality and beautiful tradition which my father had taught me, and the Judaism that was dictated – and held to ransom – by a group of autocratic rabbis who emphasise the patriarchal legality of ancient times. I became angry with the Jewish religious authorities; yet, as my children grew up, I was dependent on them because they were, and still are, the controlling and regulating authorities concerning all Jewish rites of passage: birth, circumcision, naming, *bar/bat mitzvah* (which is the ceremony of adulthood), weddings, and burials.

My anger grew when I realised that the rabbinic authorities reinforce the lower status of Jewish women. In some cases, they are resistant to change even when it is obvious that certain laws and customs put women at a legal disadvantage, or are simply degrading to them. A few examples will show what I mean: When a baby boy is born, there is a beautiful ceremony on the thirtieth day, which is called the "redemption of the first born", symbolising the fact that the boy is holy and should be dedicated to God. Since there is no child sacrifice in Judaism and thus the parents cannot dedicate the newborn to God, they symbolically redeem/buy their son from God. In modern times the parents of the newborn boy give money to charity, thus paying for his redemption. However, when a girl is born she does not need to be "redeemed"! Does it mean, then, that girls are not holy enough to be dedicated to God?

When a boy reaches his thirteenth birthday, he is called up in the synagogue to stand in front of the community and read from the *Torah* (the holy scriptures), kept in the Holy Ark in the Synagogue. After this ceremony, called *bar mitzvah*, the young man is accepted as a full member of the community and can participate in all rituals. Being more physically mature than boys at this age, girls are recognised as adults when they are twelve years old. However, instead of having privileges bestowed upon them, as is the case for boys, all their privileges are taken away. For example, they are no longer allowed to go

into the main hall of the synagogue where they used to sit with their fathers at holy services. As grown women with menstrual cycles, they are not allowed to touch the *Torah*; in fact they are not "counted in", metaphorically and literally, in the religious quorum, the *minyan* (Adler 1995: 12–18). Women sit apart in a special section of the synagogue and must keep their voices down during religious services, as was advised by Maimonides, the famous Jewish philosopher (1135-1204CE).

The girls' equivalent, the *bat mitzvah*, is a twentieth-century sop to equality. They are not allowed to touch the *Torah*, they are not allowed to participate in conducting the service. The ceremony has no spiritual meaning; the girls are simply dressed up nicely, read something they have prepared, and have a party. In some cases the rabbi does not even bother to bless them. This treatment of girls as second-rate members of the religious community runs like a thread through all rites of passage in Judaism, as well as in legal matters like marriage and divorce.

I find this heartbreaking. I feel that I need a religious circle within which I can bring up my children. I feel that I need a spiritual community to which I can *belong* – which would be like an extended family to my children, providing them with a yardstick for moral values and ethics of behaviour, as well as sense of kinship, a feeling of belonging to a people with a past to be proud of.

For me, Judaism is a very beautiful religion in its ethics and values, and one rich in a most wonderful past of which I am very proud. So I have a major dilemma: I love the tradition, yet reject the conservative elders who are in charge. Initially I took a comparatively moderate stance. I did nothing.

The redeeming factor for me was that most traditions and rituals do not occur in the synagogue but rather within the family: at home, around the dinner table. Consequently I celebrated my Jewishness in our home, where the rabbis could not dictate to me what to do. I stopped looking for approval from others. I made it a habit to study the *Torah* and the *Halacha*, (the Jewish Law). The more I learned, the more spirituality I found, side by side with the increasing anger I felt at being excluded from the community to which I should have belonged.

This is how I became interested in finding out what alternatives other women turned to in order to satisfy their need for spirituality and social fulfilment.

Part B: Jewish Women's Search for Affiliation and Esteem

Paula Hyman has said, "woman who has, throughout her life, come in contact with a synagogue whose ritual is reserved for men, gets the message: she is not needed there. Quite literally, she does not count" (cited in Koltun 1976: 110).

Remembering my search for a neighbourhood synagogue to satisfy my need

for affiliation, and realising that officially I could never be fully affiliated to the community to which I belonged by birth, I looked around at my fellow Jewish women. I wanted to find out how they satisfied their need for belonging. I noticed that some made themselves part of the congregation as the servers of tea and cake at the *brochah teas* (the breaking of bread, and tea, that follow the religious services), but that many others were active in secular Jewish women's groups which operated independently. In these groups the women were able to develop a sense of affiliation by working together for a common purpose, gaining esteem through recognising their achievements. In the organisations which they had created, then, women belonged to a group for whom they counted and by whom they were needed. This phenomenon can be explained if we understand Abraham Maslow's theory of the hierarchy of needs.

Abraham Maslow, a transpersonal psychologist, developed a holistic-dynamic theory of human motivation (Maslow 1970: 35–58). He suggests an ascending hierarchy of human needs: from the fundamental requirements of survival, which he calls *basic needs*, to our need for meaning and spiritual fulfilment, which he calls *being needs*. He proposes that, in most cases, lower needs relating to requirements for physiological survival, like air, food, warmth and shelter, must be met before people can put energy into satisfying even just slightly higher needs, such as safety needs: for security, stability, and freedom from anxiety and chaos.

If both physiological and safety needs are satisfied, Maslow suggests that there will emerge the love and "belongingness" needs. At this stage a person feels hunger for affectionate relations and "for a place in his group or family, and he will strive with great intensity to achieve his goal. He will want to attain such a place more than anything else in the world ... Now he will feel sharply the pangs of loneliness, of ostracism, of rejection, of friendlessness, of rootlessness" (ibid: 43).

It is at this level, I found, that opportunities for women frequently fall short. This level of needs has always easily been satisfied for men. Through the workplace, regiment or football team, the drinking place, meeting place or religious gathering, it is easy for them to be with a group and feel part of it. But woman's life has often been restricted to the home and the immediate family circle, and her need for "belongingness" – i.e. affiliation – is dependent on the immediate family to which she belongs through marriage. To Jewish women this issue is problematic, as their need for "belongingness" to the Jewish community – as full members who count and are counted – is denied to them. Maslow suggests that "[i]n our society the thwarting of these needs is the most commonly found core in cases of maladjustment and more severe pathology" (ibid: 44). So why is it that not all Jewish women display maladjustment symptoms? I suggest that Jewish women found another outlet for their need for affiliation: They formed their own organisations in which they were, and are,

fully counted members.

The need for esteem

Once the need to belong is fulfilled, Maslow suggests, we have a desire for self-esteem and for esteem and respect by others. There are, in fact, two slightly different aspects here. The first is the desire to achieve, to be adequate, competent, and even master whatever we are busy with in order to gain confidence. The other aspect is the desire to be recognised as competent, as proficient, an expert, and thus gain reputation and prestige.

When this need is satisfied, people are often restless until they fulfil their potential – what Maslow calls *self-actualisation*. (Maslow 1970: 46). For women, it is the opportunity to experience life fully, not just within the home, and to develop their own unique values and capacities, not just those that are of benefit to the husband or family. The need in women for self-realisation was articulated as early as 1930 by Golda Meir, the woman who was successfully to challenge men in the political arena and become Prime Minister of the State of Israel. "Inevitably," she said, "the modern woman asks herself: Is there something wrong with me if my children don't fill up my life? Am I at fault, if after giving them, and the one other person nearest to me, a place in my heart, some part of me still demands to be filled by activities outside the family and the home? Can we today measure our devotion to husband and children by our indifference to everything else?" (Gelber 1995: 59).

The importance of self-actualisation is highlighted by Maslow's warning to his students: "If you deliberately plan to be less than you are capable of being, then I warn you that you will be deeply unhappy for the rest of your life" (Maslow 1973: 36).

This paper proposes that, initially, affiliation to women's organisations provided Jewish women with an immediate sense of belonging. However, continued engagement in the organisations' activities provided them with the opportunity to excel in what they did, to improve their organisational skills and other abilities – so that not only could they feel "belongingness", they also gained esteem and fulfilment. Now, according to Maslow, having all these needs met opens the way to the next stage: reaching for the "beyond" and aspiring to understand the universe. Maslow calls this highest stage the desire to Know and Understand (Maslow 1970: 48). This is the final stage: *the need for transcendence*. It is more than the desire for personal self-fulfilment, it is the desire to experience life as sacred, to search for the divine. Its significance for this paper is that, as the higher needs are not usually dealt with until the lower needs are satisfied, and since Jewish women can never fully satisfy their lower needs within the Jewish religious institutions, they can reach for transcendence via an alternative route, i.e. their affiliation to Jewish women's organisations.

How did Jewish women in general, and, more specifically, how did Jewish

women in South Africa, satisfy their need for affiliation, for recognition and self-fulfilment?

Historical Background

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In the Eastern European *shtetls* from which they had emigrated, Jewish women were constantly occupied with trying to satisfy their two basic needs: physiological survival and the need for safety. In the busy life of caring for children, feeding their family, fulfilling the *kashrut* requirements (special dietary laws), preparing for the Sabbath, and frequently supporting the family to enable the husband to study the holy books, they had little time or energy to search for identity, purpose or affiliation. Moreover, the rabbis had closed the door to women even before they had a chance to aspire to these. "For much of Jewish history women were denied access to the intellectual life of the community, which centred around study of the sacred texts ... The rabbis assumed that, as a practical matter, the vast majority of women would be absorbed in domestic responsibilities for most of their adult lives ..." (Barak Fishman 1993: 101). But there was another reason for excluding women from study and public worship: "Women's physical attractions were perceived as a sexual snare for men" (ibid). Few women had the opportunity to study the holy books like Yentl (in the story by Bashevis Singer), who adopted a man's guise in order to satisfy her need for intellectual pursuits and spirituality; but this does not mean that the desire wasn't there. Rabbinic *Responsa* of the Middle Ages revealed the frustration felt by women over their limited lives (Hellig 2000: 39). Secular Jewish literature of the 19th century described their unhappiness at arranged marriages, their limited education, and the lack of control over their own lives (Heschel 1995: xiv). It was only at the time of the Enlightenment and the accompanying general questioning of the authority of religion, that rabbinic authority weakened (Hellig 2000: 39).

Gradually the position of Jewish women began to change. Women whose families were able to provide them with shelter and safety, thus satisfying their basic needs, began to look for more from life. As urban, middle-class, emancipated Jews in central Europe progressed up the social and economic ladder, their women – whose social position precluded them from employment, and whose femaleness precluded them from any meaningful role in the religious community – sought opportunities to improve themselves intellectually and spiritually through social organisations. Since they did not have access to men's study groups, which centred on the study of the holy books, they could find such opportunities only in a secular group. The barring of women from certain Jewish institutions caused many of them to reject their Jewish identity alto-

gether, but this was not necessarily a wise choice: rejecting all that they knew and held dear resulted in a vacuum. Consequently, they began to move out and assimilate. As Barry Rubin points out: "No matter how secular they [the older generation] became, they could look back on a childhood in that universe of customs and sensibility. However, the new generation had no such memories. They were rebelling against a spiritual vacuum and symbols too stripped of meaning to merit respect" (1995: 36). They wanted something to fill this vacuum and provide them with esteem and self-actualisation which would, ideally, lead to spirituality. They needed an organisation to which they could belong, an organisation without the trappings of a religious establishment from which they felt excluded as a result of their femaleness, and by virtue of their desire to be more like 'the other'.

That there was such a need was shown by the development, in the mid 19th century, of women's movements. A study by Maya Fassmann (Zeller 1998: 2) of Jewesses in the German Women's Movement from 1865 to 1919 shows that these came from the German-Jewish bourgeoisie which was then undergoing assimilation. That they faced much anti-Semitism is abundantly clear from statements quoted in the study, such as: "Everywhere in the women's movement Jewesses are doing all the talking," and "Our women must notice that the women's movement is anti-German, full of foreign, poisonous spirit. Who are the women who are doing all the talking here? With few exceptions, non-Germans, Orientals" (Katinka von Rosen; cited in Zeller 1998: 3). These Jewish women who were described as "non-Germans," however, with a cultural background of ideas of *tzedakah* (charity) and the need to help the less fortunate, are acknowledged as having made a major contribution to the development and practice of German social work that grew out of these movements.

For Jewish women who did not wish to assimilate, who did not wish to face rejection as a result of non-Jewish sentiments, Jewish national organisations that could provide opportunities for status within the Jewish community, and a form of spirituality, had a strong appeal. Women could learn about their Jewish identity in a secular manner; and their desire for transcendence could be channelled into an idealistic desire to return to Zion, or to achieve the perfect society through socialism. "To a large degree Jewish-nationally orientated women desired strongly to work as partners with Jewish-nationally orientated men. They wished to raise Jewish consciousness, to instil Jewish pride and to forge a modern Jewish identity based on the principles of Jewish nationalism" (Gelber 1995: 54). Women's Zionist groups were active long before Theodore Herzl gave the movement political acceptability in Basel in 1897 (ibid). The *Miriam Association of Jewish Young Ladies* was founded in Vienna in 1885; the *Moria* (established in Vienna, 1891) studied Jewish national literature and history, and the protection of modern Jewish family life. *Western Women's Tent* (England, 1891) helped the colonisation of Palestine; *Judea's Daughters* (Berlin, 1895)

aimed to intensify Jewish self-awareness and to stimulate love of Jewish ideals. They provided group affiliation, education, intellectual stimulation, opportunities to meet other women and to gain status and esteem. The names of these groups themselves indicate Jewish identification and spirituality – yet these feminist movements often tended to alienate the women from traditional Jewish life by the rejection or neglect of Jewish holidays and customs. Both Zionism and socialism were idealistic movements in the forefront of women's rights. Gelber notes that "Jewish nationalism, specifically Zionism, was viewed by many at the turn of the [20th] century as a progressive forward looking ideology, which could provide women with equal opportunity and with a special ideological function" (ibid: 54).

The early Zionist groups had many debates about the role of women, whose equality was seen by male thinkers as being mainly in educating the nation and setting the moral tone for the national soul. Women's function was to instil the correct national ideas in their children and turn the men's theories into practicalities. Long before Western societies had agreed to enfranchise women, however, Herzl, in his Utopian novel *Altneuworld*, imagined a Zionist society with total legal and civil enfranchisement of women. In the First Zionist Congress in Basel in 1897 there were official women delegates who were able to vote – this was at a time when, in Western countries, not only could women not vote, but they were not even allowed to belong to public organisations. Furthermore, each congress included a special report on the status and activities of the women's organisations. On the ideological level, then, gender equality was achieved, yet in practice the position of women – even in these movements – was one of constant struggle for recognition and equal opportunity.

South African Jewish women's search for affiliation, esteem and self-actualisation

What about the position of the Jewish women in South Africa, women in transition, trying to find roots in the new land to which they had come?

The Cape Town Jewish community dates officially from 1841 when the first religious service was held – although isolated Jews had been living there long before. The role of their women was too insignificant to be recorded, but there must have been some Jewish women because there was a Jewish wedding in 1844. The first Jewish bride to be married in a synagogue was one of the eight daughters of Sloman, himself among the original founders of the community. His daughters were involved in the synagogue, but in a way considered suitable for Victorian women: they had provided the vestments and curtains suitably embroidered.

The first women's group in Cape Town was the *Ladies Association*, established by the Cape Town Hebrew Congregation in 1895 (Abrahams 1955).

This group was still within the ambit of the religious establishment; and most of its aims were activities suitable for ladies whose role in society was to look after the aesthetic side of the community and perform acts of *tzedakah* (charity work). Its aims and objects were to:

> beautify the Synagogue and to promote the attractiveness and impressiveness of the services, to supervise the training of an efficient choir, to decorate the Succah, to provide for the adequate equipment of the schools, and to supply prizes for the pupils; to visit the sick in their homes and in the hospitals, and to minister to their wants; to search out and enquire into cases of distress, and to obtain means for their relief; to provide vestments for the dead and flowers for the graves in the cemetery (ibid: 100).

These activities must have filled a need because, within six months, there was a membership of 117 and a healthy bank balance. The women ran their association efficiently but were patronised by the members of the brother organisation, the *Cape Town Jewish Philanthropic Society*. In August 1897 they rebelled and refused to allow the men to dictate to them how to spend their funds. The men apologised and agreed to consult them in future (Schrire 1993: 87).

The 19th century Jewish community had come either from Britain or from Germany, and had assimilated into the dominant English-speaking culture, but from 1880 Jews from Eastern Europe – mainly Lithuania – began to immigrate. They were Yiddish-speaking with a strong Jewish identity. The 1904 census showed that there were 8708 male and 2959 female persons of Russian origin in Cape Town (Bickford-Smith 1981). The preponderance of males arose because the men in the family emigrated first, sending for their womenfolk once they had become settled. Language and custom acted as a bar to integration into the new society in which the women did not feel comfortable. Culturally and linguistically, the new immigrants were far removed from the assimilated Anglo-German ladies of the *Ladies Association*. As strangers in the country, they felt the need to supply the missing sense of community, affiliation and group social support. For the men, this could be found in the synagogue *minyan* (ritual quorum); for the women, the development of women's groups would provide a means of identification and affiliation; and Zionism was a cause they had brought with them from the 'old country'.

Unfortunately the Zionist organisation, *Dorshei Zion*, like the synagogue, was for men. They turned down a proposal to allow women to attend meetings at which inspiring speakers were to talk. For new immigrants, lectures were a cheap form of entertainment and one that fitted their culture of learning. Unable to attend the lectures, the women sought to have their own society.

"The [Dorshei Zion] committee as a whole was sceptical in regard to the need for or the possible accomplishments of a women's society" (Gitlin 1950: 47). Fortunately, one of their members, Moses Zuckerman, held views on the participation of women that were more enlightened than those of the majority of his colleagues. He believed that "if you want to make a success of an organisation, you should get the women in" (cited in Gitlin 1950: 47), and in 1901 his view prevailed and a women's Zionist society, the *Bnoth Zion Society*[1], was established in Cape Town. "Being the person responsible for the formation of the society," said Zuckerman, "I was determined to see it firmly established and I was invited to all their meetings. It was no easy task to interest the women. In spite of all the difficulties the 'Bnoth Zion' succeeded in pulling through" (ibid). It pulled through because, for the first time, the new immigrant women had an organisation that met needs not satisfied in their homes nor in their synagogues.

From the beginning, education was important to this organisation – as well as fund-raising and socialising. They had been excluded from lectures, now they were going to see to it that women and children were given opportunities to learn. By 1926 they had established the first Hebrew Nursery School against considerable opposition – from women as well. "Jewish education for girls was not regarded [as important] and for most the ability to read the Siddur [prayer book] without necessarily understanding it, to be familiar with the service in the synagogue, and the ability to follow in Mama's footsteps in the running of a Jewish home was as much as was required" (Clouts 1960: 71). These ideas were beginning to be challenged by women who wished to provide their children with opportunities that had been denied to them. Membership of the *Bnoth Zion Association* presented women with the chance to develop in many spheres. Although a secular organisation, it did not challenge religious orthodoxy, organising educational activities on Jewish festivals as well as on general topics of Jewish and Zionist interest. Women began to accept opportunities for self-actualisation and esteem as their right.

Traditional attitudes adapt slowly, however, and conservative men disliked the less restrictive attitudes. A letter in the *Zionist Record* (local Jewish newspaper) on 14 April 1916 complained that even the word *adultery* was now being coupled to Jewess. "Listen to the drawing room talk of Jewish women, look at their immodest dress; look at the novels our young Jewish girls read and you will be amazed and horrified." Twenty years later, in 1938, the same patronising attitude towards what was called the "leisured class" was expressed in the *SA Jewish Chronicle* (6 May):

> A good deal of attention has been drawn at the Zionist Conference to the work of the leisured class – the women. Though it can never be accepted that the modern woman

> is freed from her domestic responsibilities, yet it is a practical fact that the Jewish woman of today does make the time to devote herself with earnestness to the up-building of the national home. It was surprising to find at Conference to what degree their spokeswoman had to stress her claim to a full share of the work.

It is true that the members were the leisured class – women's place was, for most, still very much in the home. Women worked until marriage, then stayed at home and looked after the children. With poverty-stricken people desperate for work in South Africa, however, the women had the opportunity of employing domestic servants to assist in the running of the home, thus being freed for their morning meetings. At the same time, through the women's group, they were able to enjoy new interests and to define themselves beyond the household and motherhood.

Feodora Clouts recalled that when she took the chair in the 1920s she "found a small group of women completely dominated by the demands of the men and what they thought was right and proper. The activities at the time were circumscribed because the men had no respect for the women" (cited in Sherman 1983: 32). Men's expectations of the traditional female role were being threatened; and ever-present, but never clearly stated, "was the supercilious attitude of the male Zionists in regard to WIZO[2] work" (Gitlin 1950: 263–4), plus the realistic fear that their (male) structure would suffer if the women used their energies for their own women's organisation. (Their fears were justified in that, as the women's societies grew, the men's societies diminished.) Few groups give up power or prestige easily, but Feodora was not prepared to accept the status quo. When the *Dorshei Zion*, planning a reception for an important visitor, wrote to the *Bnoth Zion Association* asking them to provide tea,

> I said to the ladies of the committee "I think we must now demonstrate our ability to stand up for ourselves" and we wrote that we had no part in arranging the reception and we had no intention of providing tea! After these little demonstrations of our will to be on our own, the men got the message and they decided to have a representative of the Bnoth Zion at their meetings and in this way we came into the management of Zionist Affairs. The women had no difficulty in deciding and arranging what to do with the money they were able to raise (Schrire 1992).

By the 1920s the women were no longer insecure new immigrants and were less parochial in their interests. The dominant society in a country with class and

racial stratification was white English-speaking Protestants, and Jewish women were not entirely welcome. By 1929 a need was felt for an organisation to deal with the problems of Jewish life in South Africa as well as in Palestine. Consequently, Toni Saphra, a staunch advocate of women's rights, with the assistance of Advocate Morris Alexander, head of the Jewish Board of Deputies, established a nationwide association of Jewish women. It was called the *Union of Jewish Women*, modelled on the *World Union of Jewish Women*.

> A constitution was drawn up which included among its aims the promotion of the social, educational, spiritual and moral welfare of the Jewish woman, the co-ordination of Jewish women's organisations, the linking up with similar Jewish women's organisations in other countries, the reform of discriminatory Jewish laws, equality of status between men and women in the Jewish community, support for a Jewish national home in Palestine, and participation in general social welfare work (Strauss 1997: 4).

Like the *Bnoth Zion Association*, the *Union of Jewish Women* (UJW) was a secular organisation, run by women and operating within the parameters of the Jewish community. Through the organisation, the members could find a sense of identity and recognition, as well as opportunities to develop their potentialities – *self-actualisation* as Maslow terms it (Maslow 1973: 45). Significantly, this was achieved, not within the male dominated conservative religious establishment, but through a forward-looking women's organisation.

In her history of the UJW, Terry Strauss summed up the effect of the organisation on Jewish women when she remarked that the organisation helped to expand the women's range of activity away from their home, and broadened their opportunities. In addition, women together could achieve more than they could as individuals; consequently the organisation gave Jewish women the leverage to push for a more equal role for women in Jewish religious and communal life. Moreover, the UJW provided Jewish women with the means of participating in general and communal activities. It offered them an identity and a sense of camaraderie through the sharing of concerns and fears, and the discussion of their experiences as women and as Jews in a society that discriminated against both. For the first time, there was an organisation through which Jewish women of varying opinions could give expression to their ideas and ideals in relation to Jewish affairs and civic interests, and yet remain under one roof (Strauss 1997: 6,13).

As has already been implied, the UJW immediately started to challenge the status quo. One of the first fields they tackled was the male domination of religion, and the issue of women's rights in the synagogue. Women were not

allowed to vote, attend meetings, or be eligible for election to any synagogue committee. As a result of the UJW's efforts, however, by October 1932 the Cape Town Hebrew Congregation was admitting women to full membership, with the exception of their appointment to executive office – and the all-male citadel began to crumble. By September 1933, for the first time in the history of South African Jewry, women members were able to record their votes in all Jewish communal institutions.

The organisation extended its interest in equality for women outside the synagogue as well: fighting for, and winning, representation on the local committees of Jewish communal institutions such as the South African Jewish Board of Deputies, and the executive committees of various synagogues. The UJW also addressed the issue of discrimination against women in Jewish law, and worked closely with the *Council for the Amelioration of the Legal Position of the Jewess* in London and the *International Council for Jewish Women* (ICJW).[3] Efforts were made to re-interpret certain discriminatory laws, and UJW members travelled abroad to participate in conferences, address meetings, and organise petitions. As in the *Bnoth Zion Association*, education was emphasised as a means of raising women's status and enhancing their self-esteem. The UJW organised regular lectures and courses for their members; and developed a chain of pre-primary schools as well as a school for remedial education.

Another important concern for the movement, as for all Jewish women's groups, was *tzedakah*. As Jewish women became more secure, both within themselves and as members of the broader South African society – not just of the Jewish society – they began to address some of the issues of racism, poverty and ignorance that were part of South African life. No longer women in transition, they felt sufficiently at home in South Africa to criticise the running of that home, and to try to do something to improve it. In 1941, the UJW had begun to establish crèches for children of disadvantaged black mothers. This led to milk depots and soup kitchens; and work with the elderly, patients with cancer, the mentally ill, and with victims of rape and trauma.

By the mid-century, the women's capabilities and achievements were being recognised. At their 1948 Annual General Meeting, Rabbi Israel Abrahams remarked: "I am impressed not only by the diversity of your interests and undertakings but by their true catholicity – education in its broadest connotation; civics liberally understood; social service scientifically administered; a proper concentration of Jewish Endeavour but not to the exclusion of general South African and human causes" (cited in Strauss 1997: 16). Although the praise was well deserved, and was certainly well meant, it could be argued that this venerable rabbi would not have made those same remarks had it been a meeting of a union of Jewish men. Men were *expected* to have diverse and catholic interests and to do things in a proper and scientific way.

After 1948 the Nationalist government became entrenched, and their rigid

racist policies increasingly restricted opportunities for women to make contact outside their own racial pigeonholes. Racist laws became more and more oppressive. There were bannings, telephone tappings, house arrests, midnight raids, searches, and detention without trial for 12 days (1962), 90 days (1963), and then 120 days (1965). "All Jewish women were susceptible to the pernicious effects of racial and religious prejudice. Events had necessitated group alignments and those who were unaffiliated suddenly realised that their self-respect could only be maintained if they stood together as one in a milieu that was often perceived as hostile" (Strauss 1997: 13).

Jews featured prominently in the freedom struggle. Politicians and government-supporting newspapers were quick to point out that 23 of the 156 accused in the 1957 treason trial were white, of whom 15 (over 65%) were Jews, and that all five whites arrested at Rivonia in 1963 were Jewish. "Where does the Jew stand in the White struggle for survival" asked the Afrikaans newspapers. "When one is suspicious of a group, one judges it facilely by the deeds of its most extreme members. Hence [they] become, in the first place, not saboteurs but Jews who wish to undermine South Africa" (Richards; cited in Shimoni 1980: 234). These antagonistic feelings hardened after Israel voted against South Africa at the United Nations in 1961. Jews were being seen as disrupters of white supremacy from within, and, as supporters of Israel, betrayers of South Africa from without (Shimoni 1980: 341). President Verwoerd tried to link the South African Jewish community to Israel's vote, but after two years withdrew this and announced that he would not allow anti-Jewish feeling because of the vote.

The ridiculousness and rigidity of apartheid thinking was such that consternation could be produced when, in 1969, the visiting Israeli premier, Ben Gurion, turned to the Afrikaans cleric sitting next to him and asked him, "How do you explain the fact that Moses married a black woman?" (Gilbert 1998: 294). Ray Fine, the Cape Town chairlady, had to issue an avowal of loyalty to South Africa, saying that South African Jews, while linked to Israel by age-old ties of history, religion and sentiment, did not owe it any political allegiance, nor were they accountable for the actions of the State of Israel. Even charity was suspect. A town councillor queried a grant given to UJW to run a soup kitchen for poor blacks, in case they had ties to a subversive organisation. Multiracial concerts that the UJW had organised for orphans since 1944 were banned: it was against the law for black children to sit next to white children (Strauss 1997: 21).

Such suspicion, and the racist pigeonholing, made it difficult for Jewish organisations to work with women who were not categorised as fitting into their group. In 1974 Jimmy Kruger, the Minister of Justice, stated that "Jews, because of their dubious loyalties have no right to criticise South African laws" (cited in Hellig 1997: 38). The Jewish Board of Deputies, however, supported the women's efforts to work with women from other groups. They had adopted

a clear resolution at their conference in 1976, namely: "Every member of the Jewish community should strive for peaceful change, in particular for the elimination of unjust discrimination so that all regardless of race, creed or colour be permitted and encouraged to achieve the full potential of their capabilities and live in dignity and harmony." David Mann, the President of the Jewish Board of Deputies, told Prime Minister Vorster, "I believe that there is a new sense of urgency abroad in our land, a realisation that we must move away as quickly and effectively as is practicable from discrimination based on race or colour and that we must accord every man and woman respect and human dignity and the opportunity to develop to their fullest potential" (Saron 1977: 34). Given the extensive and oppressive government restrictions and detention clauses on the statute books, and the fact that the Jewish community was blamed both for the foreign policies of Israel and for the activities of the local Jewish leftists, it was difficult for the community to do much more.

Things have changed in South Africa, however. Respect, human dignity, and the opportunity to fulfil their potential – these are what women have always wanted; and now at the beginning of the new millennium, they are all possible. Post-apartheid South Africa is proud to have adopted one of the most democratic constitutions in the world. The 1996 Bill of Rights has guaranteed equality to all and prohibited discrimination against anyone on grounds which include race, gender, pregnancy, marital status, ethnic or social origin, colour, sexual orientation, age, disability, religion, conscience, belief, culture, language and birth. Following the adoption of the Constitution, it was agreed that one of the most discriminatory laws against Jewish women, i.e. the divorce law, was unconstitutional. In religious law, only a man can grant his wife a divorce. Previously a Jewish man could divorce his wife in the civil court, but refuse to give her a *get* – a religious divorce – thus preventing her from remarrying in the synagogue, and ensuring that any child from a civil marriage would be regarded within the Jewish community as a *mamzer*.[4] Some men would extort large sums from the woman for her freedom to remarry. Under the new law, which is unique within the Jewish world, no civil divorce will be granted until the court is shown that the husband has given his wife a *get* (Reisenberger 1999: 43–49).

In the civil arena, the social status of South African Jewish women has undergone a transformation as well. No longer are they in a state of transition, but fully absorbed into the society, including parliament. The social changes that have occurred in the field of gender equality have enabled women to pursue virtually any career or lifestyle they desire. Even Maslow's ultimate stage, that of a search for transcendence, is within our reach – certainly within the minority Progressive Movement, in which there is full equality, and in which, since the 1970s, women can be ordained as rabbis. However, within the majority Orthodox synagogue movement change is less likely. Nevertheless, Jewish women are becoming increasingly vocal in their criticism of their position,

even within the Orthodox communities. We are witnessing the beginning of change: "The inclusion of Orthodox women as leaders in the outreach enterprise demonstrates their increased importance within their community. Although their creative endeavours are still limited by traditional norms, they are not just passive recipients, even in such traditionally male spheres as the creation of theology" (Myers and Litman 1995: 71). Blu Greenberg sees Orthodox women as being in the process of asserting themselves in women's only groups like prayer or *Torah* study groups. She believes that women should form subcommunities alongside the larger communities where they could lead the services and be called up to read the *Torah*. Some communities have instituted female rites of passage like the naming of baby girls and more meaningful *bat mitzvah* ceremonies.

The role of women in the spiritual, liturgical and intellectual spheres is in the process of being redefined and there is a shift from the private to the public realm (Greenberg 1981). In America a few female 'religious mentors' have been appointed, but these women are not counted as members of a prayer quorum nor can they lead prayer services, sit on a rabbinic court, or serve as a religious witness (Wiener 2001). Cape Town is far from the well points of such ferment, and transition is slower, but it is beginning. Women's *Rosh Chodesh* groups have developed in Cape Town, where all-female groups conduct religious services for themselves and even read from the *Torah*.

It is not equality, it is not even separate but equal, but it is a start on the road to full acceptance as equals. Having attained the possibility of meeting our needs for affiliation and acceptance, recognition and achievement, and of fulfilling our potential, we are now free to search for the Divine.

Notes

1 "Bnoth Zion" means literally "the daughters of Zion".

2 Women's International Zionist Organisation

3 This council co-ordinated activities for Jewish women worldwide, and the women's Zionist organisations had also played a leading role in its establishment. The ICJW established a productive Jewish-Zionist context for their self-realisation as Jewish women and for the development of a positive personal Jewish identity in the Diaspora.

4 A *mamzer*, in Judaism, is a child born out of incestuous or adulterous copulation, with terrible consequences, such as that the child can never join the Jewish faith, neither by marriage nor conversion.

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