

SOCIO-POLITICAL CHANGE IN SOUTH AFRICA: THE RESPONSE OF THE JOHANNESBURG JEWISH COMMUNITY

WCJCS Conference
**"COMMUNITIES IN TRANSITION:
Challenges & Opportunities for the Communal Professional"**
19 – 20 November 2008. Israel

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Slide 1

INTRODUCTION

Ladies and gentlemen, Shalom. My colleague, Rodney Richard and I are very pleased to participate in this conference. It is an opportunity to share and learn and it gave us an opportunity to reflect, together with many colleagues in our community, on the process that we have engaged in.

We hope that in presenting our experience to you that you may find some commonalities and issues that may be of benefit to your communities.

Our contexts are very different but we share experiences of crisis, crisis management, our heritage of survival, being a minority within a larger society, concerns regarding perceptions of Jewish communities and guarding against anti-semitism and others.

Leaders in our community want to emphasize that the challenges to be described were not threats to the Jewish community in particular and that the socio-political changes have impacted on the whole country.

It was felt by them that the community has made an extremely effective adaptation to the changes it has faced... "through tough and challenging conditions". It is believed that this has always been a remarkably strong, self-sufficient, well organized and well structured community and that it has in the past and will continue to function very effectively.

This does not imply that there are not periods of significant distress, despair and despondency. Such a time was in early 2008. The whole country was reeling from an energy crisis of serious proportion, xenophobic attacks against people from neighbouring African countries, political conflict and upheaval. Simultaneously the Jewish community of Johannesburg suffered the murder of three community members over a three month period. One man was very well known

and respected, another was killed for his tallis bag whilst he was on his way to shul, and the third was an elderly woman who was on her way to hire a wheel-chair for her ill husband.

This situation rocked the community to such an extent that emigration and aliyah figures increased significantly and scores of people felt that they could no longer live in the country.

However even after periods such as this one, the majority of the community grieves, experiences uncertainty, but then adapts. Most people have to do this and it is this capacity of the individuals and organizations concerned that we will focus upon.

At the end of the presentation I will share our thoughts on the applicability of our experience to other contexts.

THE JOHANNESBURG JEWISH HELPING HAND/CHEVRAH KADISHA

Rodney and I work within the Johannesburg Chevrah Kadisha/Jewish Helping Hand Society. It has been widely acknowledged in the community that this organization has led the way in meeting the needs of the community in a highly effective manner in the past decade and more. We therefore believe it is a useful case example to present to you. We will therefore be presenting from the perspective of the Johannesburg Jewish community, where the largest number of our community live , and will simultaneously share the responses of other sectors in the community who responded in similar spirit and vein.

Slide 2 The CK/JJHHS

Our organization the CK is a strange concept for many of you. Unlike most Chevrah Kadisha's we care for the living as well as the departed. The organization which is now 120 years old provides a very wide scope of services and the majority of Jewish welfare and health services fall under its' umbrella.

It provides residential and community based services for children, adults, aged people, and people with intellectual disability, mental illness, an employment service, financial assistance a bereavement service and many other services. It has a budget for 2009 of R200 million.

THE NATURE OF THE CHALLENGE and RESPONSES MADE BY THE JHB JEWISH COMMUNITY

Slide 3 – pics only

The ending of apartheid and building of a non-racial democracy has been a period of both success and significant challenge for all South Africans. During apartheid the country's budget and services catered to the white minority. Post apartheid there has to be redistribution of resources to cater to the 40 plus million black majority as well.

As was previously noted, challenges that resulted have not affected the Jewish community specifically. Nevertheless the community has made several responses to assist members of its' own and the broader community. They can be categorized as follows:

Slide 4 – health care, crime and violence

1. Health Care

Falling standards of health care resulted in the CK providing:

- Financial assistance and private health care for life saving and other treatment, access to medication, an expanded community medical centre, hospital liaison and visiting, a community mental health service and oxygen in electricity supply emergency situations.
- A community group initiated a private medical rescue service, an ambulance and pre-admission service...'Hatzolah' which has saved many lives

2. Crime and violence

Urban crime, assaults, robbery and murder increased significantly and despite some successful interventions by both government and the community it continues to be the most negative feature of people's lives.

The Jewish community is affected in the same way as all communities, but tend to become very distressed, angry and despondent when one of its' members is targeted. It has also resulted in significant stress and trauma.

The CK developed:

- A trauma debriefing service, A trauma response unit, 24 hour helpline and has had to spend significantly to protect its' facilities and people within them

Other responses by the community were:

- The SAJBD developed the CSO - Community Security Organization which provides security at Jewish communal events and addresses other issues regarding community security
- Chief Rabbi Dr W Goldstein developed a very successful initiative...CAP – Community Active Protection. This was in response to a dysfunctional police force and criminal justice system. CAP has reduced contact crimes significantly at an 80-90% level in the areas in which it operates - and has been resoundingly appreciated

Slide 5

3. Changes in living standards, education and employment.

- Many urban areas deteriorated and due to various factors became very unsafe.
 - The CK relocated many members of the community from unsafe areas and into predominantly Jewish areas which were also more costly. Residential facilities were established and refurbished.
 - Increase in the cost of food, education and accommodation led to increased financial assistance to those who required it.
 - As many people have over-spent and accumulated much debt a new service known as Budget Wise has been developed for debt counseling and mediation.
- Due to the racial desegregation of the labor market and new legislation, formerly advantaged people had more difficulty securing employment.

- i. The CK established an employment agency – Staffwise, and later on developed protected work opportunities for people who lacked the ability to be successful in the open labor market

General deterioration in public services results in much frustration. There have been examples where citizens fund, for example, broken pavements as it is unlikely that public services will do so.

4. Education

Due to significant changes within the general education system the majority of Jewish families prefer a Jewish education. Although this is positive on many levels, they cannot all afford a private education. Additionally all private educational institutions lost government funding. Our education sector has therefore experienced significant financial challenges.

- The CK has responded by contributing to a subsidy programmes for the children of our clients
- The education sector embarked on significant restructuring and fund-raising ventures. They have maintained their level of excellence and it is believed that we have the largest enrollment of Jewish learners in comparison to other Jewish communities in the Diaspora

Slide 6

5. Revenue

The aforementioned will have made it obvious that financial obligations have risen significantly for Jewish individuals and organizations. Responses have been:

- Rationalization and amalgamation which was seen in both the welfare sector and across other Jewish structures. Within the welfare sector many major Jewish organizations joined the CK
- .Organizations such as the SAJBD, SAZF, IUA_UCF and Union of Jewish Women came together under one roof and pooled their administration needs.- Beyachad
- Clearly the community has had to embark on wide scale and vigorous fundraising to meet the deficits caused by loss of government funding and development of new services This has been successfully achieved and communal structures are to a large extent in a financially stable situation
- Ex patriate members of the community living abroad have also contributed financially to our organizations

Aside from responding to the needs of the Jewish community there has long been a tradition of engaging with the broader community and government

6. Engagement within the broader community and with Government

Slide 7

- Individual members of the Jewish community have always made a significant contribution to all fields of endeavour in South Africa such as the arts, literature, law, business, medicine, science, education, sport. Some of these people such as Helen Suzman, Professor Philip Tobias and Nadine Gordimer enjoy a world-wide reputation. It has often been said that there are an inordinate amount of Jewish people amongst South Africa's heroes in relation to the size of the community. Colloquially it has been said that "the community punches well above its weight".
- There have always been many inter-faith and bridge building initiatives between the Jewish community and groups in the broader community. Effective relationships with government figures are maintained mostly by the SA Jewish Board of Deputies, the political arm of the community who enjoy a positive relationship with the State. At the same time there is the challenge of confronting Government's political views on the state of Israel. The ANC have been longtime sympathizers with the Palestinians and the ANC struggle has been likened to the struggle of the Palestinians. This has led to frequent comparisons between Israel and Apartheid South Africa. This is vigorously addressed through the efforts of the SAJBD and the SA Zionist federation and in particular its dedicated media team.

Slide 8

7. Social responsibility

- The Jewish community has responded in many meaningful ways to the social, welfare, educational and economic problems experienced by all South Africans, in particular poverty and its' implications experienced by previously disadvantaged people. Many of these initiatives have been in existence for a few decades, assisting those who suffered under apartheid.
- Social development programmes increased significantly following the abolition of apartheid. To quote Chief Rabbi Goldstein: "The teachings of our sages require us to share in hopes and dreams of the new South Africa, and to do more than that. They call upon us to actively contribute to its' progress and welfare- *Tikkun Olam* – in SA this means alleviating poverty and redressing the injustices of the past.'
- In addition to the concept of *Tikkun Olam* the Jewish community understands that as a minority within a minority and a successful one at that, it could be seen by the wider population as elitist, aloof and insular. Inter-faith initiatives are therefore hoped to build positive inter-faith relationships.

The CK provides several programmes addressing:

- Literacy development through the contribution of elderly volunteers, development of skills in the child and youth care field, bereavement services for those affected by loss in relation to HIV/AIDS, life enrichment for intellectually disabled people.

Other sectors in the community are very active in this area:

- Many community organizations offer programmes to reduce the impact of poverty, illiteracy, gender specific abuse, malnutrition et al. All services are based on empowerment of individuals and development of self-reliance and sustainability. These programmes have been in existence for many decades and are very well established.
- Additionally under the patronage of former President Nelson Mandela and the late Chief Rabbi Harris an outreach organization, Ma-Africa Tikkun was initiated and continues to offer significant upliftment programmes
- Specific crises are addressed in meaningful ways. For example, in May 2008 South Africa experienced a shocking wave of xenophobic attacks against people from other African countries. The SAJBD led a co-ordinated, wide-scale humanitarian response by various groups in the community to assist those displaced by these attacks and continues to work with other groups in this effort.
- After the Tsunami in Thailand the SJBD organized a successful effort for SA Jewish victims and a rescue mission for all affected South Africans

Having described the responses of the Jewish community we turn to exploring what factors seem to have contributed to this positive adaptation to difficult times:

CONTRIBUTING FACTORS TO ADAPTATION

Slide 9

- Communal leadership has been strong and resilient. It needed to remain optimistic as well as realistic, contain hysteria, be proactive and not succumb to a sense of being immobilized.
- Religious leadership has been very effective. The late Chief Rabbi Cyril Harris led the community through the most turbulent times and was inspiring, charismatic and modeled inter-faith dialogue. His successor, Chief Rabbi Warren Goldstein has contributed a great deal to the positive image others have of the Jewish community. He has also led the community's response to the most recent crises. The words of the current Chief Rabbi that one must be realistic but not catastrophise is definitely a very important strategy. The CAP security programme was his initiative as was the Bill of Responsibilities. Rabonim in general have assisted members of the community to cope with stress, trauma and change.
- The Lithuanian composition of the community may lend a culture of collective action and caring for its members. The vast majority of South African Jewry are of Lithuanian origin
- The pioneering, creative and entrepreneurial spirit of the Johannesburg community, which had its roots in the early days of the Gold Rush.
- The growth of Jewish identity and religiosity is a significant strength. Strong Jewish values, structures, a single Beth Din and a close relationship between Rabonim all lend strength and cohesiveness.
- The vitality and responsiveness of our socio-cultural organizations such as the Jewish media, Women's, Students' and other cultural organizations lend purpose and a sense of connectedness to the community
- Collaboration between various sectors in the community as previously mentioned, viz the CK and Beyachad

Slide 10

Contributing factors to adaptation ctd

- Post apartheid SA provides the Jewish community with a greater sense of security on certain levels. It ushered in one of the world's finest democratic constitutions. Religious rights are protected in the Bill of Rights and SA Jews have enjoyed diminished and very low levels of anti-semitism in this period.
- There is officially an acceptance of both the existence of the local Jewish community and the right of Israel to exist. Recently the probable incoming President of SA, Jacob Zuma, stated government support for a 2 state settlement in the Middle East a position echoed on behalf of his predecessor, Thabo Mbeki at the United Nations.
- The fact that leadership and individuals have engaged very effectively within the broader community minimizes insularity and isolation, and contributes towards better inter-faith relationships
- It is felt that the response to the vast and varied needs of the people who suffered under apartheid have been and continue to be meaningful and contributes to positive relationships between the Jewish and broader community. It also enables the Jewish community to give expression to the desire of many people to contribute to building the new South Africa.

Slide 11

Contributing factors to adaptation – the Welfare sector

An analysis of the response of the welfare sector, viz the JJHHS is useful:

- It has never succumbed to despair or stagnation. On the contrary it was led by a sense and style of optimism, confidence and determination to develop
- Amalgamation of services facilitated synergy, and pooling of intellectual and other capital
- Amalgamated services retained their staffing with few exceptions
- There was much emphasis on service delivery, efficiency, accessibility and responding to unmet needs
- An emphasis on professional expertise and less of that of lay leadership
- Adaptation was facilitated within the organization – not by external expertise
- Significant growth in the credibility of the organization
- Very strong leadership and management
- Significant investment in empowerment of personnel

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Slide 12

Concluding comments

With hindsight leaders have reflected on some lessons learned:

- The education sector could have responded to the impending financial crisis in a more proactive and efficient manner
- Young leadership was relatively inexperienced and this has had some negative consequences.
- Whilst emigration has been a significant loss to the community it seems unlikely that the Jewish communal structures could have ameliorated this. To prevent emigration cannot be the responsibility of communal leadership in the face of criminal violence and threats to personal safety. Few leaders would take the responsibility to discourage people from emigrating. It became the stance of many Jewish organizations to state...”Go home or stay home” which was in support of making aliyah. Certain religious groups believe that they have a responsibility to stay in the country so therefore would not encourage emigration.

It is clear that the JHB Jewish community has survived and remains well served by its structures. It was and remains a very strong and organized community and is to be commended.

- To a large extent people feel that they adapted because they had to. Personal resilience to adapt is probably the single most important factor in surviving as is the ability to make meaning of a struggle and changed circumstances. This occurs simultaneous to and complementary to institutional adaptation – political, religious and spiritual, welfare and health, education, socio-cultural.
- My personal opinion is that the pre-morbid coping ability, or the coping ability prior to the crises, probably deeply impacts on the community’s ability to adapt.
- Adaptation inevitably involves gain as well as loss and loss of people through emigration and violence has been devastating for many. Emigration has increased in 2008 and this is expected to continue into 2009. This was in response to the political upheaval, Xenophobia and energy crisis of 2008. Emigration has cost the community many talented individuals, and many young families have left. Aside from causing a loss of talented individuals and causing a demographic shift, there is the psychological impact regarding loss of family and friends.
- Criminal violence remains the single most important factor determining the future for all in South Africa. As it is mostly directly linked to poverty the eradication of abject poverty and the gap between affluent and poor must be the major goal facing all South Africans.
- Provision of services to the Jewish community has been remarkable when one considers that the population has dwindled a great deal since the 70s. At that point the community numbered 116,000, and in 2005 was believed to be 75,000. The phrase that the community not only survived but thrived was frequently repeated.

- It is widely agreed that bar some unforeseen enormous disaster the SA Jewish community will continue to exist albeit smaller than several decades ago.
- Perhaps our Jewish heritage informs our survival..and as Moses said to Hashem...”we are a stiff-necked people”

Thoughts regarding applicability of our experience to other contexts

There are no doubt unique features of all our contexts and you are the best judges as to the applicability of our experience to your own situation.

However, in summary we feel that the following stands all communities in good stead for facing situations of threat:

- Preparedness in several areas:
 - Development and maintenance of effective working relationships both within and external to the Jewish community. Such relationships serve to enable collaborative action when needed and to preserve the image of the Jewish community within the larger community
 - Collaborations and coalitions both within the community and on an inter-faith level.
 - Engagement with leadership and organizations external to the community should facilitate co-operation during times of crisis
 - Social responsibility programmes beyond the Jewish community, demonstrating responsibility to the country as a whole
 - Leadership development, including training.
 - Development of leadership amongst youth
 - Development and maintenance of community security
 - Development of expertise in crisis management
 - Sound financial planning and management
 - Financial sustainability
 - Development of professional expertise
 - Development of and respect for personal resilience
- Responsiveness:
 - Provision of crisis oriented services – trauma support
 - Development of needed new services
 - Communicating consistently and speedily with the community in times of crisis
 - Contextualizing situations/ noting hard facts amongst panic and hysteria
 - Optimistic, confident and determined leadership

We hope that you have found this presentation of value to yourselves. It has been a helpful exercise for Rodney and I and it was an interesting research process to pose our questions to our colleagues. There has been little time invested in looking back and assessing the response. Perhaps this is because it is our nature to get on with the job/reach out/ go into survival mode very quickly and respond to all needs of the community.
Thank you.