

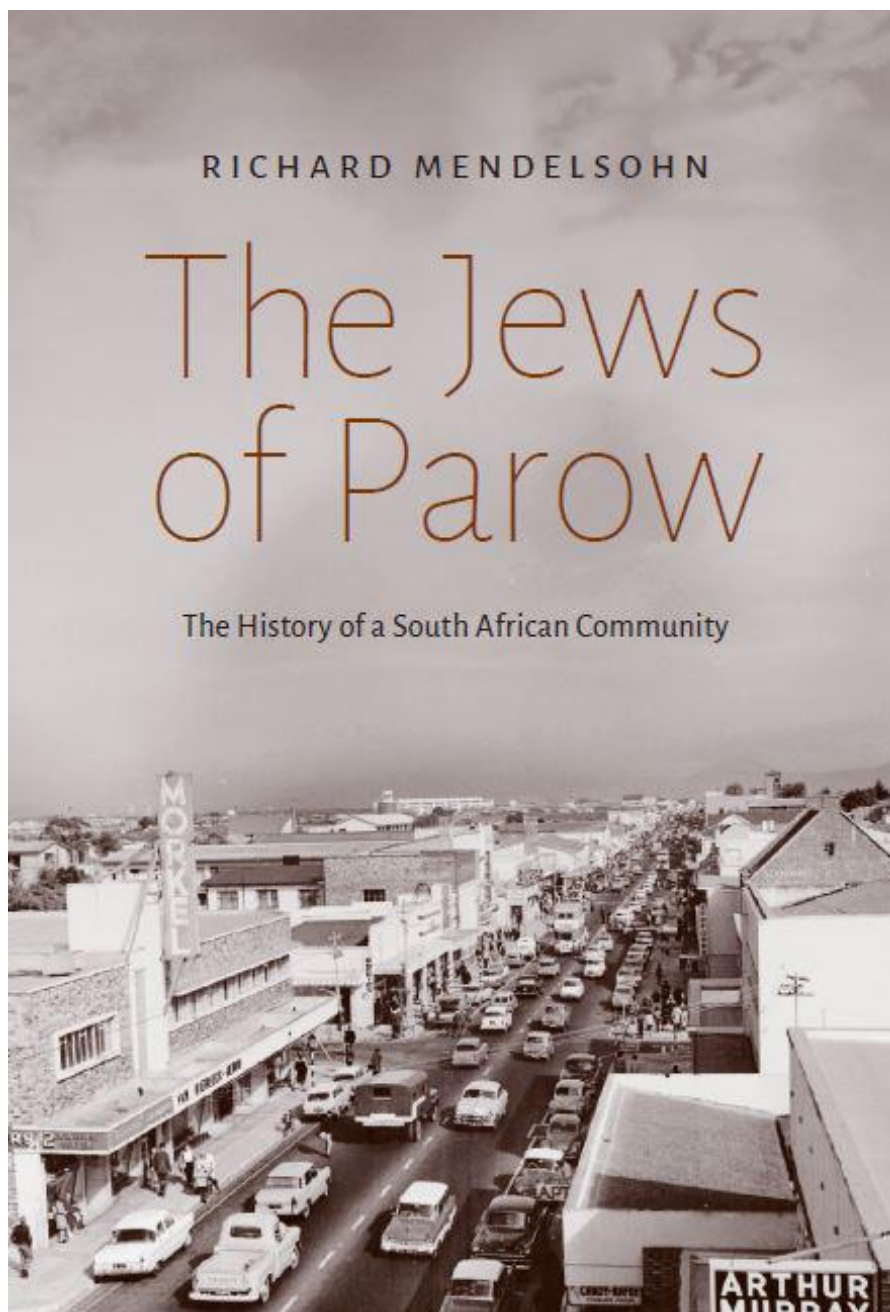
CHOL – Community History On-Line

A forum for those involved in preserving the footprint of Southern African Jewish community life in digital form

Community History On-Line

Newsletter #10

October 2024



Celebrating the Jews of Parow

The whole of this CHOL Newsletter #10 is dedicated to the Jewish community of Parow which has been well and truly celebrated in the last month.

Professor Richard Mendelsohn who has been central to all this, writes this report for the CHOL Newsletter:

September 2024 was an extraordinarily busy and exciting month for what was once the Jewish community of Parow.

A small suburban community on the unfashionable 'northern' edge of Cape Town, it never numbered much more than a hundred families and ceased to exist officially in 1993 when its synagogue was

deconsecrated.

Yet, despite its small size and its disappearance over three decades ago, it has had a remarkable afterlife thanks to the generosity and vision of one of its leading early family clans, the **Kaplans**

and **Kushlicks** who together founded **Cape Gate**, the international steel company which has a strong presence in South Africa and overseas.

After the closure of the synagogue, Mendel Kaplan arranged in the mid-1990s for the shipment to the newly constructed Shivtei Israel synagogue in Ra'Anana in Israel of the Parow shul's furniture, its seats, bimah and pulpit. A Parow Torah followed shortly afterwards. Two-and-a-half decades or so later, Oren Kaplan, Mendel's son and his successor in the business, came up with a similarly imaginative way of celebrating the community that had hosted the birth of the family business. The



elegant interior of Parow shul

Approaching the 95th anniversary of the foundation of Cape Gate in 1929, and the 50th anniversary of Yehudah Steel, the family's Israeli steel company, Oren conceived the idea of the Parow Project, a research project into the history of the Jewish presence in Parow.

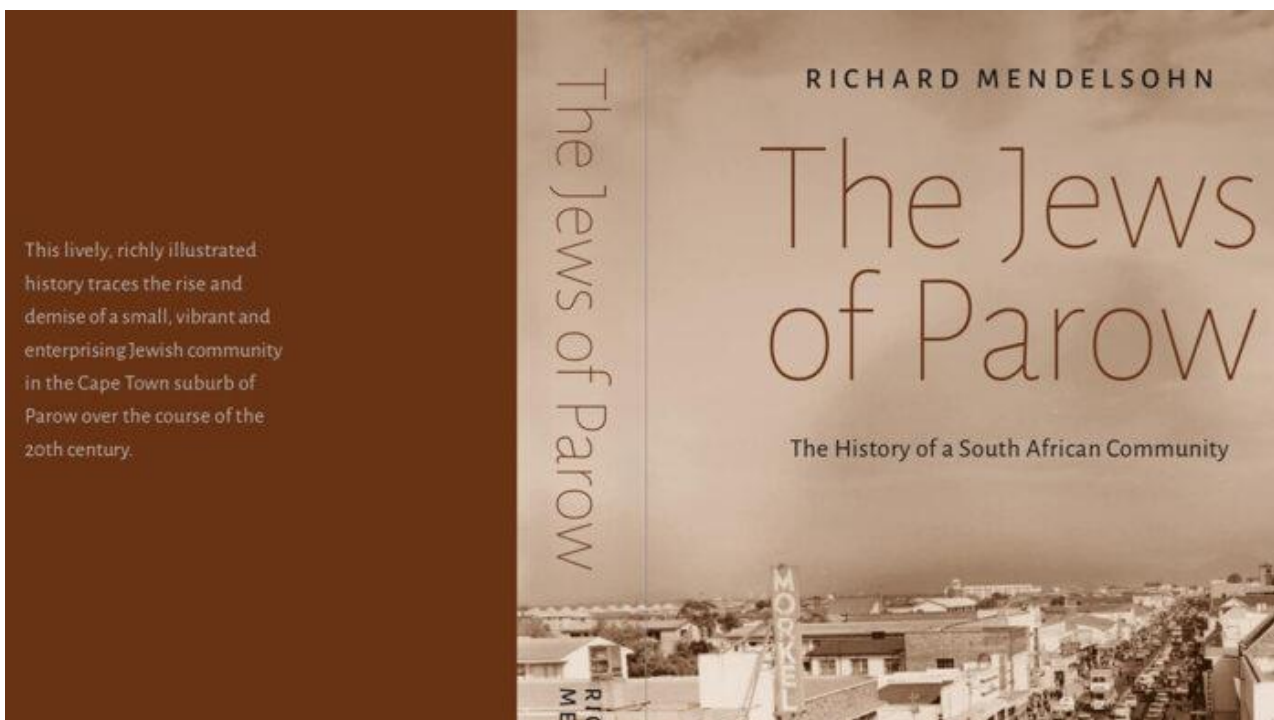
The triple outcomes of this multi-year project were publicly unveiled last month in both South Africa and Israel:

- **A richly illustrated book**, *The Jews of Parow. The History of a South African Community*, authored by the historian Professor Richard Mendelsohn of the University of Cape Town.
- **A lively and innovative exhibition** at the South African Jewish Museum in Cape Town, titled *Echoes of Parow. The Story of a South African Jewish Community*.
- **A comprehensive and voluminous website**, *The Jews of Parow*, housing the mountain of material discovered by the Parow project research team.

The book: *The Jews of Parow.* *The History of a South African Community*

For myself as the author, this was a deeply personal project since I had myself grown up in Parow in the 1950s and 1960s, the heyday of the Parow Jewish community. I have deep roots in Parow since my grandfather Heshel Daitsh was an early leader of the community during the interwar years. My late mother Enid was born and grew up in Parow in those years and returned to Parow at the beginning of the fifties where she and my father Dr Leonard Mendelsohn, a general practitioner, remained until 1995, and were among the very last Jews to leave the suburb.

I have previously co-authored (with Professor Milton Shain) a general history of South African Jewry, but here was an opportunity to explore at the local level, and in depth, a small typically South African Jewish community. The book argues that the Parow experience, while in some ways distinctive, is nevertheless an instructive microcosm of the South African Jewish experience at large. Parow's waxing and waning through the course of the twentieth century mirrors the broader trajectory of South African Jewry, its growth and recession, while the community's social, business and religious life is reflective of South African Jewish life at large.



This lively, richly illustrated history traces the rise and demise of a small, vibrant and enterprising Jewish community in the Cape Town suburb of Parow over the course of the 20th century.

Jews in Parow practised (or failed to practise) their religion, earned their livelihoods, and socialised together, as they did elsewhere. Hopefully readers familiar with the history and character of other Jewish communities in South Africa will see aspects of theirs represented in the Parow case.

The book explores:



Exterior of the Parow Shul opened 1951

- **The social, professional and business lives** of the Jews of Parow, where Jewish businesses once dominated commercial life along Voortrekker Road, the Parow main road, and where, in Parow Jewry's heyday most Parow residents were served by a 'Joodse Dokter'
- **The Jews of Parow's religious and recreational lives** with its uneven contest between prayer and play, with shul often taking second place to rugby and cricket at Newlands, and bowls and golf at the King David Country Club
- The Jews of Parow's cautious relationship with a conservative, predominantly **Afrikaans-speaking host society**
- The place of **Jewish women** in a patriarchal communal order;
- The ties, **including Zionism, ethnic solidarity and kinship**, that closely bound the community together.

The book is a work of collective biography: it tells many individual and family stories, including those of the founding matriarchs in the early twentieth century, who were forced by unhappy circumstances to raise their children on their own; the entrepreneurs, some of very humble origin, who built major industries; the shopkeepers, large and small, and their close relationships with their diverse customers; the doctors, lawyers and pharmacists, who once dominated Parow's professional life; and above all, Parow Jewry's remarkable and controversial rabbi, Benjamin Lipshitz, who served the community for three-and-a-half decades despite repeated efforts to oust him.

The book is available at the South African Jewish Museum in Cape Town.

The website: *The Jews of Parow*

<https://ibali.uct.ac.za/s/the-jews-of-parow/page/home>

The 'engine' of this cutting-edge website was imported from the United States and adapted for the purposes of the Parow project by IT experts at the University of Cape Town. It makes easily accessible to any visitors/enquirers the great volume of material collected over more than two years by the projects research team. These include:

- **Video of many of the interviews** Richard Mendelsohn conducted with those who grew up in Parow. These are indexed for easy access to the material they contain.
- **Photographs of the many pages** from the South African Jewish press, including the *South African Jewish Chronicle*, that contain Parow-related material. These span the decades from the 1930s to the 1960s. These have been 'tagged' so that individuals and events can readily be tracked down.
- **Photographs of all the pages of all the surviving minute books** over many years of the Parow (and later Tygerberg) Hebrew Congregation. Again, these have been 'tagged' so that individuals, events and themes can easily be tracked down.
- **A database of all property transactions** in Parow involving Jewish purchasers or sellers from the 1900s, when Parow was established, till the 1960s.
- **Documents from the Western Cape Archives** in Roeland Street about early Parow.
- **The military records**, from the archives of the South African National Defence Force, of Jewish service men and women linked to Parow, who served in the Second World War.

The website can be explored in a variety of ways, including via a detailed timeline and through extensive property mapping. (These are accessed to best effect through a laptop or desktop computer.) One of the most engaging and richest of these routes is the biographical section. The website includes individual entries for well over a hundred of the Jewish inhabitants of Parow. These include biographical entries, some of them extended where information is available, and linked documents that reveal aspects of their lives.

Here is a sampling, taken from the website, with entries drawing on the Parow book: Firstly: **Rachel Bloch** [Hebrew name: Rachel Hinda bat HaRav Yisrael

Rachel Bloch, 'Bobbe Rochel'

Rachel Bloch, 'bobbe Rochel', was a founding mother of the Parow Jewish community and the matriarch of the Bloch/Kaplan/Kushlick clan, which played a key role in Parow Jewish life from its foundations in the 1900s until its eventual disappearance in the 1990s.

Rachel was born to Israel and Gruna Groll in Riteve in the Kovno province of the Russian empire in 1882, a deeply inauspicious year for the Jews of the Pale of Settlement. In May of that year the Tsarist government enacted a series of harsh restrictions that, together with the pogroms of the previous year, set in motion a tidal wave of Jewish emigration from eastern Europe.



Growing up in an impoverished community, with minimal educational opportunities for girls and poor prospects, Rachel made an entirely natural decision to depart. She left for South Africa in 1905 at the age of 23, escorted on her journey as a single woman by a young *landsman* from the shtetl. Arriving in Cape Town in December, she was soon engaged to Isaac Bloch, an earlier arrival from Riteve. The couple, who had not known each other in their hometown, married in Maitland in March 1906. Isaac ran a store on the Parow main road, and the young couple lived in a home adjoining the shop. Rachel and Isaac soon had five children, one of whom died in early childhood. In addition to her household responsibilities, Rachel played an active part in the business.



Rachel and Isaac Bloch's children: Janie, Jesse, Sammy and Abe Bloch 1921

In 1914, before the outbreak of the First World War, which put a brake on Jewish emigration from the Pale, she brought out her pious widowed father Isaac Groll, formerly a cattle dealer, and her youngest sister, Rose. Both settled in Parow, with Rose soon marrying Meyer Stander, a local butcher and good family friend. Rachel's husband Isaac died of cancer at home in Parow in February 1920. He was 39 years old and left four children under the age of 12, Janie aged 11, Jessie aged 10, Samuel 8 and Abie 5. His 37-year-old widow would now have to raise these on her own and take sole charge of their modest business. Rachel was left with little more than an insurance policy for £500 that Isaac had taken out two years before and with £300 in monies owed by their customers. Somehow she struggled through the crisis with the support of her family, in particular her brother-in-law Max Stander and her father Israel Groll. Israel helped in the store despite lacking a common language with the customers, and so did the children despite their youth.

Rachel needed more help in the store than her young children and elderly father – who died two years after his son-in-law – could provide. The solution was to draw on short-term assistance from new arrivals who needed to learn the language and South African shopkeeping. Rachel would sign surety for these when they landed and provide them with board and lodging before they moved on. Rachel also eventually took on a manager.



When the position fell vacant in 1926, a young man from Wynberg called **Isaac Kaplan**, who had been considering emigration to Australia, applied for the job. The 20-year-old Isaac came to live with the Blochs, and fell in love with the younger daughter, Jessie. They were to marry in 1933.

The warm and hospitable family home Rachel Bloch created, with its streams of visitors, was fondly remembered by her daughters Janie and Jessie in interviews they gave in old age. Resourceful, cheerful and good-humoured, their mother was a *balebosta*, a skilled homemaker, who Janie says was endlessly active, at home and in the business. 'She did not have any time because when she didn't work in the shop she was doing other work, she was either sewing or knitting or doing other things ... My mother was an outstanding person, there wasn't a thing she couldn't make.'

Rachel Bloch was unusually knowledgeable for a Jewish woman of a generation that laid little stress on women's education. Janie says that her mother 'could read Hebrew and follow the service same as the men, and when she used to go to the synagogue she would sit and everybody would come to her to find the place; she knew Hebrew and she was educated practically like a boy.' Family lore has it that she had paid her brother Barnett to teach her in the shtetl.

Rachel Bloch's level of observance was much like that of many others of the immigrant generation. The imperative of making a living meant that strict Sabbath observance had to be sacrificed. The family store had to remain open on Friday evenings and Saturdays, prime shopping times. While the Sabbath was necessarily jettisoned, the principal festivals were observed, and while Isaac Bloch was alive, services in Parow were held in the Bloch home. But what was not compromised was *kashrut* in the home. Keeping kosher, Janie says of her mother, was 'very important in her life'. As for other women of her generation, *kashrut* had a special valency, a particular charge; it was at the heart of their Jewish identity.

In the 1930s Rachel was joined in her sometimes struggling business by her younger son Abe. When he married Helen Kleinman in December 1941 and they set up home in Hopkins Street, Rachel came to live with them as she did until shortly before her death a decade-and-a-half later. Till her married daughters Jessie Kaplan and Janie Kushlick moved from their nearby homes in Parow to the southern suburbs in the 1950s, Rachel would visit them on a daily basis.

Rachel, who had been in poor health for some time, passed away in June 1954. On a Sunday afternoon in March, just two months before her death, she and the community had collectively celebrated her long and close connection to the congregation. The occasion – reported at length in the *South African Jewish Chronicle* – was her presentation to the Parow shul of a Torah, the gift of gifts that a congregant can make.

In his speech lauding the guest of honour and wishing her 'a long and happy life', the president of the congregation, Julius Goodman, announced the inscription of Rachel Bloch in the Golden Book of the Jewish National Fund by the Parow Hebrew Congregation 'in token of her services to the Jewish cause and the presentation of the Torah...Mrs Bloch, in a touching reply, referred to her life-long ambition to present this Torah to the Congregation and that it was her own personal effort without any financial assistance from her children. She was proud and happy to have been spared to see this day and thanked all those present who were rejoicing with her.'

Rabbi Lipshitz, who had been commissioned by the donor to purchase the Torah on his recent visit to Israel, 'then traced the history of the Parow Congregation from its earliest days and recalled how Mrs Bloch and her late husband were responsible for maintaining the Jewish tradition in a village which in those early days was without all those civilised amenities which today are taken for granted. Mrs Bloch maintained a Jewish home in the face of adverse conditions and inculcated that Jewishness into her children, at the same time organising "Minyonim" in her home when the occasion demanded.'

Abe Bloch concluded the proceedings in 'a short but moving speech', thanking 'all those present, especially those relatives and friends who had come from all parts of the Western Province and one or two from as far afield as Johannesburg, for coming to assist in this crowning day of his mother's life'.

Two months after this 'crowning' moment, on 4 June, Rachel Bloch died. Like the Siyum Hatorah two months before, the funeral was a communal honouring of a pioneering life. Unlike today's Capetonian Jewish practice where the funeral rites begin at the cemetery, Rachel Bloch's began at home in Parow.

The hearse and funeral procession set off from the Hopkins Street residence of her son Abe, where she had formerly lived, and stopped in front of the Synagogue and the coffin was borne by



members of the Committee of the Parow Hebrew Congregation who laid it on the steps at the entrance to the Synagogue....

From the Synagogue the cortège proceeded on its way, and on the pavements many a citizen stood still as a mark of respect to this grand old lady.

The service at the graveside at the Pinelands Cemetery, where she was finally laid to her everlasting rest, was well attended by all the Jewish residents of the Northern Suburbs, as well as many Jewish and Gentile friends of the Bloch family in the Peninsula.

Rachel Bloch the proud grandmother of her daughter Jessie's baby **Mendel Kaplan** in 1937

The Daitsh Family



The Daitsh family Back: Heshel and Etta Daitsh; front: Enid, Thelma and Abe Daitsh

The second sample is drawn from my own family, who, like Rachel Bloch, were pioneers of Parow. Research for the book and website was a personal voyage of discovery, of a much-loved but little known 'oupa'.

Heshel Daitsh [Hebrew name: Yehoshua Heshel Ben Yosef] my maternal grandfather.

Heshel was born in April 1878 to Yossel Leyzer and Toiba Daitsh in Keidan, a historic centre in Lithuania with an attractive old town and a proud connection to the Vilna Gaon, who had studied and married there. Heshel came from an established and well-to-do merchant family who were prominent members of the Keidan community, but almost nothing is known of his early years and of his arrival in South Africa. (Family lore has it that he had come to South Africa via Turkey.) His first appearance is in 1912 in Braby's Orange Free State Directory, where he is listed as the only storekeeper at Priors, a railway station on the main line to Bloemfontein, close to the border with the Cape Province. In 1911 he had married **Etta Sackheim**, who had come to South Africa after the Anglo-Boer War with her parents and siblings from the great Polish textile manufacturing city of Łódź in Poland with her parents and siblings, and had settled in Kaffir River, another insignificant railway stop, along the main line but closer to Bloemfontein.

In 1918 they left the Orange Free State and moved to Parow with their **two children, Abe**, born in 1913, and **Thelma, born in Bloemfontein in 1918**. In Parow they would have a third child, **Enid born in 1921**.

Arriving in Parow at the age of 40, Heshel took over the Smith & Robbins general dealership on the strategically sited corner of Station and Main roads. He registered it as the Western Province Trading Company with the Village Management Board and rapidly entered into an active business relationship with that body as a regular supplier of goods. During the Spanish Flu pandemic later that year he was contracted to supply groceries to the Parow families which the Board was supporting; to reassure the cost-conscious council, the Daitsh firm pledged that no 'delicacies' would be provided.



Heshel Daitsh's business Western Province Trading Company corner of Station and Main roads, Parow.

Heshel Daitsh's business acumen and competitive spirit were bitterly resented by his Jewish competitors obliquely across the main road. Shalia Freedberg believed that he was ruining her husband's business through price cutting. Heshel's horizons stretched beyond storekeeping, though. 'Mr Daitsh', Bob Freedberg writes, 'had other plans for his own future – his general dealer's business was simply a means of realizing his ambition to become a property man. He used his merchants' suppliers' sometimes apparently inexhaustibly patient credit facilities to acquire properties in and around Parow and before long he had brought a brother into the business and converted it into a builders' hardware supply store as a further means of enlarging his property empire by the erection of houses etc. for sale.'

As his younger daughter, Enid – born in Parow in 1921 – recalled, her father had an appetite for buying property. He would himself draw the plans of the simple homes he built and would rent these to the families streaming in from the countryside in the interwar years.

Bob Freedberg adds: 'Mr Daitsh became extremely wealthy in the acquisition and partial disposal of large tracts of ground in Parow; the Avondale Estate development was largely his enterprise, and he obtained liquor and hotel licences in Goodwood and elsewhere, which in those days were major entrepreneurial prizes.' These came to include the City Hall Hotel close to the Grand Parade in Cape Town, and the popular Marine Hotel in Muizenberg, which he bought with partners during the Second World War. In time he also added the Glenboig quarry and brickworks – on the northern edge of Parow – to his burgeoning property portfolio after its owners fell into financial difficulty.

Unlike his mother, the young Bob Freedberg liked Mrs Daitsh, as he did her husband. 'My recollection of Mrs Daitsh was of a kind and gentle soul who was always asking personal questions about our family life and affairs which I was warned by my mother not to divulge, and her artistic ability which took the form of oil-painted flowers on velvet cushion covers.

I saw Mr Daitsh as a portly, affable Jewish gentleman, something of a Hebrew scholar and a leader of the Jewish community, generous in his financial support of the Congregation which he was instrumental in establishing as a junior partner with the Bellville congregation.'

In 1919, a year after Heshel's arrival in Parow, the Jews of Parow had met at his home close to his store to consider the formal establishment of a congregation and the appointment of a minister. Caution ruled, though, and it was decided that 'the time was not yet ripe' to have their own minister and that 'they should wait until the community had grown'. Meanwhile, they should approach the neighbouring Bellville congregation to share the services of its minister for three days a week. In 1927 Parow built a communal hall; again, Heshel Daitsh played a leading role, signing on behalf of the congregation for one of the properties it acquired. Heshel served as the chairman of the congregation.

Heshel Daitsh also played a very active part in civic life.

He was elected by a show of hands by 48 votes at a public meeting in the National Hall in 1930. Heshel was to serve until 1932, chairing the key finance and works committee. He was a very active participant at board meetings with civic improvement his special concern. When the Board built new offices in 1930, it was Daitsh who instructed the architect. When the Board proposed building a batch of new roads, it was Daitsh who led the way. It was Daitsh who proposed motor transport for the removal of night soil. Before Daitsh left the Board after his busy tenure, Norman Berold proposed a vote of thanks 'on the good work carried out by him during the period he has served on the board ... The future of Parow will be assured if members of the same calibre as Mr Daitsh are returned at the next election.'

Heshel Daitsh was a passionate supporter of the 'national movement', a generous donor to the Zionist cause. Together with his friend, the pioneering Parow industrialist Barney Berold, he paid an early visit to Mandatory Palestine in 1936. In 1938, after twenty very successful years in Parow, he moved to Sea Point where he took up residence in a gracious home in Avenue Normandie. Heshel was a man of progressive views, insisting that his two daughters have a professional education as well as their brother, one qualifying as an architect, one as a doctor. After leaving Parow Heshel retained his connections with the Parow congregation, and his passing in 1960 was marked with a special memorial service. Heshel died on 13 March 1960 and is buried in Pinelands.



Heshel and daughter Thelma at the Empire State Building, New York

The entry for Heshel Daitsh on the Parow website has links to no fewer than 408 items, including family photographs, property records and press reports, particularly of his Zionist passion and activism.

Rabbi Benjamin Lipshitz [Hebrew name: Binyamin b. Moshe Arie]h]

A further example on the website, drawn from the book, is **Rabbi Benjamin Lipshitz**, the long-serving spiritual leader of the Parow Hebrew Congregation from 1930 to 1964. (The book has a whole chapter devoted to this remarkable figure, described by an admiring former cheder pupil as ‘the most misunderstood Rabbi of his time’.)

Benjamin Lipshitz was born in Poland in 1900 to Moshe Arie Lipshitz, a merchant, and his wife Batya. Little is known of his childhood. By his own later account, his early education in eastern Europe was at the ‘Stuzin Wolkowisc Yeshivoh’ (*sic*). After arriving in Mandatory Palestine as a young adult, he studied for ten years at the Mea Shearim Yeshiva, a Mizrahi (religious Zionist) institution where Rav Kook, the champion of religious Zionism, frequently lectured, and at the Mizrahi Seminar, a religious teacher training college established in 1921.

Unusually, he concurrently spent five years in the late 1920s auditing courses at the recently established Hebrew University. Though he had had no regular high school or gymnasium schooling, he was admitted to the Faculty of Humanities by a committee chaired by the renowned scholar Professor Joseph Klausner, presumably on the basis of his rabbinical and teacher training. Klausner, one of the luminaries of the university, was Lipshitz’s academic hero and mentor. Klausner inculcated in him a passion for the Hebrew language and literature. Despite Klausner’s mentorship, Rabbi Lipshitz was never awarded a degree by the Hebrew University, but

it certainly left its mark on the young rabbi, who throughout his subsequent life combined a deep intellectual interest in the religious and the secular. He was proud throughout his life of his connection with the renowned institution.



Benjamin Lipshitz married Nechama Kook in Jerusalem on 12 December 1929. Nechama was a fine match for the young rabbi and student who came from an undistinguished family. By contrast, she came from rabbinical royalty. Nechama was the niece of Abraham Isaac Kook, the great Rav Kook, the first Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of Mandatory Palestine. She was the daughter of Rav Kook's younger brother, Dov Ber Kook, himself a distinguished rabbi and Av Beit Din (leading judge of the religious court) of Afula, who had brought his family to Palestine from eastern Europe in 1925.

The newlyweds left Jerusalem the year after for Parow, where they were to spend the better part of their adult lives. It is not documented how they were recruited. Certainly, the young couple's commitment to Zionism, and their close family connection to the champion of its religious wing, would have appealed to the contemporary leadership of

the congregation. The young couple seem to have settled in quickly and easily to a community still dominated by an older immigrant generation, but this was not to remain the case in later years.

Benjamin Lipshitz's arrival as rabbi in 1930 and his departure 34 years later in 1964 spans much of the history of the Parow Jewish community and, arguably, its most vital and vibrant years. Throughout that period the rabbi was at the centre of communal affairs. A controversial and complex figure, he was both the pivotal figure in congregational life and the focus of recurrent conflict, simultaneously a source of communal strength and of division.

Much of the conflict centred on his controversial teaching methods, both physical and verbal. Ironically, at the same time that complaints streamed in about these methods – inherited from the *cheders of der heim* but no longer acceptable in South Africa – he was praised for the outcome. When, for example, Parow's Talmud Torah was inspected by the Cape Board of Jewish

Education, the Parow shul committee noted that 'The report was wholly satisfactory and reflected great credit on the Rabbi'. This was to be a continuing paradox throughout Lipshitz's long tenure as teacher. While his methods would be the source of endless parental complaints over time – and of wry or rueful recollection on the part of his former pupils – the outcomes were regularly applauded by the Board's inspectors and by the shul committees which were otherwise censorious.

A former pupil attests to these positive outcomes:

Rabbi Lipshitz taught me from a young age until I went to Herzlia. There is no doubt that I arrived at Herzlia with a greater level of knowledge than the kids who had been at Herzlia from Sub A, and this is knowledge that I acquired five times a week for an hour in the afternoon whereas they had Hebrew classes and all sorts of activities at school. He did prepare me for my bar mitzvah and I think he inculcated a Jewish way of thinking. He was very definite about that. ...there is no question that his influence as an educator was very great. He was a remarkable person on the one hand, but there wasn't a warmth about him.

Despite repeated crises over the years, when the community came close to dispensing with his services, Rabbi Lipshitz continued in service in Parow till he chose retirement in 1964.

On his return to live in Israel, Rabbi Lipshitz, who had sold properties he owned in Parow, acquired an apartment in Jerusalem at 11 Kovsky Katamon Street. He also used his Parow funds to establish the Binyamin and Nechama Foundation, a non-profit organisation housed at the Mercaz Harav Yeshiva, the famed institution founded by Nechama's illustrious uncle, Chief Rabbi Abraham Kook.

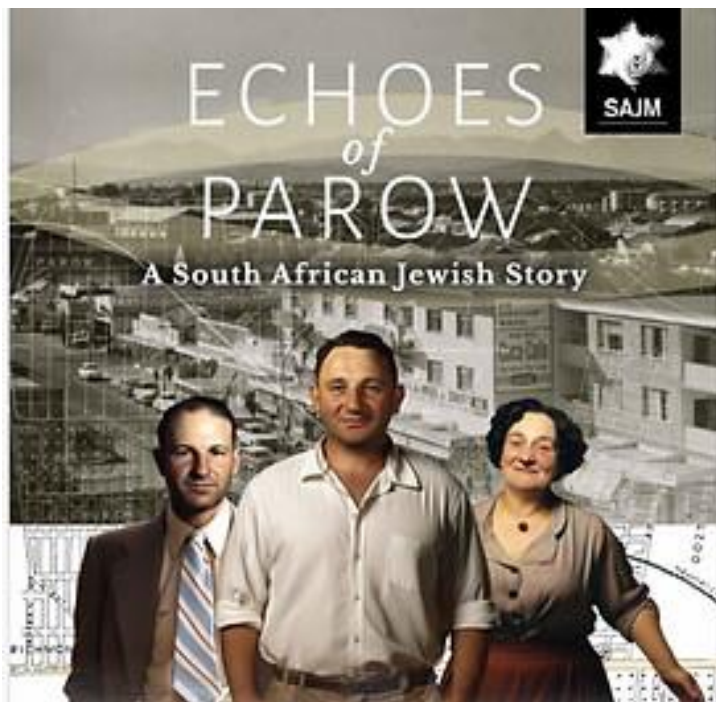
The aims of the organisation were 'to support talented as well as destitute scholars of Mercaz Harav Yeshiva, by providing stipends or loans.' After Nechama Lipshitz died in 1980, her husband endowed a synagogue in her name. A congregation that had begun originally in the early 1960s with a group of lecturers and graduates of the Hebrew University, Benjamin Lipshitz's alma mater, had acquired a plot of land next to the Jerusalem Theatre, and it was here, with the assistance of Rabbi Lipshitz, that they built their beautiful modern synagogue, named Ohel Nechama (the Tent of Nechama) in her honour.

Rabbi Lipshitz died in 1985 and is buried in the Sanhedria cemetery in Jerusalem. The inscription on his tombstone reads: 'He served the Parow Hebrew Congregation in South Africa for thirty-five years.'

The entry for Rabbi Lipshitz on the Parow website has links to no fewer than 441 items, many of them discussions with and about this controversial figure in the minutes of the Hebrew congregation. The website also includes the many articles that Rabbi Lipshitz wrote for *Barkai*, a Johannesburg-based Hebrew publication; these cover a wide variety of topics, reflecting his broad intellectual interests.

The Exhibition: *Echoes of Parow.* ***The Story of a South African Jewish Community.***

Simultaneously with the book and the website, a remarkable exhibition -- *Echoes of Parow. The Story of a South African Jewish Community* -- was launched in September at the South African Jewish Museum in Cape Town. This was deliberately not a conventional exhibition with walls covered in text and accompanying photographs. Instead, it was a ground-breaking interactive exhibition, using cutting-edge museum technology, including AI (artificial intelligence), to bring to life both visually and aurally the Jewish experience in Parow.



The exhibition was designed and executed by FormulaD, a company with broad international experience of museum design. Rather than attempting a broad and conventional comprehensive overview of Parow Jewry, the focus was on the recreation of a sampling of real historic characters, selected because of their representative interest. Thus the founding 'machers' of the community, the pioneering industrialist **Barney Berold** and the property developer **Heshel Daitsh**; the founding matriarchs **Rachel Bloch** and **Shalia Freedberg**, both of whom were forced by circumstances to raise their children on their own; the dynamic communal and

civic leader Dr **Jack Karpas**; the industrialist **Isaac (Ike) Kaplan and his wife Jessie**, a Zionist leader; the thrusting German-Jewish businessman **Walter Levy** who revolutionized shopping in Parow; and the controversial **Rabbi Benjamin Lipshitz**.

Each figure was recreated at a particular moment in time, some in the 1920s, others later on. Artificial Intelligence was used to recreate their physical appearance, their younger selves, from existing older photographs. Their voices, in particular their accents, were imagined and they were played by voice artists coached by an expert in the area. The scripts for their imagined interaction were prepared by a script writer, drawing on the research for the Parow project.

Visitors to the exhibition are equipped with headphones and a tablet and pass through a series of 'stations' each depicting part of the Parow Jewish story at a particular moment in time. Thus for example, we meet Heshel Daitsh and Barney Berold, the two 'machers' of the early community meeting in the communal hall in 1930 and discussing the imminent appointment of a rabbi; Rachel Bloch at home at a dance party; Dr Jack Karpas examining Barney Berold in his surgery in Parow, not long before the latter's early death; Walter Levy diplomatically handling his feisty landlady Shalia Freedberg in his National Bazaars store; Ike Kaplan and his cronies at the card table; Solly Freedberg on the golf course at King David; and Rabbi Lipshitz in the Parow shul.

All these vividly imagined encounters give a taste of Jewish life in Parow (and in South Africa beyond) as it might have been in Parow Jewry's heyday.

Researching Parow and South African communal history

As CHOL amply demonstrates, South African Jewish communal history has become a rich field for research. The Parow Project might possibly suggest a few further avenues for pursuing this.

The Parow project was a team effort, with researchers scouring the wide range of sources potentially available for the social history of any Jewish community in South Africa. The public archives, searchable online at least for the title of documents though not for their actual contents, yielded a wealth of information.

Resources

The Cape Archives, housed behind the facade of the historic prison in Roeland Street, holds the naturalisation applications of the immigrant generation; the estate papers of many who once lived in Parow, as well as court cases involving the litigious; and company registration records. The treasures it preserves included the minutes of the Village Management Board established when Parow first emerged as a township in 1903. These were particularly valuable for the earliest years when pioneering Jewish shopkeepers sometimes appear in an unfavourable light as the subjects of charges about their unhygienic storekeeping practices, as well as for the later decades, after the First World War, when Jews play a leading role in public life as members of the Board.



Walter Levy and his wife Molly née Friedlander

Parow became a fully-fledged municipality in 1939, and the Cape Archives has a large collection of the records of the town council and its subcommittees. Again, Jews feature prominently in these since at times, particularly in the 1950s, Jewish councillors made up as much as a quarter of the council. Similar records exist in the archives for other local government bodies across the Cape and would reward exploration for the histories of their Jewish communities.

The Deeds Office in Cape Town, overlooking the parliamentary precinct, provided a possibly unique insight into Jewish property ownership, a very promising area of research for South African Jewish communal history. Rows of shelves hold the erf registers of local areas including Parow, detailing the transfers of title, erf by erf, over time, while the title deeds themselves fill whole storerooms.

The project's researchers created a master spreadsheet – mined from the multiple volumes of erf registers recording Parow property transactions – of all transfers involving Jewish names and, where known, companies with Jewish ownership. The erf registers led to the title deeds, which were also sampled. This exhaustive exercise pointed to the primacy of property ownership as the preferred place of investment for Parow Jews, and arguably South African Jewry at large, in both the immigrant and South African-born generations.

In the north, the **Standard Bank archives**, housed at the bank's corporate headquarters in Johannesburg, hold the 'inspection reports' of the bank's branches in Bellville and Parow (and elsewhere). Dating from the interwar years, these provide an informed view of the current state and prospects of these towns, as well as nuggets about certain clients. The archives of the South African National Defence Force, housed in a new complex outside Silverton near Pretoria, hold the service records of Jews with Parow connections who volunteered during the Second World War. This archive is well organized and readily accessible.

Jewish archives that were explored included those at Beyachad in Johannesburg and at the Kaplan Centre for Jewish Studies and Research at the University of Cape Town. The latter has preserved the **minute books of the Parow Hebrew Congregation** as part of an earlier collection effort of Jewish communal records. The richness of the Parow records, an invaluable source for this book, is a powerful demonstration of the value of such collection and preservation exercises.

The minutes, dating from the end of the 1930s to 1960, with an unfortunate gap after that before resuming for a few years, detail the concerns of a small community, including its often-strained relationship with its long-standing rabbi; its almost decade-long struggle to build a synagogue; and its religious practice (or, on occasion, the lack thereof). A particular virtue of the Parow minute books is just how full they are. This is no mere dull recording of decisions (as in much cautious and circumspect modern minuting). Instead we have detailed accounts of debates, always 'he said, he said', never 'he said, she said' since women were excluded from shul committee membership in patriarchal Parow and confined to their own Ladies Synagogue Guild, whose records unfortunately do not survive. The committee debates were sometimes acrimonious, particularly when the rabbi's controversial conduct was concerned.

The Jewish press, particularly the *South African Jewish Chronicle*, but also the *Zionist Record*, proved a major resource. The team's original researcher paged patiently through decades of the *Chronicle* in search of Parow items. This was less of a needle-in-a-haystack exercise than might have been expected given the size and limited significance of the Parow Jewish community. For all the *South African* in its title, for decades the *South African Jewish Chronicle* was based in Cape Town and provided the Jewish version of 'parish-pump' news about local Jewish affairs, including Parow's. From the shul minutes and the articles themselves, it is clear that much of this coverage was provided by the community itself, but it is no less valuable for this. This reporting is remarkably detailed and draws a richly textured portrait of communal life.

Barkai, the Hebrew-language periodical published in Johannesburg by Jack Rubik from the 1930s to the 1970s, was uniquely valuable. Benjamin Lipshitz, Parow's scholarly rabbi, developed an appetite for writing in his last decade and a half in Parow. His many contributions – rendered into English in masterly translations by a team member – on a wide range of topics tell us much about this intriguing figure and about the South African Jewish community he served, or at least his view of it.

The Parow project had the services of a skilled **genealogist**. He scoured the surviving eastern European records for family origins and the shipping lists for arrivals in South Africa. He found the wedding and death records for many of the names on a list of communal members when the new synagogue was inaugurated in 1951, plus the many others who had come and gone before then or who came afterwards. He also connected the kinship dots, demonstrating the importance of extended family networks in scaffolding the structure of the Parow Jewish community.

Perhaps the most important source for the social history of Parow Jewry, particularly in its heyday in the post-war decades, was **oral history**. Over fifty interviews, some with multiple participants, were conducted with subjects who had either grown up in or worked in Parow. The oldest of the subjects was the 97-year-old Sam Goronovsky – who has sadly since died – who recalled Parow as it was in his interwar childhood and after, as did his younger sister Bessie Lonstein. Robert Kaplan, Irma Myers (née Kushlick), Mickey Glass and Rhona Fainsinger (née Katz), all children of the 1930s, vividly recalled the Parow of their parents' generation.

Most of those interviewed, though, grew up in the later Parow of the 1950s and 1960s. Almost all the interviews conducted locally were filmed professionally while those further afield were interviewed via Zoom, one of the very few positive outcomes of the age of Covid. All of the interviews have been indexed and some transcribed. While the interviews were discursive and covered wide ground, common themes emerged, including communal cohesion, schooling both in Parow and beyond, experiences of the shul and *cheder*, and, inevitably, memories fond and otherwise of Rabbi Lipshitz, the community's long-serving spiritual leader and irascible *cheder* teacher. There were telling absences too, in particular memories of any widespread or pervasive antisemitism. While there certainly were incidents, these were occasional rather than pervasive. At the end of the interviews participants were asked to reflect on the influence of a Parow Jewish upbringing on their later lives. Most were refreshingly positive.

To a greater or lesser degree similar sources would be available for many other Jewish communities in South Africa. The national archives as well as the Military and Standard Bank archives hold a wealth of material of Jewish interest. The Jewish press is the mother lode for communal history. All of these, however, require researcher 'boots on the ground', physical visits to archives and libraries. What does *not* is the great untapped – or at best, only partly tapped – resource for South African Jewish communal history, the systematic interviewing of those who grew up in South Africa's fading constellation of Jewish communities. All that is required for this is Zoom.

Richard Mendelsohn, Cape Town, October 2024

Next CHOL Events: November /December 2024

New Research on South African Jews

Three sessions: Wednesdays 6 and 27 November and 4 December 2024 7.00pm South African time

(10.00am California; 1.00pm New York; 6.00pm UK; 7.00pm South Africa, Europe; 8.00pm Israel)

South African Jewish community history offers so many topics for in-depth study. The CHOL community fulfils a great role in eliciting and organising personal family stories and primary research documents for our communities. But we are eager to hear what subjects have been chosen for current dissertations for higher degrees and by leading research scholars. In this series curated by professors Shirli Gilbert (UCL) and Adam Mendelsohn (UCT) we are offered a window into the academic world of South African Jewish research.

- 6 November: **Reviva Hasson**
Topic: *The Paradox of South African Jewish Emigration*
- 27 November: **Gavin Beinart-Smollan**
Topic: *Finding Displaced Relatives: how South Africans found their missing loved ones during and after the Second World War.*
- 4 December: Professor **Shirli Gilbert**
Topic: *Who is researching What, about South African Jews these days?*

Read the details for each presentation below:

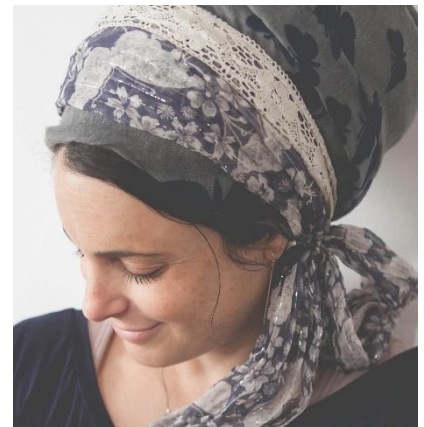
To join please email info@chol.website for the link (and to be put on the CHOL mailing list)

New Research on South African Jews

Three sessions: Wednesdays 6 and 27 November and 4 December 2024 7.00pm South African time
(10.00am California; 1.00pm New York; 6.00pm UK; 7.00pm South Africa, Europe; 8.00pm Israel)

Topic with details

- 6 November: Reviva Hasson
Topic:
The Paradox of South African Jewish Emigration
- The South African Jewish community ranks as the strongest Jewish community in the English-speaking world and yet Jews have been leaving such that the population today is half what it was at its peak. This paradox underlies our question: why have Jews been leaving South Africa? Using data from three community surveys in the post-apartheid era we explore the ‘what, where and why’ of South African Jewish emigration trends as well as differences based on age, place of residence, financial wellbeing and Jewish identity strand.
- **Bio**
Reviva Hasson is a social scientist at the Kaplan Centre for Jewish Studies. Her research focuses on the study of contemporary South African Jewry, with an emphasis on survey data analysis. She holds a BSc in Environmental Science and a Master’s in Economics, both from UCT. Reviva coordinated the 2019 nationwide survey of the South African Jewish community, is a participant of the prestigious international Nahum Goldman Fellowship program and is a recipient of the UCT Research Associateship Award. She lives in Cape Town with her husband and three children.



- 27 November: Gavin Beinart-Smollan
Topic: *Finding Displaced Relatives: how South Africans found their missing loved ones during and after the Second World War*
- *In 1944, the South African Jewish Board of Deputies established the 'Relatives Information Service' (RIS), to help South African Jews trace relatives in Europe with whom they had lost touch. In this session, we will explore how this remarkable organisation worked and try to understand its place in the massive global effort to help people in the Allied countries, Jewish and not, find their missing European relatives. We will also explore how you might go about searching for the names of your own relatives in the files of the RIS. Please come prepared with any South African family stories of WW2-era relative tracing that you have!*

- **Bio:**



Gavin Beinart-Smollan is a public historian and PhD candidate in History and Judaic Studies at New York University. His dissertation is titled 'Fragile Ties: The Translational Family Relationships of Lithuanian Jews, 1899-1949'. Gavin is the creator of the [South African Jewish Cookbook Project](#), and is the public historian in residence at The Jewish Board, a large mental health agency in New York City. He lives in Stamford, Connecticut with his wife and daughter.



- 4 December: Professor Shirli Gilbert
Topic:
Who is researching What, about South African Jews these days?
- *Where are the current scholars based, and what topics have piqued their interest? Shirli Gilbert, Professor of Modern Jewish history at University College London, tells us what is currently in the pipeline, who is investigating and on what topic from German-Jewish refugees to Yiddish newspapers.*

- **Bio**

Shirli Gilbert is Professor of Modern Jewish History at University College London. She obtained her D.Phil. at the University of Oxford and was a postdoctoral fellow in the Society of Fellows at the University of Michigan. She has published widely on the Holocaust and its legacies, and Jews in South Africa. She is Editor-in-Chief of *Jewish Historical Studies: A Journal of English-Speaking Jewry*.



- To join the zooms, ask for the link by emailing info@chol.website.

(Those already on this mailing list will receive the link in due course) We hope you will join us on zoom to add to the discussion, as we get to know each other, from around the world.

Your feedback to the CHOL Newsletter would be welcome. Please send to info@chol.website
Please keep us informed of your own 'Community History On-Line' activities and interests. If you know people who might be interested in CHOL activities, please forward this Newsletter to them or pass on their details to CHOL.
You can also say if you would prefer not to receive post from CHOL

CHOL Newsletter no 10 compiled by Geraldine Auerbach MBE, London, October 2024, with material supplied by professor Richard Mendelsohn, comes to you with warm wishes as we round up our year and go forward, hopefully, to happier times.

Checkout the CHOL website: www.chol.website which now has on it:

- 53 communities <https://chol.website/communities.htm>
 - 57 Memoirs <https://chol.website/memoirs.htm>
 - 142 original stories <https://chol.website/stories.htm>
 - 34 Videos of presentations <https://chol.website/presentations.htm>
- also on the site are resources and journal articles and all our CHOL newsletters

CHOL – Community History On-Line is a forum set up in 2020, under the auspices of the Kaplan Centre at UCT and the South African Jewish Museum – bringing together all those working on / or interested in creating an online presence relating to the **History of Jewish Communities in Southern Africa**. see www.chol.website contact info@chol.website.



SAJM
South African Jewish Museum